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# WORK ARRANGEMENTS IN THE NEW (UN)NORMAL

WHAT DO WE ALREADY KNOW ABOUT WORKING OUTSIDE OF THE OFFICE?



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The report has been co-created in collaboration with CD PROJEKT.

CD PROJEKT S.A., headquartered in Warsaw, conducts business activities in the dynamically growing global digital entertainment segment. It is the holding company of the CD PROJEKT Capital Group, whose operations are divided into two key segments: CD PROJEKT RED and GOG.COM. Video game development is carried out by the CD PROJEKT RED Studio, which develops and publishes video games for personal computers and gaming consoles. The studio's flagship titles include The Witcher series of games, GWENT: The Witcher Card Game and the futuristic AAA role-playing game — Cyberpunk 2077.



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## INTRODUCTION

The pandemic has shaken all areas of our lives, including the job market. Although its effects are undoubtedly negative, it is difficult to clearly assess all aspects of the changes as they depend on a variety of factors. Many companies went down while others generated record-breaking revenues. Some people lost their jobs, others – against all odds – benefited from certain aspects of the shift. Importantly, however, the pandemic, as is usually the case during crises, reinforced certain trends that had already been visible earlier. Therefore, in this relatively short report we tried to analyze various phenomena intersectionally, without artificially separating them from their root contexts such as generational shifts or long-standing experiments with new working arrangements in the technological sector. We believe that looking at pre-pandemic data in this way helps to point out the consequences of working in the new (un)normal – at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is still an existing, albeit recognized threat.

### FLEXIBLE WORK IS HERE TO STAY

When considering the future of work after the pandemic, the problem of work arrangements, i.e. where and when we will do our work, becomes more and more significant. There are numerous potential answers to these questions, and their multitude is best represented on a chart devised by Prof. L. Gratton (2021) who distinguishes between synchronous vs. asynchronous models by time and shared vs. distributed models by space (table below).

**Table: Work arrangements in place and time**

		Place of work	
		shared	distributed
Working time	synchronous	from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., in the office	from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., anywhere
	asynchronous	anytime, in the office	anytime, anywhere

Source: Gratton, L. (2021, May 1). How to do hybrid right. *Harvard Business Review*.

Even before we start considering this array of possibilities, it is clear that the long-standing trend of making the workplace and the working hours more flexible is a fact. Eagerly picked up by the mainstream media during the pandemic, this topic is now most often discussed when new,

exciting research results are published by technology and consulting companies. As the research shows,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of companies do not plan a forced return to offices for everyone (Castrillon, 2020), and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of employees want to continue working in a hybrid model (Tevaán, 2021). While these reports lead us to believe that the rise of hybrid and remote work stems from the preferences of employees and employers alike, it is important to look at the economic determinants of this change as well. To put it bluntly, the decision on the direction of change will reflect companies' profit and loss accounts, not their employee satisfaction surveys. Quoting Barrero and his associates (2021), at least three economic arguments point to the persistence of the trend towards flexible work arrangements:

1. businesses want to capitalise on the investments made in remote work facilities throughout the past several months,
2. we are observing an onset of technological innovation supporting remote work (video conferencing software, applications for monitoring work, teamwork tools etc.) which not only make teleworking cheaper, but also more and more adaptable,
3. recruiting employees to work remotely can open up access to a more qualified talent pool.

However, reaping the economic benefits will require efforts to maintain the company's key resource – its human capital. And part of it will be strengthening both the fundamental readiness to do the job and the intricate network of interpersonal relations enabling complex tasks to be performed. Offices were an incredibly effective mean of reinforcing these relationships. There interpersonal ties were established and information was shared in the corridors, staff rooms and elevators. Due to the growing popularity of remote work, companies are forced to experiment with solutions that support collaboration and co-creation also in home environments, co-working facilities and virtual spaces (Kark et al. 2019). In the first place, these experiments will involve very specific professions and enterprises before becoming commonplace.

### WHY WILL SO FEW IMPACT ALL OF US?

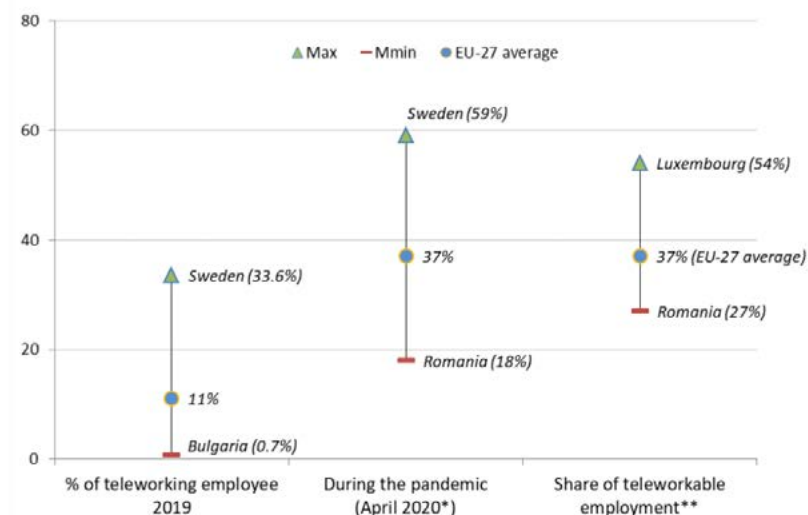
Our study concerns work during the pandemic, but obviously its scope does not encompass the entire labour market. While there is no reliable data on this issue, it seems that the phenomenon primarily affects two categories of companies. Firstly, knowledge-based businesses. They are the companies that produce intangible goods based on company know-how and employee competencies. Because they have tried and tested IT systems in place and have experience working remotely with freelancers, consultants and researchers functioning outside the organization, the shift to teleworking was relatively easy for them. It is also for them that the need to return to the offices was and still is the least obvious. Even if they do not represent a large proportion of the population of enterprises, they are the forerunners of a bigger change. The benefits of a widespread adoption of remote work in these companies will be an argument for others considering similar moves.



The second category of companies concerned are those in which some of the work has a high degree of teleworkability. This term refers to the potential for isolating a specific range of activities, the results of which are easily quantifiable and subject to simple evaluation, so that the performance of this type of work outside the office does not pose any major difficulties. An example of this is the functioning of a call centre – most often carried out 'alongside' the company's core operations with standards laid down for the number of calls made and continuous customer satisfaction surveys. We will cover call centers in more detail in the section of this report dedicated to the organizational perspective.

It is far more difficult to transition a business model based on orchestrating multiple, complex creative processes into a remote working environment. This does not change the fact that it is worth looking at the experiments conducted in call centers for two reasons. First, more and more jobs and tasks are subject to tighter description and quantification, making them increasingly similar to the call center working model. One of many examples would be the work of programmers who produce certain functionalities within a defined time frame and according to a set of standards. Secondly, the examples described above show that the success of the call center experiment encourages change in the entire company. That means the changes may reach employees with low teleworkability faster than they might expect. This is especially true in the light of EU statistics which show that only 37% of employees in positions that can be performed outside the office actually use such solutions.

**Figure: Teleworkability among employees in the European Union**



**Figure 2: Teleworkability and past and current prevalence of telework across countries (% of employees)**

Source: Eurostat LFS data for 2019.

\*Eurofound (2020) "Living, working and COVID-19: First findings" – April 2020.

\*\* JRC-Eurofound "Teleworkability and the COVID-19 crisis: a new digital divide?"

Source: S. Milasi, *Who can telework today? The teleworkability of occupations in the EU*. The European Commission's science and knowledge service, 2020.

The extent and depth of this change is yet to be determined. But exactly how difficult it is to carry out on a social level is shown by narratives concerning the new working arrangements. These, with remote work among them, were the subject of one of the main discussions surrounding the popularization of the Internet in the early 21st century. Quite quickly, however, it became clear that it was not fully feasible. In his monumental work entitled "Network Society," published in 1996, Manuel Castells remarked that the mobility of most of the workforce is limited, dismissing the fantasy of escaping the cities and working entirely remotely. In addition, the market crash of 2000 – the burst of the "dot-com bubble," and the economic downturn of 2008, proved that more traditional forms of employment offer greater stability and security which make them a far more desirable option in the eyes of employees.

## UNCERTAINTIES AND AMBIGUITIES

These unfulfilled prophecies of the imminent arrival of absolute freedom of time and place of work encourage us to offer a number of reservations. **We must, first of all, emphasize that we are describing an emergent situation.** This position has certain advantages because, among others, it allows this report to have an impact on this flux phenomenon. At the same time, however, it presents a certain research challenge. The difference between what is declared and the consequences we are witnessing, are well visible. New standards, from legal to cultural norms, are being forged before our eyes. In this relatively new situation, we don't always know what works for us and what does not. In further sections we will talk about the consequences of avoiding the office, for example in relation to the prospects of promotion. However, we can easily imagine organisations embracing remote working to a greater extent over time which means people working from home will be less affected by the negative consequences. At the same time, among the studies we analysed there are also claims that the last several months were a period of "emergency" in which the workforce, aware of how privileged they were to be able to continue working despite the pandemic, went out of their way to make sure that the drop in efficiency due to working remotely was not noticeable. But after all, this kind of extraordinary motivation cannot last forever. Moreover, the institutional landscape is changing before our eyes, and some of the research findings on the consequences of remote work may be changing too.

Last but not least, while preparing this report we tried to structure it mainly on the foundation of scientific studies, but at the same time we did not want to dismiss the often interesting market research. However, we are aware that some of the information presented in those studies should be treated especially critically. We try to be cautious when comparing different types of data, but at the same time even if the conclusions of the analyses do not provide easy answers concerning the transformations of the labour market, we believe that they can all contribute to a deeper understanding of the situation.

Environmental issues may, in a way, be a marker of how difficult it is to clearly assess the situation. Although it might seem that, at least in this single area, the shift towards remote

and hybrid work will have mostly positive effects, the issue proves more complicated. The most obvious points to be made, such as the reduction in the number of trips to the office<sup>1</sup>, are only a portion of this complex problem. The latest data shows that there is a substantial increase in the energy consumption by households taking over the office function, which through sheer scale may have the opposite effect to what has been expected. There are even studies emerging which suggest that, in environmental terms, the worst possible scenario is hybrid work where high power consumption is recorded both in offices and in employees' households (The Carbon Trust, 2021). Therefore, although in this report we will focus on data that allow us to extrapolate certain trends and patterns that can in turn be translated into real solutions that could be implemented by organisations, we do not want to create the impression that all the available data on the effects of the pandemic are in themselves conclusive.

