

THE IMPACT OF WORKING FROM HOME ON PRODUCTIVITY. A STUDY ON THE PANDEMIC PERIOD

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Abstract: *The study on working from home productivity has received much interest from researchers in the recent years. Numerous studies have found working from home to be productive. However, now with the coronavirus pandemic turning many more people into remote workers overnight, is working from home still productive? This is what the current study aims to find, taking into account that the employees have no choice during this pandemic period; they are forced to work from home. Before the pandemic, the employees were consent with working from home and usually they were coming in the working environment at least one day a week, but usually two or three days. Full-time working at home may be different. Moreover, the employees are now forced to work from home without any training or preparation. Most of them have never worked from home before. Even if the employees worked from home occasionally and they are trained for it, yet they are not prepared for such a long period away from their working environment. Working from home still has its advantages: there are no face-to-face meetings, no distractions from co-workers, no annoying managers to boss them around, no wasted time in traffic, no worries about the children's safety, as they are at home. Besides the advantages, working from home comes also with some disadvantages. The specialists worry about the negative effects, such as an explosion of mental health issues that could also generate physical health problems. The current study focuses on finding the advantages and disadvantages of working from home, but also on ways to make working from home more effectively. For this purpose, a questionnaire was administered to the employees from three private companies in Bihor county. The final results indicate a negative effect of working from home on productivity. We have found the main benefits and challenges and also the ways to improve productivity when working from home.*

Keywords: *working from home; remote worker; productivity; coronavirus pandemic; benefits; challenges.*

JEL Classification: *M50; M54.*

1. Introduction

Working from home is a modern way of working, very common in the current conditions. Even before the pandemic, this way of work had begun to grow. Actually, working from home refers to an office at home. So, instead of a traditional office with colleagues, the employees move their workplace at home, but still they do the same work.

Most often there are minimum technical requirements, such as an internet connection. Theoretically, the employees can get their work done from anywhere in the world, as long as the technical conditions are right. Anyway, beside the technical requirements, there are also other conditions that must be considered when working from home (such as an ergonomic home office) so that the employees can focus on getting their work done. When an employee works at his/her home, or in some other place that is not an organization's usual place of business, he/her is called a remote employee. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Given this concept, working from home/the home office can be regarded as a special kind of remote work.

In Romania, work from home is regulated in the Labor Code, articles 108, 109, 110. Thus, the employees who work from home are considered those employees who fulfil the specific attributions of the position they hold at their home. In order to fulfil their tasks, the employees who work from home establish their own work schedule. The employer is entitled to verify the activity of the employee who work from home, under the conditions established by the individual employment contract.

The individual work at home contract is concluded only in written form and contains the following:

- a) the express statement that the employee works from home;
- b) the program when the employer is entitled to control the activity of his employee and the concrete way of performing the control;
- c) the obligation of the employer to ensure the transport to and from the employee's place, as the case may be, of the raw materials and materials he uses in the activity, as well as of the finished products he makes.

The employee who work from home has all the rights recognized by law and by the collective labor contracts applicable to the employees whose job is at the employer's headquarters. Through the collective labor contracts and / or through the individual labor contracts, other specific conditions regarding work at home can be established, in accordance with the current legislation. (Codul muncii)

Despite both the digital revolution and especially the pandemic period, a large part of population cannot work from home. As is expected, in the field of care, catering, or the hotel industry, the activity can only be on site.

The activities on a PC, can theoretically be performed at home. Anyway, face-to-face communication with clients or face-to-face meetings with colleagues, cannot be sometimes successfully replaced with online communication or video conferences. Therefore, many companies prefer an alternating system, work from home – work from office.

2. Advantages and Disadvantages of Working from Home

More research shows that working from home has the potential to be more productive than working from the office. Working from home is generally beneficial for the employee, the company and the environment. Unfortunately, when working from home, there are details that can affect or compromise the productivity. It is

important to set up a work system and not leave things to chance. Some aspects can positively affect the level of productivity, and some others, negatively.

