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# Employees' Perception of the Difficulties of Work at Home from the Perspective of their Experience on Remote Working

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***Abstract:***

***Purpose:*** *The research objective was to check whether there is a correlation between feelings about difficulties in Work from Home (WFH) and having previous experience in remote working.*
***Methodology:*** *During the research the literature review and a questionnaire study were conducted. The CAWI method was applied in April 2021, i.e., a year after the first case of COVID-19 in Poland, and five months after the introduction of the obligatory WFH in public institutions. The study covered 1284 employees of various positions and branches. The Pearson chi square test of independence and the U-Mann-Whitney test were applied.*
***Findings:*** *The research results show that there is a correlation between feelings about the difficulties and WFH benefits and the experience of remote working before the pandemic. The hypothesis that in the group with no experience in remote working more people feel difficulties related to WFH than among those with experience, was only confirmed as to the problem of lowering the living comfort. Other difficulties, for which a statistically significant correlation with experience was found, were mentioned less often by people without experience than by those who worked remotely before the pandemic. As for the benefits, it was found that their strength was higher for those with no experience than those who had previously worked remotely. The exception was the benefit of low level of supervisor control, which was felt more strongly by employees with experience.*
***Practical Implications:*** *Assuming that with the time of remote working the benefits decrease, and the number of difficulties increases, managers should develop an appropriate motivation system and support for WFH employees. This will be beneficial not only during a pandemic, but also in the future, as remote working is likely to remain in a hybrid form in some organizations, or it will be implemented along with the development of Economy 4.0.*
***Originality Value:*** *The research focused not only on the difficulties (and benefits) experienced by employees providing WFH, but also on the relation between their feelings and experience in remote working before the pandemic outbreak. The correlations should become an inspiration for further research, mainly of a dynamic nature.*

***Keywords:*** *Remote working, WFH, Work From Home, COVID-19, pandemic.*

***JEL:*** *I31, J81, M12, M54, N34, O15.*

***Paper Type:*** *Research Paper.*

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## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic first appeared in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. On March 11, 2020 the disease was given the name by the World Health Organization (WHO) and on March 12, 2020 it was called the pandemic (Hui *et al.*, 2020). The first disease in Poland was confirmed on March 4, 2020. As in other countries, also the Polish government applied many restrictions, among which there was an obligation of remote learning at schools and universities and the transition to Work From Home (WFH) was implemented in those companies where it was possible. On December 4, 2020, the WFH obligation was introduced for officials and employees of public services (Journal of Laws of 2020, item 2316).

For many Polish employees the pandemic meant their first contact with remote working. Before the outbreak of Covid-19 in Poland, only 2.13% of employees were working in this way (Wpływ ..., 2021), most of them in large cities and in the Warsaw metropolis (in the last quarter of 2020, when the level of WFH use increased significantly as a result of the pandemic, for Podkarpacie it was approx. 8%, while for the metropolitan area it exceeded 17% (Wpływ ..., 2021), which shows the scale of differentiation between regions).

It is known that WFH, which derives from remote working (Errichiello and Pianese 2016; Anka *et al.*, 2020; Choudhury *et al.*, 2020; Graves and Karabayeva 2020; Yawson, 2020), may have potential benefits and risks. At the beginning of the pandemic, observing the increasing incidence and predicting the severity of this trend, many scientists assumed that there would be a need to switch to remote working and wondered what negative effects this change would bring. As time passed and more people switched to WFH, it was possible to verify their assumptions, check the scale of the phenomenon and which of the negative aspects of remote working are most severe for employees.

However, not only the feelings of employees, but also the relations between perceived defects and various employee characteristics are important from the point of view of the future. One of the aspects that may be relevant for perceiving the difficulties of this form of work is the fact of having experience in remote working or the lack of it. An interesting question from the point of view of science is the one of how the perception of difficulties related to WFH changes with the experience in remote working.

## 2. Potential Difficulties of WFH

Considering the negative aspects, the authors of research on remote working mention the following:

Blurring the boundaries between work and private life, which results from the constant stay in the same space with other household members and combining

professional duties with family life. This can be experienced strongly, especially by parents whose partners also perform WFH, and their children learn remotely while the parents work. It can be really hard for those who work from a living room or a bedroom (Bulut and Reziyamu 2021; Chawla *et al.,* 2020; Davis *et al.,* 2020; Kniffin *et al.,* 2021; Vargas-Llave 2020).