A good example of this are the studies on the computer game industry. Experts broadly agree that the pandemic has been an important growth impulse. However, from the game development perspective, the issue is more complicated. The Game Developers Conference report entitled *State of the Industry: Work from Home Edition 2020*, based on a survey of nearly 2,500 developers, shows that nearly all game development studios have transitioned to working from home. Nearly half of them believe that this has simultaneously translated into lower productivity and longer working hours – which of course means that the other half is of a different opinion. The same study concludes that believe the new situation has negatively affected their teams' creativity and generated delays. Other examples: 31% of developers think the pandemic improved their situation while 32% think it left them damaged (p. 3).

## ARRIVING AT A DECISION TOGETHER

In summary, our goal was to create as comprehensive a source of data as possible on the consequences of remote work before and during the pandemic. We aimed to draw up a report that will help employees and business owners to possibly make informed decisions about the arrangement of work in the future. A report that will also indicate the strengths and weaknesses, but also opportunities and threats associated with the implementation of the selected solution while not depriving the companies and employees of the right to make the final decision themselves. A report that will, on the other hand, show that the number of reservations to consider is so large that this decision should be subject to individual reflection and careful strategy<sup>2</sup>. In order to allow this decision to be the result of joint efforts on the part of employees and business owners, we divided this report into three interrelated sections representing the three important perspectives – psychological, socio-cultural and organizational. The first section shows how

<sup>1</sup> They may even be misleading. As one analysis by Zhu, Wang, and Jiang (2018) shows, increasing the amount of work done remotely can lead to an increase in total urban miles traveled. Places that employees used to visit on their way to / from work, which did not generate additional mileage, now became the destination of additional travel.

<sup>2</sup> To ensure that the report is not a closed-ended study, each section contains a short summary to help the reader confront their decision on the choice of working model for their own organization. It also contains a list of bibliographical references that provides a better understanding of the research findings that form the backbone of this report.

remote work is experienced by workers and how it affects their psychophysical and psychosocial well-being. The second section takes into account the cultural issues such as attitudes to work, but also changes regarding the entry of a new generation of workers into the labour market. The final, concluding part of the report focuses on aspects important to the functioning of a company – among others productivity, competencies and cooperation. Intended to be complementary with respect to each other, these three parts should encourage a joint discussion.

## 10 CONCLUSIONS ON WORK ARRANGEMENTS

1. Several months of the pandemic allowed us to get accustomed to it – to come up with answers to some initial questions and to form new habits and customs. At the same time, the current situation is still far from being predictable. To give one example, while it is now clear to what extent vaccines will protect us against the virus, we do not know what percentage of the population will be immunised and what the consequences of that will be. Therefore, when deciding on a new work arrangement, it is as important to be clear about its shape as it is to be certain about the boundary conditions for its introduction and withdrawal. This will enable adaptation to changing conditions.
2. The model should not be introduced top-down, without extensive consultation with employees. Even if managers now have certain knowledge and have developed strong intuition, they do not have access to the data that materially affect the effectiveness of the chosen model. This concerns both the information concerning the relationships with employees' co-residents (affecting their mood and motivation), as well as precise data on living conditions and the actual possibilities of remote work such as a dedicated working space at home.
3. In employee interviews, in turn, it is necessary to go beyond declarative data. As research on lifestyle or mental health shows, people, also during a pandemic, are either unaware of their actions or avoid sharing real information about these issues. The divergence between declarations and behaviours is particularly visible in studies on physical activity, alcohol consumption or mood disorders. We exercise less, drink more and feel worse than we are prepared to admit. The role of responsible employers will therefore be to support and even facilitate the process of developing healthy habits for employees, especially in the context of remote work and hybrid arrangements.

4. The preference for hybrid / remote work may also be an effect of the organizational culture prevailing in companies. This culture might be still deeply penetrated with patriarchal relations. They are manifested by such symptoms as, for example, a high power distance, low decision-making autonomy of employees, strong dependency relations, increasing productivity by increasing the time and intensity of work. In these kind of workplaces, working from home becomes a way to protect oneself from the effects of such a culture – to regain partial control over working time and responsibilities. In other words, employees working in companies where they experienced symptoms of oppression do not want to return to their offices.
5. The discussion about the new work arrangement should also be viewed as a struggle between 'young' (generation Y and Z) and 'old' (generation X and boomers) members of the organization. The former, although not yet occupying prominent positions, are already promoting a new attitude to work based on greater care about the relationship between work and private life, a desire to combine passions with work or establish flexible career paths. These expectations may increase the preference for hybrid/remote work within this group.
6. As remote work seems to be a radical solution which is not suited to most professions (those with low and medium teleworkability), the preferences of both managers and workers generally revolve around a hybrid model. One that combines work from the office with work from outside the office. This model, perceived as being homogeneous, actually includes two solutions – the office-first model (most days are spent in the office) and the remote-first model (most days are spent outside the office).



- 7.** The office-first model, which preserves the dominant role of office work, is shown in experimental studies to benefit workers in professions which do not require close interaction with others while demanding prolonged focus, both at the level of productivity and job satisfaction. At the same time, for people whose work requires constant contact and intense collaboration, it is a model that does not impair either productivity or satisfaction. The office-first model, then, is in principle an arrangement that promises profits without any costs.



- 8.** The remote-first model, which introduces the dominant role of working from outside the office, can also generate gains in job satisfaction and productivity, but is not without significant costs. Employees who are more likely to take advantage of the opportunity to work outside the office are statistically less likely to be promoted and receive bonuses. What is more, over time, there will also be a growing number of people among them who will take advantage of the lack of physical control to keep their efforts to a minimum. As a result, the company, which was so far relatively homogeneous, will divide internally hurting itself and its employees alike.
- 9.** Remote work as the only option, especially in the long term, can generate numerous psychological problems which are not always realized by the employees. As research conducted at the end of the third wave of the pandemic showed, people working remotely experienced feelings of loss of control, lowered mood, loneliness, social alienation, and even reduced motivation to grow both as workers and members of society.
- 10.** Such consequences can be prevented in the remote-first model by changing the work culture to one that promotes, among other things (1) asynchronous work, (2) written documentation instead of oral communication, (3) emphasis on process definition and systems development, (4) strict division of responsibility and (5) universal access to data and results, as well as (6) psychological support. As the experience of companies undergoing such changes shows, long-term employee training is needed to disseminate and ingrain new behaviors, and the success of such efforts is not always guaranteed.



## A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE. WORK ARRANGEMENTS VS. PSYCHOPHYSICAL AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL-BEING OF EMPLOYEES

Shifting to remote work might seem like a dream come true for many employees. There are many reasons why being able to do work from home seems to be more beneficial. These include: the ability to sleep longer in the morning, not having to “get ready” for work, put on makeup, shave or comb, avoiding morning traffic, not having to interact with disliked co-workers, or to have daily “face to face” contact with the boss (who we fear or simply personally dislike).

Remote work gained in value during the COVID-19 pandemic, when we clearly saw the negative effects of staying at the workplace during the peak of each wave. Since the virus is contracted mainly through contact with other people, going into remote work at the peak of a pandemic makes sense and can genuinely protect people's health and lives. But does social distancing – which has its indisputable medical benefits – have an equally positive effect on people's mental functioning?

### FROM DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR TO ATTEMPTS AT REGAINING CONTROL

First of all it's worth emphasising that the pandemic crisis has been going on for several months now. How significant is time in this case? From the point of view of people's psychophysical and psychosocial functioning – it is very significant because each crisis occurs in phases which have certain typical properties (Kasprzak, 2000). It can be argued that a crisis – including a pandemic – has its own dynamics. It begins with a phase of disbelief and feeling unreal about the situation that has arisen. Often this phase is accompanied by denial, lack of acceptance for what has happened. In subsequent phases, however, the individual must accept the new conditions and attempt to adapt to them. The process of adaptation can be very difficult and is usually accompanied by seeking relief in pleasurable, but at the same time destructive activities. It may involve alcohol abuse, consumption of excessive amounts of food, especially tasty but unhealthy products, escape into sleep or physical and aesthetic neglect. However, after some time, a significant portion of people begin to look for constructive solutions in the face of the looming personal or professional disaster. They reorganize the way they think and function, make an effort and regain commitment to their actions which usually leads to sorting out the chaos caused by the crisis and regaining a sense of control.

At what stage in the transition through the crisis are we as a society now? No doubt at the stage of trying to regain control and find relief, but often still at the stage of entertaining destructive solutions. According to an analysis by Public Health England (Burton et al., 2021), increased alcohol consumption due to being “locked up at home” translated into a 20% increase

in deaths from alcohol-related diseases. Analyzing the data more deeply, it becomes clear that the percentage of deaths among people with psychological problems related to alcohol abuse increased by 11% during the pandemic. In contrast, 15% more people died directly from alcohol poisoning than before the pandemic. Interestingly, the authors of the report indicate that at the declarative level, no increased alcohol consumption or, more accurately, no increased propensity to admit to drinking more alcohol was observed. Given that liver disease is the second most common cause of premature death among the working population of the UK, the results of the analysis indicate a low level of competence associated with effective coping with pandemic stress and the restrictions introduced during periods of lockdown.

The second way of coping with the effects of the pandemic crisis and the need to spend more time at home is, besides alcohol use, the consumption of excessive amounts of food in order to please oneself with eating, developing overweight and obesity as a result (Bogdanski et al., 2020). According to Professor Bogdanski (2020), citing his research findings, the rate of weight gain increased even more during the pandemic, causing additional average weight gain of 3 to 6 kg for Polish people.

What are the implications of this fact from the perspective of human and employee well-being? They are very serious, and stem well beyond the issues of appearance or self-acceptance (body positivity). In fact, it is about physical and mental health. Let us start with direct links to morbidity and the course of a COVID-19 infection. As indicated by Barry Popkin's (2020) research, people who are overweight or obese have a significantly increased risk of viral infection, death from disease (by 48%), hospitalization (by 113%) and admission to an intensive care unit (by 74%). This is alarming data considering that obesity does not only mean an increased risk of contracting COVID-19, but also proneness to suffer a number of other health-related problems such as cancer, heart disease, type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders, or even dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's disease) and depression (Arden, 2017).

What conclusions can be drawn from the aforementioned data? Firstly, social isolation, does indeed protect people against contracting COVID-19, but it also puts us at risk of suffering a host of other health problems, especially if we are unaware of the impact of isolation on our physical and mental functioning. While it is true that the virus spreads to a lesser extent, being confined to one's home causes people to seek relief, pleasure, and enjoyment of life in behaviors that increase their vulnerability to disease, including to the coronavirus itself. Secondly, when isolated from others, a person is a considerable danger to him or herself, or as some may say – a ‘health risk.’

It is worth distinguishing at this point between the different levels of human functioning in the pandemic: declarative vs actual and gratifying vs constructive. People tend to declare that they are functioning better on many levels than they actually are – for example they drink small amounts of alcohol, eat healthily, and exercise regularly. Unfortunately, the actual state of affairs is often quite different (as shown, for example, by the PHE report cited above). What's more, behaviors that people commonly associate with mood enhancement, including taking



care of oneself, are actually associated with a very short-term pleasure while having long-term negative consequences.