The main advantages when working from home are:

- Balance between personal and professional life

Employees who work from home have a much better balance between personal and professional life. This is due to efficiency. They can organize themselves, solve their tasks when they want, leaving more time for personal life.

- No time wasted in traffic

Many employees who work at company headquarters mention that the time spent in traffic to the corporation, which is even out of town, tires them and lowers their productivity. For example, according to numerous studies, in Bucharest, employees spend an average of 2 hours in traffic, to and from the office. Even if they do not work during that period, employees mention that they feel tired and do not have time for relaxation activities at the end of the day.

- Flexibility

Another advantage of working from home is the flexibility that employees have. They can start work earlier to have more free time in the evening or they can choose to work after 10 am to get more hours of sleep.

As specified in the Labor Code, employees working from home can organize their own program, with the consent of the employer. The employer establishes with the employees the way he/her can check them, most often using a program that can be installed directly on the computer.

- Increased productivity

This is a benefit for both employees and employers. Two-thirds of managers mentioned that employees who work from home are more productive than those who work at headquarters. This is because people who work from home are not distracted by colleagues or superiors. This way, they can finish their tasks without being interrupted.

In the light of these advantages, the idea of working from home sounds nice, but there are also negative aspects to this way of working. The main disadvantages are:

- Lack of organization

Management plays a key role in any company. A manager must organize and coordinate a team. Although communication can be done online, employees who work from home often have problems organizing tasks because they lack effective communication with the manager. In the online environment, more information may be lost, and employees may not receive all the necessary details. Until recently, working from home was a relatively new trend in Romania, but, in the new conditions required by the pandemic period, it was adopted by more and more companies.

Employees who want to work from home must be organized and have a schedule to follow. Although flexibility and work environment attract many candidates to work from home jobs, other candidates prefer to work from the office, where they can be coordinated by the manager and where they have all the necessary resources at their disposal.

- Social isolation

Employees who work from home feel isolated. Having no one to communicate with, this feeling of isolation can lead to decreased morale and efficiency. Therefore, it is important for employees to keep in touch and communicate daily with superiors or colleagues. Even if this communication takes place on social networks or on business platforms, employees will feel that they are part of the team.

- Distractions at home

A common problem among employees working from home is the distractions they have at home. On the one hand, given the fact that children learn from home during this period, they can distract their parents from work, disturbing them with school problems, especially if they are younger or with other kind of problems. On the other hand, the involvement in household chore can be another distraction. Because they are at home, many employees feel compelled to cook or tidy the house while working. Unfortunately, this leads to low productivity and more distractions than those caused by office colleagues. To avoid this disadvantage, employees working from home must make a clear schedule and follow it daily.

- Separate workplace is needed

In order to have a quiet work atmosphere, employees who work from home must have a separate space. Children screaming, being demanding while the parents are working, a package delivery, a washing machine beeping, other this kind of things can be disruptive factors in the situation when the workspace cannot be a separate one.

3. Research Methodology, Results and Discussions

A questionnaire was sent by email to 150 employees of three large companies in Bihor County. 57 people completed the questionnaire, which means that response rate was 38%.

Our objective was to find out how working from home impacts productivity during the pandemic period.

The questionnaire consisted of 10 questions:

1. How often did you work from home before the pandemic period?
2. How satisfied are you with your current work from home arrangement?
3. How full-time work from home arrangement influences your productivity?
4. What work from home arrangement would you like?
5. Do you have all the equipment you need in order to do your work from home?
6. Do you have a dedicated workspace where you can work at home?
7. Do you keep to a regular working schedule at home?
8. Do you consider you have more distractions at home or at work?
9. What is the biggest benefit when working from home?
10. What is the biggest struggle with working from home?

