
Positive and Negative Effects of Remote Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Small Enterprises in Poland

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Abstract:

Purpose: The paper aims to show the positive and negative effects of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic in small enterprises in Poland. The study is both theoretical and empirical. The theoretical part shows the essence and factors that influence working from home. The practical part presents a survey conducted among employees on the positive and negative effects of remote working.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The methods used in the study include the literature analysis and the selection, deduction, and synthesis of secondary and primary empirical source materials. The author's questionnaire as a research tool was used to obtain preliminary data. The questionnaire addressed small business employees who had to switch to the home office due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sixty-seven employees of small enterprises located in various regions of Poland participated in the study.

Findings: The study has revealed the positive and negative effects of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most frequently cited positive effects of working from home were more excellent timeliness and employee commitment, positive relations between employees and managers, increased satisfaction with the effects of work, and the possibility of flexible working time at home.

Practical Implications: Other positive effects included the possibility of combining professional and household duties, casual dress code, calm atmosphere, lack of constant supervision, saving time and money due to the lack of commutes, and the possibility of raising IT skills. The respondents referred to the limited access to the company's resources and documents and the lack of complete control of managers over employees.

Originality/Value: The article covers current issues and presents problems regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper is a new contribution to research in the context of the impact of the pandemic on remote working. It reveals the behavior of employees and managerial decisions regarding the functioning of enterprises in the pandemic.

Keywords: Remote working, COVID-19, small enterprise.

JEL Classification: D22, D81, D83, M54.

Paper Type: Research study.

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on small businesses in Poland. It makes managers take decisions under sanitary regimes and external threats to ensure the continuity of the company's operations. In Poland, the state of epidemic threat has been in force since 20 March 2020 in connection with SARS-CoV-2 virus infections. On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) recognized COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international scope. There have been several phases of epidemic development in Poland:

- the initial phase from March to May 2020, during which lockdown was introduced,
- the phase of the epidemic stabilization in June-September 2020,
- the phase of another increase in COVID-19 incidence from October 2020,
- another lockdown at the turn of March and April until the beginning of May 2021,
- the phase of easing the restrictions from 30 May 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic has a significant impact on changing social and professional behavior. New types of social behavior include: social distancing, wearing face masks, hand sanitizing, and self-isolation. Employers introduced several organizational changes in terms of adjusting working conditions to the new sanitary requirements. One of the crucial changes was the transition to working from home wherever it was possible.

Remote working is performed at any distance from the place where the results of this work are expected using available IT and telecommunication tools (Zalega, 2003). Remote working is performed regularly outside the workplace, using electronic means of communication according to the regulations on providing electronic services (Baran *et al.*, 2009).

Remote working minimizes the risk of coronavirus infections. Working from home adds a new dimension to the way people work (Jamal *et al.*, 2021). Home conditions are very different from working in the office. Access to appropriate resources and adaptation to new requirements are necessary. An employee needs to have a computer, software, and multifunction devices to work effectively. In addition, when working from home, one has to combine professional and household duties. Moreover, employees needed to develop new working habits and behavior, such as self-discipline during occupational isolation, collaborating remotely, and shaping relationships with employees and managers.

The article aims to show the positive and negative effects of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic in small enterprises in Poland.

The results of the analyses are intended to fill the gap in research on various aspects of remote working, including employees' opinions on the impact of work resources on work organization, the ability to combine professional and household duties, shaping relationships with employees and managers, and identifying factors influencing satisfaction with the work performed in isolation.

2. Literature Review

Studies on selected aspects of remote working during the Covid-19 pandemic can be found in the literature. Many employees had to adapt to the requirements of remote working. They had to gain skills to use devices, computer programs, and technological tools independently at home. The pandemic caused this adaptation to be implemented quicker than average circumstances (Nagel, 2020). There has been an acceleration of the digital transformation by moving the workplace from the office to the employee's home. This required a significant reorganization of work and a change in how work was performed on the Internet.

Employers try to provide appropriate equipment for remote working, if possible. They also prepare employees to work from home by offering them proper training (Chomicki and Mierzejewska, 2020).

