

HOME WORKING EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The coronavirus pandemic has allowed many employees in various professions to experience the pros and cons of working from home. Their experience, whether positive or negative, is important for all employers considering shifts from traditional, office-based working to more flexible arrangements, including home working. The findings of a questionnaire survey on home working employee experience are presented to analyze challenges of home working for different employees and make suggestions for the better use of home working by different employers. The survey presented was carried out by authors from February to April 2021 and included responses of 113 employees of various professions experiencing home working during the coronavirus pandemic. The findings showed that most of the respondents were comfortable working from home, especially in terms of better work-life balance. However, a significant problem for most respondents was social isolation exacerbated by restrictive measures, as well as insufficient technical equipment and overall support from the employer. These seem to be the major opportunities for improvement.

Keywords: covid-19, Czech Republic, flexible arrangements, home working

JEL Code: M10, M12, M50

Introduction

Home working is commonly known as a flexible working arrangement allowing a shift from traditional, office-based working arrangements and establishing an effective work-life balance to enhance employee satisfaction and performance, increase operational productivity, and reduce employment costs (Bloom, Liang, Roberts, & Ying, 2015).

The essence of home working is the application of information and communication technologies to enable people to work from home, away from the office. Home working can be relevant to many jobs (analysts, consultants, designers, editors, programmers, etc.) and people may work full-time or part-time from home (Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015). It follows that a shift towards home working generally does not mean people have to work only at home. Usually splitting time between home and the office seems to be the most productive

arrangement, when employers want employees working from home to regularly attend the office to stay informed and involved (Predeteanu-Dragne, Tudor, Popescu, & Nicolae, 2020).

There are many benefits as well as challenges of home working for both employers and employees. Employers have the opportunity to reduce operating costs, increase work productivity, and improve the use of employees' skills, although at the same time they have to solve some organizational, technical, or legislative issues of home working. Employees can reduce travel costs, gain time flexibility, or achieve work-life balance, but at the same time, they must be able to deal with self-management, social isolation, or team cooperation (van der Lippe & Lippenyi, 2020).

However, the coronavirus pandemic has changed the common approaches to the application of home working and has allowed many employers and employees in various industries and professions to experience the pros and cons of home working. This paper focuses on the employee experience, whether positive or negative, that is important for all employers considering temporary or permanent shifts from office-based working to home working.

1 Goal and method

The paper introduces findings of a questionnaire survey on home working employee experience to analyze challenges of home working for different employees and make suggestions for the better use of home working by different employers.

The questionnaire survey presented was carried out by authors from February to April 2021 and included responses of 113 employees of various professions experiencing home working during the coronavirus pandemic in the Czech Republic, which means from about March 2020. Respondents were contacted via Facebook. The set of respondents was characterized by gender (61% female and 39% male), age (34% 18-29, 24% 30-39, 22% 40-49, 17% 50-59, and 4% 60 and over), education (49% secondary and 51% university), and industry (52% administrative activities, 13% information technologies, 10% wholesale and retail, 9% legal activities, 5% public administration, 4% finance, 4% construction, and 3% education). The online questionnaire used contained ten questions focused on respondents' experience with home working: (1) respondents' experience with home working before the coronavirus pandemic, (2) organizational and technical conditions for home working created by the employer, (3) specific measures provided by the employer to respondents working from home, (4) specific measures respondents had to take to work from home,

(5) frequency and means of respondents' communication with their superiors, colleagues, or subordinates, (6) respondents' work-life balance when working from home, (7) respondents' home working arrangement in terms of the number of days of work from home, (8) factors negatively affecting respondents' well-being and productivity, (9) respondents' productivity when working from home, and (10) things that respondents working from home would need for better well-being and productivity.

The responses were analyzed applying calculation of relative frequencies, creation of pivot tables, and evaluation of dependence of responses on a home working arrangement in terms of employees working full-time from home (five days a week) and employees working part-time from home (less than five days a week). Performing chi-square goodness of fit test, two hypotheses related to the respondents' experience with home working were verified:

H1: Work-life balance is better for employees working full-time from home than employees working part-time from home.

