

EVALUATING THE EXPERIENCE WITH WORK FROM HOME

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Abstract: Work from home has become a part of everyday life for most of us. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has become a necessity rather than a formerly desired benefit. An important part of this way of working is its effect on workers and how workers have handled this phenomenon of modern times. The objective of the paper was to find out how office workers perceived the transition to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The paper also examined whether office workers perceived higher productivity when working from home and whether they were able to separate private and work life. Data from a questionnaire survey distributed to 33 employees of a project office of the company T-Mobile Czech Republic a.s., who compared their experience with working from home before the pandemic and during the lockdown. The data obtained were then evaluated on the basis of relative frequency. The results show that employees were more productive when working from home, both before the pandemic and during the lockdown. At the same time, most employees did not have problems separating private and work life, unlike working parents, who reported problems related to online education during the lockdown. These findings represent certain benefit for HR departments, who can, based on these findings, decide on the length of working from home. The findings also form a basis for considering how to help employees to adapt to this newly emerged trend.

Keywords: work from home, home office, COVID-19 pandemic, productivity, employees, private and work life

1 Introduction

Work from home, home office (hereinafter referred to as HO), telework, and others have become increasingly more important nowadays. Besides being a very desired benefit in most large and medium-sized enterprises, it also becomes a tool to protect the health of population. If not for concerns about COVID-19, most trade companies would have not introduced HO to such a large extent (Belzunegui-Eraso, 2020).

Many companies experienced working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic for the first time, since it was the only possibility to keep their business running. More experienced companies, which had already been practising this way of working even before the pandemic, could test the functioning of the systems set and the effectiveness of their employees when working from home in the long run. Unlike the Western European countries and the USA, the Czech society was not prepared well for such a situation. In 2013, one-third of Czech companies enabled their employees to work from home (Čaha, 2018). Vrchota et al. (2020) conducted a survey involving a total of 1018 small and medium-sized enterprises in the CR before the outbreak of the pandemic. According to the findings, about 60 % of companies in the Czech used a form of HO. In the USA, it was more than 70 %.

The reason why a lower percentage of Czech companies are interested in HO compared to foreign companies consists in the doubts whether working from home is effective. Another obstacle was a lack of legislation (Vrchota et al., 2020). Despite the concerns of companies in general, the share of employees working from home rocketed due to the efforts to stop the spread of the new disease, COVID-19. Therefore, to be able to manage the pandemic crisis, it is necessary to analyze employee attitude to working from home (Zöllner and Sulíková, 2020). This issue is dealt with by the research group of Schade et al. (2021), who found that employees are able to adapt to the change in the working environment while remaining productive. Awada et al.

(2021) concluded that women and high income or older employees showed higher productivity. Based on their research outputs, Schade et al. (2021) recommend employers to foster employee intrinsic motivation through a sense of autonomy and competences. This way, a lack of interaction with colleagues might not represent such a big problem, if employees feel they may rely on them if necessary (Ližbětínová, 2017).

Working from home brings certain advantages and disadvantages both for employers and employees. The main advantages include e.g. cost savings and increased employee performance. Moreover, when set up properly, working from home increases employee loyalty and satisfaction (Vrchota et al. 2020). Hau and Todescat (2018) stated that working from home enables better work-life balance. The disadvantages of HO include e.g. worse connection of employees with the organization, extended working hours due to more frequent breaks, and difficult communication between employers and employees. For some employees, it might be difficult to separate work and private life, which may result in increased stress. It shall be noted that what is perceived as disadvantage may be an advantage for other employees. The preference for working from home is related to personality traits of employees. Vrchota points to the fact that more introverted employees tend to prefer HO as opposed to extroverts who find working from home frustrating (Vrchota et al. 2020).

