OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK

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Abstract

In a dynamic crisis situation such as the current one, the forecasts for the impact of COVID-19 on the world economy and the development of individual countries and cities are constantly changing. The impact of COVID-19 has turned many industries upside down in unexpected ways. More organizations switch to remote working environments for their employees due to the current world health crisis.

The purpose of this article is to outline the opportunities and challenges facing Bulgarian employees working from home during the March-April 2020 state of emergency and beyond. We discuss the many advantages and disadvantages of remote work from an individual point of view.

Key words:

remote work, COVID-19, work from home, employee attitudes, telework

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1. Introduction

2020 was a difficult year. This year the world economy faced the crisis of the century. The global spread of the corona virus infection has led to a recession and destabilization of global financial and commodity markets. International and local businesses are experiencing increasing difficulties, and a sense of insecurity is increasingly prevalent in global economic life. Rapid, informed and coordinated response and the development of innovation and digitalisation at international and local level are becoming increasingly key to tackling the pandemic.

The spread of Covid- 9 around the world has led to the widespread introduction of work from home. According to *Leonardi* (2021) “this shift is enabled by digital

technologies that allow workers to communicate via text, audio, and video and to share and edit data and documents in real-time. As examples of the dramatic and swift increase in remote work enabled by digital technologies, Zoom's daily active user base grew by 67 per cent in March 2020, the number of daily active users of Microsoft Teams grew from 20 million in November 2019 to 44 million in March 2020".

For some companies, the evolving nature of work drove a shift to virtual operations well before COVID-19. These organizations are in the fortunate position of having already made the investments in processes, platforms and training that enable a truly successful remote work environment. However for other organizations a shift to remote work can be particularly challenging.

The emergence of the corona virus and the introduction of the state of emergency in Bulgaria put business organizations to the test and forced them to introduce remote work in their practice.

Remote work is definitely not a new trend in Bulgaria, it has been discussed for years, and in a number of companies in areas such as information technology it has long been applied. But before the unexpected health crisis, for many companies, fulfilling their day-to-day responsibilities was remotely part of the future. However, the extraordinary circumstances necessitated rapid action to change business processes and practices in order to quickly adapt to the new conditions.

The purpose of this article is to outline the opportunities and challenges facing Bulgarian employees working from home during the March-April 2020 state of emergency and beyond.

The topic is especially relevant in the context of the pandemic, as periodic lockdowns have forced a very large number of organizations to organize the work of their employees remotely. There is still no definite data on whether remote work is more efficient or not than office work, and whether in the future, after the end of the pandemic, organizations will keep this way of working for their employees.

This article does not aim to establish how effective the work of employees working from home is. We are discussing the multifaceted motivations and drawbacks to remote work, but only from the individual perspective. The results of the present study could be used as a basis for future research on proving the effectiveness of remote work and its relevance in different sectors of the economy or for a comparison between organizational and individual opinion about remote work.

To achieve the stated goal, a survey was conducted among 242 employees in organizations of different sizes in terms of their experience with remote work. The study was conducted through a questionnaire sent through email and social networks to various employees of the private and professional contact network of the author. The survey does not claim to be representative of all areas of activity and all employees in

Bulgaria. The study was conducted in June 2020, after the end of the state of emergency in Bulgaria, imposed due to the covid-19 pandemic.

2. Theoretical review

According to Cambridge Business English Dictionary *remote working* is a situation in which an employee works mainly from home and communicates with the company by email and telephone.

The remote work is not a new idea. There are many publications describing the advantages and disadvantages of remote work. Describing the concept of remote work, the researchers focused primarily on the place of work, the use of information and communication technologies in the process of performing official duties, and the work schedule of the person providing the work (Garett and Danzinger, 2007, p. 28).

According to Greenberg and Nilssen (2008, p.5) “telework is replacing an employee’s travel from home to office and from office to home with information processing technology (e.g. computers, telecommunications). It is related to mobility and can be used to create bonds between employees from different places around the globe and their work”. Gray, Hodson, and Gordon (1993, p.2) think that “remote work is work performed away from the traditional workplace for a significant amount of time with the use of telecommunication tools”. Hynes (2014,p.581) reports that “remote work is providing work outside the place where the results of work are needed or which would be a traditional place of work in the past, using information technology”. According to Mannering and Mokhtarian (1995, p. 49) remote work is “work performed at home or in a place close to home, without commuting to a conventional office during standard working hours”.