We analyzed the answers of these questions and the results were as follows:

The most popular response to the question refers to how often the employees worked from home before the pandemic period revealed that 62 percent of the employees had never worked from home before, while just 4 percent stated they had a full-time work from home job before.

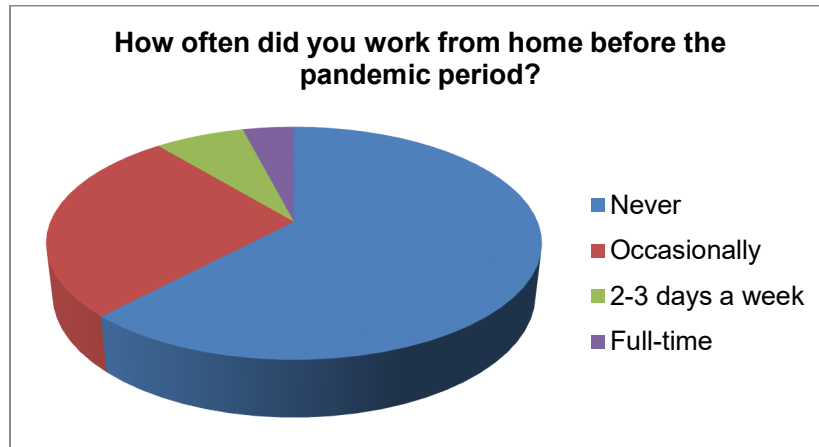


Figure 1: WFH before the pandemic

When asked about their satisfaction related to the current work from home arrangement, just a 13 percent claimed that they are very satisfied, while 27 percent claimed they are very dissatisfied.

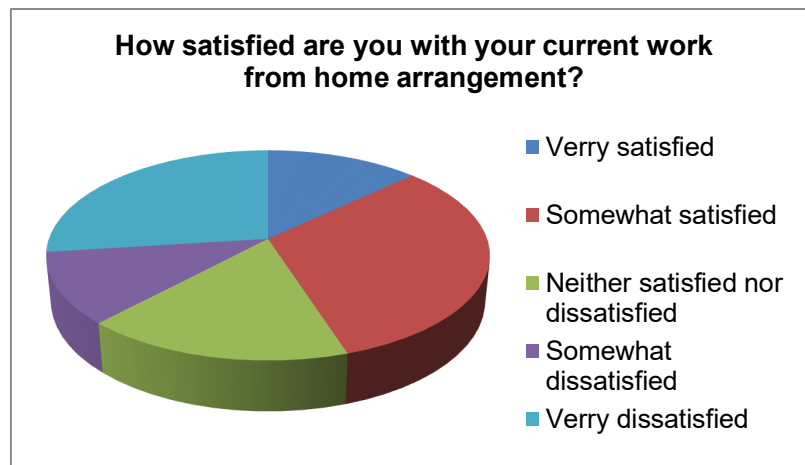


Figure 2: Level of satisfaction with WFH

A large percentage of employees who work from home, 57 percent, consider that this way of work negatively influences their productivity, while 43 percent consider that their productivity was positively affected.

While more than 50 percent of the respondents, would prefer working from home 2-3 days a week, a small percentage want a full-time work from home job.

