Does Gen Z Question the Wisdom of Returning to the office? Results of the Research Conducted During the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Youngest Generation of Employees

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Abstract:

Purpose: The main goal of the article is to identify premises influencing the decisions of young employees regarding the choice of the form of work organization after their experience of remote work in an uncertain time of SARS-CoV-2.
Design/Methodology/Approach: The authors conducted a diagnostic survey with a survey questionnaire. The questionnaire was carried out using the CAWI method. It was filled in by 310 respondents who represent Generation Z, are professionally active and worked remotely during the pandemic.
Findings: The surveyed employees - representatives of Generation Z, adapted very well to the conditions of remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of this form of work organization, they have different experiences, both positive and negative. However, they do not allow for an unequivocal answer to the question: Are the young question returning to the office? For many, remote work will remain an attractive and the most desirable solution. In their opinion, companies offering it to employees will be more competitive than other organizations. The representatives of Gen Z are also aware of some benefits that can be brought by working at the company's premises, especially when they are just starting their professional careers. Considering the above opinions of Gen Z employees, many companies decide to use indirect solutions - a hybrid work organization, combining the advantages of remote and stationary work.
Originality/Value: Leaders today are facing an unprecedented, challenging situation: how to understand, lead, manage, and motivate Generation Z working remotely. The research results shall contribute to the debate on what young employees (Gen Z) expect, need, and want in a remote work environment. The research based-understanding of these is a pivotal step to leading them effectively and making appropriate and satisfactory choices for all interested parties regarding current and future forms of work organization.

Keywords: Generation Z, remote work, hybrid work, HRM.
JEL Classification: M54, J21, J24.
Paper type: Research article.

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1. Introduction

Every time a young generation enters the labor market, it is now the 'Z' generation, human resource managers face several challenges. They mainly concern the necessity to adjust HRM practices to the needs and expectations of young employees. They share not only birth years, age, location but most of all "critical" factors that include changing societal attitudes; key political, economic, and social events; and significant incidents that have meaning at that time to that generation (Mannheim, (1952 [1923]); Kupperschmidt, 2000). All this means that successive generations of employees differ from their older colleagues in terms of values, ways of life, and views on work (Smith, 2015; Sidor-Rządkowska, 2021). In the case of generation Z from the representatives of generations: Y, X or BB.

For representatives of particular generations, such a "critical" factor was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It caused a revolution in many areas of their functioning, including their work environment. The need to restrict interpersonal contacts and thus reduce the risk of infection transmission made employers, who had such opportunities, implement remote work on a massive scale and at an unprecedented pace (IPC Research Institute, 2020). Remote work has become the new professional standard for employees representing different generations. With more or lesser support from their employers, employees experienced numerous advantages and disadvantages of this form of work organization (Birimoglun *et al.,* 2022).

This article focuses on the experiences of the youngest employees representing Generation Z in this area. These young people born between the early 1990s and later (Lanier, 2017) are considered the first true digital native generation. They were born in the digital age, grew up during the technological explosion (Turner, 2015) and have never experienced a world without constant and ubiquitous connectivity (Self *et al.,* 2019). Many Z-ers don't remember a time without the internet or before social media (Lanier, 2017). In this regard, they are unlike any previous generation. Numerous studies on Generation Z also show that its representatives value work-life balance and flexibility in the workplace. Young employees expect their employers to secure a wide variety of flexible solutions pertaining to the forms of work organization as well as the time of work.

These should include, among others, perform work in the form of remote work (Kantar TNS, 2018; Nieżurawska-Zając, 2020; Chillakuri *et al.,* 2018). It is also necessary to note that many young Z-ers were forced into remote work just as they started their professional lives (Bruner, 2021). Unfortunately, many Generation Z employees who began their professional careers in purely remote work environments had no chance to live the working life they dreamt of during college.

They do not experience the in-person onboarding, networking, and training they typically expect when working in a company. In connection with the above,

questions arise about the experiences of young employees with remote work during COVID-19; the way they functioned during this period, the problems they faced? Will the pandemic experiences with remote work affect and how will their decisions regarding the choice of the form of work organization? Answering these questions can help young worker's managers better understand this generation and lead to better recruitment, retention, communication, and employee engagement in a changed post-pandemic world of work.

