

WORKING FROM HOME – A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN THE BEGINNING OF THE PANDEMIC PERIOD AND A YEAR LATER

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Abstract: The study on working from home has received growing interest from researchers over the last year, when the coronavirus pandemic turned many people into remote workers overnight. Romanians used teleworking much less than other Europeans before the pandemic, but now that they have been forced to work from home, their numbers have increased. Nevertheless, the crisis caused by the pandemic accelerates teleworking and reduces the digital differences between European countries. In Romania, many of the employees who work from home today have never had this experience before. They started this way of working without any prior training or preparation. The current study aims to find how working from home has evolved in terms of productivity in the last year, how employees' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages have changed, but also which are the long-term consequences of working from home. For this purpose, we analyzed the answers received after administering a questionnaire to the employees from three private companies in Bihor county at the beginning of the pandemic and a year later. The final results indicate a significant difference in how employees perceive this way of working after a year. If at the beginning of the pandemic the results indicated a negative effect of working from home on productivity, now, after a year, the results indicated a positive effect. Their answers referring to the advantages and challenges of working from home have changed after a year's experience of working from home. While the main benefits have remained the same, the biggest challenges have changed.

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

JEL classification: M50; M54.

1. Introduction

The beginning of 2020 was the beginning of the pandemic and nothing has been the same as before. Everything has moved online, including work. Working from home was common even before the pandemic in some countries, but not in Romania. Moving office work online found Romanian employees unprepared; they were not familiar at all with this type of work. In some companies, employees occasionally worked from home, but that does not mean that they were prepared to work from home full time and for so long.

First of all, working from home requires adequate technical means that some of the employees did not have. Indeed, sometimes working from home requires only a

laptop and a good internet connection, but other times other technical means are needed.

Moreover, an appropriate atmosphere is required, in which the employees can concentrate on solving their tasks. When the whole family is at home, carrying out their activities in the online environment (online school, online job), the employees often face disturbances from the family members. Indeed, when being at the office there are disturbances from colleagues, but being surrounded by them also means an easier collaboration.

Not least, working from home requires a separate workspace; when this cannot be done, there are many more disruptive factors both from the inside (children making noise, the spouse interrupting voluntarily or not), or from the outside (a package delivery, a neighbour).

All these were problems which the Romanian employees that were moved overnight online faced, and which they had to learn to manage as soon as possible. Unlike office work, each employee faced a different level of noise around them, a different system of organizing the home office and, in some cases, the presence of family members or roommates. This made everyone's work experience at home different and could have a positive or negative impact on productivity. Of course, at the beginning of the period it was very difficult, given the unexpected situation, but gradually, during the year, the employees adapted to this way of working. Many of the employees adapted very quickly and became more productive when working from home. For others, the adjustment period was longer, but given that working from home continued in most cases throughout the year, they succeeded to adapt and found ways to be productive.

Both employees and employers have sought and found ways to increase productivity when working from home. (Jernegan, 2020) Therefore, many employers consider continuing this way of working even when the pandemic situation will no longer require it.

As for employees, while some may be eager to meet their colleagues and leave home every day, others may be concerned about the prospect of resuming social life and may need encouragement. Some employees have found that they have more time for their hobbies or family while working from home; they may not be very interested in returning to the office. If the employees did not find too many differences in work-life balance, they will be more willing to return to work.

However, going back to the office will not be an easy process, just as going online has not been easy. (Guide Covid-19 Returning to the workplace, 2021)

2. Returning to the Workplace after the Pandemic

Immediately after the onset of the pandemic, working from home received special attention, with many researchers looking to find ways to increase productivity. After a long period of working from home, researchers' attention is now focused on returning to the office. (Guide Covid-19 Returning to the workplace, 2021) According to research conducted during this period, there are both advantages and disadvantages of working from home. (Catton, 2020)

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.

No time wasted in traffic - Employees use the time they would have wasted in traffic to work. In addition, there is no fatigue caused by hours spent in traffic.

Flexibility - Employees working from home can organize their own programme, with the consent of the employer.

Increased productivity - Numerous studies have shown that working from home is more productive. Even though the beginning of the pandemic was a difficult period, especially for employees who had not worked from home before, studies have shown that working from home is/has become more productive.

The main disadvantages when working from home are:

Lack of organization - Employees who work from home must be organized and have a schedule to follow. A manager must organize and coordinate a team and that's harder when employees aren't in the office.

Social isolation – The employees are used to communicate face-to-face with managers and colleagues. When working from home, communication takes place on social networks, is lower and that could make them feel isolated. All employees can be affected by the consequences of isolation.

Studies show that after a period of isolation, people are more likely to face problems such as anxiety, insomnia or difficulty coping with stress. It was also found that there are no differences in this regard between young or old people, between men and women.

Distractions at home – Children can distract their parents from work. The involvement in household chores can also be a distraction.