The research by Anna Dolot (2020) shows that employees had little experience in remote working before the pandemic and that the change in working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic was a significant change for them. They noticed some benefits of working remotely, such as saving time (as they didn't have to commute), adapting working hours to their own needs and the family's needs, and the possibility of combining occupational and household duties. On the other hand, employees noticed the opposing sides of remote working, such as lack of direct contact with colleagues and blurring the boundary between personal and professional life. Employees had problems with self-discipline. They complained about the lack of support from their colleagues and their supervisor. They also mentioned a lack of control on the part of the superior (Dolot, 2020).

Remote working also poses completely different requirements for managers who manage a team without direct face-to-face relations. Coordinating teamwork in a virtual environment is much more complex than in stationary working conditions in the company. It is much easier to cooperate when employees have direct contact than only via the Internet. Online communication requires greater precision and takes more time. Managers are less likely to let one work from home if the job requires high interdependence (Jamal *et al.*, 2021). There are also positive aspects of remote working. It increases employees' commitment, allowing them to enjoy more flexible working hours (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021).

However, factors that motivate employees to work may, in some situations, cause anxiety (Jeran, 2016; Szluz, 2013). The greatest fears include the feeling of isolation

and weakening of interpersonal ties, the disappearance of the boundary between professional and private life, lower motivation, and a decrease in productivity due to distracting factors at home, lower opportunities for promotion and participation in training compared to stationary employees and insufficient access to information (Jeran, 2016; Szluz, 2013).

In addition, employees have difficulties managing the boundaries between working time and after-work time, which leads to overwork (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). Remote working makes employees miss interpersonal interaction, work environment, and face-to-face interaction for better collaboration (Vyas and Butakhieo 2021). In addition, employees may experience more significant stress, fear of job safety, anxiety, loneliness, and burnout (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). These situations require managers to play new leadership roles that help reduce stress, fear, and anger and build trust, loyalty, and commitment (Durst and Henschel, 2021).

In the initial period of the pandemic, enterprises encountered staff problems. The absence of employees increased due to childcare, illness, or quarantine.

Family factors have an impact on remote working. The number of people present at home, the individual workspace, and the number and age of children are essential (Vyas and Butakhieo, 2021). Employees may find it difficult to concentrate on their job when other people are at home. And some get the feeling of being at work all the time. Others point to the need to help children learn remotely.

Consequently, it can cause physical and mental fatigue and a decrease in the effects of work. Limited contact with co-workers (mainly contact with the use of technical devices) may cause a feeling of isolation and loneliness. According to the research conducted by Mierzejwska and Chomicki (2020), the most significant inconvenience in working from home is the lack of social contacts and direct communication and cooperation.

Studies conducted by Sliž (2020) show that not all companies have clear rules for remote working. In practice, there are usually informal rules, as there are no regulations for working from home. The most common rules refer to the use of software, communication with clients and colleagues, information security, working hours, dealing with technical problems, and the method of employee control (Wróbel and Jendza, 2018).

Small businesses often have owner-defined rules. Management of small enterprises is usually characterized by a low degree of task formalization and flexibility in adapting to changes. The flexibility of small businesses helps them to respond to changes more easily and quickly. They can introduce changes in a short time. Simple organizational structures facilitate direct contact between the manager and the employee, which favors the flow of information and decision-making.