Excessive workload and dealing with professional matters in irregular working hours (phone calls, text messages, e-mails) create a sense of being constantly at work. This may result in overwork, stress, sleep disorders, demotivation, burnout, and even depression and a lack of sense of what you do (Bulut and Reziyamu 2021; Fritz and Cotilla Conceição 2021; Kniffin *et al.,* 2021; Malik *et al.,* 2020; Sęczkowska, 2019; da Silva and Neto, 2021; Sheth, 2020; Yu *et al.,* 2021). In addition to affective disorders, health problems may be associated with physical ailments such as back pain, joint and muscle pain. They result from poor ergonomics at work and lack of exercise (Carnevale and Hatak 2020; Davis *et al.,* 2020; Donthu and Gustafsson, 2020; Vargas-Llave, 2020). Additionally, the problem of putting on weight may arise, and this can lead to states of low mood, a feeling of helplessness and even depression.

However, the feeling of isolation and loneliness are the most emphasized dangers of WFH in the COVID-19 pandemic (Algahtani *et al.,* 2021; Bentley *et al.,* 2016; Brooks *et al.,* 2020; Creary *et al.,* 2018; Henning-Smith 2020; Kniffin *et al.,* 2021; Wang *et al.,* 2020), which can be especially acute for people living alone. The need for WFH introduced by the lockdown, while limiting meetings with family, friends or colleagues who an employee had spent an average of 8 hours a day with, make them feel lonely or even socially excluded. It is hard to replace rumors over coffee in the office, lunches in the company's cafeteria, going to company events or private meetings outside of work with virtual contacts.

Limiting business contacts to virtual ones causes communication problems (Jeran 2016; Malik *et al.,* 2020; Martins *et al.,* 2004). Non-verbal communication is limited and there are technical difficulties. Communication problems can naturally translate into lower effects of work (especially during teamwork tasks), a drop in creativity and productivity. When one adds to it analogous problems in communication with superiors and a sense of lack of influence on the fate of the organization and one's own, as well as the fear associated with the possibility of dismissal (Henning-Smith, 2020; MacIntyre, 2020; Malik *et al.,* 2020; Sharma, 2020; Shigemura *et al.,* 2020; Zhou *et al.,* 2020), there is a high probability of demotivation, a decrease in work commitment, and even depression.

## 3. Methodology

The purpose of the research was: checking if there is a correlation between feelings about difficulties in WFH and the fact of having previous experience in remote working.

The following research hypotheses were adopted for the study:

*H1: There is a correlation between feelings about the difficulties of WFH and the fact of having previous experience in remote working.*
*H2: In a group with no previous experience in remote working, more people experience difficulties with WFH than among those with experience.*

The hypotheses result from the supposition that people who did not provide remote working yet, but were forced to do WFH unexpectedly and immediately and without preparation, could react according to the principle: every change gives rise to resistance. So regardless of the potential benefits, the imposed and sudden change could cause frustration and fear of the new and unknown among them.

Secondly, it was assumed that the lack of experience increased the feeling of difficulty in finding oneself in the new situation, and people who previously worked remotely had managed to develop mechanisms to adapt to the new realities and to cope with some of the difficulties, reducing their severity.

In addition, in the research it was assumed that in order to fully assess the negative effects of WFH, it was worth looking not only directly at the difficulties, but also considering whether and how the benefits associated with work changed when switching from remote working to WFH. Thus, it was assumed analogously that:

*H3: There is a correlation between feelings about the benefits of WFH and experience in remote working.*
*H4: People with no previous remote working experience feel the benefits of WFH more than people with experience.*

The fourth hypothesis was based on the assumption that people who have not had contact with remote working so far will show a kind of enthusiasm related to the feeling of ”freedom” and ”independence”.

To verify the hypotheses a questionnaire study was conducted by means of the author’s own questionnaire. Based on the literature review, a list of 21 difficulties were compiled (and additionally a list of 15 benefits).