According to *Gurova (2016)* remote work is the performance of a certain employment contract of the labor function outside the location of the employer, its branch, representative office, other separate structural unit (including those located in another area), outside a stationary workplace, territory or facility, directly or indirectly under the control of the employer, subject to use for the performance of this labor functions and for implementation of interaction between the employer and the employee on issues related to its implementation, public information and telecommunication networks, including the Internet.

Many organizations around the world used this opportunity for remote work even before the pandemic. Gallup research in the United States before 2020 shows that more and more employees are working remotely. Between 2012 and 2016, Gallop reports the number of remote employees increasing four percentage points, from 39 percent to 43 percent of the American workforce. Thirty-one percent of remote workers reported

spending between 80 and 100 percent of their time remotely in 2016 (Hickman and Robison, 2020).

Remote work (telework, or work from home) is quite logically enshrined in the state of emergency - in practice because it was the only job opportunity for many people. The term “telework” is used to describe remote work in many countries around the world, but it is not present in the Bulgarian legislation and practice. The labor code in Bulgaria defines the concepts of home work and remote work (or work from distance). In essence, however, the term “telework” defines the conditions for remote work. For this reason, the terms “remote work, telework or work from home” are used as synonyms in this article. All of these words and expressions describe an increasingly adopted practice by organizations around the world. This is the time to clarify that working from home / remotely does not mean homework.

According to the Bulgarian Labor Code - Art. 107h, para. 1, the work from a distance is a form for organizing work, taken out of the premises of the employer, through the use of information technologies, which before its removal was or could be performed in the premises of the employer (*Labor Code, art. 107h, para. 1*). With Art. 107n, para. 1 of the Labor Code explicitly establishes that the employee who performs remote work has equal labor and trade union rights with those of employees who work in the premises of the employer.

According to Art. 107b of the Bulgarian Labor Code, homework may be agreed in connection with the production and / or provision of services in the home of the employee or in other premises of his choice outside the workplace of the employer for remuneration with his and / or the employer's equipment, materials and other aids (*Labor Code, Article 107b*). Again, it is about organizing the work process outside the employer's premises, but the difference with remote work is that the latter is related to the use of information technology, involves software, internet connectivity, etc. But in both cases, disciplinary responsibility and equal treatment with other employees in the company are mandatory.

The transition to remote work is a “salvation” for most companies when quarantine measures related to COVID-19 restricted the movement and life of the people. Before Covid-19, businesses were slowly learning how good remote work was. Since the advent of Covid-19, the forced global remote work experiment has revealed to many how well remote work works.

Remote work offers a **vast number of benefits** from a **managerial and HR perspective**. As *Tuyo (2020)* report studies of University Credit Union have showed that employees who are given some flexibility in their work actually become *more productive* team members. If someone in the team needs to get up from their desk for any personal reason at home, it doesn't really have a negative impact on their productivity

for the day. Flexibility during the work day helps teams stay happier (despite everything else happening in their lives) and better communication helps ensure everything is completed on a daily basis. In a way, remote work forces teams to find a focus around common goals, which facilitates efficient coordination of tasks.

Study, reported from *Bloom et al. (2015)*, for the effects of work from home in the Chinese company CTrip with 16,000 employees shows a 13% *increase in productivity*. This was due to two main factors: firstly, employees were able to work more minutes per shift on a monthly average, due mainly to fewer breaks and sick days. Secondly, being able to work in a quieter, more convenient environment, made it possible for them to focus better and thus perform a higher number of similar tasks in the same amount of time. Based on the results of the experiment, CTrip “improved total factor productivity by between 20% to 30% and saved about \$2,000 a year per employee working from home. About two thirds of this improvement came from the reduction in office space and the rest from improved employee performance and reduced turnover” (Bloom et al., 2015, p.170).

Remote work is also frequently associated with greater flexibility in work schedule, which can be another dimension along which workers can optimize. Some workers may be more productive working early in the morning and others late at night. By reducing stress about coordinating work and family schedules, remote work can also allow greater focus while at work. Lastly, the reduction in travel time can extend the hours employees are able to work each day.

A natural part of the transition to remote work was to establish new frameworks and protocols for team communication. “Smoother and more consistent communication across the team quickly proved itself as a very positive benefit that was a boon to the team’s effectiveness” (*Tiyo, 2020*).