### ALLEGED BENEFITS, REAL DISORDERS

However, the question arises – what is the role that the working arrangement in which people perform their professional duties will play (and has played) in the area of human well-being, the actions people take and the way they function in a pandemic crisis situation? In light of the statistics on people's mental health in the last 1.5 years, the potential, purported benefits listed at the beginning of this chapter that were supposed to result from the fulfilled dream of getting up late, staying in pajamas all day, and working with a computer in bed seem more like a fulfilled nightmare than a happy dream come true. For example, research conducted in the United States by the National Center for Health Statistics showed that between June 2019 and January 2021, the percentage of people experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depressive disorders increased from 11% to over 41% (Panchal et al., 2021).

According to a Polish study, the level of risk of depression and other mental health problems increased significantly during the pandemic and varies according to the spread of the infection. A longitudinal study conducted by Professor Małgorzata Gambin and associates (Gambin et al., 2021) in 2020 (3 phases of the study: in May, June/July and December 2020) on a representative sample of Polish people showed that the highest rates of depression symptoms and anxiety disorders were recorded in May and December. During the summer phases of the study (June and July 2020), the rate of mood disorders was lower. In December 2020, 29% of women and 24% of men were in the risk group for clinical levels of depressive disorders. Additionally, 31% of women and 26% of men were in the risk group for clinical levels of generalized anxiety disorder symptoms. Additionally, the study identified factors significantly associated with a higher prevalence of mood disorders. Parents of children under the age of 18 exhibited higher levels of depression symptoms which were associated with difficulties in functioning in remote work. Gender was also found to be an increased risk factor. Women were more likely to experience clinical risk of depression symptoms and anxiety disorders – they were the ones who mostly stayed home looking after their children while at the same time doing work and assisting with online education. On the other hand, a good financial situation and the certainty of salary continuity constituted a kind of protective umbrella against the intensification of symptoms of emotional problems, regardless of gender.

### MENTAL HEALTH AT HOME AND IN THE OFFICE

What role does remote work play in the impact of the pandemic and the social constraints it has caused? A study by Qualtrics (2020) conducted on a sample of more than 2,000 workers in Australia, France, Germany, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States found that 44% of people saw their mental health deteriorate as a result of the shift to remote work. Those working remotely indicated that they felt worse due to a 'chronic feelings

of sadness' and higher levels of fatigue than before. The aforementioned study also found that nearly 66% of the respondents experienced a significant increase in feelings of stress, and among parents of children who are remote learners, stress literally skyrocketed – nearly 80% of them experienced anxiety.

Similar results were obtained in another study, conducted by Oracle and Workplace Intelligence (2020) on a sample of 12347 employees from 11 countries. The results of the survey showed that the pandemic has negatively affected the mental health of 78% of the respondents, while 85% believe that their mental state caused by the impact of problems at work (having to work remotely) impacts negatively on other areas of their lives. Employees typically experience the following disorders: sleeping disorders, physical health problems, decreased feeling of happiness in their personal lives, problems in family relationships, feelings of isolation from friends and acquaintances. As many as 76% additionally believe that their employers are not doing enough to support employees and protect their mental health.

How are different work arrangements related to the well-being of Polish people? The answers to these questions are provided by yet unpublished results of a study conducted by researchers at SWPS University (Zalewska et al., 2021). The survey was conducted on a representative sample of 1084 Polish people in two phases: in February and March and subsequently in June and July 2021. Below are the dimensions of well-being and mood that have been shown to significantly differentiate between the following groups of employees: those working remotely, those working on-site, and those working in a hybrid model.

How did people who were forced to switch to this model feel and function in remote work settings? First, let us look at the issue of job satisfaction. The results of the survey showed that those who worked on-site were more satisfied with their current work situation than those who worked remotely. Respondents working in hybrid settings ranked between the other groups in terms of their satisfaction<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, people who worked on-site were significantly less likely to feel discomfort related to loneliness or the constant presence of household members in the past month. Again, workers in mixed settings ranked between the other two groups in this area.

Another important factor that differentiated workers pursuing particular work arrangements was their sense of control – an extremely important component of mental health. It turned out that people working remotely were significantly more likely to have felt a loss of control over important matters in their lives in the past month compared to those working on-site. Again, the hybrid model appears to protect employees from such negative psychological effects. It is probably this lower sense of control that makes people who work remotely more likely to use psychoactive substances (e.g. cannabis). The use of such "coping" strategies to deal with stress most often represents an attempt to escape reality which deprives people of the ability to influence their own life at any given time. However, the results also indicate that people who work

<sup>1</sup> For more about employee satisfaction associated with working in a hybrid setting, see the section dedicated to the organizational perspective. There we show how it changes depending on the number of days of out-of-office work spent within this solution.

remotely try to find constructive forms of combating tension or finding relief. They were more likely to have played sports or gone for walks in the recent period compared to on-site workers. In terms of exercise, people who work in a hybrid setting perform best.

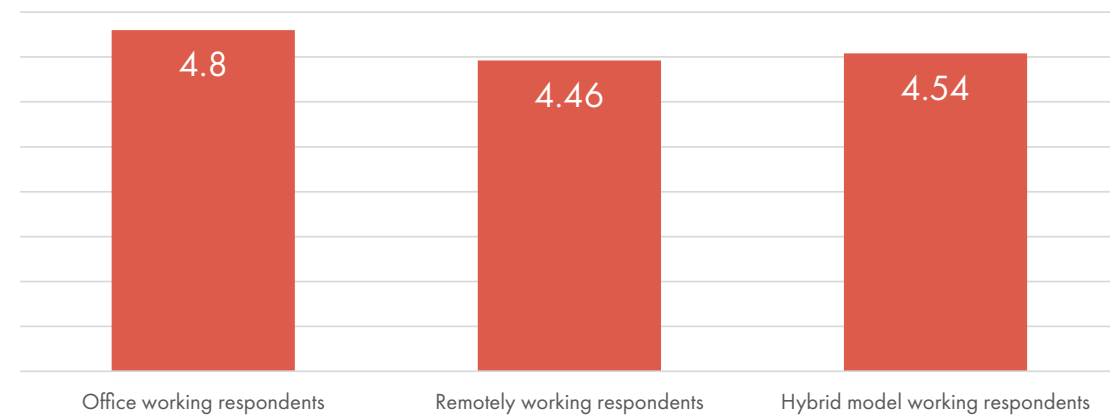
Those who worked remotely experienced feelings such as melancholy, depression, or even a conviction that they would be better off dead in the last 2 weeks before the survey compared to those who worked on-site! They were less likely to feel joy, cheerfulness, devotion or contentment. Those who work remotely also experience numerous symptoms related to negative perceptions of society and their role in it. For example, they are less likely to feel that they are contributing significantly to society, that society is a good place for all, that people are fundamentally good, or that the way our society works makes sense. Those working remotely were less likely to feel that they were coping with daily responsibilities and that they were experiencing something that made them want to grow and become a better person. Moreover, they considered their relationships with people to be warm and trusting to a lesser extent than people working on-site. Also, their sense of meaningfulness and purpose in their own lives appeared to be diminished.

*In light of the statistics on people's mental health in the last 1.5 years, the potential, purported benefits listed at the beginning of this chapter that were supposed to result from the fulfilled dream of getting up late, staying in pajamas all day, and working with a computer in bed seem more like a fulfilled nightmare than a happy dream come true.*



### 1. Job satisfaction depending on the work model

Q. Mark with the appropriate number to what extent you are satisfied with your current professional situation (7-point scale: 1 – very dissatisfied, 7 – very satisfied)

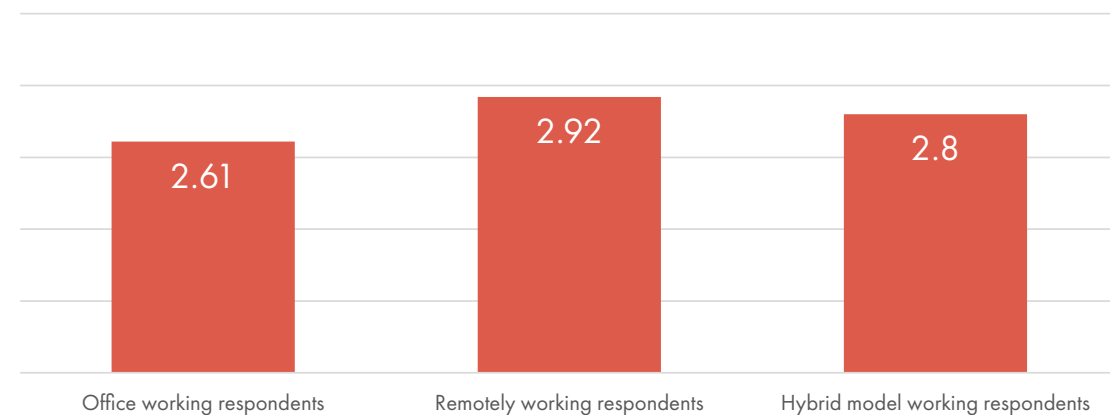


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.08

Comment: people working remotely had a lower level of job satisfaction than people working stationary at the level of the statistical trend).

### 2. Feeling of losing control

Q. In the last month, how often have you felt that important things in your life were getting out of control? (5-point scale)

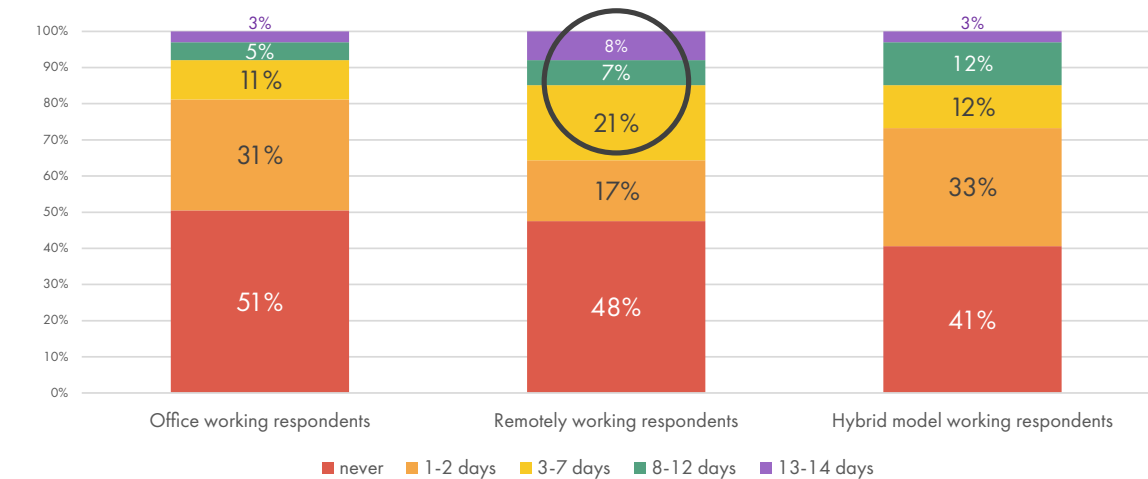


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.019

Comment: People working remotely more often than the respondents working stationary felt the loss of the sense of control.