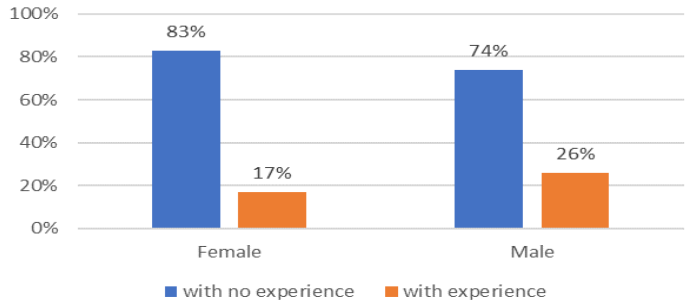
Among the difficulties mentioned, the participants of the study indicated those that concern them. The severity degree of the difficulties for an employee were not checked, but only the fact that they appeared. The benefits were evaluated by the respondents in relation to both WFH and remote working to verify the differences in how they felt. A 7-point rating scale was used, where 1 - minimal benefit, and 7 - benefit of great importance.

All three scales were verified by means if the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for their reliability and consistency. For the WFH difficulty scale, and both benefit scales the

Cronbach's alpha coefficients were (0.78), (0.91) and (0.93), respectively. The research was carried out by means of the CAWI (computer-assisted web interviews) method in the period of April 6-30, 2021, i.e., a year after the first case of COVID-19 was diagnosed in Poland, and at the same time five months after the introduction of the WFH obligation in public institutions, for which it was the first experience of working outside the organization. The questionnaire was completed by 1894 respondents. After incomplete or untrustworthy copies were rejected, the 1284 questionnaires were accepted for the statistical analysis. The Pearson chi square test of independence and the U-Mann-Whitney test were used for the research. The research was carried out at the significance level of $\alpha = 0.05$. It was assumed that: when $p < 0.05$ there was a statistically significant relation (marked with *); $p < 0.01$, there was a highly significant relation (**); $p < 0.001$, there was a very high statistically significant relation (***). The majority, as much as 80% of the sample, were people who had no experience with remote working before the pandemic (1,030 people), the remaining 20% had previously worked remotely.

For both groups, it was checked whether there were any socio-demographic features related to previous experience of working remotely. The research showed a statistically significant relation between gender and experience in remote work, $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0002$). Before the pandemic, men were more likely to work remotely (26%). 17% of women worked remotely. The responses are shown in Figure 1.

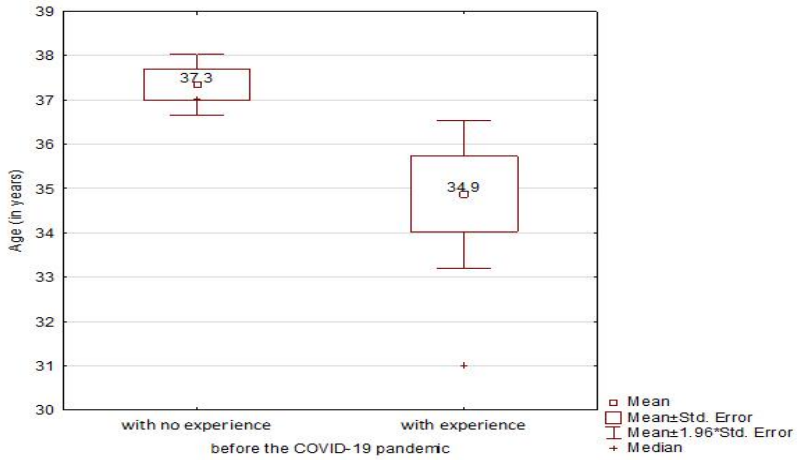
***Figure 1.*** *Gender and experience in remote working before the pandemic*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

It was checked whether there were differences in the age of people who worked remotely before the pandemic and those without such experience. The research showed statistically significant differences $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0000$). Before the pandemic, younger people were more likely to work remotely - they were around 35 years old on average. The median age in this group was 31 years old, so half of the people in this group were 31 years of age or younger (Figure 2).