H2: Productivity is higher for employees working full-time from home than employees working part-time from home.

2 Home working during the coronavirus pandemic

As the coronavirus pandemic has evolved all over the world, governments of most countries have taken various restrictive measures ranging from the restriction on free movement and the closure of unimportant businesses, to the lockdown of entire economies to eliminate and prevent the spread of coronavirus infection (Wong, Cheung, & Chen, 2021). According to the latest International Labor Organization Monitor on the COVID-19 pandemic and the world of work (ILO, 2021), in early January 2021, about 93 percent of the world's employees lived in countries with some form of workplace closure measures in place. In response to required workplace closures, many employers have begun to apply home working as a suitable alternative working arrangement (Bolisani, Scarso, Ipsen, Kirchner, & Hansen, 2020), which has brought new challenges for both employers and employees.

The application of home working has enabled employers to keep working, maintain desirable productivity, and preserve necessary jobs while reducing face-to-face contacts and safeguarding the health of employees (Wong, Cheung, & Chen, 2021). However, home working is not universally applicable as not all jobs can be done outside the employers' workplace (Cuerdo-Vilches, Navas-Martin, & Oteiza, 2021). This is especially the case of most agricultural, manufacturing, construction, logistic, or service jobs, so home working is

mainly suitable for office jobs. In many cases home working is simply not practical or feasible (Schade, Digutsch, Kleinsorge, & Fan, 2021). This has a particularly negative impact on already disadvantaged individuals in the labor market, who are least able to work from home (Bell & Blanchflower, 2020) or are less likely to have a job that can be done from home (Holgerson, Jia, & Svenkerud, 2021).

The critical factors of a successful application of home working seem to be tasks and duties of the job performed, as well as the technical requirements for performing the job, including the available internet (Sanchez, Parra, Ozden, & Rijkers, 2021). So, employers often need to figure out an alternative plan for employees, which cannot work from home, and arrange suitable organizational and technical conditions for employees, which can work from home.

Some employers may have relied on previous experience with home working. However, many employers have applied home working arrangements for the first time. The successful application of home working has required the active involvement of both employers and employees. Typical difficulties in applying home working have been organizational, technical as well as personal (Aczel, Kovacs, van der Lippe, & Szaszi, 2021). Employers have not been prepared for a new way of organizing work and managing employees. At the same time, they have been unable to provide employees with the necessary technical support (Marzban, Durakovic, Candido, & Mackey, 2021). Employees have not been prepared for a new way of cooperating and communicating with superiors, colleagues, or customers. At the same time, they have been unable to deal with self-management and social isolation or they have lacked suitable workspace and technical equipment (Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt, 2021).

3 Authors' findings and discussion

Due to restrictive measures and workplace closures during the coronavirus pandemic, many employees were obliged to work from home. This was also the case of all 113 respondents of the authors' questionnaire survey, whose experience with home working is analyzed and discussed below.

The first question asked about respondents' experience with home working before the coronavirus pandemic and 93% of respondents stated they have no previous experience, which is the general issue of most employees (Schade, Digutsch, Kleinsorge, & Fan, 2021). Before the coronavirus pandemic, home working was used as a specific benefit rather than

a standard working arrangement, however, the coronavirus pandemic significantly expanded and accelerated the use of home working, for which many employers and employees were not always sufficiently prepared (Cuerdo-Vilches, Navas-Martin, & Oteiza, 2021).

The employer should create suitable organizational and technical conditions for employees to work from home, which was the focus of the second question. Organizational and technical conditions for home working created by the employer were valued by 46% of respondents as satisfactory, by 50% of respondents as acceptable, and only by 4% of respondents as unsatisfactory. In this context, the third question asked what specific measures the employer had taken and respondents mentioned the necessary technical equipment (48%), adjusted working hours (11%), organized online training (8%), or paid additional costs (7%). Following the employers' measures, the fourth question asked what specific measures respondents had to take to work from home and 42% of respondents stated that they did not have to arrange anything because their home conditions fully suited them, while 35% of respondents had to rearrange furniture at home, 25% of respondents had to buy suitable technical equipment or furniture, and 23% of respondents had to learn to work with technical equipment.

