ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic started significant changes among employers and employees and a shift away from the traditional thinking that productivity depends on fixed hours in an office environment. In the face of the crisis, organizations were forced to switch to remote work. The ongoing processes can permanently change work patterns. After the pandemic stops, it will be possible to observe that employees will not be willing to return to the office after the restrictions are lifted. Flexible schedule, the ability to work from any place and the lack of commuting are the most frequently mentioned benefits of remote work by employees. Of course, working from home brings not only benefits, but also challenges faced by remote workers. As a society, we value freedom of choice, and many people would like to be able to work remotely for the rest of their careers. An important aspect of this consideration is that lockdown emphasized the value of flexibility in the workplace. The economy is slowly starting to reopen, it remains to be seen in the near future whether the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the inevitable trends in work culture. The aim of the research is to analyze the psychosocial changes in the popularity of remote work in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words: remote working, Covid-19 pandemic, psychosocial changes

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, a significant economic recovery has been visible in practically all branches of the economy. A special boom has been observed over the last few years. The increase in private consumption, wages and a drop in unemployment resulted in an increase in GDP, which was reflected in the positive sentiment in the economy. Enterprises
developed dynamically, often achieving impressive increases, and thus increasing their teams of employees and developing their headquarters. In early 2020, the situation changed completely after the first information about the new coronavirus appeared and the plans to introduce restrictions by the governments of individual countries. After the pandemic spread rapidly in China, and then in Europe and other continents, restrictions were implemented, cross-border traffic was stopped in most countries, borders were closed and some industries were banned from operating. The situation began to become very serious overnight, which translated into concerns of both consumers, employees and employers. They were concerned not only for their health and the health of their relatives, but also for their financial security and further professional future.

Enterprises had to adapt very quickly to the new reality and adapt to the applicable restrictions in order to ensure the continuation of their activities. For most companies, this was a significant challenge because they were not prepared in terms of infrastructure, training and organizational culture to switch to remote work within a few days. Loss of control over employees, lack of appropriate working conditions, lack of infrastructure and skills, lack of legal regulations, fear for the effectiveness of activities and the future are just some of the challenges faced overnight by organizations, both state-owned and private companies.

The goal of this paper is to identify and analyze the psychosocial changes in the popularity of remote work in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The article is based on a literature review, an analysis of press releases of current research in this area, as well as examples and observations from practice. The aim was achieved by systematizing the available data on the labor market during the pandemic and analyzing the research conducted so far in the field of research topics and presenting possible changes and social attitudes towards remote work.

1. Remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic

1.1. The labour market during the Covid-19 pandemic in the literature

The effect of the epidemic on the labour market raises interest in the scientific literature. Mongey et al. [1], analyze the link between the feasibility of remote work and the changes taking place in the US labour market in terms of employment dynamics, in March 2020. Gallacher and Hossain [2] measure changes in employment in March and April 2020 in their research, and then compare these changes with the estimated adaptation of workplaces to remote work. According to the results obtained by these scientists, more than 40% of jobs in Canada may be remote work places. Gallacher and Hossain [2] draw attention to the fact that there is a differentiation between provinces and cities, and also different sectors of the economy. Covid-19. The subject of other articles devoted to the situation on the labor market during the Covid-19 pandemic was focused on the analysis of jobs. Lange and Warman [3] pointed in their research that there has been a very rapid decline in job offers in Canada, which was caused by the Covid-19 crisis and the economic downturn in March 2020. As a result, in April 2020 the number of advertisements fell by as much as 50%. The aim of the research by Kahn, Lange and Wiczer [4] was to analyze the changes in the number of job vacancies and the amount of insurance paid in the event of the Covid-19 pandemic among various occupations and economic sectors in the United States. Prochazka et al. [5], in their research, focused on examining workers during the Covid-19 crash, in which they present data that can be used to describe how the influence of pandemic on the peoples work in four European countries and how it affected their professional attitudes, feelings and results at work. Their research emphasizes the importance of the research issues undertaken in this article and the fact that this area has not been sufficiently identified by scientists.

The existing literature on the labour market during the Covid-19 pandemic mainly concerns structural changes in the labour market during the pandemic and does not analyze changes in the context of psychosocial effects caused by the changes and possible long-term changes in the work environment after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic. The available scientific literature is mainly English-language, therefore it seems important to present the analyzed problem in Polish scientific literature. Taking into account the conducted analysis of the literature, it is possible to identify a research gap in the research topic discussed in this article, the aim of which is to present the cognitive and theoretical psychosocial changes in the popularity of remote work in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.2. Changes in the work environment during the Covid-19 pandemic in the EU