The objective of the paper was to determine how office workers perceived the transition to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 Literary research

Many authors have been dealing with the issue of the impact of working from home on employees. Based on the search in databases (PsychInfo, ProQuest, and Web of Science) for the years 2007-2020, Oakman et al. (2020) states that the effects of HO on employee physical and mental health are very different. Employee health was influenced by the availability of support from organization, support from colleagues, external contacts outside the organization, and the degree of conflict of work and family requirements. Women reported higher level of fatigue and stress compared to men.

Based on the results of a questionnaire survey conducted at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Xiao et al. (2021) concluded that working from home might have been more difficult for women, since they usually tend to take more responsibility for household chores and other activities at home. Also, working mothers might have felt pressure caused by lack of support in home schooling and childcare. According to the research by Lonska et al. (2021), it was difficult for employees to reconcile work and personal life, especially in the case of women at the age of 18-44 and respondents who lived with minor children. According to Thompson et al. (2021), before the pandemic, the third most common motivation (answered by 25 % of the respondents) for working from home was tend to family demands. Employees also experienced less conflicts of family and work when working from home compared to when working in an office (Darouei and Pluut, 2021). Employees who took care of young children during the pandemic showed a lower level of productivity, while in the case of taking care of teenage children, the effect was opposite (Awada et al., 2021). Similarly, Ipsen et al. (2021) found that during the closure of schools and kindergartens, people working from home, who took care of children, showed lower productivity than childless employees. Using online survey, the authors found that working from home increased employee productivity in general. According to the respondents, the advantages of HO include the protection against the spread of the infection and the disease, saving of time necessary for commuting and higher flexibility in terms of having more time for meals and breaks. Most respondents lacked social contact with colleagues. Another disadvantage was the

impossibility to separate work and home environment and unsuitable conditions for working from home. The issue of productivity was dealt with e.g. by Galanti et al. (2021), whose research showed that fear of the disease increases productivity, since working from home reduces the fear of possible infection. According to the research by Zöllner and Sulíková (2021), employees, who are allowed to work from home, will be willing to do so to protect themselves against illness.

Research by Beno and Hvorecky (2021) also dealt with the issue of productivity when working from home. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, during the lockdown, and after the lockdown, the authors sent questionnaires to employees in Austria. The results showed that employees with many years of experience did not show higher productivity in any of the periods but they found that employees who did not like working from home were less productive. The reasons that reduced productivity included childcare including home schooling, looking after pets, caring for others when working, routine work, or less work. Productivity was also addressed by Stefan (2021), who used a questionnaire survey focused on employees in Romania and found that in the first months of the pandemic, productivity increased in more than a third of them. A half of them reported fatigue caused by longer working hours.

Based on an online questionnaire focused on employees in Italy, Awada et al. (2021) did not report any change in the overall perception of the level of productivity of employees compared to their productivity when working in the office before the pandemic. However, the number of hours spent working increased by about 1,5 hours at HO. The research showed a very low correlation between relative productivity and change in hours spent working from home. More hours spent working were reported by individuals who had school children, owned office desk or adjustable chair and had adjusted their working hours. However, research conducted in Italy by Moretti et al. (2020) shows that employees felt less productive but less stressed than when working in office but just as satisfied.

Online research by Mihalca et al. (2021) showed that work performance and work satisfaction during the COVID-19 is affected by situational (family, work, organization) factors and individual factors. The authors also found that workload is a significant indicator of productivity and satisfaction with work but not of work performance. A surprising finding was that the support from organization did not influence productivity or satisfaction with work. Nemteanu et al. (2021) concluded that remote work does not have a significant impact on work performance, but influences counterproductive work behaviour, which is caused by insufficient communication with superiors.

Pfeifer (2021) is one of the few authors who focus on mental health and work attitudes of Czech employees and managers during the COVID-19 pandemic in the year 2020. The data were obtained using an online survey focused on industrial companies, which received the same questionnaire every month. Based on the literary research, it was confirmed that people who worked remotely are at higher risk of suffering from social isolation, which is closely related to stress (Jurasek, 2021). During the lockdown, this feeling was even stronger. Unlike employees, managers perceived negative impacts on psyche less negatively than employees. This may be due to learned discipline and better self-management that managers use on a daily basis (Pfeifer, 2021).