2. Methods and Characteristics of the Research Sample

The article's primary goal is to identify premises influencing the decisions of young employees regarding the choice of the form of work organization after their experience of remote work in an uncertain time of SARS-CoV-2. For the purposes of this article the following research questions were formulated:

RQ 1. How did Generation Z function while working remotely during the pandemic?
RQ 2. What factors significantly determine the decisions of Generation Z employees to return to work at the company's premises?
RQ 3. What factors significantly determine the decisions of Generation Z employees to continue working remotely?

The presented goal and research questions implied the need to select appropriate methods, techniques and research tools. For the purposes of this article, an empirical, quantitative research method was used, which was a diagnostic survey using the surveying technique. The research tool was a questionnaire. It contained closed questions in the form of a disjunctive cafeteria. The survey ended with a metric that enabled carrying out a socio-demographic characteristics of the studied population.

Due to the nominal nature of the variables, frequency and percentage statistics were applied in the statistical evaluation. A total of 310 people participated in the study, of which 71.6% were women. Every third of the representatives of the youngest generation works in the service sector (32.9%). Most of the surveyed people live in a large city (61.3%) and in majority they do not have children (88.4%) (Table 1)[3].

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics pertaining to the research sample*

		n	%
Gender	Female	222	71.6
	Male	88	28.4
Business sector	Commerce	20	6.5
	Production	26	8.4

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[3]*This article is another study that was created on the basis of the research characterized above, carried out by the research team, which includes the article's authors (Żarczyńska-Dobiesz et al., 2022).*

Does Gen Z Question the Wisdom of Returning to the office? Results of the Research
Conducted During the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Youngest Generation of Employees
648

	IT	38	12.3
	Service	102	32.9
	Education	14	4.5
	Medicine	12	3.9
	Other	98	31.6
Residence	Country	54	17.4
	Small town (population below 20k)	30	9.7
	Mid-size town (population between 20k - 100k)	36	11.6
	Big city (population over 100k)	190	61.3
Children	Yes	36	11.6
	No	274	88.4

Source: Own work based on conducted research.

3. Results

The first question addressed to the respondents concerned the identification of their opinions relying on changes in the area activities and behaviors undertaken by them in connection with their swap to the remote work mode and the consequences of this state of affairs (Table 2). The following 15 statements/questions were verified for this purpose.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics pertaining to activities and behaviors of employees during the remote work [%]*

Statement/Question	yes	no
Did you have the freedom to organize your work?	83.1	16.9
Did you handle private matters during the declared working time?	72.1	27.9
Have your household costs related to your remote work increased?	59.1	40.9
Have you noticed an increase in household duties resulting from the transition to remote work mode?	37.9	62.1
Did the family situation (the presence of children at home due to isolation, quarantine, remote learning, etc.) reduce your effectiveness?	37.0	63.0
Has your commitment to remote work increased?	36.6	63.4
Has your commitment to remote work decreased?	35.1	64.9
Did you have the opportunity to work remotely before the Covid-19 pandemic?	28.6	71.4
Has the efficiency of your remote work decreased?	24.8	75.2
Did you feel more stress when working remotely compared to working at the company's premises?	24.7	75.3
Did the amount of household duties hinder the delivery of professional duties?	22.1	77.9
Were you afraid of being laid off?	19.4	80.6
Was the remote work your first job?	14.8	85.2
Did you feel more control from your employer when you switched to remote work?	11.0	89.0
Have you been looking for ways to "circumvent" this control?	9.7	90.3

Source: Own work based on conducted research.

It is worth emphasizing that remote work was not the first job for the vast majority of respondents (85.2%). The young people were not stressed by the transition to remote work (75.3%) and were not afraid of being laid off (80.6%). In the opinion of every third respondent, their commitment during the period of remote work increased (36.6%).

However, a similar percentage of respondents believe that their commitment has decreased (35.1%). When analyzing the obtained results, it is stated that the decrease in involvement was indirectly reflected in the decrease in the effectiveness of their work, which was indicated by every fourth respondent (24.8%). The vast majority of respondents declared that their work efficiency did not decrease but remained at the same level or increased (75.2%).

Such an effect may result firstly from considerable freedom in terms of the way of organizing the work performed (83.1%), secondly from the lack of children and the related family obligations (63.0%) as well as relatively fewer household duties (62.1%). This possibility of flexible work organization and the lack of ongoing control (89.0%) meant that the youngest employees even admitted to being able to settle their private matters in the declared working time (72.1%).

Another issue analyzed was the recognition of factors that make the respondents reluctant to return to stationary work at the company's premises (Table 3).