Separate workplace is needed - Employees who work from home must have a separate space. They can concentrate better when they have an adequate space, with the necessary technical means, where children and spouse do not bother him/her during the work schedule.

The longer the period of isolation, the more social isolation stands out as the main disadvantage of working from home. Social networks are obviously a way to keep in touch with others, but of course, they cannot replace face-to-face communication. Personally, social isolation opens the list of negative consequences and can generate negative repercussions over time, both on mental and physical health. Of course, there are e-mails, video calls and applications meant to bring individuals closer, but some things are easier and faster to explain when one person is right next to the other. Limited communication options can make collaboration more difficult.

A serious consequence is the appearance of depression or a sedentary lifestyle, given that for some people the only form of exercise is to go to the office.

But anxiety and depression can also set in when returning to the office. After a period of crisis that lasted long enough to create an adaptation to the new conditions, employees now need a period of time to readjust to the old conditions. (Mangia, 2020) Adaptation involved a new routine and new relationship systems. Change can make room for new acquisitions in the comfort and development of the individual, but it can also create anxiety and resilience out of a desire to maintain the comfort and predictability zone prior to the pandemic. (Spitzer, 2020)

For anxious or depressed people during this period, adaptation is difficult and they need support. It is important not to ignore their subjective and emotional needs, because otherwise the defense mechanisms will be triggered and the adaptation time will be increased.

3. Research Methodology, Results and Discussions

The objective of the current study was to compare employees' perceptions of productivity, the advantages and disadvantages of working from home in two important time periods - at the beginning of the pandemic and a year later. A questionnaire was sent by e-mail to 150 employees of three large companies in Bihor County at the beginning of the pandemic (April, 2020). 57 people completed the questionnaire, which means that the response rate was 38%. The same questionnaire was sent to the same employees a year later. The response rate was 34%; 51 people completed the questionnaire in April 2021. The target group was not significant, but we were able to get a general idea of changing employees' perception of productivity, benefits and disadvantages of working from home in the first year of the pandemic.

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 when working from home?

To these questions were added the socio-demographic questions regarding age, gender, number of family members in the household.

Table 1: Age distribution

Below 25	25-34	35-44	45-54	Above 54
-	6%	41%	51%	2%

Table 2: Gender distribution

Men	Women
63%	33%

Table 3: Distribution according to household members

1 member	2 members	3-5 members	More than 5 members
21%	14%	65%	-

When asked about their satisfaction related to the current work from home arrangement in April 2020, the percentage of those who claimed to be very satisfied was 13, while in April 2021 the percentage was 24. 27 percent claimed in 2020 they were very dissatisfied, but in 2021 the percent has decreased to 16. In both 2020 and 2021, the percentage of women who claimed they were satisfied and very satisfied with working from home arrangement was higher than that of men.

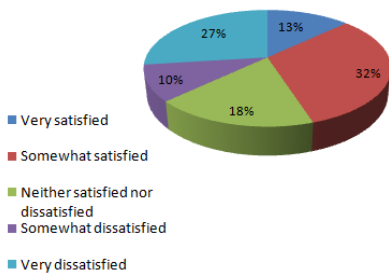


Figure 1: Level of satisfaction with WFH in 2020

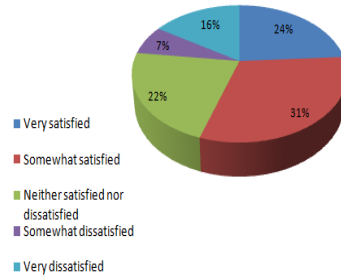


Figure 2: Level of satisfaction with WFH in 2021

A large percentage of employees who worked from home in April 2020, 57 percent, consider that this way of work negatively influenced their productivity, while 43 percent consider that their productivity was positively affected. In April 2021 the perception of employees working from home has changed: 67 percent consider that this way of work positively influenced their productivity, while 33 percent consider that their productivity was negatively affected.

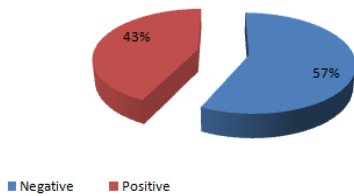


Figure 3: Perceived influence of work from home on productivity in 2020

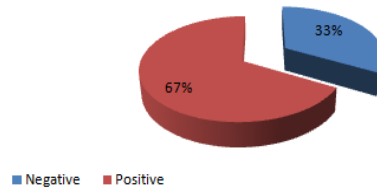


Figure 4: Perceived influence of work from home on productivity in 2021

Regarding the equipment they needed in order to do the work from home, in 2020, a percentage of 23% of the respondents did not have all the equipment they needed, but in 2021 this percent was much lower, 4%. At the beginning of the pandemic period they were not prepared, but after a year they had the technical means necessary to carry out the activity. The 4% could mean that there were probably situations when the internet connection was not good or they would have needed a better copy machine.