The impacts of remote work could differ by working conditions in individual countries as well as given quarantine measures adopted due to the global pandemic (Nemteanu et al., 2021).

In order to achieve the objective of the paper, the following two research questions are formulated: 1) Did office workers perceive higher productivity when working from home? 2) Were office workers able to separate work and private life?

3 Data and methods

3.1 Data

The basic data source is a questionnaire survey consisting of 7 closed and 4 open-ended questions. Before the start of the questionnaire survey, the so-called preliminary research will be carried out. The preliminary research will have a form of an interview with 2 respondents, who provide feedback concerning whether the respondents understand the question.

Subsequently, 50 questionnaires will be distributed in person in the headquarters of T-Mobile Czech Republic a.s. The questionnaire survey will examine subjective views of employees mostly in managerial positions in a project office concerning their productivity when working from home, and how they managed to reconcile private and work life.

The research sample will include employees of a project office due to the fact that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, they were allowed to work from home twice a week. During the national lockdown, the situation changed and they were allowed to work in the office twice a week in line with the restrictions adopted.

In the introductory part of the questionnaire survey, respondents are asked to fill in the questionnaire and the objective of the research is explained. In the next part, there are closed questions concerning gender, age, job, and children. The most important part consists of closed and open-ended questions, which enables better understanding of the issue and the respondents will not be affected by any expected answers. The questions will concern subjective perception of the respondents' productivity and the ability to separate private and work life before the COVID-19 pandemic and during the lockdown.

3.2 Methods

All data obtained from the questionnaires will be processed in MS Excel. 11 questions from the questionnaire survey are gradually entered into each cell in the first line. The answer from a certain respondent is added to relevant question in the next line. This means that each line will be assigned to one questionnaire. The document will thus contain 11 cells in the 1st row (11 columns). Each column will contain a question and an answer from the respondents.

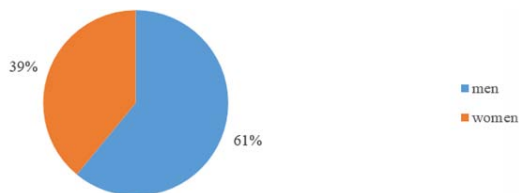
Subsequently, a table will be created to record the frequency and relative frequency to each question of the questionnaire survey. The answers to 4 open-ended questions will be evaluated and then included in the group of representative answers. The first column of the table will contain responses (e.g. strongly agree, rather agree, rather disagree, strongly disagree, don't know), the second column will include the frequency of responses, while in the third column, the calculated relative frequency of responses will be entered in percentage.

Moreover, the application of data filtering will be used to present specific data in MS Excel. The output will be a table for recording frequency and relative frequency for each finding.

The results of the questionnaire survey are presented in the form of pie charts including comments.

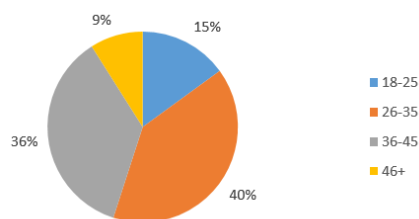
4 Results

On 1 November 2021, 50 questionnaires were distributed to the project office in the headquarters of T-Mobile Czech Republic a.s. The questionnaires were sent back after a week with the total number of 33 respondents ($n = 33$), i.e. 66 % of the employees addressed, out of which 20 were men (61 %) and 13 women (i.e. 39 %) see Graph 1).