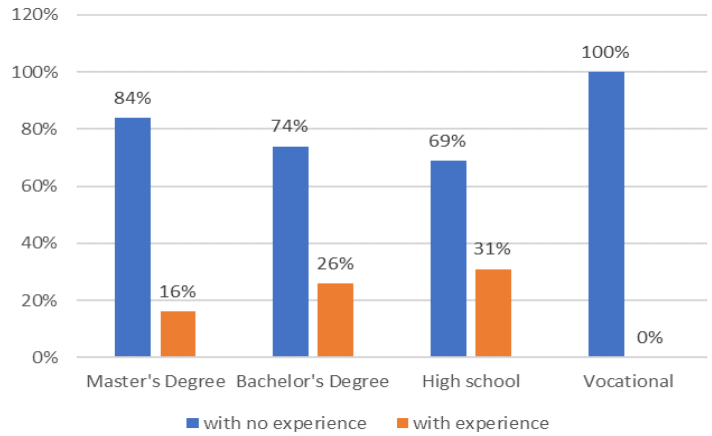
***Figure 2.*** *Age and experience in remote working before the pandemic*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

It was checked whether there were differences in the education of people who worked remotely before the pandemic and those who did not. The test also showed statistically significant differences $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0000$). Before the pandemic, remote working was most often performed by people with secondary education (31%) and higher or engineering education (26%). The responses are shown in Figure 3.

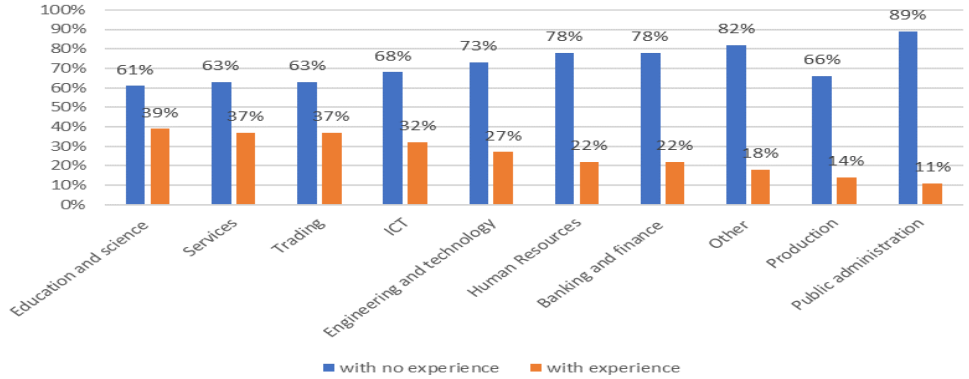
***Figure 3.*** *Education and experience in remote working before the pandemic*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

Whether or not anyone worked remotely before the pandemic was also related to the branch where they worked $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0000$). Most often, people working remotely before the pandemic worked in education and science (39%), and in services and sales - 37% each. The least frequent were administrative workers (Figure 4).

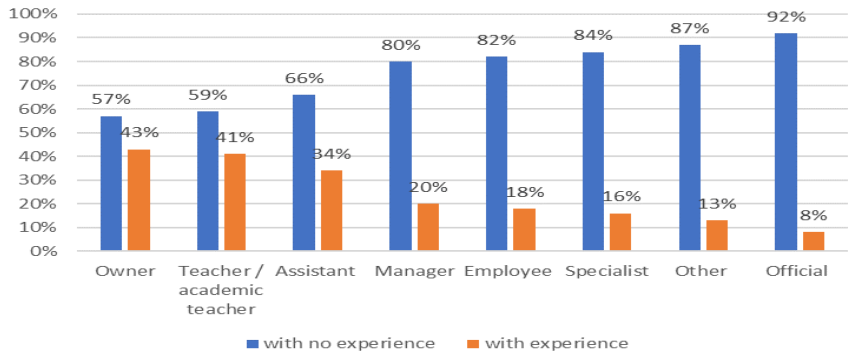
***Figure 4.*** *Branch and experience in remote working before the pandemic*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

The so far experience was related to the position taken by the respondent $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0000$). Before the pandemic, remote working was most often performed by owners (43%), teachers and scientists (41%), and assistants (34%). Clerks worked in this way least often (8%). The responses are shown in Figure 5.