When working from home, it is important to stay in regular contact with a superior, colleagues, or subordinates, which is made possible by various communication technologies (Predeteanu-Dragne, Tudor, Popescu, & Nicolae, 2020). That is why the fifth question asked how often the respondents communicated with their superiors, colleagues, or subordinates and what means of communication they used. In answer to this question, 76% of respondents stated they have communicated with their superiors, colleagues, or subordinates several times a day, using e-mail (44%), Microsoft Teams (29%), Skype (16%), Zoom (4%), or WhatsApp (2%). None of the respondents stated they would not communicate with their superiors, colleagues, or subordinates at least once a week.

One of the commonly mentioned benefits of home working for employees is the achievement of work-life balance. However, this requires friendly working hours as well as effective self-management (Aczel, Kovacs, van der Lippe, & Szaszi, 2021). Therefore, the sixth question asked how respondents have felt about their work-life balance when working from home and 69% of respondents stated satisfactory, 19% of respondents stated acceptable, and 12% of respondents stated unsatisfactory. Following this, the seventh question asked how many days a week respondents worked at home and only 42% of respondents stated five days a week. In other words, they could work full-time from home and did not have to go to work during the workweek. The remaining 58% of respondents worked at home

on average three days a week. They worked part-time from home and had to go to work regularly, on average two days a week. More interesting, however, is that among the 12% of respondents who mentioned their work-life balance as unsatisfactory, 57% of respondents have worked full-time from home. This confirms that work-life balance depends not only on the home working arrangement, but also on other work and home factors that affect the overall well-being and productivity of employees working from home (Bolisani, Scarso, Ipsen, Kirchner, & Hansen, 2020). Performing the chi-square goodness of fit test, hypothesis H1 was verified that work-life balance is better for employees working full-time from home than employees working part-time from home (see tab. 1). There was no significant difference in responses depending on a home working arrangement ($p > 0.05$). The null hypothesis was tested that respondents' work-life balance does not depend on a home working arrangement. Since the chi-square statistic [χ^2] was lower than the critical chi-square value [$\chi^2_{0.05}(2)$], the null hypothesis was not rejected. The hypothesis H1 was not confirmed.

Tab. 1: How have you felt about your work-life balance when working from home?

Home working	Satisfactory	Acceptable	Unsatisfactory	Σ
Full-time	33	7	8	48
Part-time	45	14	6	65
Σ	78	21	14	113

H01: Respondents' work-life balance does not depend on a home working arrangement.
HA1: Respondents' work-life balance depends on a home working arrangement.

Chi square statistic $\chi^2 = 1.952$
Critical chi-square value $\chi^2_{0.05}(2) = 5.991$

The hypothesis H1 was not confirmed. Work-life balance is not better for employees working full-time from home than employees working part-time from home.

Source: authors

Factors negatively affecting well-being and productivity were identified in the eighth question and respondents mentioned lack of social contacts with colleagues or friends (66%), distractions caused by children or other family members (32%), distractions caused by unexpected e-mails or phone calls (24%), problematic communication and cooperation with a superior, colleagues, or subordinates (8%), or unsuitable technical and office equipment, including internet, printer, table, or chair (6%). Elimination of these factors requires the involvement of both the employer and employees, in other words, both the suitable organizational and technical conditions from the employer and effective self-management from employees.

