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Distance working in organizational praxis

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Abstract

The paper is embedded into the topic of distance working (or teleworking) in organizational praxis, it means how the Czech companies implement the possibility of distance working for employees and how employees assess this possibility, respectively working concept. The topic is relevant regarding recent economic, technological and societal changes, as well as actual situation around pandemic COVID-19. According to the findings of questionnaire survey, it is obvious that the concept of distance working brings significant opportunities, deals with several threads, and could be significant part of future working models. Authors hope that research introduced in this paper could bring useful findings for managerial praxis as well as for academic experience.

Keywords: distance working; management; employee; organization; questionnaire

1. Introduction

Distance working (or teleworking in other words) could be perceived as one of the modern concepts of work. It is related to economic, technological and societal changes of last decades or two (e.g. concepts of smart economy, industry 4.0, holistic approaches to management of organizations, preferences of new generations in working life and leisure time etc.). Regarding this, distance working could be a significant working concept for the future, also with reference to information and communication technologies development and implementation into processes in organizations.

Benefits of distance working are related to organization's and employees' performance, motivation, quality of work, possibilities of designing and harmonization of professional and private life, effective time utilization and cost savings (time, economic, personal etc.; regarding both, organization's and employees' viewpoints).

Note, that organizations, managers respectively, have to carefully assess whether or not distance working is suitable for their employees. This issue is relevant for particular economy sectors (e.g. manufacturing vs services), types of job or employees themselves.

For successful implementation of distance working, there are important two main determinants – firstly, the attitude of management; secondly, preferences and attitudes of employees. Not all of these stakeholders are ready and compliant to accept and implement concept of distance working. Unsuitable model of distance working in organization can lead to disappointment and doesn't bring potential and anticipated benefits.

In this paper, there are introduced findings of realized questionnaire survey between employees of several organizations, focusing on attitudes and perceptions of employees regarding distance working. Summarizing the findings, the purpose of the survey (and this paper as well) was fulfilled. Next sections of the paper stepwise describe theoretical context of distance working, methodology (focusing mainly on questionnaire survey), findings of the survey, and finally are provided some conclusive remarks.

2. Theoretical context of distance working

In this part, context of distance working is described, according to academic research. “What is distance working?” - this question is crucial for perception of the whole concept. Initial definition can be formulated as follows (see Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Nilles, 1994; Valenduc and Vendramin, 2016; Greer and Payne, 2014) – distance working means working outside conventional working location, including communication with employer, colleagues, clients and other stakeholders in working process via information and communication technologies. It is not necessarily designed as so-called home-office working model (like often perceived), but it can be designed also as legwork, fieldwork (e.g. in the location of a client), working outside home location as well as location of employer, working in employer's satellite locations etc. (Valenduc and Vendramin, 2016; Boell et al., 2016; Greer and Payne, 2014; Haddon and Brynin, 2005 for discussion). Bailey and Kurland (2002) note that distance workers can perform under this concept just a part of their full workload. The whole concept emerged as a reaction on economic and societal problems and changes (Bailey and Kurland, 2002); provides modern and flexible working possibilities (Vasarhelyi, 2001; Ilić et al., 2019; Boell et al., 2016); utilizes information and communication technologies (Vasarhelyi, 2001; Ilić et al., 2019; Boell et al., 2016); challenges all stakeholders (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Boell et al., 2016; Haddon and Brynin, 2005; Illegems and Verbeke, 2004).

Distance working concept can provide a wide range of benefits, on the other hand, unsuitable implementation can lead to several threads or negatives. Thus, the implementation and utilization of distance working is not black and white. Contradictory, it is always necessary to regard the specific context and needs of organization and its employees. Both, positive and negative aspects of distance working are introduced in table 1.