### 3. A sense of melancholy

Q. How often have you felt melancholy over the course of 2 weeks? (response scale: never, rarely 1-2 days, sometimes 3-7 days, often 8-12 days, very often 13-14 days).

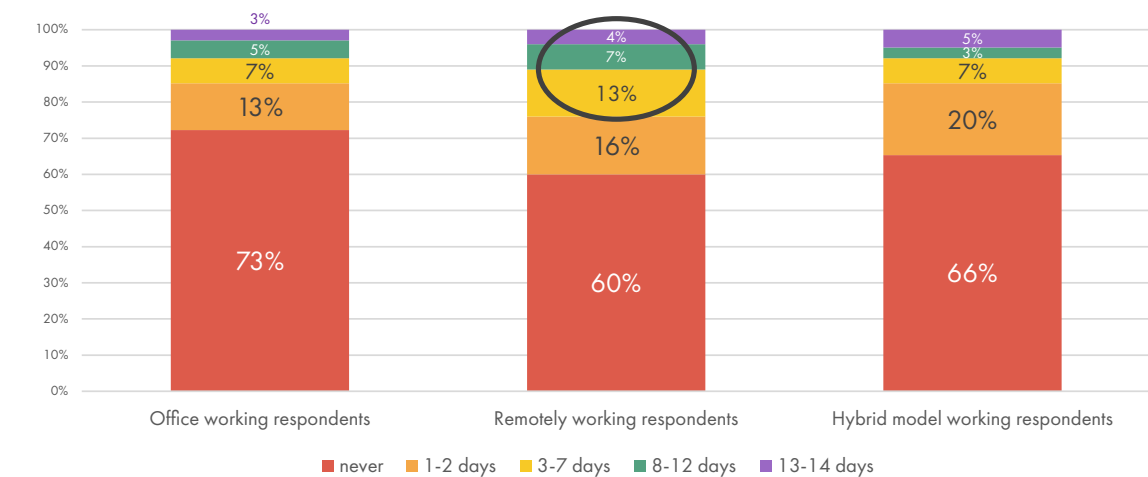


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.031

Comment: people working remotely more often than the respondents working stationary experienced melancholy in the last 2 weeks.

### 4. Feeling like it's better to be dead (7 point scale)

Q. Over the course of 2 weeks, how often have you felt that it would be better to be dead? (response scale: never, rarely 1-2 days, sometimes 3-7 days, often 8-12 days, very often 13-14 days)

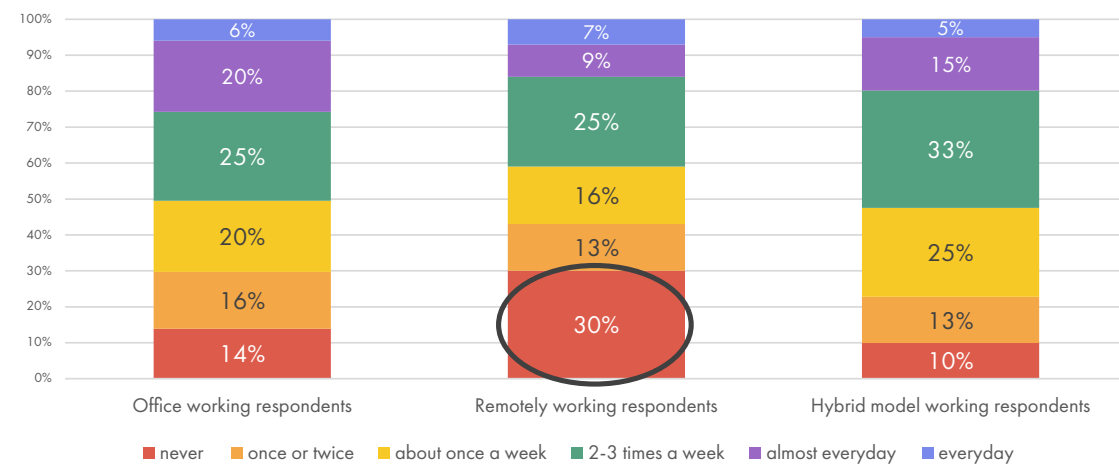


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.056

Comment: people working remotely more often than respondents working stationary felt that it would be better to be dead.

### 5. The feeling that I am bringing something important to society

Q. How often in the last month have you felt that you are contributing something important to society (response scale: never, once or twice, about once a week, 2-3 times a week, almost every day, every day).

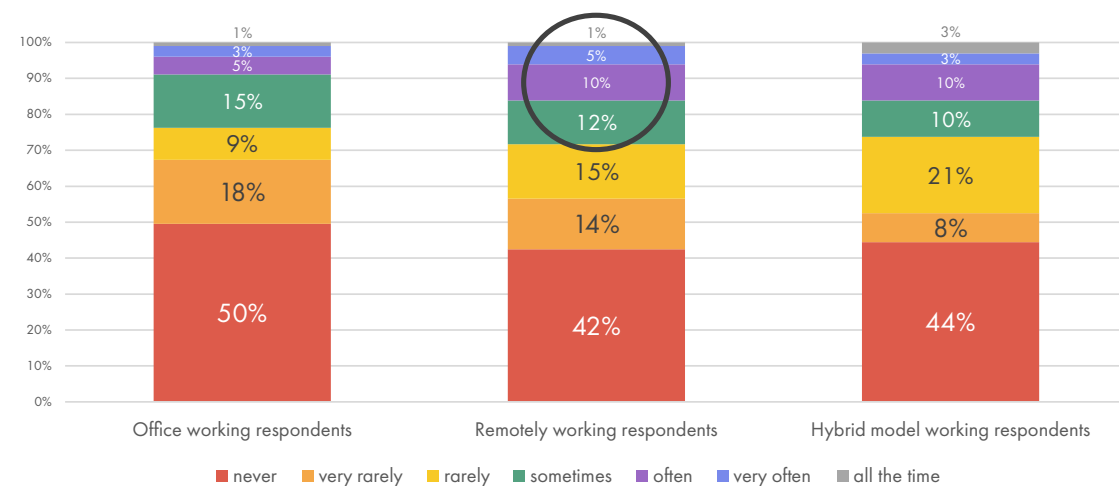


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.008.

Comment: As many as 30% of people working remotely in the last month never felt that they were bringing something important to society.

### 6. Feeling depressed

Q. How often have you been depressed last week? (response scale: never, very rarely, rarely, sometimes, often, very often, always).

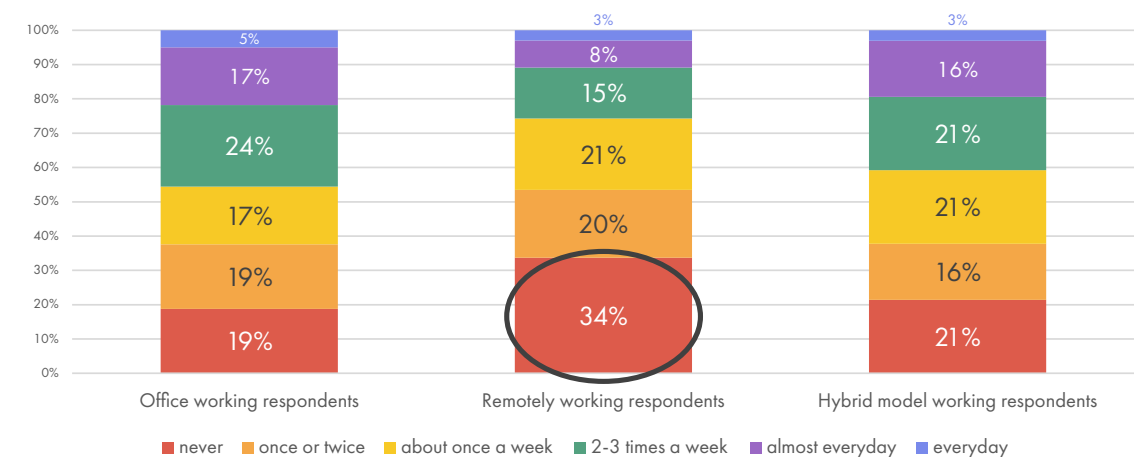


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.063.

Comment: People working remotely slightly more often than the respondents working stationary experienced a sense of depression (statistical trend level).

### 7. Feeling that society is a good place for all people

Q. How often in the last month have you felt that society is a good place for all people (scale of answers: never, once or twice, about once a week, 2-3 times a week, almost every day, every day).

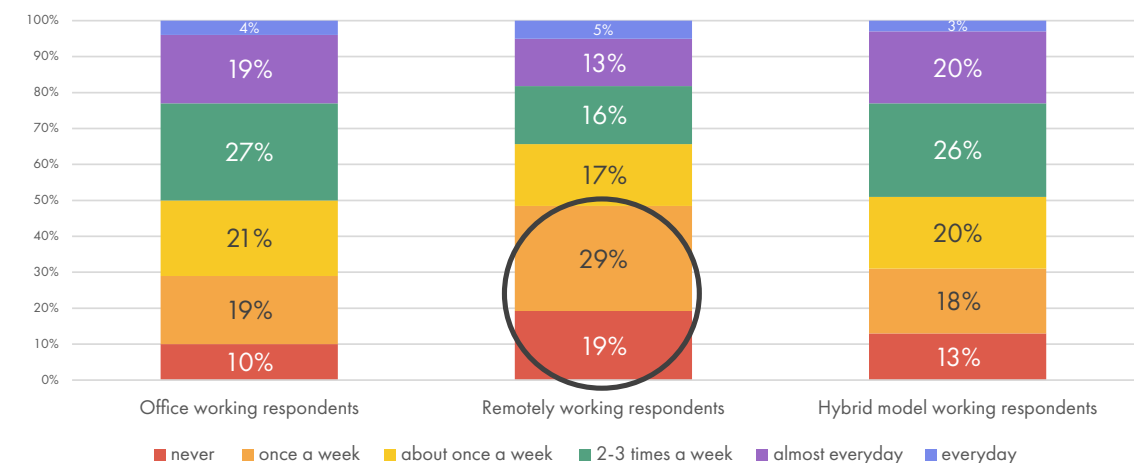


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.001.

Comment: As many as 34% of people working remotely in the last month never felt that society is a good place for all people.

### 8. The feeling that people are basically good

Q. How often in the past month have you felt that people are basically good (scale of answers: never, once or twice, about once a week, 2-3 times a week, almost every day, every day).