3. Research Methodology

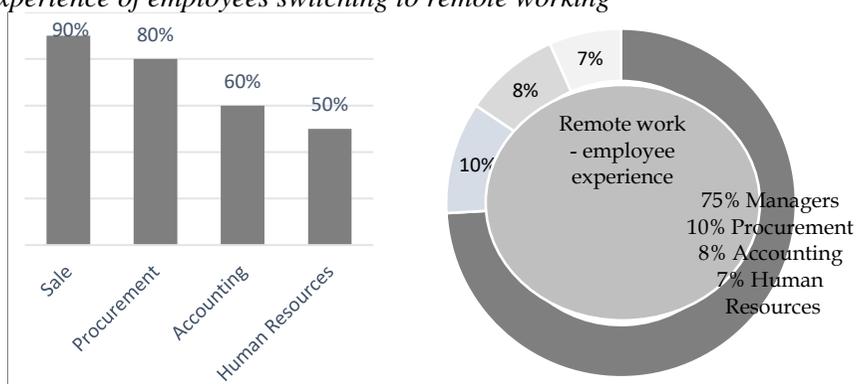
For research purposes, a survey questionnaire was developed to obtain employees' opinions on the positive and negative consequences of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-six employees who had to work from home due to the pandemic participated in the study. 54% of the participants were females, and 46% of them were males. They were between 25 and 62 years old. Most of the respondents lived in a household of two or more people (69%). The selection of the research sample was random. The questionnaire used a 5-level Likert scale: 1 - I strongly disagree, 2 - I disagree, 3 - I neither agree nor disagree, 4 - I agree, 5 - I strongly agree.

The factor analysis was used for statistical analysis. The principal components method was adopted to isolate the analysed factors, and the VARIMAX procedure was used as the rotation method.

4. Results and Discussion

Before the pandemic, the sales department employees used IT tools in their daily work, including videoconferences, and were well prepared to switch to remote working. When the pandemic started, as many as 90% of the sales department employees changed to remote working, 60% in the accounting department, 80% in the procurement department, and 50% in the HR department 50% (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of employees working remotely (in individual departments) and experience of employees switching to remote working



Source: Own study.

Managers (75%) had the most incredible experience in remote working. The employees of the procurement department (10%), accounting (8%), and the personnel department (7%) had little experience. Managers and specialists have company computers and work from home 3 to 5 days a week. The employees communicate and stay in constant contact using phones, e-mails, and communication platforms. This strengthens mutual relations and allows them to solve emerging problems.

Positive effects of remote working according to the employees: The first stage of the analysis was to identify the employees' positive impact of remote working. Factors influencing individual and teamwork were presented. The result of the study was a three-factor solution, as indicated by the criterion of the initial eigenvalue (three components were distinguished, the eigenvalues and sums of the squared loadings after isolation are more significant than 0.7 (Table 1).

Table 1. Positive effects of remote working

Factors	Component matrix			Rotated component matrix		
	Component			Component		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Using virtual platforms to communicate with employees	.920	-.199	-.	.367	.621	.605
Greater task timeliness	.890		.340	.504	.765	.273
Positive relationships among employees	.873	-.167	-.419	.312	.328	.873
Increased satisfaction with the results of work	.873	-.167	-.419	.312	.328	.873
Fewer conflicts	.872		.349	.617	.680	.213
Possibility of flexible working hours at home	.817	.224	-.178	.627	.244	.545
Fast information sharing on the Internet	.800	.350	.197	.770	.403	.212
Possibility of teamwork	.782	-.522	.253	-.	.883	.404
Fast and individual way of contact	.750	.545	-.	.859	-.	.344
Factor extraction method – principal component method. Rotation method - Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 7 iterations. Cronbach's alpha 0.940						

Source: Based on the results of the analyzes.

The most frequently cited positive effects of remote working were using virtual platforms to communicate with employees, more excellent task timeliness, positive relationships among employees, increased satisfaction with work results, fewer conflicts, and the possibility of flexible working time at home. As part of the second component, two responses were with the highest value regarding teamwork and a faster and unique way of contact. Two responses also appeared under the third component and referred to positive relations among employees and increased satisfaction with work results.

To obtain detailed analyses, a matrix of rotated components was used (Table 1). This made it possible to get three hidden dimensions, giving a more transparent arrangement of factors. Within the framework of the first dimension, there were two questions - statements (with loadings above 0.7). They referred to quick and individual contact and fast information sharing via the Internet. Within the second dimension, the most important was the possibility of teamwork and more excellent task timeliness. As for the third dimension, positive relationships among employees and increased satisfaction with work effects also turned out to be of crucial importance (as in previous analyses).