***Figure 5.*** *Position and experience in remote working before the pandemic*

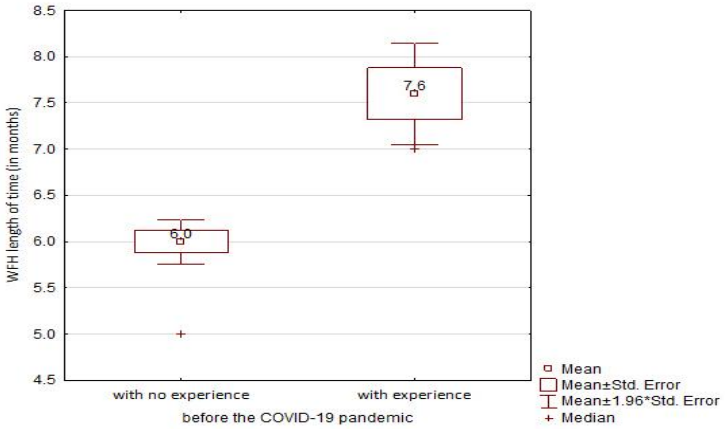



***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

## 4. Results

It was checked whether there were differences in the length of WFH (calculated in months) during the pandemic, and whether the person had any experience with remote working. The analysis shows that the differences are statistically significant $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0000$). People who worked remotely before the pandemic provided WFH longer than others during the pandemic. This was on average about 7 and a half months (7.6) over the year between the outbreak of the pandemic and the survey. People with no previous experience worked for 6 months on average. The median for this group was 5, so half of the people with no experience worked from home for 5 months or less (Figure 6).

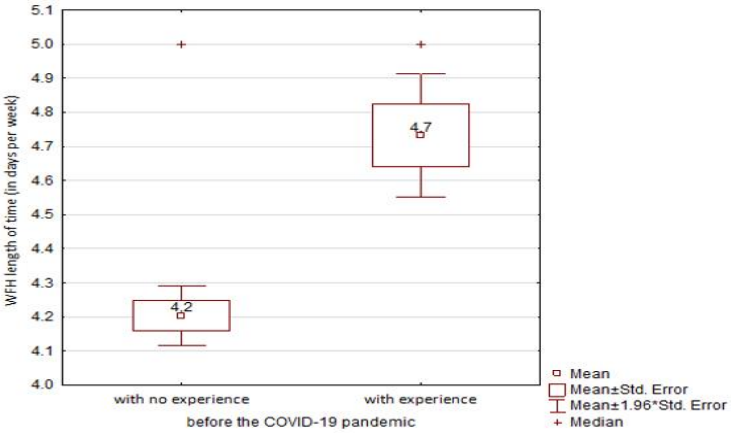
***Figure 6.*** *Average WFH (in months) during the pandemic in the group of people who worked and did not work remotely prior to the pandemic*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

It was checked whether there were differences in the length of WFH during the pandemic (calculated in days per week), and whether the person previously worked remotely. The analysis shows that the differences are statistically significant $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0000$). Before the pandemic, people who worked remotely during the pandemic provided WFH for more days a week than the rest - almost 5 days (4.7), i.e. for almost the entire five-day working week. People with no prior experience worked for 4.2 days (Figure 7).

***Figure 7.*** *Average WFH time ( in days/week) during the pandemic in the group of people who worked and did not work remotely before the pandemic*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

It was checked whether there were differences in the assessment of difficulties among people who worked or did not work remotely before the pandemic. Statistically significant relations took place in the case of feeling of "being at work

all the time" $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.012$), necessity to plan time and tasks independently $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0042$), a feeling of isolation and loneliness $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0255$), lowering the living comfort $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0471$), ability to be self-disciplined and act consequently $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0254$), no supervisor control $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0025$) and difficulty in feeling the sense of work $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0011$). The results of the independence test of Pearson's chi square are presented in Table 1.

***Table 1.*** *Pearson's chi square test results for independence. Difficulties and experience in remote working before the pandemic*