Table 1: Positives, opportunities, negatives and threads of distance working

Positives and opportunities of distance working	Negatives and threads of distance working
Effective harmonization of professional and private life of employees	Loss of particular employees' benefits (e.g. transportation or boarding allowances)
Significant savings regarding operating expenses of employers	Weakening of employees' loyalty and engagement
Better possibilities for handicap people employment	Loss of social contact with colleagues and other stakeholders
Shrinkage of environmental burden, reduction of emission, energy and transportation savings	Lack of flexible and immediate reaction and feedback between employees, managers, teams, clients etc.
Increasing of employees' performance and motivation, increasing of employees' satisfaction and self-realization	Negative attitudes of employees who don't have the possibility of distance working (e.g. jealousy, misunderstandings etc.)
Higher effectivity of work performance, leaning of processes and time-delays reduction	Risk of social roles conflicts in case of distance workers (e.g. employee, parent, family member), house-hold conflicts, absence of rituals connected to the fluent role transition and employee-role self-identification etc.
Better work organization, self-management and self-control competencies enhancement	Decrease in working performance and working motivation
Increasing of development potential in case of general and professional competencies (e.g. time-management, ICT competencies, decision-making, independence, problem-solving, professionalism)	Negative attitudes and reluctance of managers provide the possibility of distance working, lack of trust in employees and fear of management from loss of control and managerial powers

Source: compiled according to Bailey and Kurland (2002), Huws et al. (1990), Boell et al. (2016), Greer and Payne (2014), Illegems and Verbeke (2004), Sardeshmukh et al. (2012)

Preferences of employees regarding distance working differs from their socio-economic characteristics. Based on Mannering and Mokhtarian (1995) or Luukinen (1996), slight majority of men prefers distance working compared to women; better suite of administrative, IT or service-providing employees for distance working model compared to manufacturing (Baruch and Nicholson, 1997) can be observed; there exists higher preference of distance working between more educated or younger workforce (Mannering and Mokhtarian, 1995 or Luukinen, 1996). Altogether, two groups of motivational factors of distance working can be distinguished (Mannering and Mokhtarian, 1995; Bailey and Kurland, 2002 or Luukinen, 1996) – pull motivational factors enhancing employee's affinity to distance working (e.g. harmonization of professional and private life, costs of commuting etc.) and push motivational factors displacing the employee from employer's location (e.g. disturbances at workplace, interest of employer in

lowering operating costs). Regarding abovementioned findings, it is crucial to reveal and understand the motivation of employees, as well as employers, in the context of distance working and its implementation.

Boell et al. (2016) stress the need of customized, personalised approach to distance working model designing and implementation, reduction of unified and vague solutions, as well as wide communication and stakeholders' engagement during the process of model designing and implementation. Considering all the positive and challenging aspects of distance working, Greer and Payne (2014) conclude the distance working to be the future of employment concepts.

3. Methodology and main findings of realized questionnaire survey

Following text briefly introduces methodology of the questionnaire survey and accordingly its main findings. The main purpose of the paper, as was mentioned in introduction, focus on questionnaire survey realized between employees of several Czech organizations who realize their work (or at least a part of the whole workload) under the distance working model. The aim is to indicate attitudes and perceptions of employees about distance working.

3.1 Methodology of questionnaire survey

Respondents of the survey were employees who, at least partially, realized their work under distance working model. The questionnaire contains mainly closed questions with limited answer variants, formulated regarding academic sources. At the end of the questionnaire was placed one open question providing space for additional commentaries of respondent. Respondents were employees of 78 formerly addressed organizations which agreed with participation. The survey lasted three weeks (after two weeks, respondents were remaindered) and was realized via e-mail. 600 employees were addressed, overall return rate was 54,5 % (thus, 328 questionnaires entered evaluation).

Results of the survey were evaluated using basic descriptive statistics and visualized as introduced in the following part of this paper. It is noteworthy, that there were not indicated statistically significant differences between various socio-economic groups according to gender, age, family status or commuting distance between home and employer's location. Basic socio-economic structure of respondents is following:

- Majority of respondents was in age between 31 and 50 years
- Majority of respondents was men (196 male respondents compared to 132 of women)
- Almost half of respondents were married with children (compared to a third of childless respondents)
- Majority of respondents lives in 15km or lesser distance from employer's location.