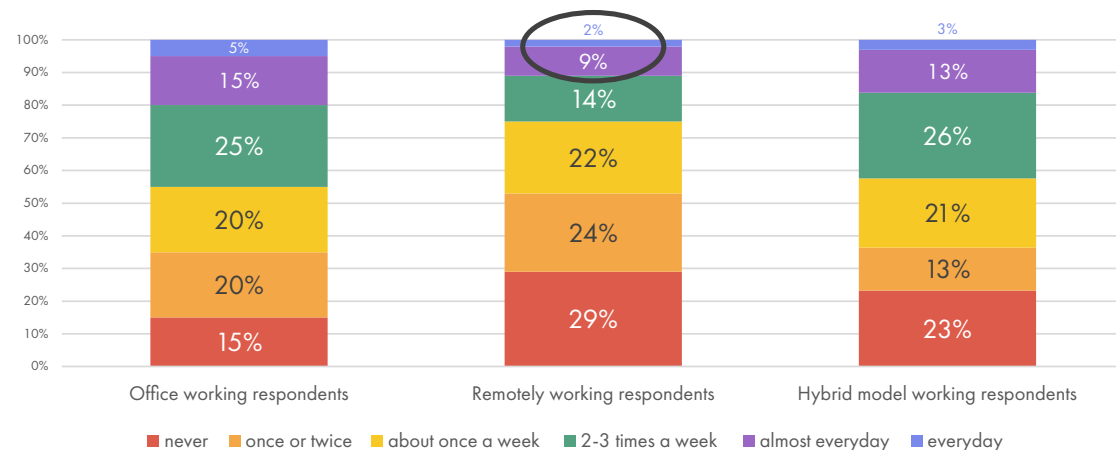


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639, p=0.01.

Comment: almost half of people working remotely did not feel that people are basically good (they did not have this feeling at all, or they felt this way once or twice in the last month).

## 9. The feeling that the way our society works makes sense

Q. How often in the last month have you felt that the way our society works made sense (response scale: never, once or twice, about once a week, 2-3 times a week, almost every day, every day).

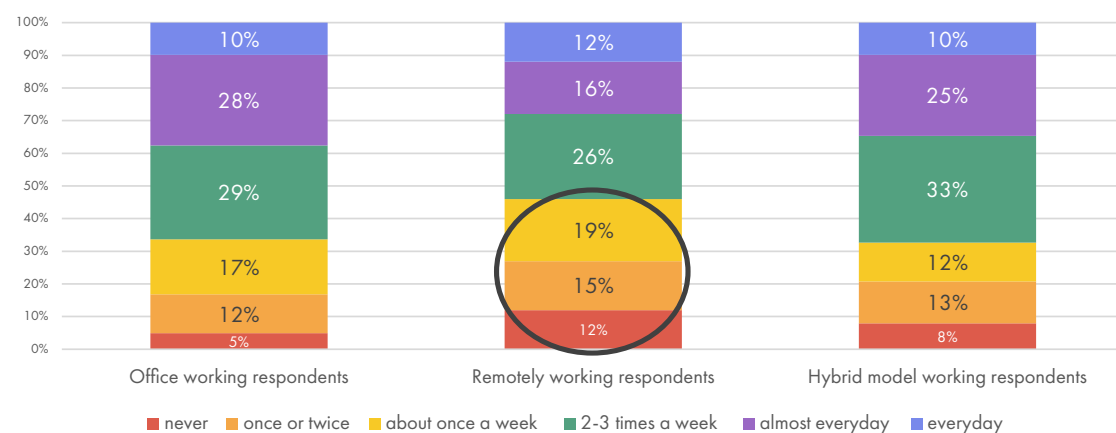


Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639,  $p < 0.000$ .

Comment: only 11% of people working remotely experience a daily or almost daily feeling that the way our society works makes sense; almost 1/3 do not have such a feeling at all.

## 10. Feeling that your own life has purpose and meaning

Q. How often in the last month have you felt, your life has purpose and meaning (scale of answers: never, once or twice, about once a week, 2-3 times a week, almost every day, every day).



Base: respondents working during the pandemic, N=639,  $p < 0.06$ .

Comment: people working remotely less often than stationary workers had a sense of purposefulness and meaningful life.

Temperament and personality traits are worth considering as moderators of the relationship between different work arrangements and well-being in subsequent research. Unfortunately, to date there were no research attempts dedicated to the role of temperament and personality traits in the process of coping with remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, individual differences seem to be potentially important variables that could explain why some people adapt to remote working conditions faster and others slower or not at all. One pre-pandemic study conducted by a team of researchers (Luse et al., 2013) found that openness to new experiences was the most important factor in preferring to work in a remote team. People with a high level of this trait like to experiment with all kinds of novelties and enjoy variety and changeability of conditions. As expected, people marked with high intensity of this characteristic preferred working in a remote team more often than respondents with a low level of this feature. The second trait that was found to be significant was extroversion. Extroverted individuals who need face-to-face interactions with people to maintain optimal stimulation levels prefer working in on-site teams. Meanwhile, introverts were more likely to feel comfortable in a remote setting. The cognitive style of the study participants was also found to be important. Those who value quick, concrete decisions preferred to work in a remote team, while respondents who tended to debate longer and valued extended conversations with people felt more comfortable in teams that met face-to-face.

It is worth remembering, however, that pre-pandemic surveys do not fully reflect people's actual experiences in the present. Those who are open to new experiences may be excited about the prospect of remote work when it's a new and interesting experiment compared to what they've known so far, but how long-term work in the virtual world will affect them – we don't know at this point. Likewise with introverts. Even if, at the level of their personal preferences, we can observe more positive attitudes towards this model of work, their psychological condition due to the sanctioned possibility of being away from people, especially in the long term, can deteriorate.

## CONCLUSION, OR HOW TO AVOID THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

As can be seen, although remote work may in theory seem to be a convenient solution, even ideal for professions that do not require presence in the workplace, people working in this type of setting may experience many psychological disadvantages. Furthermore, they are not always aware of the causes of their own condition and do not directly link it to remote work. The current study did not ask directly about remote work and its impact on their lives, but asked a series of seemingly unrelated questions instead. Of course, the study was conducted using a correlational method, not an experimental method, so the possibility of causal inference is also limited. However, it is difficult to ignore the pattern of results obtained and to distance it completely from the work arrangements pursued by the subjects. Interestingly, the hybrid work arrangement seems to be a fairly successful compromise, not leading to a lower functioning workforce, while – at least for now – not boosting it to a great extent either. The process of



adaptation to the pandemic reality is still ongoing and will probably also change, clarify and refine the mixed model of work arrangement. At this point, several days in the workplace and another few days at home seems a psychologically acceptable solution that does not impact negatively on the emotional functioning of employees.

## A SOCIO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE. A CASE STUDY OF POLAND

Not forgetting about its dramatic implications, the pandemic also turned out to be a kind of collective exercise in reflexion. People probably have never talked so much about work-life relationships. Also, it has never seemed so real to reorganize work, and to try out different arrangements has never been such a common part of experiencing everyday life. Change affects individuals – the related problems are addressed in the section on the psychological perspective. However, individuals are at the same time part of larger communities and function in a specific context. This may mean that a person with a personality type inclining them to work remotely, sharing a small apartment with a large family, will nevertheless prefer to go to the office. On the other hand, Jerzy Kociatkiewicz, Monika Kostera and Martin Parker (2021) remind us that according to classical definitions of alienation, i.e. the main source of employee discomfort, those employees do not feel 'at home' when they are in the office. This is the effect of detaching work as an economic activity from social ties. Therefore, considerations of individual preference are worth juxtaposing with the socio-cultural contexts of work, some of which are universal, while some are of a local nature.

Since the recent global financial crisis, there has been a resurgence of discourse concerning the meaningfulness of work in the capitalist model. In Poland, those discussions are additionally supported by references to historical debates on feudal service and the long-lasting authoritarian model of management in Polish companies. Kacper Pobłocki also points to the patriarchal and violent bond between the landowners and the peasants, which could translate not only into relations in the workplace, but more broadly into social relations in Poland, based on the desire to arrange relationships with others through subordination (Pobłocki, 2021). It is difficult to go beyond anecdotal examples and to analyse this type of action by means of precise indicators, although such attempts have been made. According to Janusz Hryniewicz, authoritarian relations 'prevail with varying intensity in up to 70% of Polish enterprises,' while the democratic-participatory model of management, involving subordinates in analytical and decision-making processes, is applied by only 20% of the staff (Hryniewicz, 2017: 72). At the same time – which could confirm the toxic patriarchal interdependence – as many as  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the staff, including university graduates, value peace and stability above all, which makes them passively submit to the ideas and sometimes even the moods of their superiors.

Authoritarian or patriarchal relations in organizations are not without consequences for workers. According to the authors of the report entitled *The Workforce View in Europe 2019* based on a survey of over 10,000 people from 8 European countries, compared to other European nations, Polish people stressed by work to the largest extent. One out of four people surveyed said they experience workplace stress every day (ADP, 2019). At the same time, issues of staff well-being do not seem to be central in Polish companies, in addition, one can

observe a kind of mutual acceptance of this situation among superiors and their subordinates alike: "almost half (45%) of Polish employees believe that their mental health is of no interest to their employer, and almost as many say that they would not feel comfortable sharing their problems" (ADP, 2019: 19). At the same time, participants in the same study ranked high levels of stress among the factors most likely to reduce productivity. Compared to other Europeans, Polish employees are also most interested in maintaining the organizational *status quo* and least interested, for example, in experiments limiting its duration.

Extrapolating these observations to the discussion on remote work, one can speculate that for some Polish employees its novelty was a drawback, but on the other hand it could be seen as an attractive prospect in companies where employees do not feel comfortable in the actual office. Working from home can therefore be encouraging insofar as it allows staff to "hide" in the safe space of their home from, for example, toxic workplace relationships. It would also seem valid as a way of avoiding situations where a distrustful supervisor is constantly keeping an eye on his or her employees. However, if this hypothesis is true, we could see reluctance to return to the office as a marker of an oppressive work culture in an organisation – which looking at the statistics, unfortunately, is not uncommon.

It is not without influence on the perception of remote work that Polish people generally work a lot. Even if the percentage of economically active people is not among the highest, those working in 2020 delivered as many as 1766 hours of labour (OECD, 2021). Although the trend is downward (on average, we worked as many as 1,928 hours in 2017), this is still a world-leading result, especially contrasting with the working hours in Western Europe (Germany is at the other end of the spectrum with only 1,332 hours per year). Work is also simply important for Polish people. In the research into value systems, for years now the concept of work has been the last of the three most important factors of a sense of fulfilment, right behind health and family issues (Czapiński, 2015: 272-273). It is worth mentioning here, however, that in the same data work is associated with money rather than with social life, which for Polish people is much less important outside of the family sphere, which in turn translates into a low level of trust towards people from outside the closest circle of relations – a.k.a. 'toxic familism.' This may indicate a preference for work performed from home, even if it means long hours and lack of extensive contact with co-workers. All these elements, which draw a rather stable, even if not always optimistic picture, statistically overlook one important issue already noticeable on the labour market – generational change.