| No. | Difficulty | p-Value |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Difficulty in "work-life balance" | 0.2563 |
| 2. | No direct contact with the supervisor | 0.5484 |
| 3. | Lack of social contacts with co-workers (gossiping over coffee, etc.) | 0.8974 |
| 4. | Collaboration difficulty in a "virtual" team (technical problems) | 0.3546 |
| 5. | Collaboration difficulty in a "virtual" team (no face-to-face contact, etc.) | 0.4589 |
| 6. | Feeling of "being at work all the time" | 0.0012** |
| 7. | Necessity to plan time and tasks independently | 0.0042** |
| 8. | Difficulty in concentration (presence of home dwellers, etc.) | 0.3352 |
| 9. | A feeling of isolation and loneliness | 0.0255* |
| 10. | Lowering the living comfort | 0.0471* |
| 11. | Difficulty in communication with colleagues (linguistic ambiguities, etc.) | 0.3147 |
| 12. | Technical problems (software, Internet problems etc.) | 0.5562 |
| 13. | No hardware (laptop, printer, etc.) | 0.2347 |
| 14. | Higher labor costs (cost of utilities, etc.) | 0.8792 |
| 15. | No separate workplace | 0.3365 |
| 16. | Lack of work comfort (work ergonomics, etc.) | 0.5669 |
| 17. | Physical health problems | 0.5467 |
| 18. | Ability to motivate to work | 0.3215 |
| 19. | Ability to be self-disciplined and act consequently | 0.0254* |
| 20. | No supervisor control | 0.0025** |
| 21. | Difficulty in feeling the sense of work | 0.0011** |
| 22. | Depreciation by environment of remote work as "staying at home" | 0.2984 |

***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

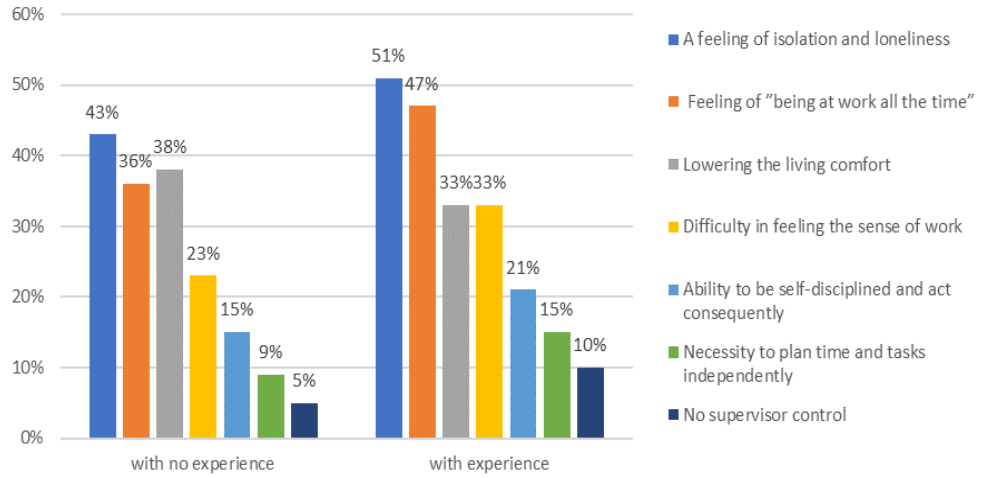
People who did not have experience in remote working before the pandemic less often complained about the feeling of being constantly at work than people who already worked remotely (36% and 47% of people, respectively). The responses are shown in Figure 8. A smaller percentage of people who only got to know the specifics of working remotely also suffered from the need to independently plan the day and tasks (only 9%). In the group of people with experience it was 15% (Figure 8). People without experience also less frequently indicated a sense of isolation/loneliness (43%) than those with experience (51%). However, it should be noted that in both groups the percentage of people experiencing loneliness is alarmingly high (Figure 8).

More people, among those who did not work remotely before, experienced the problem of reduced living comfort due to the need to combine work and home space (38%). Among people with experience, this problem was severe for 33% of employees (Figure 8).

Fewer people among those who first encountered remote working had a problem with the ability to discipline and consistency in carrying out professional tasks (15%). Among people who worked remotely before the pandemic, this problem affected as many as 1/5 of them (21%). The responses are shown in Figure 8.

Similarly, the problem of the lack of control on the part of the boss was reported less frequently by people with no experience than those previously working remotely (5% and 10%, respectively). The responses are shown in Figure 8. People who first encountered remote working also less often noted the difficulty in feeling the meaning of work (23%) than people with experience, among whom as many as one third (33%) noticed this problem (Figure 8).

***Figure 8.*** *Difficulties of remote working and experience in remote working before the pandemic*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

Additionally, to verify the perception of the shortcomings of WFH, depending on the experience in remote working, the strength of perceiving particular benefits by these two groups was compared. In general, people who entered remote working as a result of the pandemic rated its advantages higher than those with experience (12 out of 14 benefits). At the same time, both groups indicated the same direction of change (decrease/increase) for particular benefits when entering WFH. The exception was the level of stress, which increased in the case of people without experience, and in the case of people with little experience, it turned out to be lower for remote working (Table 2).