3.2 Main findings of questionnaire survey

Attitudes and perceptions of employees regarding distance working can be influenced by the share of workload which is realized under this concept (e.g. lower share can decrease the risk of social isolation or exclusion of the employee, or his low engagement with organization – see Bailey and Kurland, 2002). In this context, most of respondents work under the distance working model less than one half of total workload and these employees work relatively often and steadily at employer's location with direct contact with colleagues, managers and other stakeholders.

Majority of respondents perceived distance working to be some kind of benefit, on the other hand, almost 40 % of them don't see distance working to be benefit based on working performance or assess it in a negative manner.

Self-assessment of working performance is positive from employees' viewpoint – more than 60 % see their working performance to be higher and more effective under the distance working model (see figure 1). Often it was mentioned, that during distance working absent disruptive elements (like phone-calls of others, colleagues' questions and request etc.), or possibility of most suitable work-scheduling (e.g. according to other duties in family, daily productivity circles etc.). Notwithstanding, these findings could be biased by overestimating of work performance by employees themselves (it would be beneficiary to compare the findings with perceptions and opinions of managers).

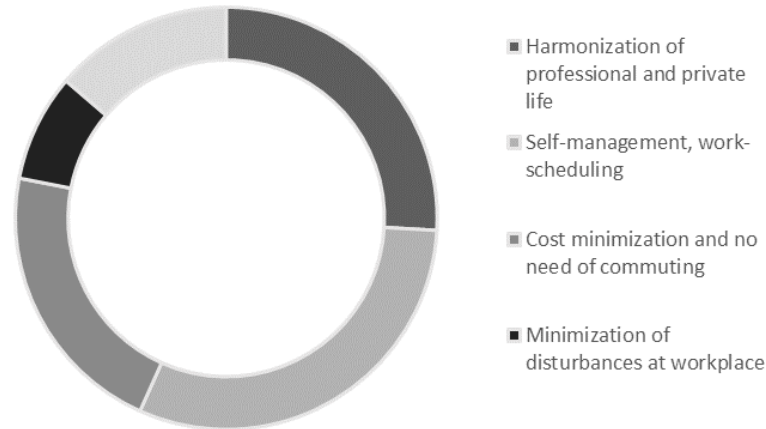
Respondents were asked to assess given theses about main benefits of distance working (based on academic research; see figure 2). Mostly appreciated aspect of distance working was possibility of own time-management and work-scheduling, respectively high freedom in this regard; followed by the possibility of harmonization of professional and private life. Other appreciated aspect was also commuting costs minimization, economic or time.

Figure 1: Self-assessment of work performance



Source: Authors.

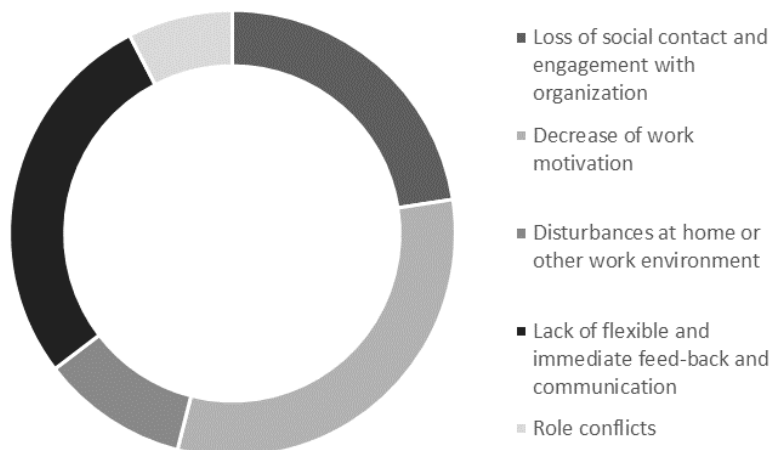
Figure 2: Perception of benefits of distance working



Source: Authors.