Remote positions can access higher quality workers anytime there are higher quality workers outside the local market. Remote work capabilities allow a firm to access a larger labor market. This will lead to better matching of firms with higher quality workers if they can find each other, and if firms can entice distant workers to work for them remotely.

On the other hand, implementing remote work practices also comes with **potential challenges**. For instance, as *Popovici and Popovici (2020)* note, companies can find it difficult to build a culture that is accepting and supportive of remote work, which can be detrimental to their retention efforts since it can go as far as impacting employees’ motivation and satisfaction. It can also be difficult for an organization to track exactly who is working remotely, when and how, particularly when remote work is adopted more informally. This also brings up a unique set of managerial issues specific to telework practice, which can only be addressed when taking into account the overall

organizational context such as culture, values, control practices etc.

According to Surkova (2020) remote work has many **benefits for employees**:

- *you can work where you want to*. This is the main advantage of remote work for employees.
- *you can plan it yourself, start the day and choose the time work*. Often employers do not regulate the work schedule, focusing on implementing a specific task as for indicator of labor efficiency. Employees are often presented the opportunity to successfully combine study or care for children or elderly relatives with work;
- *In remote work there are no age limits and the employee appearance is not relevant at all*. The most important thing here is the immediate result of the work;
- *saving money and time*. Working remotely, you don't have to spend money and time on travelling from home to work and back, no need to buy expensive clothes and shoes. Food costs are also minimized.

Objectively, “there are some **disadvantages of remote work** for employees that must be kept in mind. *The nature of many companies does not provide the possibility of switching to remote work*” (Surkova, 2020). In such cases, it is possible to consider the distribution of workers only in some departments, as a rule, in office space. Remote work involves minimizing live communication. Teamwork with instant messaging and video communication does not compensate for the required amount of communication for sociable people. It is not always easy for an employee. That is why it is important to understand that remote work is not suitable for some people due to character traits and lifestyle. “Social isolation has a strong psychological impact on the individual and the community as a whole” (Charlampous et al., 2019).

Due to the intense use of information and communication technologies, remote workers are even more vulnerable to health risks such as high stress and anxiety levels, fatigue, burnout, headaches and eyestrain (Eurofund, 2020).

All of these aspects can affect remote workers to different extents. Now is the time for organizations to pay extra attention to all these negative aspects that remote workers are facing. As the remote work phenomenon as a whole increases, their potential harmful impact is also prone to increase.

The current pandemic has posed serious challenges for HR executives that have never been so valued by senior management. The list of tasks for HR managers is constantly growing – take care of the health of employees, keep the spirit of the company high, manage telecommuting, decide when and whether to dismiss employees (*The Economist Newspaper*, 2020).

“In this unprecedented crisis, not a small part of the employers in Bulgaria resorted to dismissal of employees without realizing the problem they will have after

the crisis for quality staff. Because the people who have been fired will not return to the company” (*Varbanova, 2009*). What is already clear is that the main and decisive competitive advantage after the end of the corona virus crisis will be the quality of human capital in the company.

For each organization, the crisis is a period of instability, an opportunity for a serious change. The result can be final - either unfavourable or positive. But in all likelihood, the crisis is a threat to the survival of the organization (*Prahalad, S.K, Ramaswami, V., 2009: 19*). Possible assigned new tasks in a crisis management situation usually require new skills, approach, knowledge and action.

The corona virus pandemic could be a catalyst for something new - more frequent work from home in the future. Before the pandemic in Europe, regulated work from home was an exception rather than a norm. According to Eurostat, in 2019, only 5.4% of workers aged 15-64 in the EU usually worked from home. Among the European countries where even before this crisis the practice of working remotely was necessary are Norway, Iceland, Luxembourg, Finland, Austria. The Netherlands is considered the “champion” in this respect with 14% of employees. This is also the country that is said to have the best balance between professional and personal life. At the opposite pole with between 1 and 2 % are Cyprus, Hungary, Croatia, Greece, and in Bulgaria and Romania less than 1% of employees work remotely (see Figure 1) (Eurostat, 2020).

As can be seen from the figure, Bulgaria lags far behind the global trend for teleworking and flexible workspaces. In Bulgaria, due to the crisis with Covid-19 and the state of emergency imposed in March, only 28% of non-financial organizations preferred telework instead of cutting staff or putting them on leave, and in April even 26.5%. These are data from a survey of the National Statistical Institute in Bulgaria, conducted in the period April 8-May 25, which included 3770 enterprises with approximately 230 000 employees (NSI, 2020). For comparison, in Spain COVID-19 has increased to 88% the companies whose staff works from home , while before the crisis they were only 4%. (EAE Business School, 2020).