### CHANGE IS COMING: GENERATIONS Y AND Z

While the logic of generational labels often makes the differences between generations seem obscure, it is difficult not to notice a significant shift taking place at the moment. New generations have entered the job market. Although, due to the demographic decline and the related ageing of the population, the influence of the new generations is not always visible in research, the millennials born in the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s, also referred to as "generation Y",

have significantly influenced at least a part of the Polish labour market. Due to a relatively pessimistic vision of their careers, representatives of generation Y attach less importance to work, value more non-financial values, and are also convinced that collecting experiences is more meaningful than accumulating goods (Deloitte, 2019). This effect of the economic situation, is even more evident among the representatives of the next group graduating from university, labelled "generation Z". Immersed in the internet, but also depressed by the climate crisis, they have significantly different expectations of work. They also hold more progressive views of work-life balance than their older counterparts, i.e. the 'baby boomers' (people born in the 1960s and 1970s), obsessed with their careers, but also often being beneficiaries of political transformation.

Although most people belonging to generation Y, and especially generation Z, are in the early stages of their careers, for them work is no longer only (or even primarily) a source of income – its meaningful dimension is becoming important as well. These groups have a different work ethos, shifting emphasis from material to post-material values, which translates into high expectations towards the employer. They look for consistency at the level of values adhered to by employees and companies, but also the expectation of a respectful and appreciative approach to employees. Although in the discussion concerning the Polish job market the 'Ys' and 'Zs' are usually presented as a challenge to the organisation, their approach to work which seems to be much more relationship-based than that of their predecessors, may actually be an opportunity. It may be a chance to rebuild Polish companies which have long been neglecting this dimension of their functioning, focused rather on values such as professionalism and competitiveness (Jastrzębska, 2020)

How does generational change translate into a pandemic work arrangement situation? According to the authors of the PwC report entitled *Young Polish People on the labour market in the "new normal"* (2020) dealing with students and graduates entering the labour market, the new generation, as one may expect, is open to experiments with the form of work – the possibility to work remotely is important for as many as 31% of the respondents. What is more, another report entitled *Young Polish People on the Labour Market 2021* (PwC, 2021) shows that interest in remote work is growing – 44% of the respondents prefer remote work to working in the office, and full-time remote work is considered unacceptable by only 6%. Moreover, "Access to remote work opportunities is a must-have benefit for 33.7% of the respondents. On the other hand, 56% of young people want to work from an office. The hybrid working model is a solution that will help reconcile the preferences and needs of both groups." (PwC, 2021: 3).

The results of the cited reports are consistent with the research already conducted in Poland on the issue of remote work – for young employees, the key benefits are greater flexibility of working hours and time savings associated with not having to commute to the office. However, combining work with other areas of life in one space remains problematic, especially when paired with social isolation and organizational difficulties which require special skill to overcome in the context of remote work (Klopotek, 2017). Therefore, it seems that the optimal solution would be a sort of compromise, i.e. making office work more flexible while at the same

*The two groups most severely affected by working from home appear to be the young adults, who spoke of great difficulty in mobilising for work, and parents living with children, complaining about the need to combine work with childcare when home becomes "school, creche and work all in one place".*



time maintaining it as the element which gives structure to professional activity and facilitates the nurturing of social ties.

### OFFICE? YES, BUT NOT AS A VALUE IN ITSELF

The discussion on the role of the office also fits into the trend of “making sense” of work and reflecting on its conditions. A significant part of this trend is the criticism of the so-called “presenteeism” – the fetishization of physical presence in the office, the expectation that this condition will be met no matter the circumstances. Such critical voices are not only the perspective of authors calling for the protection of workers' interests, but also the approach of companies that advocate extreme flexibility and work organisation in which the relationship between the employer and the employee is purely project-based (see Thompson, 2015). At the same time, there are recurring voices about the risks of loosening relationships within teams that work 100% remotely. And these relationships – we have no doubt about it – are extremely important for effective, but also rewarding work. “Having social support from coworkers reduces stress, helps reduce burnout, improves efficiency and productivity, and increases employee engagement,” says Marissa King, author of *Social Chemistry: Decoding the Patterns of Human Connection* (King, 2021).

Another thing is that there are also voices contesting the widely-repeated praise of the benefits of spending time in a shared space. In fact, it can also have negative consequences such as the emergence of “subcultures” or clans based on personal relationships. From this perspective, remote communication can be more inclusive and transparent, potentially resulting in benefits for, among others, women and other groups that are still discriminated against in some workplaces (Miller, 2021). Mostly, however, these are speculations supported by historical analyses. How different practice could be from the assumptions concerning changes in the workplace is shown by the concept of open space, dating back to the 1930s. While it was intended to increase the amount of interaction between employees, it actually dramatically reduced it by as much as 70%. It turned out that people do not actually want more spontaneous interaction during working hours and so they build a sort of “fourth wall” around themselves which consists in being reluctant to engage in conversation or isolating themselves through, for example, wearing headphones (see Bernstein and Waber, 2019).

Finally, there is one more, in our opinion extremely important point, which concerns a certain bias connected with the studies which are being written on the subject of remote work. This is perhaps a more general problem with the internet becoming not only a space for our activity, but also a platform for conducting research. It is a tempting platform for researchers, because in many cases it allows them to learn not only about what the respondents declare, but also what they actually practice. However, we feel that the underrepresentation of information related not to the individual, but to his or her situation (in the area of housing, economic status, family etc.) emerges as a sort of side effect in research. And yet it is clear that these factors are crucially important from the perspective of remote work arrangements.

### CONTEXT, YOU FOOLS!

In his study on remote work, Piotr Binder (2021) points out that before the pandemic it had a marginal presence in Poland – accounted only for about 1% of the market. Presenting a large qualitative study (150 interviews), the author highlights recurring themes in the statements of subjects who worked remotely during the pandemic. They primarily involve a fear of employer dissatisfaction based on an assumption that this mode of work will reduce employee productivity. Another recurring theme is the feeling that remote work is a privilege available to a select few. The third one involves depreciation of the value of labour rendered from home – by the workers themselves who recount that it's partly actual work and partly “just staying at home.”

Although the survey was conducted on a diverse sample, with a significant representation of IT workers, the key factor influencing the evaluation of remote work was not at all the place of employment. The two groups most severely affected by working from home appeared to be the young adults, who spoke of great difficulty in mobilising for work, and parents with children, complaining about the need to combine work with childcare when home becomes “school, creche and work all in one place” (Binder, 2021: 79). Of course, we can also add a gender component to the issues related to childcare: we know that in Polish households women spend more time caring for their offspring than men do. This brings us back to the classic observations of research on remote work – that the context of its performance is crucial because the same elements can be an advantage for someone who gains a sense of control over time and space, and a disadvantage for someone else, because for them they are difficult and demotivating.

### SUMMARY, OR THE UNCERTAINTIES

Even the studies emphasizing that most Polish companies have coped well with the transition to remote work point out that it still poses enormous challenges in terms of conducting creative processes and exercising leadership, which are difficult to achieve successfully without face-to-face contact at least part of the time (Włoch, Berdys, 2020). However, the authors emphasise that programmes to address these issues must be “tailor-made”, as staff will not always welcome a standard package of training on work organisation and employee welfare. It therefore seems crucial to prepare solutions on the basis of an in-depth analysis. This is what the following part of this paper will provide guidance for.



## AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE. HYBRID, MEANING WHAT?

Hybrid work arrangement appears to be an acceptable compromise from the perspective of employee welfare. It is also heavily promoted in media discourse as the best solution for pandemic and post-pandemic times. Under the umbrella term “hybrid,” however, there is a whole spectrum of arrangements where work is done in different places and at different times. From office-first solutions where out-of-office work can be done 1-2 days a week. All the way to remote-first models encouraging work out of the office, which the employees are expected to use occasionally – once a week or less. While it is convenient for the media to call office-first and remote-first solutions hybrid models, this is, in fact, an oversimplification. That is because it blurs the difference in the competencies needed to implement each model, as well as the consequences of such application.

The differences between office-first and remote-first solutions will be shown on the example of experiments conducted in large companies in Europe, Asia and America. Although these experiments were conducted in individual companies, understanding their results can significantly expand our knowledge of the consequences of implementing hybrid working models up until to this point shaped by staff and management surveys. This is because experimental studies provide the highest quality data – (1) with sampling before, during, and after research, (2) with randomized participants assigned to an experimental group and a control group, and (3) with measures to control extraneous factors that may influence the results. Moreover, because most of these experiments were conducted before the pandemic and some during its course, we can draw conclusions that are relevant to both the period of strong threat (e.g. a subsequent increase in infections or hospitalizations) and the time of its absence.

### OFFICE-FIRST SOLUTIONS OR A SAFETY CUSHION

Companies usually proceed very cautiously when introducing organizational changes. They look for the smallest possible change that will have the desired effect. Therefore, first experiments on time and place of work, the main task was to test the consequences of introducing changes covering only several days in a month. In the case of an Italian company supplying electricity, water and gas, the change involved allowing employees to work out of the office for one day a week<sup>1</sup> at any hours<sup>2</sup> (Angelici and Profeta, 2020). After 9 months

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting the difference between working from home and working from any location. As the study by Choudhury et al. shows (2021), the possibility to choose any place to work (the “Work from Anywhere” approach extending the “Work from Home” policy) resulted in an additional 4% productivity gain among U.S. patent clerks.

<sup>2</sup> Increasing flexibility in working time has its own independent consequences which extend well beyond allowing people to change their place of work. During the pandemic, the women who were able to adjust their work schedules to suit their needs reported being more engaged and productive (Allas, 2021).

of study, significant changes were observed. It turned out that this one single day was very consequential for both employees and the organization.

Participants in the experiment achieved better psychological well-being, improved their work-life balance<sup>3</sup> and life satisfaction. What is more, feeling better, they began to perform better – were able to focus on tasks for longer, less stressed, better prepared to make decisions and overcome difficulties. As a result, their productivity increased both subjectively (as evaluated by themselves or their superiors) and objectively (in relation to the goals and standards set for them). Why such an improvement? Flexibility concerning where and when they work has given employees the chance to better match their responsibilities to their own needs both in life and at work. Sometimes it was a matter of running errands around town during the day, and sometimes it was about completing tasks that required focus outside of a noisy office<sup>4</sup>.