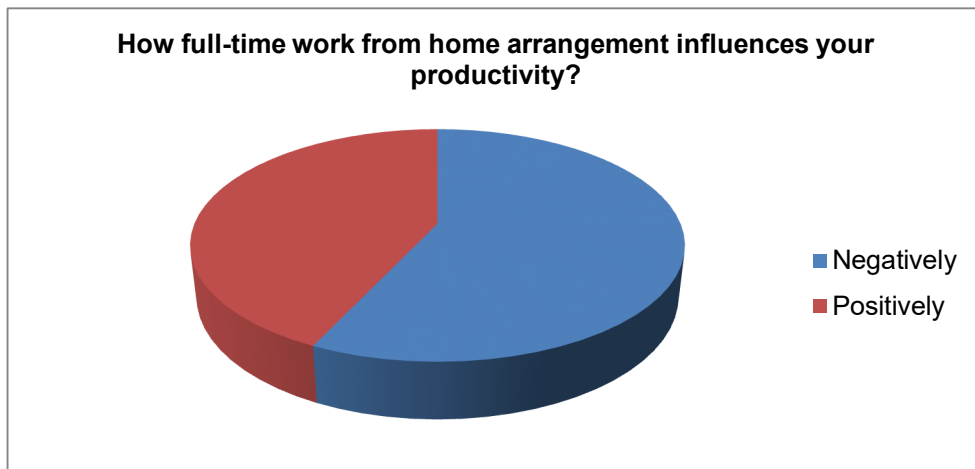


Figure 3: The influence of full-time WFH

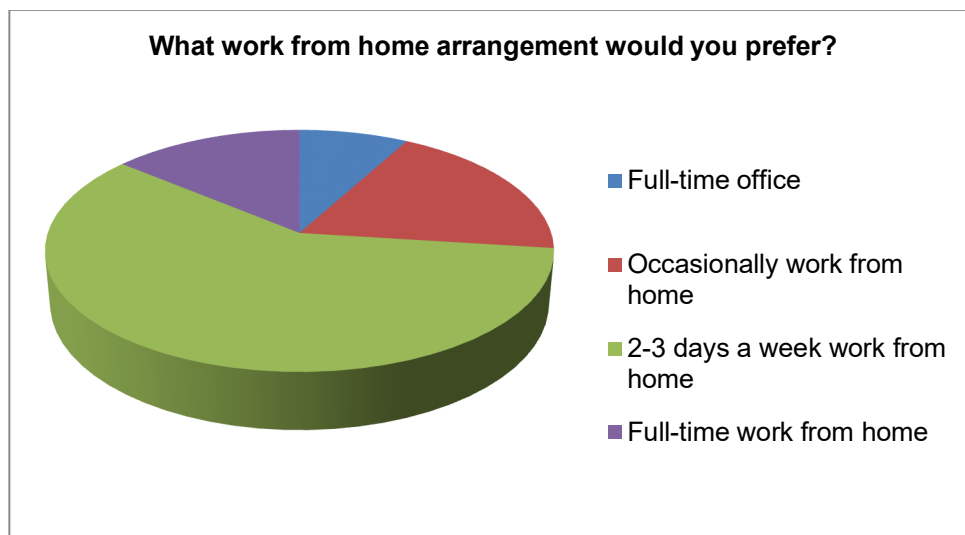


Figure 4: Preference for the way of WFH

23 percent of the respondents donot have all the equipment they need in order to do the work from home. As the study was conducted at the beginning of the pandemic period, we can consider that they were not prepared for this situation.

Regarding the workspace we learned that 38 percent donot have a dedicated workspace where they can work at home. This is somewhat explicable, given that 62% have never worked from home before the pandemic period.

About the same amount of people (43 percent) reported that they don't keep to a regular working schedule at home. Especially women are tempted to take care of household chores, so that they are not able to have an orderly work schedule. More than 50 percent of the respondents said they have more distractions at home than at work. Most likely, a large number of employees have children who stay at home and are disturbed by them during working hours. Regarding the biggest benefit and challenge, the results are presented in figures 5 and 6.