***Table 2.*** *Average values of benefits for remote working and WFH for people with and without experience*

| No. | Benefit | With no experience | | The direction of change | With experience | | The direction of change |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Remote working | WFH | | Remote working | WFH | |
| 1. | Tasks content adaptation to my personal needs | 4.39 | 4.09 | □ | 4.47 | 3.93 | □ |
| 2. | Possibility to reconcile ”work-life balance” | 3.73 | 4.75 | □ | 4.14 | 4.49 | □ |
| 3. | Lots of time for loved ones | 3.27 | 4.53 | □ | 3.57 | 4.19 | □ |
| 4. | Time saving | 4.62 | 4.68 | □ | 4.44 | 4.47 | □ |
| 5. | Money saving | 4.23 | 4.79 | □ | 4.04 | 4.81 | □ |
| 6. | Low level of supervisor control | 3.18 | 3.50 | □ | 3.46 | 3.89 | □ |
| 7. | Concentration ease | 4.63 | 4.09 | □ | 4.70 | 3.94 | □ |
| 8. | High creativity | 4.41 | 3.98 | □ | 4.61 | 3.93 | □ |
| 9. | High motivation to work | 4.71 | 4.02 | □ | 4.63 | 3.70 | □ |
| 10. | High commitment to work | 4.97 | 4.35 | □ | 4.92 | 4.12 | □ |
| 11. | High work efficiency | 5.00 | 4.33 | □ | 4.99 | 4.08 | □ |
| 12. | Quick/efficient tasks performance | 5.05 | 4.35 | □ | 5.00 | 4.22 | □ |
| 13. | High job satisfaction | 4.66 | 4.05 | □ | 4.65 | 3.91 | □ |
| 14. | Low level of stress | 3.81 | 4.21 | □ | 4.00 | 3.96 | □ |

***Source:*** *Author’s own research.*

It was checked whether there were any correlations regarding the evaluation of the benefits of WFH and the previous experience in remote working. The research shows that statistically significant differences occurred in the case of: the ability to reconcile professional duties with private life $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0283$), having more time for the closest ones $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0078$), low level of supervisor control $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0008$), high work motivation $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.00159$) and high work efficiency $p < \alpha$ ($p = 0.0356$). The U-Mann-Whitney test results are summarized in Table 3. The possibility to reconcile work and personal life, more time for loved ones, high motivation to work and high work efficiency were more experienced by people who had not previously worked remotely, while the low level of supervisor control was felt more strongly by people with experience in remote working (Figure 9).

## 5. Results and Discussion

The research conducted allowed verifying the adopted research hypotheses:

*H1: There is a correlation between feelings about the difficulties of WFH and the fact of having previous experience in remote work.*

*H3: There is a correlation between feelings about the benefits of WFH and experience in remote working.*

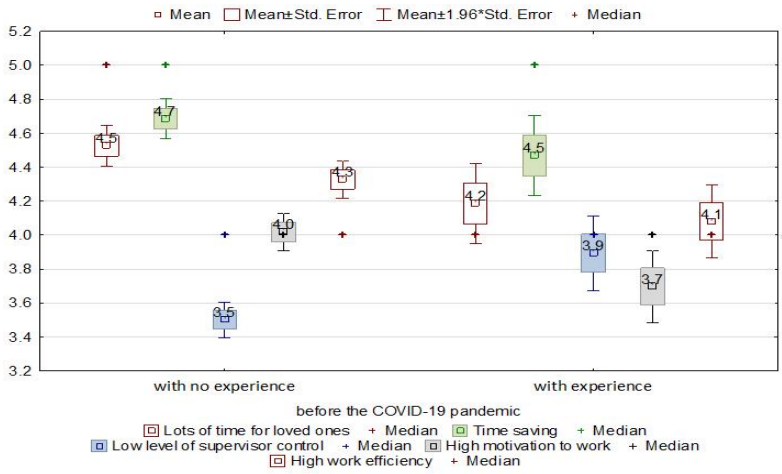
In the light of the present research, it can be concluded that the perception of both the difficulties and the benefits of WFH depends on whether the employee performed remote working before the pandemic.