Contradictory, most severe or relevant risks or negatives of distance working were related to decrease of work motivation, lack of flexible and immediate feed-back and communication with colleagues, managers or other stakeholders, or lack of social contact or engagement within organization (see figure 3). Role conflicts were not indicated to be severe potential risk of distance working.

Figure 3: Perception of negatives of distance working

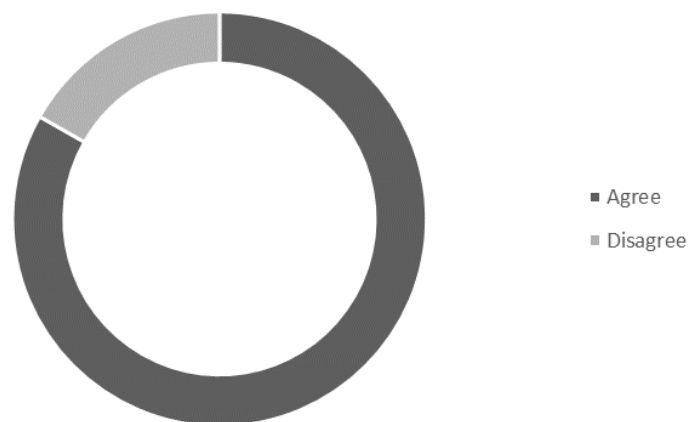


Source: Authors.

Almost half of respondents assess distance working model to be beneficiary also for employer, regarding mainly cost savings and potential higher work performance of employees. Relatively high share of respondents does not have relevant information to provide solid opinion. Vast majority of respondents also agreed that they are provided with sufficient and convenient equipment and technique. On the other hand, loss of particular benefits (e.g. transportation or boarding allowances) was assessed in a negative manner.

Finally, more than 80 % of respondents see the distance working concept to be significant part of future in employment (see figure 4), providing lots of potential benefits and fulfil future demands of labour market, employees and organizations. Sustainability of the concept or its virtual necessity is embedded in information and communication technology development or in current and anticipated economic and societal trends.

Figure 4: Perception of the future of distance working



Source: Authors.

4. Conclusion

Distance working is perceived to be still mostly additional or optional working concept in the reality of the Czech labour market, respectively organizations, as well as some kind of benefit (not a standard complement of working model). Nevertheless, it is assessed to be a working model with significant future potential for both – employees and organizations. This fact is embedded in the context of economic and societal trends and changes (preferences of young generations related to workload, work duties and work performance; information and communication technologies utilization and development etc.). Respondents point at current relative unreadiness of employees, managers, organizations and whole Czech economy on distance working concept.

Self-management and strengthening of employees' freedom in work-scheduling, possibility of better harmonization of professional and private life are appreciated mostly,

regarding distance working. Benefits are nevertheless indicated at both sides – employees and employers. Preferred are models combining both concepts, distance working and present working at employer's location. Altogether, distance working is relatively popular model between employees, providing potential benefits if it is appropriately implemented, according to needs and targets of organization and its employees.

During distance working concept implementation, it is essential to consider potential risks or negative aspects. Mostly, these risks or negatives are related to decrease of work motivation and performance of employees, delays in work tasks realization, lack of flexible and immediate feedback and communication between stakeholders of working process, or lack of social contact and engagement with organization.

Readiness of employees and organizations to distance working was currently challenged by situation related to COVID-19 pandemic and lock-down of economy. Thus, this readiness seems not to be fully sufficient and adequate, providing space for strengthening. Organizations that are able to effectively and immediately react on current situation and future trends will benefit from distance working implementation and will exploit competitive advantage undoubtedly.

Purpose of the paper was to introduce realized survey between employees who realized at least a part of their workload under distance working concept and indicate their attitudes and perceptions about distance working. Of course, the survey has its limitations (in methodology and respondents' sample). The survey and its findings could be furtherly supported and supplemented by perceptions of managers and organizations themselves, as well as by perceptions of employees who do not perform their work under the concept. These other viewpoints can bring more comprehensive overall picture of distance working in the context of the Czech organizations.

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