In the following analysis stage, positive factors concerning working conditions at home were identified (Table 2). As a result of the analysis, three components were distinguished. Values greater than 0.8 were adopted for the study. Most of the items appeared within the first component. The respondents listed the following positive aspects of working from home: the possibility of adjusting work to private life, casual dress code, psychological comfort, calm atmosphere, lack of constant supervision. They also mentioned easy access to an online office, working even during illness, and a sense of security against the virus due to the lack of contact with other employees. Another advantage was saving time and money as they did not commute to work. Moreover, they had an opportunity to develop their IT skills.

Table 2. *Positive aspects of working conditions at home*

Factors	Component matrix			Rotated component matrix		
	Component			Component		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Possibility of adjusting work to private life	.968	-,	-.124	.637	.630	.388
Casual dress when working from home	.957	-,	.154	.679	.405	.561
Mental comfort, calm atmosphere, no constant supervision	.931	.128	-,	.529	.575	.525
Easy access to the online office	.889	.264	.266	.865	.235	.356
The ability to work even when you are ill	.887	.260		.401	.598	.585
A sense of security due to the lack of direct contact with other employees	.860	-.425	.160	.914	.283	.173
Saving time and money because you don't commute	.848	.149	-.419	.333	.833	.335
Raising IT competences	.831	-.380	-.125	.767	.508	-,
Style of work is not important, only the effects matter	.692	.640	.271	.147	.247	.938
Factor extraction method – principal component method. Rotation method - Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations. Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin test 0.858. Bartlett's test df36, chi-square 413.524						

Source: *Based on the results of the analyzes.*

A matrix of rotated components was used to obtain a transparent system of loadings. Three hidden dimensions were obtained. The first dimension includes three questions – statements (with loadings above 0.7). They were concerned about a greater sense of security against the virus due to the lack of direct contact with other employees, easy access to the online office, and improved IT competencies. The most important was saving time and money within the second dimension as there was no need to commute. In the third dimension, the respondents indicated that the effects of work mattered, not the style of work. Undoubtedly, combining household duties and job responsibilities require a flexible type of work.

According to employees, adverse effects of remote working: According to the respondents, remote working has several opposing sides. The most frequently indicated adverse effects of remote working were limited access to documents in the company, limited access to company resources, and the manager's lack of complete

control over the employees (Table 3). Additional problems resulted from poor self-discipline of the employees, limited direct contact with other employees, and in complete control over the company's documentation.

Table 3. *Negative effects of remote working*

Factors	Component matrix			Rotated component matrix		
	Component			Component		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Limited access to documents in the company	.934	.309	.043	.397	.783	.446
Limited access to company's resources	.929	.110	-.179	.440	.556	.636
The manager does not have full control over the employee	.897	.077	-.369	.470	.334	.784
Poor self-discipline of the employee	.878	-.440	.168	.913	.236	.321
Limited direct contact with other employees	.874	-.446	.173	.916	.231	.315
Incomplete control over the company's documentation	.749	.607	.212	.149	.954	.201
Factor extraction method – principal component method. Rotation method - Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations. Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin test 0.780. Bartlett's test df 15, chi-square 296.626						

Source: *Based on the results of the analyzes.*

After rotating the components, three hidden dimensions were obtained. There were two questions within the first dimension. They referred to limited direct contact with other employees and poor self-discipline of the employees. In the second dimension, the problems included complete control over the company's documentation and limited access to documents. As for the third dimension, the manager's lack of full control over the employee was the fundamental problem.

The final part of the research focused on the impact of remote working on motivation and relations with employees and family (Table 4).