***Table 3.*** *U-Mann-Whitney test results. An assessment of individual benefits in the group of people working and not working remotely before the pandemic*
*0– I do not feel or feel minimally … 7 – strongly felt benefit…*

| No. | Benefit | With no experience | With experience | p-Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | Tasks content adaptation to my personal needs | 4.09 | 3.93 | 0.2164 |
| 2. | Possibility to reconcile ”work-life balance” | 4.75 | 4.49 | 0.0283* |
| 3. | Lots of time for loved ones | 4.53 | 4.19 | 0.0078** |
| 4. | Time saving | 4.68 | 4.47 | 0.0977 |
| 5. | Money saving | 4.79 | 4.81 | 0.8557 |
| 6. | Low level of supervisor control | 3.50 | 3.89 | 0.0008*** |
| 7. | Concentration ease | 4.09 | 3.94 | 0.2286 |
| 8. | High creativity | 3.98 | 3.93 | 0.7600 |
| 9. | High motivation to work | 4.02 | 3.70 | 0.0159* |
| 10. | High commitment to work | 4.35 | 4.12 | 0.0547 |
| 11. | High work efficiency | 4.33 | 4.08 | 0.0356* |
| 12. | Quick/efficient tasks performance | 4.35 | 4.22 | 0.2518 |
| 13. | High job satisfaction | 4.05 | 3.91 | 0.3504 |
| 14. | Low level of stress | 4.21 | 3.96 | 0.0570 |

***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

***Figure 99.*** *Average assessment of benefits in the group of people with and without experience*




***Source:*** *Author's own research.*

*The second hypothesis (H2)* that in the group with no previous experience in remote working, more people experience difficulties related to WFH than among people with experience, it can only be accepted for the difficulties defined as: lowering the living comfort. Other problems (feeling of ”being at work all the time”, necessity to plan time and tasks independently, a feeling of isolation and loneliness, an ability to be self-disciplined and act consequently, no supervisor control, difficulty in feeling the sense of work ) were indicated less often by people without experience than by experienced employees.

It can be assumed that this is the result of the ”first impression” and a kind of “choking” of freedom resulting from the lack of rigid rules, working hours and personal control on the part of the superior. This is confirmed by the results of the analysis of the benefits perception, where people with no experience in WFH, in relation to 4 out of 5 benefits in which experience was significant, declared that they felt them more strongly than people with experience.

Therefore, *the fourth hypothesis (H4)* that people without previous experience in remote working experience the benefits of WFH more than people with experience - in terms of benefits: possibility to reconcile ”work-life balance”, lots of time for loved ones, high motivation to work, high work efficiency can be partially accepted. Regarding the benefit: low level of supervisor control, the hypothesis must be rejected.

As a result of the analyzes, it can be assumed that the experience of employees is correlated with the way they perceive the difficulties (and benefits) of WFH. Generalizing, it can be stated that ”rookies” perceive WFH as less burdensome and more attractive than people who worked remotely even before the pandemic.

## 6. Conclusion

For the full verification of the conclusion, this research should be deepened and it should be checked whether the identified correlations do not also result from other factors interacting with experience, such as gender, nature of work, i.e. branch and position, etc.

Additionally, the research should be repeated on the same group of ”debutants” after some time, when this form of work will not be something new for them, but will become known and ”familiar”. It is possible that then more people will feel the difficulties and/or the benefits will seem not as great as at the beginning of remote working. However, this would require dynamic research.

In such a case - if the assumptions resulting from this research are confirmed - it can be expected that as the experience increases, the enthusiasm, motivation and commitment of employees who provide remote working will decrease and there will be a stronger sense of isolation and other problems that have a negative impact on

well-being of employees. It is obvious that this will also translate into the efficiency and results of the organization.

Thus, taking into account the declarations of the majority of employees that they would like to work in a hybrid form after the pandemic (80% in the group with no experience and 74% in the group with experience), managers should already draw conclusions today to prevent the strengthening of ratings for difficulties and worsening of benefits assessment.

Development of appropriate motivation tools and technical solutions requires in-depth qualitative research, including individual interviews with employees of specific companies and an open discussion of managers and/or owners with subordinates about their expectations and problems related to the transition to remote work in a pure or hybrid form.

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