Europe is one of the world's regions most affected by the pandemic of COVID-19 on the beginning 2020 year. As cases have spread across Europe, the authority faced threat of the healthcare systems collapse. In the most European countries to prevent spreading of the virus an extraordinary restrictions have been carried out which curb business activity and citizens' freedoms to curb people-to-people contacts. These restrictions in the EU countries were comparable, but varied in their scale and other few condition which affect personal and business activities. Diversified in terms of the restrictions introduced is also visible in sectors of the economy, those that are considered necessary avoid closure. In a situation of extreme uncertainty in European labour markets, it can be very useful to estimate the psychosocial changes in the context of work in society. Moreover, such an assessment may also provide some clues as to the prospects of psychosocial changes in the labor market in the post-Covid-19 crisis period. [6]

The Covid-19 pandemic caused many changes in the functioning of society, the sanitary regime and the obligatory social distancing became common. The work environment also reflects the situation during the pandemic. In all sectors of the economy, businesses and organizations have switched to remote work. [7, pp. 48-53] Entrepreneurs and managers was faced an challenging situation in which they tried to help employees find themselves in the reality dictated by the regime caused by Covid-19. Furthermore to efforts
focused on personal health, many workers find it difficult to adjust to a new uncertain reality in which social distancing becomes essential. Employees rushed to organize office space in their own homes, teams of employees test applications enabling collaborative work, and managers try to provide support in a completely new work environment for many employees [8, pp. 6-7] Before the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the popularity of remote work in the European Union was relatively low [6]. When looking at data from 28 countries in total, 5.3% of employees typically worked remotely in 2019, and an additional 10.8% worked remotely sometimes. The remaining 83.9% of employees had never worked remotely before. [9] Since the Covid-19 pandemic, remote work has turned into the new norm for numerous number of peoples’ around the world.

Preliminary assessment of Eurofound (2020) says that about 40% of people currently working in the EU have started to drive full-time remotely as a consequence of changes in work environment caused by Covid-19 restrictions. [10]

Many workers and employers were likely to face the challenges of a sudden transition to remote working, because of the fact that prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, only 16% of the workforce in the EU had on occasion to worked remotely. However, depending on other factors related to previous experience with remote work, the scale of these challenges may vary significantly. [11] Nevertheless, the introduction of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the implementation of a number of changes in the organization and technology, as well as overcoming psychological barriers among employees and employers. During the pandemic, remote work has become common and popular, and due to the extraordinary circumstances, companies have adapted to remote work at a rapid pace. As a consequence of these events, both entrepreneurs and employees will probably be willing to continue working in a remote environment, it can be expected that the percentage of people providing remote work after the pandemic ends will remain at a similar level, and the changes initiated by the pandemic will result in growing trends among people providing remote work in subsequent years.

2. Psychosocial attitudes of people working remotely

2.1. Benefits and challenges of working remotely

The ability to work remotely is becoming one of the priorities for job seekers. The choice of workplace and the associated flexibility is a real asset, as many employees appreciate the ability to work from home and the ability to adjust their working hours. As a result, employees can achieve a better balance between work and private life. The development of technology makes it possible to perform work from anywhere. Moreover, among remote workers the sense of duty for the tasks performed increases, and therefore they become more productive, as well as more emotionally connected with the performed work. There is a visible increase in the quality of remote work and the hours of its performance. [12, pp. 22-25] The basic, much appreciated benefit of remote work indicated by employees working remotely is the resulting flexibility, both in the context of choosing a workplace and adjusting the work schedule. Other benefits of remote work appreciated by employees include, among others, no need to travel to the workplace, the opportunity to spend time with the family and the opportunity to work from home. [13]

Working remotely is always challenging, although they are various for every person. Employees providing remote work in the conducted survey indicated that two exceptional problems seem to be the most important: difficulties in cooperation and communication, and loneliness. In addition, other difficulties can be distinguished, such as difficulties with disconnecting from work in free time, all kinds of home distractions, the availability of entertainment and the ability to perform household duties, working at a time other than the team, being motivated during the entire work time, the possibility of going on vacation or access to a stable internet connection. [13] Remote workers usually spend more hours on working during a day than stationary workers because technology allows them to access their work outside of working hours. Many employees say that they find it difficult to disconnect from work because of their greater sense of duty when working remotely. In such a situation, it should be remembered that the work-life balance may be disturbed, and the combination of this effect with excessive monitoring of remote workers may become as harmful to the mental health of employees and their productivity as straight working frameworks and open office spaces. [12, pp. 22-25]

2.2. Psychological and social changes in the face of the popularity of remote work

The most important challenges resulting from remote work are supported by solutions in the form of modern dedicated technology, the development of which has recently accelerated significantly. Employees have repeatedly broken the psychological barriers of online communication, not only in the professional but also private sphere. [14, pp.653-662] During the introduction of the strictest restrictions and prohibitions to leave households without a justified, necessary life need, the society developed teamwork skills using online tools, and in the private sphere it satisfied the needs of social contacts through meetings with families and friends on video talks . There has been a significant increase in the popularity of instant messaging and online teamwork tools across all sectors. Thus, the most significant disadvantages of working remotely, such as communication and collaboration difficulties, and the experience of loneliness, lost importance with the development of new technological and social skills by society during the Covid-19 pandemic. [15]

Due to the growing popularity and universality of remote work, online communication in all sectors of the economy becomes technologically easier and psychologically more accessible. An example is the fact that during the Covid-19 pandemic, the psychological barrier of online medical services was
broken. [16] Due to the epidemiological threat, such a sensitive sphere as people’s health, which so far required a personal visit of the patient, has successfully and patiently transformed into the provision of telemedicine services. [17, pp. 30-34] It is an important example of psychosocial changes taking place in the context of remote work.