Table 4. *Negative effects of remote working in relation to motivation and relations with employees and family*

Factors	Component matrix			Rotated component matrix		
	Component			Component		
	1	2	3	1	2	3
Loss of motivation to work caused by working too long in front of the computer	.897	-.074	.435	.459	.376	.804
Loss of motivation to work caused by fatigue and too much work	.956	.139	-.089	.641	.645	.337
Home conditions make it difficult to work remotely - lack of psychological comfort and peace	.971	-.169	-.124	.830	.401	.370
Working from home causes stress and disrupts family life	.876	.466	-.003	.373	.864	.316
Weakening relations between employees	.966	-.213	-.050	.814	.353	.439
Isolating oneself from colleagues	.976	-.107	-.137	.808	.457	.350

Factor extraction method – principal component method. Rotation method - Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 8 iterations. Kaiser-Mayer-Olkin test 0.849. Bartlett's test df 15, chi-square 210.306

Source: *Based on the results of the analyzes.*

The first dimension turned out to be of key importance. It included six questions - statements (with loadings above 0.8) which revealed the following negative effects of remote working:

1. being isolated from colleagues,
2. lack of psychological comfort and peace because home conditions make it difficult to work remotely,
3. weakening relations between employees,
4. decline in motivation to work due to fatigue and too much work,
5. decrease in motivation caused by working too long in front of the computer,
6. the emergence of stress and disruption of family life.

However, after rotating the components, three key factors appeared in the first dimension. They referred to the lack of psychological comfort and peace because home conditions make remote working difficult. In addition, weakening relationships between employees and isolation from colleagues had a negative impact on the well-being of the employees.

5. Conclusion

The pandemic has changed the existing working conditions of managers and employees. It made it necessary to comply with the sanitary regime and to limit direct contacts at work. Several new duties related to remote working were imposed on managers and employees. The organization, coordination, and control of remote working changed. Also, personal communication between employees and management became limited to the minimum.

According to the research, positive aspects included the possibility of flexible working time, saving time and money due to the lack of commuting, a sense of security against the virus due to the lack of contact with other employees, more excellent task timeliness, and greater satisfaction with the results of work. According to the respondents, remote working requires greater self-discipline due to the lack of direct control of the manager and the ability to combine professional duties with household duties. The employees who are parents also pointed to the need to help children learn remotely.

The respondents also noticed the adverse effects of remote working. Those who did not have previous experience working from home pointed to the need for quick training in the use of computer programs. The negative aspects included the limited access to documents in the company and the lack of direct relations with the supervisor

and employees. The respondents also mentioned higher costs of working from home (higher electricity consumption, heating, and water). According to some respondents, home conditions made remote work difficult. They did not provide psychological comfort and peace due to various obligations of other people living in the household. When it comes to co-workers, weakening interpersonal relationships and domestic isolation was described as disadvantages.

Managers were able to fulfill leadership roles that influenced the attitudes and behavior of employees in remote working conditions. However, they met various obstacles. Long-term isolation and working from home reduce the creativity of employees. It causes apathy, depression, and a feeling of fatigue. Social relations are weakened, and the respondents partly withdraw from them. There is a visible decline in professional activity, and duties are limited to a minimum. Work efficiency decreases. Employees begin to lack face-to-face contact and ordinary conversations with colleagues. There is no work-life balance. Employees complain about exhaustion and lack of leisure time. Long-term isolation at home and temporary bans on traveling during festivals result in a lack of direct contact with the family.

Managers find it difficult to control employees remotely and motivate them to work more efficiently. It is difficult to counteract the states of apathy of employees. Managers are also temporarily apathetic. They must deal with their weaknesses and offset the decline in professional activity. Managers should help employees cope with negative emotions and build a strong relationship of trust. In large enterprises, consultations with a psychologist are offered. This is rarely seen in small businesses. In practice, employees rarely consult a psychologist; they do not want to reveal their weaknesses. They justify them as a state of momentary apathy and that it is temporary.

The pandemic revealed that most businesses and the public, in general, were not prepared to deal with a crisis of this scale and nature. Despite these limitations, companies can cope with problems. However, it requires a lot of determination of managers and employees. Many managers succeed in finding a way to survive. The features of entrepreneurial activity are the critical determinants of companies' resilience to external crises. Owing to the flexibility of operation and the ability to adapt to sudden changes, they can face a pandemic crisis. The critical elements of modern leadership should focus on managing relations with employees. Managers should inspire and motivate employees to work effectively and counteract the adverse effects of professional isolation.

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