Considering the workspace, we learned that 38 percent did not have a dedicated workspace in 2020, but in 2021 only 17% claimed they did not have a space only to work.

If we refer to maintaining a regular work schedule at home, the difference between April 2020 and April 2021 is not too big, 43 versus 32. The employees are tempted to interrupt their work for some household chores.

Regarding the biggest benefit, the hierarchy remains the same in 2021, the percentages being slightly different.

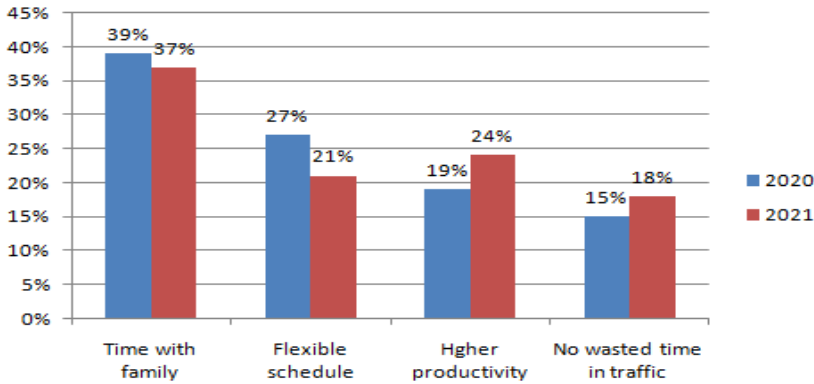


Figure 5: The biggest benefit when working from home in 2020/2021

Referring to the biggest challenge, the percentage of those who said that this is social isolation is almost double (67% compared to 39%). Figure 8 shows that the hierarchy of the biggest challenge changed in 2021. If social isolation remained on the first place, the other challenges are on different positions. During the year, the employees managed the disturbances at home better, they organized their work better, but it was more difficult in terms of arranging a separate space. It was more difficult for the employees to have a separate space dedicated to work; they probably needed a bigger house and this change was not taken into account by the employees.

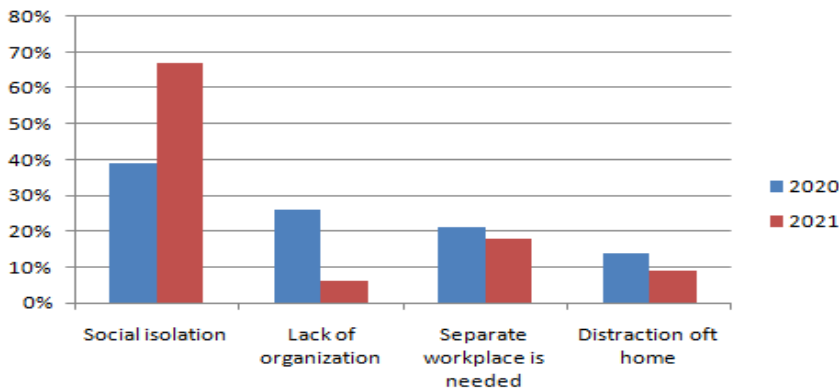


Figure 6: The biggest struggle when working from home in 2020/2021

4. Conclusions

Working from home has demonstrated its advantages in the pandemic period, but the office cannot be completely eliminated, as it has the role of supporting collaboration, strengthening relationships between colleagues and stimulating the feeling of belonging to the team. Before the pandemic, working from home was

considered to be a benefit that some employees could enjoy. Many of them proved to be more dedicated and productive, taking on more roles. After the pandemic, working from home will probably be integrated into employment conditions. But those who will continue to work from home will probably also carry out certain activities in the office.

The results of our research indicate:

The employees' perception of productivity has changed after a year. Unlike the beginning of the pandemic, when the employees perceived working from home as having a negative impact, after a year, they claimed that the impact of working from home on productivity was positive.

Women are more satisfied than men with working from home arrangement.

The biggest benefit identified by our respondents was the same in 2020 and 2021 - the time spent with the family; the same hierarchy was maintained for the other advantages: a flexible schedule, higher productivity and no time lost in traffic.

The main challenge was social isolation; our respondents indicated that both, at the beginning of the pandemic, but to a greater extent after a year.

Social isolation was indicated as the main struggle to a greater extent by those who had one family member. In fact, the number of those who indicated social isolation as the main disadvantage was inversely proportional to the number of household members.

However, there are many psychological studies (Akitunde, 2020) which sustain that for periods longer than 9-12 months the psychological impact of working from home is negative. Lack of interaction, lack of relationships between people and lack of office dynamics affect certain categories of people and decrease productivity.

Numerous studies (Chery, 2020, Sarnier, 2020) have shown that the most common post-isolation symptoms caused by the Covid-19 pandemic were: anxiety; sadness; insomnia; confusion; anger; depressive mood; stress; emotional disorders; irritability; emotional exhaustion. The biggest challenge in the next period of time will certainly be managing these negative effects of social isolation.

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