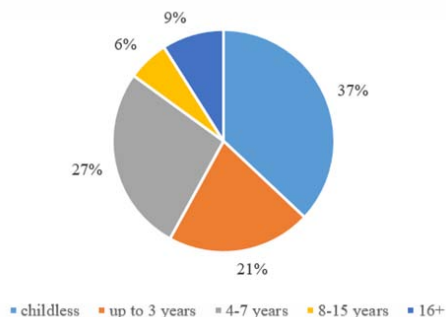
Graph 1: Structure of respondents by gender
Source: Authors

The age structure of the respondents is presented in Graph 2. As seen from the graph, 5 respondents (15 %) were at the age of 18-25, 13 respondents (4 %) at the age of 26-35, 12 respondents (36 %) at the age of 36-45, and 3 respondents (9 %) at the age of 46 and old.



Graph 2: Age structure of respondents
Source: Authors

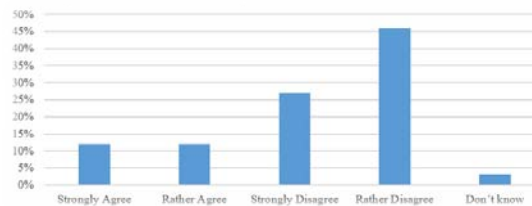
Within the survey, the respondents answered the question of how old their youngest child is. As seen from Graph 3, the highest number of the respondents did not have any children (37 %), 21 % had children under 3 years, 27 % had children at the age of 4-7 years, 6 % of the respondents had children at the age of 8-15, and 9 % had children at the age of 16 and older.



Graph 3: Absolute frequency of responses to the question of How old is your youngest child?
Source: Authors

The question of whether it was difficult for employees to separate work and private life when working from home before the COVID-19 pandemic was answered as follows: 12 % of the respondents answered “Strongly Agree” and 12 % “Rather Agree”. 27 % answered “Strongly Disagree”, 46 % answered “Rather Disagree”. 1 person stated he/she did not know the response to the question. The responses are shown in Graph 4.

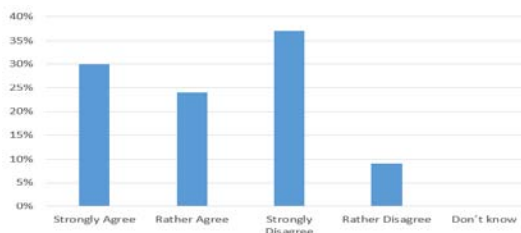
If the respondents answered “Strongly Agree” or “Rather Agree”, they did not further specify where the problems were (open-ended question). 2 out of 8 respondents stated they were not able to use time more effectively when working from home compared to working in office. Moreover, 6 out of 8 respondents specified they were distracted by various factors, such as children, meetings, housework, private matters.



Graph 4: Absolute frequency of responses to the question: Was it difficult to separate work and private life when working from home before the COVID-19 pandemic?
Source: Authors

Graph 5 shows responses to the question of whether it was difficult for employees to separate work and private life when working from home during the lockdown. 30 % of the respondents answered “Strongly Agree”, 24 % answered “Rather Agree”. 37 % of the respondents answered “Strongly Disagree”, while 9 % of the respondents choose “Rather Disagree”.

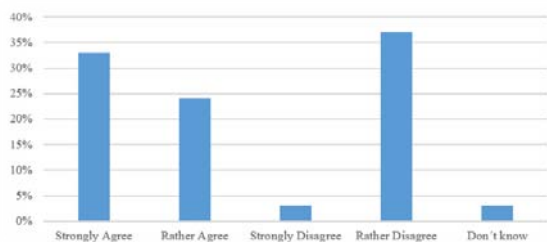
If the respondents chose positive answers, they specified the problems in more detailed (open-ended question). 1 out of 18 respondents answered that he/she is not able to use their time more efficiently when working from home than when working in the office. For 2 out of 18 respondents, it was difficult to schedule their time for work, while 10 out of 18 respondents were distracted by children during their online lessons. 2 out of 18 respondents stated that social distancing decreased their motivation to work.



Graph 5: Absolute frequency from the application of data filtering: Was it difficult to separate work and private life when working from home in the lockdown?
Source: Authors

Graph 6 shows the responses to the question of whether the respondents perceived higher productivity when working from home before the COVID-19 pandemic. 33 % of the respondents answered “Strongly Agree”, 24 % chose “Rather Agree”. 3 % of the respondents answered “Strongly Disagree”, while 37 % of the respondents chose “Rather Disagree”. One respondent chose the “Don't know” option.