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics pertaining to factors which determine the reluctance to return to stationary work at the company's premises [%]*

Factor	yes	no
Recognizing the many important advantages of remote work	92.3	7.7
Getting used to remote work	86.5	13.5
Reluctance to return to work at the company's premises after a longer period of remote work	83.9	16.1
The need to combine work and household duties	82.6	17.4
Concern for the health of loved ones	78.1	21.9
Concern about own health during a pandemic	74.2	25.8
Higher efficiency in remote work	60.0	40.0
General decrease in motivation to work	57.4	42.6

Source: *Own work based on conducted research.*

It should be emphasized that nearly ¾ of the respondents selected as many as six of eight verified determinants. In the case of some of them, the reluctance to return to work in the company's headquarters resulted from fear for their health (74.2%) or their loved ones (78.1%). It is worthy that as many as 92.3% of respondents noticed the significant advantages of remote work or got used to this form of work organization (86.5%) and would not want to change it.

Although, on average, only one in ten declared having children, as many as 82.6% of the respondents indicated the possibility of combining professional and parental responsibilities, for example, in the context of the future, related to working remotely. Against the background of the above, the most significant number of different opinions were provided by the last two factors, namely higher effectiveness in remote work over stationary work, which was indicated by 60% of respondents, and the general decrease in motivation to work reported by them - as many as 57.4% of responses.

In an attempt to deepen the research the authors of the article asked the respondents about factors which would make them willing to return to stationary work at the company's premises (Table 4). The following 15 statements/questions were verified.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics pertaining to factors which determine the willingness to return to work at the company's premises [%]*

Factor	yes	no
The need to go outside the house	89.7	10.3
The need to seek distance towards Covid-19	87.7	12.3
The need for direct interpersonal relationships	87.1	12.9
Lack of sufficient conditions for working from home	81.9	18.1
Willingness to spend less time in front of a computer screen (e.g. face-to-face contacts instead of subsequent telecons)	72.9	27.1
The need to set up new interpersonal relationships	72.3	27.7
More effective organizational communication during stationary work	65.8	34.2
The need for greater focus on the work itself	60.6	39.4
The feeling of loses resulting from remote work as compared to working at the company's premises stationary (e.g. relationships, etc.)	60.6	39.4
Longing for more amenities available in the workplace	59.4	40.6
Strong habituation to stationary working	57.4	42.6
Opportunity for greater professional development in the workplace	52.3	47.7
Recognizing significant disadvantages of remote work	51.6	48.4
Greater organizational chaos in the company resulting from remote work of employees	42.6	57.4
Fear of being an unnecessary, redundant employee in the company	30.3	69.7

Source: *Own work based on conducted research.*

When analyzing the obtained results, a relatively large discrepancy in the respondents' indications regarding the factors prompting them to return to stationary work is observed. The most frequently indicated factors were three indications, namely the need to go outside the house (89.7%), the need to seek distance toward Covid-19 (87.7%), and the need for direct relationships (87.1%). Their specificity is related to the objective difficulties related to the functioning of an employee in the Covid 19 pandemic and the related lock-down.

Over 80% of respondents justified the willingness to return to work in the company with the lack of sufficient conditions for working from home (81.9%). Almost ¾ of the respondents emphasized the importance of face-to-face relationships with current and potential future colleagues.

According to the respondents, an internet connection will not replace direct contact with other people. Similar opinions concern much more effective organizational communication during work (65.8%), a greater focus on the work itself (60.6%), longing for more amenities available in the workplace (59.4%), or more significant development and training development opportunities (52.3%). On average, every second respondent experiences significant disadvantages of remote work and therefore wishes to return to work in the company.

Against the background of the above results, the lowest percentages of respondents' indications related to the last two factors, namely the sense of greater organizational chaos in the company resulting from remote work of employees (42.3%) and fear of being an unnecessary, redundant employee in the company (30.3%).

4. Discussion

Referring to the main goal and research questions posed by the authors of this paper, the empirical research conducted shows that the attitude of Gen Z representatives to remote work is ambivalent. While young employees are open to flexible solutions in work organization, research has shown that it is difficult to define their unequivocal preferences in this regard. It is evidenced by the fact that they indicated numerous reasons for both continuing to work remotely and returning to stationary work. Because over 85% of the respondents were people who worked professionally before the start of the pandemic (with over 70% not having previously been able to work remotely), the arguments they indicate seem to be even more objective and valuable.