Fig. 1: Share of employees who usually work remotely from home

Source: Eurostat, 2020

According to *Popovici and Popovici (2020)* however, this data will have skyrocketed a year from now. The COVID-19 related health crisis has practically unleashed the potential for telework across the globe as of 2020. The numbers of those who have switched to teleworking have allegedly soared within the past few months,

marking a true revolution in the history of remote work.

The situation after the corona virus cannot be the same again as it was before. Before the corona virus, millions of people spent much of their lives in offices. Employers are now reassessing the need for large office spaces and realizing that their employees can work from home.

According to a Mercer study involving 1274 companies, a quarter of Bulgarian companies introduced flexible working conditions during the COVID pandemic. The same percentage of companies intend to keep this policy permanent after the health crisis. It is estimated that an average of 50% of employees will work remotely after the pandemic. "According to the survey, 57% of companies in Bulgaria have introduced the possibility of remote work because of the COVID pandemic, and 37% have already had this policy before" (*Marinova, 2020*).

According to Janap Boogard, director of office consulting services for the Middle East, Europe and Africa in Colliers, "the biggest surprise for many companies was the discovery that telecommuting was applicable to them without losing productivity and harms the sense of connection between team members. This has caused a number of businesses to rethink their processes, corporate culture and the future of the workplace in general" (*Chobaligova, 2020*).

Although not all economic sectors have this opportunity, many companies have chosen to work from home to help control the pandemic. However, this also proved to be a challenge. Companies faced the challenge of digitizing their work regimes. The corona virus required the shift from onsite to remote work to happen overnight. In-person meetings have been moved to web conferencing; interviews are conducted by phone and video chats, and workplace conversations have moved from over-the-cubicle to Skype or texts. Sharing paper and physical sign-off is now impossible, and so we rapidly implemented online replacements to any remaining manual processes. As expected, the companies in the IT field coped with this task most easily. But even companies that resisted telecommuting realized the benefits of this type of work.

According to *Kilgore (2020)* while there are so many challenges for employers during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's great to see vendors offering their free solutions to help us be successful with our remote work. We must also think of the future of work, with the realization that the new normal, even after the pandemic has passed, will be different than the mostly on-premises work of the past. Therefore, we need to invest in HR technology that will allow virtual HR service delivery and workforce collaboration to provide competitive advantages to our organizations.

3. Research results

The study was conducted among employees in Bulgarian companies. The survey took the form of an anonymous questionnaire available on docs.google.com. The link to the survey was provided to participants via email and social media. The results of the study were processed using Excel.

The *aim of this article* is to outline the opportunities and challenges facing Bulgarian employees working from home during the March-April 2020 state of emergency and beyond.

The *tasks set by the research* are:

1/. To establish what percentage of the surveyed persons had the opportunity to work remotely during the state of emergency in Bulgaria.

2/. To analyze the benefits and risks of the remote work indicated by the respondents.

3/. To establish what percentage of the surveyed persons would like to continue working from home after the end of the pandemic.

A total of 242 employees ($n = 242$) took part in the survey, namely 175 women (72,3% of all respondents) and 67 men (27,7%). The vast majority of the respondents, i.e. 32,2 %, were aged 36 to 45. People between 19 and 25 are 21,1%, those over 55 accounted for 2.9% (see Figure 2). This is quite logical, because it is the people in active age who most often work remotely, and the older ones find it more difficult to use modern digital means and this makes it more difficult for them to do the work from home.

Fig. 2: Distribution of respondents by age

Source: Author's own research

38.8% of the respondents did not have the opportunity to work remotely, 1.2% were laid off due to the crisis, and respectively 0.8% worked in the office of their own volition and 0,8% were on unpaid leave (see Fig. 3).-This could be due to the fact that in the sample of respondents, we came across those who work in organizations and / or areas where it is difficult to perform remote work or are not sufficiently prepared to switch to remote mode at work for such a short time. Unfortunately, in our survey there is no question about the field of activity of the organization in which the employee works.

Fig. 3: Percentage of respondents who had the opportunity to work remotely provided by employers

Source: Author's own research

Working from home has a number of advantages and provides a number of opportunities according to our respondents. The biggest benefit of working from home, according to those who have worked remotely, is that they do not waste time traveling to and from the office (80.4%). This high percentage, in our opinion, is due to the fact that most of the respondents are from the capital Sofia (68,6%), where the distances are large and more time is needed for people to travel to their workplace. This advantage is probably not so important for people from small settlements.