When deciding for a positive answer (“Strongly Agree”, “Rather Agree”), the respondents specified in more detail how the higher productivity showed (open-ended question). 1 out of 18 added he/she was able to organize the work at the expense of his/her private life, and tended to work more. 5 out of 18 answered there were fewer disruptive elements and they could thus concentrate better on their work. Similarly, 3 out of 18 were not distracted by colleagues and they could thus concentrate better. 9 out of 18 mentioned saving time for commuting and could use it better.

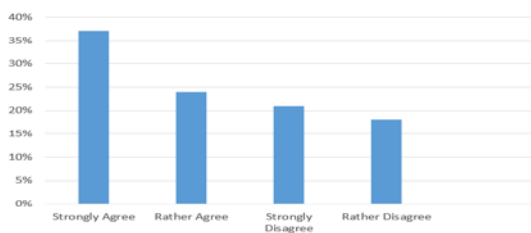


Graph 6: Absolute frequency of responses to the question: Did you perceive higher productivity when working from home before the COVID-19 pandemic?

Source: Authors

Graph 7 shows the respondents' answers to the question of whether they perceived higher productivity when working from home during the lockdown. 37 % of the respondents answered "Strongly Agree", 24 % "Rather Agree". 21 % of the respondents chose "Strongly Disagree" and 18 % "Rather Disagree".

In case of a positive answer, the respondents further specified (open-ended question) in which sense they perceived higher productivity. 1 out of 18 mentioned better time management, 2 out of 18 used the same explanation but added that it was at the expense of their private life. 5 out of 18 mentioned fewer disruptive elements. The remaining 10 respondents answered they saved time for commuting.

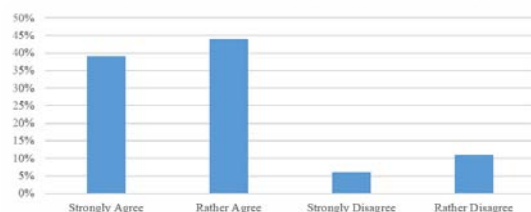


Graph 7: Absolute frequency of answers to the question: Did you perceive higher productivity when working from home during the lockdown?

Source: Authors

The last graph (Graph 8) shows the responses to the question of whether employees who lived with children under 15 years had difficulties to separate private and work life during the lockdown.

The answer "Strongly Agree" was chosen by 39 % of the respondents, while 44 % answered "Rather Agree". 6 % of the respondents answered "Strongly Disagree", while 11 % chose the answer "Rather Disagree".



Graph 8: Absolute frequencies in the application of data filtering. Question: perceived difficulties to separate private and work life during the lockdown in the case of employees living with children under 15 years.

Source: Authors

5 Discussion of results

Based on the findings from the questionnaire survey, it is possible to answer the formulated research questions:

1) Did office workers perceive higher productivity when working from home?

The data obtained showed that more than 50 % of the respondents perceived higher productivity when working from home even before the pandemic. This is in line with the findings of Ipsen et al. (2021), according to whom working from home increases employee productivity. The conclusion of Awada et al. (2021) and Beno and Hvorecky (2021) is in contradiction to these findings, as they did not notice any change in perceived productivity from the side of employees working from home before the pandemic. Beno and Hvorecky (2021) continued in their research and concluded there was no change in productivity during the lockdown, either. Nevertheless, the respondents participating in the research presented in this paper perceived slightly higher productivity when working from home before the pandemic. According to Ipsen et al. (2021), childless employees showed lower productivity compared to their colleagues living with children, but overall, employee productivity was higher. Schade et al. (2021) state that despite the change in the working environment, employees are able to adapt to the changes.