Gen Z respondents quickly adapted to the new work mode dictated by the pandemic situation. Generation Z employees felt neither stress nor anxiety about the new work mode. What is more, according to most of them, their commitment and the efficiency of work performed in remote conditions remained at the same level and even increased. It confirms their positive experience of the transition to remote work and their openness to adaptation to forms of work organization based on ICT technology.

In the opinion of the respondents, working remotely in many cases brought benefits both in the professional sphere (increased involvement and efficiency of the employee's work, increased trust in the employer who did not apply ongoing control, but rather gave relatively large freedom in the organization of work) and in their private life (more freedom and independence at work and the possibility of flexible combination of private and professional duties). In the respondents' opinion, the willingness to continue working remotely in the post-pandemic period is also

influenced by objective factors related to a higher risk of Covid 19 infection transmission, positive experiences from such work organization or simply a habit acquired during several months of working in a home office.

Against the background of the indicated positive experiences, it is worth emphasizing that the same respondents also experience significant deficits and limitations related to the transition to remote work. Thus, they constitute important reasons that encourage them to return to stationary work in the company. In their opinion, the natural need to go outside the house, seek distance from Covid-19, and the need for direct interpersonal relationships are crucial. In the context of the arguments for hindered young employees from working remotely were spending much time in front of the computer screen and limited opportunities to receive support from co-workers, which is very desired in the case of people who are at the beginning of their professional career.

Generation Z employees expressed similar opinions as part of the research conducted by The Center for Generational Kinetics (CGK) in 2020 among 1000 respondents across multiple generations in the United States (Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z). It shows that Gen Z finds remote working more challenging overall. More than any other generation, Gen Z feels like remote work has negatively affected their work-life balance (36%). They also feel their employer needs to provide them with better tools to work remotely (34%) and that remote work has been an imposition on their lives (32%) (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2020).

The conducted research shows that the pandemic experiences of young employees from remote work will affect their current and future decisions regarding the choice of work organization mode. However, it is not easy to define unequivocally in what way. Undoubtedly, the opinions of young people in this regard are divided. Many of them have become convinced of remote work, even "choked" with its advantages, and cannot imagine working in a different form, which is already visible during recruitment processes (the possibility of remote work as a decisive factor in choosing an employer).

According to the article's authors, this is somewhat short-sighted thinking and may negatively affect the professional and personal development of this group of young employees. The second group of Z-et employees is not so enthusiastic about remote work. Of course, they are convinced by its advantages, but they are also aware of the benefits of stationary work at the company's premises. It provides them, above all, with what is so important at the beginning of their professional career, namely personal connection with colleagues, team members, managers, and leaders.

These people usually help them understand the organization, culture, and work. In the face of this state of affairs, one of the possible solutions is to work in a hybrid mode. It enables the introduction of remote and stationary work, thus a specific

balance between their advantages and disadvantages. Its target formula (e.g., 2 + 3 or 3 + 2; 1 + 4 or 4 + 1) should depend on the specificity of the company, employees' professional experience and individual motivations. Such a solution will enable the implementation of not only the needs related to the work of the youngest generation but also the currently important social goals implemented by the company, especially in the long term.

5. Summary

For over a dozen years, a systematic increase in the popularity of using various forms of remote work has been observed. Remote work is becoming more and more common, thus gaining more and more followers. Covid-19 pandemic significantly accelerated the visible trend that remote work and its associated technologies will be a transformative force for many organizations over the long term (Hadidi *et al.,* 2020). During the pandemic, massive shifts to remote work led many enterprises and their employees from different generations, including Gen Z, to have an accelerated lesson in this regard.

Thus, all entities experienced a whole range of advantages and disadvantages of this work organization mode. For almost two years, all interested parties could see which solutions worked and which did not. Undoubtedly, it is time for managers to draw conclusions and make decisions considering the interests of both employees and employers. Working remotely has impacted every generation.

However, about the youngest employees, representatives of Generation Z, it seems very important to understand their specific situation. On the one hand, these people, being mingled with technology and its tools from when they were born, find it easy to work remotely. On the other hand, they are just starting their professional career and need to work in conditions that best satisfy the specific needs that are important at this stage of their professional work.

In this context, the moving mentioned above to a hybrid form of work that accommodates employees' needs, office or workspace realities, and flexible work options seems to be an effective solution (The Center for Generational Kinetics, 2020).

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Does Gen Z Question the Wisdom of Returning to the office? Results of the Research
Conducted During the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Youngest Generation of Employees
654

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