More than half of the respondents indicated that for them the benefits of telework are: flexible working hours and the opportunity to organize your own working day (59.4%), the opportunity to do some personal activity in the meantime (55.2%) and the opportunity to work in a cosy atmosphere at home (52.4%)(see figure 4).

Fig. 4: Opportunities and benefits of working from home during a state of emergency

Source: Author's own research

Slightly more than 1/3 of the respondents who worked from home during the state of emergency in Bulgaria said that, while working remotely, they managed to pay more attention to their family and homework (37.8%). A large percentage of respondents (32.9%) say that working from home have the opportunity to better focus on work in the absence of noise from colleagues, clients, etc. Some researchers believe that working from home saves money on food or is an opportunity for a more complete and healthy diet. According to the author, the low percentage is due to the fact that these benefits were not set in advance as a possible answer in the questionnaire, but there was an opportunity to indicate further and most of the respondents most likely focused on the previously mentioned possible options.

The survey shows that many people approve working from home and will probably want to be able to take advantage of it to some extent after the coronavirus crisis. A total of 64.9% of the surveyed employees indicated that they would like to work to varying degrees remotely after the end of the pandemic - 38.8% would like to work remotely after the crisis when their work for the day does not require their physical presence in the office, 25.2% - when there is some objective reason and 16.5% - when they have to do some personal work (see Fig.5).

**Fig. 5: Desire to continue working from home
and after the end of the state of emergency because of Covid-19**

Source: Author's own research

This data confirm the thesis of other researchers that remote working will permanently enter our daily lives even after the end of the corona virus pandemic. Perhaps never again will the percentage of remote workers be as low as before the pandemic. Perhaps the hybrid way of working - from different workspaces, will be a lasting trend.

Mass work from home is the most visible change since the corona virus to date. Currently, a large proportion of global companies operate from home. However, the proliferation of remote work can lead to decentralization of labor markets and businesses, which are currently concentrated mainly in the capital Sofia.

Not to be overlooked is the percentage of people who would not like to continue working remotely - 35.1%. (see figure 5). There can be various reasons for this. More than half of the respondents indicate that they lack live contact with colleagues in the office, which makes their work at home more complicated (56.2%). Office work creates connections between employees, which often overcome purely professional relationships. The opinion of our colleagues is also important for our own self-esteem when it comes to not only professional but also personal qualities. Social isolation negatively affects the mental health of employees. On the other hand, it is more difficult for employees to break away from domestic commitments in order to fulfil their official duties - 37.4% of respondents indicated that they encountered difficulties in remote work due to the presence of pets, children and other family members, which hindered their focus on work (see Fig. 6).

Fig. 6: Challenges (difficulties) to work from home

Source: Author's own research

Almost 40% of the respondents had some technical difficulties in working from home - 17.3% indicated a bad internet connection, 16.6% had problems with the platform through which they worked and 5.8% did not have enough devices (laptops, tablets, etc.) for remote work, given that the children in the family also studied remotely during this period.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that remote work is here to stay. The strong interest in remote work was confirmed by the present study. The results of the survey show a relatively high level of respondents' propensity to work remotely, although the practice of telework in Bulgaria was not very popular before the pandemic.

The advantages of remote work, which had the strongest influence on the respondents' interest in telework, were also identified. The most important benefit was the lack of time to travel to and from work. Other benefits include flexible working hours, the ability to better balance work and private life, and more.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic which overnight forced a large number of employees to work remotely, turned out to be the greatest motivator to start working remotely.

Under the pressure of restrictions due to the Covid pandemic, many Bulgarian employees discovered the advantages of remote work and changed their way of thinking about teleworking. For this reason, it would be interesting to conduct such a study in

a few years to make a comparison and see how employees' views have changed and whether the proportion of people working from home has increased significantly since the pandemic compared to with data from before. The conclusions that could be drawn from such a comparison, would be significant from both a practical and a theoretical point of view.

According to us Covid-19 has forever changed the way business organizations work. We believe there will be more and more people who want and will be given the opportunity to work remotely, and not only in the IT sector.

Today's crisis is an opportunity for many companies and their employees to discover the benefits of working in virtual teams and it is likely to significantly change people's work habits.

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