Every employer is primarily interested in managing employees working from home to be as productive as at work (Wong, Cheung, & Chen, 2021). Following this, the ninth

question asked respondents to evaluate their productivity during homeworking and 20% of respondents stated higher, 70% of respondents stated equal, and 11% of respondents stated lower. Among this 11% of respondents who mentioned their productivity as lower, more respondents worked part-time from home (58%) than full-time (42%). Subjectively, therefore, respondents did not value their productivity too differently, which is a challenge for their employers to find an effective way to measure the productivity of employees working from home. Performing the chi-square goodness of fit test, hypothesis H2 was verified that productivity is higher for employees working full-time from home than employees working part-time from home (see tab. 2). There was no significant difference in responses depending on a home working arrangement ($p > 0.05$). The null hypothesis was tested that respondents' productivity does not depend on a home working arrangement. Since the chi-square statistic [χ^2] was lower than the critical chi-square value [$\chi^2_{0.05}(2)$], the null hypothesis was not rejected. The hypothesis H2 was not confirmed.

Tab. 2: How have you evaluated your productivity when working from home?

Home working	Higher	Equal	Lower	Σ
Full-time	12	31	5	48
Part-time	10	48	7	65
Σ	22	79	12	113
H02: Respondents' productivity does not depend on a home working arrangement.				
HA2: Respondents' productivity depends on a home working arrangement.				
Chi square statistic $\chi^2 = 1.653$				
Critical chi-square value $\chi^2_{0.05}(2) = 5.991$				
The hypothesis H2 was not confirmed. Performance is not better for employees working full-time from home than employees working part-time from home.				

Source: authors

The last tenth question was focused on things that respondents working from home would need for better well-being and productivity. The respondents mentioned more social contacts, (64%), better ability to concentrate (56%), more trust and support from the employer (14%), or better technical equipment (8%).

The findings presented showed that most of the respondents were comfortable working from home, especially in terms of better work-life balance in terms of their overall well-being and productivity. However, a significant problem for most respondents was social isolation exacerbated by introduced restrictive measures, as well as insufficient technical equipment and overall support from their employer. These seem to be the major opportunities for improvement and these findings are consistent with those of other authors cited in this paper. As the coronavirus pandemic spread around the globe, many employers had to react

quickly to restrictive measures and workplace closures introduced and home working turned out to be a possible solution (Bolisani, Scarso, Ipsen, Kirchner, & Hansen, 2020), although it was previously considered a specific benefit rather than a standard working arrangement. However, many employers and employees were not sufficiently prepared and the massive use of home working has brought new challenges for both parties (Marzban, Durakovic, Candido, & Mackey, 2021). The key is cooperation. Employers are responsible for suitable organizational and technical conditions for home working. Employees are responsible for effective self-management and achieving the desired well-being and productivity (Bolisani, Scarso, Ipsen, Kirchner, & Hansen, 2020). But it also can be positively influenced by the employer through systematic employee training, especially if the employer is considering the long-term use of home working (Holgensen, Jia, & Svenkerud, 2021).

Employee home working experience, whether positive or negative, is important for all employers considering shifts to home working as a standard working arrangement. Principal suggestions for the better use of home working by employers based on presented findings could be as follows:

- defining a home working policy guiding the application of home working in practice and communicate it to all employees;
- defining specific performance standards and related deadlines determined by required outcomes, providing employees with regular feedback on actual performance, and rewarding them for meeting defined performance standards.
- providing employees with training, support, and technology needed for performing agreed tasks and duties;
- building mutual trust and communicating regularly to keep employees informed, involved, and responsible;
- taking care of employees' working conditions and work-life balance.

Conclusion

Due to restrictive measures and workplace closures during the coronavirus pandemic, home working has become a standard working arrangement for many employers and employees, who have been challenged by different organizational and technical issues, very often without previous experience. The authors' findings on the home working experience of 113 employees of various professions are consistent with those of other researchers and confirm that the most significant issues associated with home working during the coronavirus pandemic have been social isolation, insufficient organizational and technical support, fluctuating productivity, and

problematic work-life balance. The findings' analysis did not confirm the assumption that productivity and work-life balance are better for employees working full-time from home than employees working part-time from home. This confirms that desired productivity and work-life balance are dependent on the home working arrangement as well as other work and home factors that affect the overall performance and well-being of employees working from home. The successful application of home working should be based mainly on mutual trust, involvement, and responsibility. Although limited by a relatively low number of respondents, the current findings could be used in further research on the effective development of flexible working arrangements, including home working.

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