However, the impact of workplace flexibility does not have the same effect on all employees. The benefits and drawbacks associated with working out of the office are significantly affected by the nature of the tasks performed. Timothy Golden and Ravi Gajendran (2018) emphasize that work is not homogeneous – some tasks require focused work, while others need constant communication with team members. Thus, the results of the Italian study may obscure its true consequences. Therefore, in another experiment, conducted in a large English company, researchers decided to study the impact of working out of the office for an average of two days a week, considering 4 characteristics of the tasks performed:

1. job complexity (reflecting their level of complication),
2. problem solving (the need to create new solutions to new problems),
3. task interdependence (the need to synchronize actions with other efforts),
4. social support (the need to seek help from other employees).

Golden and Gajendran hypothesized that employees with high task interdependence and high social support would lose out on work outside the office. For example, instead of communicating directly with someone sitting at the desk nearby, they will be forced to call or wait for an email response. This may consequently reduce the number of tasks performed and increase stress levels.

Nothing of the sort has been observed. Employees who had jobs that required constant contact with other people (high task interdependence, high social support), such as project managers, did not perform their tasks any worse or less effectively. They maintained results similar to those for work done only from the office. In contrast, the employees who appeared to have

<sup>3</sup> As research in the UK shows (Sherman, 2020), mothers particularly benefit from changing the workplace setting. Working out of the office allows them to reduce the conflict between family and work responsibilities by about 25%, which is significant.

<sup>4</sup> While the ability to combine professional responsibilities with other activities has brought great psychological benefits and boosted employee efficiency, separating different roles throughout the day should not be considered harmful. As Mustafa's (2012) research shows, the benefits of long-term remote work are primarily enjoyed by those who have learned to separate their work time from their leisure time and their work place from their place of rest and relaxation. For example, they go out for a walk after finishing work to evoke the feeling of “coming home” and symbolically change the work space into a private living area.



jobs that required strong concentration (high job complexity, frequent problem solving), such as R&D employees, actually increased their productivity. In other words, with working from out of the office two days a week, no one was losing and some employees were actually gaining.

However, Golden and Gajendran – the authors of the experiment – caution against drawing hasty conclusions such as that working outside the office does not negatively affect the ability to complete highly interdependent tasks. On the contrary, the respondents themselves claimed that it was more difficult for them to communicate to get help or find specific information. Yet in response to these difficulties, they learned to organize their work better during the study. In the office, they completed as many tasks requiring the presence of others as possible, and they did those that could be carried out independently out of the office. What they couldn't get done remotely, they quickly made up for when they returned to the office. Golden and Gajendran claim that those 3 days a week spent in the office become a sort of “safety cushion.” They allow employees to effectively catch up on work and relieve interpersonal tensions generated by working outside the office. At least to the extent that enables them to avoid a negative influence on productivity.

When Apple and Google announce that employees will be returning to the office for at least 3 days a week, they are acting based on the two experiments outlined above<sup>5</sup>. The research clearly shows that the office-first model, which allows people to work out of the office up to two days a week, does not result in losses for either employees or the company. At the very least, it allows employees to maintain the previous levels of productivity while gaining the benefits of better matching tasks to where they are performed and work itself to the workers’ private lives. The office-first model is a win-win situation.

5 The benefits of working in an office-first model (up to 2 days a week out of the office) are also confirmed by research conducted by Golden and Veiga (2005). They claim that job satisfaction grows along with increased time working outside the office, but only up to 15 hours per week (approx. 2 working days). After that, it begins to decline slightly. Interestingly, contrary to this pattern, at the moment (January 2021) 55% of U.S. workers who started working remotely during the pandemic would like to maintain this situation for 3 or more days per week (PwC, 2021).

Table: Opportunities and threats associated with the office-first model

	Office-first model	
	opportunities	threats
The employee perspective	better work-life balance; increased life satisfaction; improved psychological well-being	–
The task perspective	facilitating deep work; better problem solving; improved decision making	when working out of the office: difficulty in performing tasks with high interdependence and requiring social support
The organization’s perspective	increased productivity on the part of some employees	changing the working requirements for some employees

Source: Angelici & Profeta (2020), Golden & Gajendran (2018).

REMOTE-FIRST SOLUTIONS, I.E. A TWO-SPEED COMPANY

While the office-first model has a built-in safety cushion, the remote-first solution is devoid of this feature. This is a more extreme model, which could be compared to driving a race car. It is more dynamic, but not everyone likes hard suspension and cabin noise. To put it differently, this type of work arrangement generates certain gains but is not free of losses and risks.

This was first handled in the study by Bloom et al. (2015) conducted in the call center of the Chinese travel agency Ctrip. An opportunity to conduct the experiment arose when the company was changing its location. During the process, 500 volunteer employees were randomly assigned for nine months to one of two groups – one was working exclusively from the office while the other worked from home four days a week. The results of the experiment partly confirmed what was earlier observed in the Italian and the English company – the productivity of employees performing tasks from their homes increased by as much as 13% during that time. They did not work any faster, but their total work time increased. At home they took fewer breaks than in the office and took sick leave less often. Interestingly, longer working hours did not lead to a decrease in job satisfaction, on the contrary – it actually increased. Respondents were happy to spend time at home and avoid commuting to work. As a result, staff turnover in this group decreased by as much as 50%. Which, for a call center job, is quite a rare result.

Encouraged by the outcome, company executives decided to introduce the possibility of working 4 days a week from home on a permanent basis. However, to their surprise, 50% of the participants in the experiment chose to return to the office. Most of them complained of

loneliness. They lacked a team to accompany them. They were deprived of contact with their co-workers. The results of this experiment show that when work out of the office begins to dominate, productivity may rise, but at the same time cracks in relationships will begin to appear. The bonds which are not only a carrier of emotions, but most of all provide employees with a sense of common purpose<sup>6</sup> become weakened.

The implications of this can be seen in a very similar experiment conducted in an e-commerce company in the United States (Emanuel and Harrington, 2021). It was interesting insofar as it was also conducted in a call center department, covering both the time just before the pandemic and a period of time during its course. According to the results discussed above, switching to out-of-office work for up to 5 days a week resulted in a productivity increase of about 7%. This was observed both among the persons who switched to this mode of work voluntarily before the pandemic and those who were forced to do so because of it.

At the same time, however, deep divides within the company started to occur. First of all, when employees began to be recruited to work in the remote-first and office-first model after the pandemic, it quickly became apparent that the employees who were supposed to work primarily out of the office were less productive. This type of work arrangement was chosen by people for whom the lack of physical supervision from their co-workers and their manager was an encouragement to avoid performing their duties. Their productivity was 18% lower compared to the persons working primarily in the office. This is how the productivity divide emerged. Secondly, a surprising consequence affected those employees who, having originally worked in an office, decided to switch to remote work. Despite the fact that their productivity increased by 7% as mentioned above, their chances of promotion after 16 months into the experiment turned out to be 50% lower compared to their colleagues who remained in the office<sup>7</sup>. Why was that? This pattern is partly explained by the so-called Allen curve (Allen, 2007). It shows that in an office space, people primarily communicate with co-workers who are physically close to them. From the point of view of exchange of information, a person who is located about 50 meters away practically does not exist. The same pattern was observed in the relationships between managers spending time in the office and their employees working in their homes. Because they were far apart, the frequency of interaction between them decreased. The less interaction, the less trust, and therefore less chance of being given more responsible tasks or getting promoted<sup>8</sup>.

Experiments in China and the United States clearly show that long-term diversification of the working arrangement creates divisions among workers. It is the productive employees who lose, as their career paths are blocked despite making an individual effort. Their positions

turn into so-called dead-end jobs – positions from which it is not possible to be promoted regardless of the quality of work. And because promotion is not on the horizon, sooner or later some employees will take advantage of this situation. Instead of increasing productivity, they will reduce their effort to the absolute minimum necessary to maintain the post. The deep division of the workplace creates a two-speed company – office work with career opportunities and remote work which, although comfortable, means long-term stagnation for the employee.

Table: Opportunities and threats in the remote-first model

	Remote-first model	
	opportunities	threats
The employee perspective	better work-life balance; increased life satisfaction	difficulty in satisfying the need to belong
The task perspective	increased time spent on performing tasks, increased number of completed tasks	limited rewards (bonuses and promotions) for those less frequently present in the office; low motivation among the persons opting for remote work
The organization's perspective	increased productivity on the part of some employees	creating a category of "dead-end jobs"; weakening normative attachment to the organization

Source: Bloom (2015), Emanuel & Harrington (2021).

In summary, it is clear that shifting to a remote-first model generates opportunities as well as increases the number and type of risks to be managed. Unfortunately, there is not enough data to estimate the potential gains and losses. We know that the transition to working out of the office generates productivity gains, at least for those workers who can perform their work in relative independence from others. But what we do not know is if these productivity gains are linear, i.e. if they will increase as the number of days worked outside the office rises. Intuition suggests that this is rather doubtful.

REMOTE WORK DURING THE PANDEMIC, OR AN (UN)CONTROLLED SKID

Call centers are a rewarding research subject. Their employees do a well-described, relatively predictable and easily measurable job. But what happens when we examine work of a completely different nature? The kind of work that is done in teams, where solutions have to be worked out on

6 Changes in the workers' social ties are difficult to evaluate, but early research shows that during the pandemic employees lost 25% of the close friendships with their co-workers (Kovacs et al., 2021).

7 The authors of a seven-year study on working Britons came to similar conclusions (Office for National Statistics, 2021). They showed that the people who worked primarily outside the office were 38% less likely to receive a bonus and 50% less likely to be promoted.

8 However, this does not mean that employees who work primarily from outside the office are always at a disadvantage. As Golden and Eddlestone (2020) show, these employees can increase their chances of promotion or a receiving pay rise by performing additional tasks exceeding their scope of duties and making an effort to maintain direct contact with their supervisor.

the fly and their effects can be evaluated only after some time? The study by Gibbs et al. (2021) clearly shows the range of losses and problems that employees working in knowledge-based firms, i.e. those which are most widely discussed in the context of the remote-first model, have had to face. This is an interesting research, because it allows us to see how an entire company functions having shifted from an office-first to a remote-first work arrangement. All previously discussed experiments were conservative in that they involved either part of the company's workforce (the Italian and the English company) or one of its departments (the Chinese and the American company). Moreover, employees volunteering to participate in those experiments had to meet stringent conditions for working outside the office. For example, they had to have a designated space to work at home. Instead, in the case of the Gibbs' et al. study, we are dealing with a process the likes of which most companies went through last year. Temporary closure of offices and a forced transition to remote-first work.