Employees with perceived higher productivity stated that they saved time as they did not have to commute to work. Some of them also argued that there were no disruptive elements when working from home. For some respondents, working from home enabled better organization of work time but at the expense of their private life. These situational factors are also mentioned by Mihalca et al. (2021), according to whom they had impact on employee productivity and satisfaction with work during the COVID-19 pandemic. It follows from the conflicting results of research on productivity that there are many factors affecting employee performance when working from home. In general, it is thus possible to agree with the findings of Schade et al. (2021), who argue that office workers are able to adapt to working from home.

The second research question (see below) could be answered as follows:

2) Were office workers able to separate work and private life?

Before the pandemic, only about a quarter of the respondents had difficulties to separate personal and private life when working from home, which means that for most employees, it was not difficult to separate private and work life. The respondents were mostly distracted by children, meetings, housework, and private matters. This is in line with the research by Hau and Todescano (2018), who claim that according to employees, work-life balance is one of the advantages of HO. On the other hand, according to Vrchota et al. (2020), the effort to keep work-life balance can be a disadvantage for some people, causing them stress.

Based on the results of their research, Lonska et al. (2020) state that especially in the case of women, time for work and for family started to overlap with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our research confirmed that during the lockdown, a number of employees who found it difficult to separate work and private life grew by approx. 25 %. Working parents with young children mentioned home schooling as the most frequent disruptive element for their work. The majority of parents with children under 15 had difficulties to separate work and private life. This finding is in line with Lonska et al. (2021), who stated that based on their research results, for parents with minor children, it was difficult to reconcile work and private life during the lockdown. Moreover, they found that this was also problem for women at the age of 18-44. The research conducted indicate that it is important to find out how to help employees who have difficulties to reconcile work and private life to work better.

When interpreting the findings of the research conducted, several limitations need to be taken into account. The first limitation was a small sample size. For this reason, the responses were not further analysed in terms of the respondents' gender, which would have helped achieve more detailed results. The

respondents were mainly managers, i.e. people with higher education. Besides, the research was limited to employees of a project office in the company T-Mobile Czech Republic a.s. in Prague. It shall also be noted that the research considered subjective employee perception of their productivity. To achieve more objective results, the research should include also the superiors and the results should be mutually compared to find out whether they correspond with the subjective employee perception.

It follows from the above that further research is needed on the impact of HO and gender differences. In this sense, there is also a need for further research focused on the issue of work-life balance. Given the current situation, research should be carried out within a longer period in order to obtain objective results.

The data and findings can be used by HR department of the company when considering whether to increase or reduce the number of days the employees are working from home in order to boost their productivity.

6 Conclusion

The objective of the paper was to find out whether office workers perceived higher productivity when working from home and whether they were able to separate work and private life. The objective of the paper was achieved. The data from respondents are analysed on the basis of their absolute frequency in the chapter "Results".

It follows from the data obtained that office workers showed higher productivity before the COVID-19 pandemic, which even increased slightly during the lockdown. Moreover, the results showed that employees did not have any difficulties to separate private and work life before the COVID-19 pandemic, but during the lockdown, problems with separating work and private life more than doubled from the 25 % before the pandemic. More specifically, this problem applied mainly to parents of children under 15 due to the closure of schools and home schooling.

The findings can be used by HR departments for employees in managerial positions. The fact that the research was conducted on employees in selected positions in specific departments is a limitation of the research. Another limitation is the fact that only the subjective perception of employee productivity from the side of employees, and its objective evaluation from the side of superiors was not included. Due to the small sample size, it was not possible to analyse the responses by men and women separately, which would have helped find more detailed answers.

From the above, the following questions arise: How can employers help working parents when working from home? What is the difference between the employee productivity perceived subjectively by employees and how superiors perceive the productivity of their subordinates? How does productivity of men and women differ when working from home? Therefore, it is necessary to conduct further research that would provide answers to these questions and thus help companies to be able to adapt to the current situation and cooperate with employees working from home.

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Primary Paper Section: A

Secondary Paper Section: EA, AH