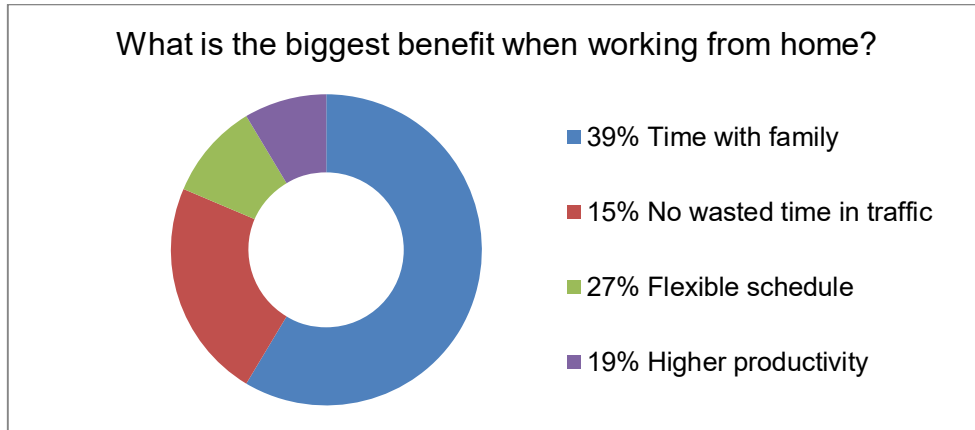


Figure 5: The biggest benefit when working from home

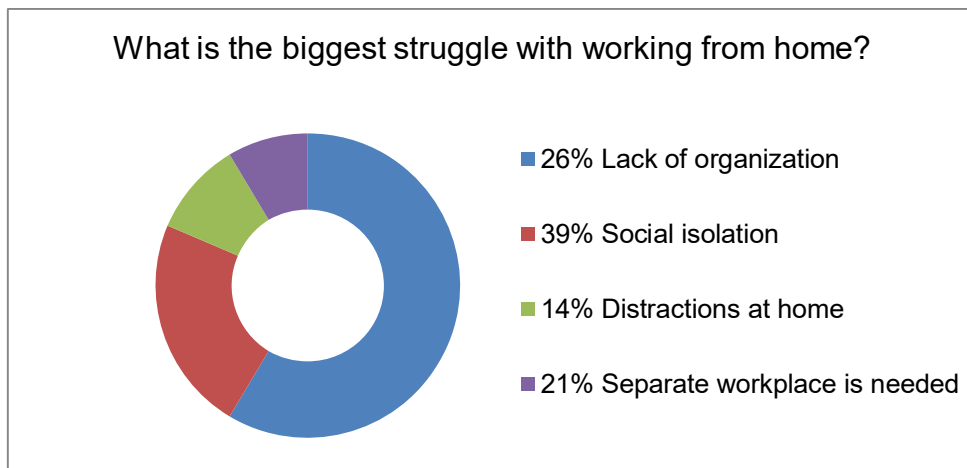


Figure 6: The biggest struggle with working from home

Analyzing the biggest challenges when working from home, we found some ways to be more productive:

- Make a schedule and stick to it

- Focus on what you have accomplished at the end of each day to keep yourself motivated
- Reward yourself for your wins
- Take regular breaks
- Stay in contact with your colleagues and other people
- Create a dedicated workspace and let your family know that you are unavailable during work hours

4. Conclusions

Working from home is a challenge, because it is difficult to stay productive and show professionalism with no boss to boss you around. The communication with colleagues and clients is difficult when you do not have the necessary tools, but however, work on the remote system had grown even before the pandemic. Even before the pandemic, in many countries, about 50% of employees solve some of their work tasks at home, and despite the fact that most have the opportunity to work from anywhere, a very large percentage of them choose to do so from the comfort of their own homes. Fortunately, there are many applications that make homework easier during this period; employees just need to show dedication and want to learn how to use them. It all comes down to productivity, pros and cons.

Working from home can mean more things in a shorter time, stress reduction, well-being. However, this does not happen automatically; if the situation is incorrectly approached, life can become a nightmare, because that professional-personal balance that everyone longs for disappears, which most of the time, employees have if they work 8 hours a day at the office.

However, surprisingly, following the analysis of the answers to the questions regarding the effect of work from home on productivity, it turned out that it is negative rather than positive. We consider that the main reason for this result is that the study was conducted at the beginning of the pandemic period, when the employees were forced to work from home, most of them not being familiar with this way of working.

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