By analyzing the consequences of this transformation in a large IT company in China and relying on non-declarative data (recording of time and results by means of the company's internal systems), the researchers came to alarming conclusions. While the company succeeded in achieving its goals, this has been done at the cost of increasing working hours by 30%, primarily during time off and at weekends<sup>9</sup>. This meant a 20% drop in productivity. The main culprit turned out to be meetings which increased in duration and frequency<sup>10</sup>. Employees needed to talk to each other for longer periods of time to make sense of the situation and to set comprehensible goals. Moreover, responding to an increased number of phone calls and emails resulted in more frequent interruptions. How destructive it is to productivity is shown by the research by Mark et al. (2015). After even a short break, it takes an average of 23 minutes to get back to a state of deep work. The number of interruptions observed by Gibbs et al. allows us to conclude that employees were distracted virtually all day.

To make matters worse, the negative consequences of changing the work arrangement were not limited to productivity issues. Similarly to what was observed in the American and Chinese experiments, increasing physical distance led to a loosening of ties<sup>11</sup>. Although within individual teams employees communicated extensively, the relationships between teams, which are crucial to the distribution of knowledge within the organization, were dramatically weakened. Teams began to become lonely islands. They also distanced themselves from their superiors. When working from outside the office, the number of 1:1 meetings with managers, which is extremely important for setting goals and evaluating performance, declined. This had

<sup>9</sup> Although the extension of working hours and the expansion of the working week into the weekend is a common experience, its scale varies. According to Microsoft's internal studies (Teevan, 2021), the number of messages exchanged outside working hours has increased by up to 50%. This increase was especially evident with managers who needed to communicate with their team and synchronize work within the organization.

<sup>10</sup> Brainstorming, planning, sharing information, and problem solving were found to be particularly problematic, and thus took up more time and effort according to the research (Teva, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> The loosening of ties between employees, as described, can be expected to occur over time. As research shows (Teva, 2021), it is much easier for employees to renew and maintain relationships online if they had previously been established face to face than to create new ones remotely.

a particular impact on new hires, especially considering the decline in coaching and mentoring hours provided by senior co-workers.

The experiment referred to above shows that companies are right to be conservative in their actions. Their managers are aware that such a sudden and dramatic change as moving from 100% office work to work done primarily remotely cannot be made without incurring certain costs. In the case in question, achieving the established goals only masked the actual experience of the work. In reality, it was a roller-coaster ride in which employees tried to salvage the situation despite knowing they were risking burnout and aggravating the conflict between work and family life.

### OFFICE-FIRST OR REMOTE-FIRST?

However, that does not mean moving to a remote-first model by companies whose employees have previously worked exclusively in the office should be strongly discouraged. This type of work arrangement has strong economic merit – it allows companies to reduce the costs of renting office space, increase the diversity of recruited employees or reduce staff turnover. However, as the practice of remote-only companies that have never owned an office shows, this decision requires building a specific set of skills and standards. Strengthening task autonomy, moving away from one-size-fits-all solutions, improving decision-making at the level of teams, evaluating the effects of work before looking at other indicators, increasing the number of organizational experiments. How these standards differ from those used by office-first companies on a daily basis is shown by the example of the policies in place at Gitlab (Gitlab, 2021), an American company that hosts software projects.

#### Principles supporting the remote-first model in Gitlab

1. Flexible working hours (over set working hours).
2. Writing down and recording knowledge (over verbal explanations).
3. Written processes (over on-the-job training).
4. Public sharing of information (over need-to-know access).
5. Asynchronous communication (over synchronous communication).
6. The results of work (over the hours put in)
7. Formal communication channels (over informal communication channels).

The popularisation of these standards and principles (especially points 2, 3, and 5) requires a profound change in the culture of most office-first firms. In the office space, recording and standardising knowledge is not necessary, because there is a direct access to the carriers of that knowledge – the individual people<sup>12</sup>. What is more, in companies built around direct relations, formalization of processes and asynchronous communication is treated as unnecessary and even contrary to the existing order. This is because it undermines the employees' need to be with each other and form bonds.

Exactly how difficult is the shift towards the values characteristic of remote-first companies is described by Cal Newport (2021) in an essay on the introduction of the so-called 'ROWE' (Result Only Work Environment) system in Best Buy. ROWE, which allows people to work when and where they want, worked successfully for several years. As long as Best Buy invested in training to teach employees the behaviors that are fundamental to the functioning of the system, such as not judging co-workers who finish early or not pressuring people to show up for office meetings in person. However, when this training was abandoned due to company's financial troubles, employees gradually began to return to their old habits. Additionally, it happened under pressure from new co-workers who unknowingly transferred habits to Best Buy that didn't fit in with the ROWE culture. At some point, the influence of the old habits became so strong that the company decided to revert to its previous management system. This example shows how important it is for companies that choose to work in the remote-first arrangement to make the decision to invest in training in order to unlearn the standards and principles that are relevant to working in an office and to learn new ones that support working remotely<sup>13</sup>.

### WHAT WE DO NOT KNOW YET, OR INVISIBLE DEFECTS

Although it is fairly certain that successful implementation of the remote-first model entails the need for significant investment in training new behaviors and changing standards and rules, the long-term effects of such a transition are still unclear. Why is that? None of the experiments quoted above lasted more than two years. From a research standpoint, that is a period long enough to be able to see substantial changes. But at the same time, it is too short to notice the changes developing over time. Three among such changes deserve a brief elaboration – (1) strategy making, (2) innovation, and (3) organizational culture.

For the process of creating and implementing corporate strategy, goals are crucial. Their formulation, communication and shared understanding is of utmost importance. The latter one is particularly important as the objectives of an organisation are often general and thus open to

<sup>12</sup> The need to maintain some form of "casual" contact is so strong that attempts are being made to move that experience to the online world as well. One of them (Bojinov et al., 2021) confirmed the validity of these actions. Interns who had the opportunity to interact virtually by having a "virtual watercooler chat" with their managers with whom they did not work on a day-to-day basis were rated higher by their supervisors and were more likely to receive a job offer at the end of their internship.

<sup>13</sup> Particular importance should be given to management training – as research shows (Grover and Karplus, 2021), firms with more strongly developed management systems suffered lower financial damage in the pandemic. They did not have to create new solutions, but rather adapt existing ones to the changing circumstances.

interpretation. Therefore, it is in fact the middle managers and their subordinates who are providing the final detail to the shape and form of these goals. They do this in the course of formal meetings, but mainly during informal conversations and other interactions in offices, hallways, staff rooms or cafeterias. The lack of these locations and employee isolation discussed earlier, may lead to an inability to successfully share the understanding of goals (Tett, 2021). This results in their varied understanding and, in the best-case scenario, a lack of synchronization of activities. The worst that can happen is the pursuit of divergent or even contradictory objectives by the individual departments. However, because many companies plan in 3-5 year cycles, there is not yet enough data to determine the impact of changing work arrangements on this process.

The argument that presence in an office space promotes innovation by (1) facilitating the incidental exchange of information and (2) enabling contact between employees who do not work with each other on a daily basis is one of the most frequently cited by proponents of the return to offices. It is supported by anecdotal evidence showing how important it was for the world's most innovative organisations i.e. Apple (Silverman, 2013) or the Francis Crick Institute (Booth, 2017) to design spaces that force incidental encounters – long corridors, shared work spaces and common staff areas. This argument is also supported by reports of breakthrough innovations in which chance played an important role. One example is the story about Post-It sticky notes, which probably would never have appeared on the market if not for the accidental idea of using them as bookmarks (3M, 2021). However, as we already mentioned in the socio-cultural perspective, this intuitive thinking of shared space as an optimal situation is sometimes contested. As Miller (2021) shows, the above anecdotal arguments are not supported by research. Creating innovation in organizations is a complex process influenced by employee attitudes and behaviors. The latter include behaviors such as (1) problem recognition, (2) idea generation, (3) idea promotion, and (4) idea implementation. The casual exchange of information in the hallway may support problem recognition, but it is not necessarily relevant to the implementation of an idea<sup>14</sup>. How the change in the work arrangement affects the nature of these behaviors and their frequency, and consequently the number of innovations implemented by the company, remains an open question.

The culture of an organization, which is a product of the adopted standards and behaviors, is certainly evolving under the influence of changing work patterns. Some norms indicating the importance of separating work from private life are being replaced by others, allowing these two worlds to intertwine. An interesting question, then, is not whether the culture of the organization is changing, but in what direction is the change occurring? Kim Cameron and Robert Quinn (2011), describing the competing values model, argue that the following two dimensions are crucial for describing organizational cultures: (1) internal or external orientation and (2) preference for stability and control or flexibility and discretion. Which values will

<sup>14</sup> In the context of the negative impact of the remote-first model on innovation in the long term, we should not forget the research findings that indicate a significant decrease in the quality and number of behaviors important for innovating, i.e. brainstorming, ideation workshops, creative work or thinking in a broad perspective (Tevaar, 2021).



*Although it is fairly certain that successful implementation of the remote-first model entails the need for significant investment in training new behaviors and changing standards and rules, the long-term effects of such a transition are still unclear. Why is that? None of the experiments quoted above lasted more than two years. From a research standpoint, that is a period long enough to be able to see substantial changes. But at the same time, it is too short to notice the changes developing over time. Three among such changes deserve a brief elaboration – (1) strategy making, (2) innovation, and (3) organizational culture.*



prevail? It is difficult to provide an intuitively correct answer to this question. On the one hand, turbulence in the surrounding reality may force the creation of new processes and procedures which would indicate an internal evolution of cultures and a preference for stability and control. On the other hand, weakening of intra-organizational ties may deepen employees' interactions with the environment and force decision-making at the lowest levels of the hierarchy. However, it may also turn out that no shift within these dimensions occurs, and companies update behaviours and norms within a previously developed culture. Because cultural change in organizations takes years to occur, again, we lack research to identify and evaluate the consequences of changing work arrangements.

### **SUMMARY OR THE CERTAINTIES**

Even though the impact of changing work arrangements on strategy making, innovation and organizational culture is yet to be determined, this essay has pointed out the certainties that should be considered when deciding on a working model. The most important of these are:

1. Within hybrid work arrangements, office-first and remote-first models should be distinguished. The former makes the place and time of work more flexible while maintaining the dominant role of work in the office. The latter introduces the dominance of remote work with office space functioning as an addition to it.
2. The office-first model, in comparison to a work done only in the office, allows for a better match between professional and private necessities, and the type of tasks performed to the place and time of work, helping selected groups of employees to increase productivity while not reducing it for others.
3. The remote-first model, introduced for some of the company's employees, allows individual productivity to increase. At the same time, however, it reinforces the risk of creating dead-end jobs and the formation of a group of workers performing no more than the bare minimum of their duties.
4. The more remote work there is in the chosen model, the greater the need to invest in training the relevant skills and introduction of standards and rules similar to those used by remote-only companies.
5. The consequences of adopting the remote-first model for phenomena occurring in the organization in the long term (strategy making and implementation, change of organizational culture) or rarely (creation and implementation of innovations) remain unclear.



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