Referring to an international survey conducted among remote workers conducted before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, as many as 98% of them expected the possibility of working remotely in subsequent installments, and 97% of respondents would recommend working remotely to others. [13] Thus, on the basis of the studies conducted so far and the analyzes of changes to remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be concluded that employees who experienced the possibility of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic will not be willing to return to stationary work. As shown by the previous research, the vast majority of people who experience the flexibility of remote work and the advantages of this type of work and are not willing to give up this privilege. [13]

3. Recommendations

Workplaces are becoming more digital and remote work can become a natural way of getting work done. This is especially true during the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the rapid changes in the functioning of enterprises in response to lockdown and epidemiological emergency situations. Employees who have experienced the ability to work remotely and the flexibility it brings may not be willing to return to the office full time. Bearing in mind this fact, and the other benefits for employers from remote work, i.e. increased productivity and cost reduction, the future possibility of remote work after the end of the Covid-19 pandemic should be analysed.

In the time of the lockdown, enterprises were forced to adapt further cooperation among employees, and experienced that the numerous processes and tasks can be done remotely. Most companies have moved existing processes to create a remote working environment and copy most pre-pandemic workflows. This approach works well in some organizations and selected processes, while others would require re-development and the creation of conditions that are appropriate for remote work. [18]

After the Covid-19 pandemic is over, companies can use hybrid solutions instead of fully switching to remote work or returning to stationary work in offices, thus taking advantage of the both solutions. Thus, it will be possible to provide flexibility for employees, and enterprises will have the ability to acquire talent globally, in addition, using online tools will increase their productivity and thus financial results. [12] Given that competition for talent has been fierce than ever in the past few years, while some talented people are unwilling to move to the places where companies’ operates than in the past, an organization may also attempt to split functions in terms of their ability to perform them remotely. Organizations, by reconstructing the way they work and determining which tasks can be performed remotely, can classify activities and work, which should be performed in person, those that can be performed partially in person and partially remotely, and those that can only be performed remotely. Tasks can be divided according to the value that remote work can bring into three types of work: stationary mode, hybrid mode and remote mode. Such a division of functions and tasks in the organization enables optimization of its activities and reaping the benefits of possible activities. [18]

It should be also remembered that the issue of ensuring an appropriate technological environment when working remotely. Numerous technology platforms and systems have a tools, which support remote work and solve some of the difficulties that arise when working remotely. Supported by appropriate systems, remote project management ensure to care at the same time for interests of team members as well as leaders, and managers, and at the same time, through video communication tools, quickly improves collaboration. In order to provide long-term benefits of introducing remote work, managers of HR departments should develop training plans teams as well as team leaders. Thanks to this, the systems will not become a barrier or obstacle and will enable the boost of employees’ attitudes. [12, pp. 22-25]

In summary, to enable effective remote work, it is necessary to provide appropriate technology, clear rules and training, and a modern attitude of employers and employees to work organization. [7, pp. 48-53] During the Covid-19 pandemic, there are significant changes in the work environment that will affect the way people work in the future. [12, pp. 22-25] The nature of work evolving in connection with the hazardous situation may bring benefits for many employers and employees, therefore it can be expected that remote work performance will be continued.

Summary

At the beginning of 2020, the first reports of the new COVID-19 coronavirus began to appear, and then a pandemic was announced around the world, which radically changed the situation of employers and employees from practically all sectors of the economy. When the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Poland on March 4, 2020, there was no doubt that the pandemic would not spread in the country as well, and most companies began to prepare to adapt to operating in the new conditions. Not only large corporations, but also small companies and state institutions switched overnight to remote work, which was a huge challenge not only for employees, most of whom had no previous experience with this mode of work, but also for the management staff, the task was to provide adequate infrastructure, training and monitoring of effectiveness.

At the moment, the COVID-19 pandemic continues and many institutions continue to operate remotely, preparing for the next wave of cases and new restrictions. At the moment, it is not possible to predict the final effects of the pandemic and to clearly define how it will affect the psychosocial changes in the popularity of remote work and the shape of the organization of work after it ceases.
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CHALLENGES ARISING FROM STUDying IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN REMOTE MODE

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