Chapter 5
The New Normal: Remote Work
after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Ivana Načinović Braje, ivana.nacinovic@efzg.hr,
Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Zagreb, Croatia

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has initiated some of the most radical changes in the way people perform their jobs – the global lockdown in April 2020 and the request for physical distancing have pushed many employees out of their offices back to their homes. Although remote work has been on the rise since the 1970s, ever since the development of information-communication technology enabled knowledge workers around the globe to work away from the office as a telecommuter (Allen et al., 2015), for many employers the shift to remote work during the pandemic was like an experiment, or as International Labour Organization stated "the most extensive mass teleworking experiment in history" (ILO, 2020, p. 1). Many speculate that this has forever changed how and where people work and that it would become the "new normal" after the pandemic (Williamson et al., 2020).

The idea of remote work was preceded by "telecommuting", a concept that has been previously well-examined, but is now phased out and replaced by remote work. Remote working is defined as "a flexible work arrangement whereby workers work in locations, remote from their central offices or production facilities, where the worker has no personal contact with co-workers, but can communicate with them using technology" (Di Martino & Wirth, 1990, p. 530). In the literature, remote work has also been referred to as telework, telecommuting, distributed work, work from anywhere (WFA), flexible work arrangements, or lately work from home (WFH) (Allen et al., 2015). These names have been used as synonyms, although there are some differences in describing exactly where and how people work. Before the pandemic, remote work was mostly used for experts or managers at upper organizational levels, and often on a voluntary basis, while during the pandemic it become compulsory for different employee groups (Wang et al., 2021). Such work from anywhere; one's home, airport lounge, coffee house, or beach, during and after the pandemic became a topic of great interest, as it was a major change to the traditional office workplace. Researchers indicate that both managers (Ozimek, 2020) and employees (PWC, 2020) show a positive attitude to remote

work. Many CEOs are tempted to implement remote work as a new paradigm of work even if its consequences for the social capital organizations have been developing for decades are unsure (Johnson & Suskewicz, 2020).

Having increased numbers of employees working from home raises several questions:

1. What are the benefits of remote work for employers?
2. What are the benefits of remote work for employees?
3. What is the future of remote work after its excessive use during the COVID-19 pandemic?

This chapter offers answers to these questions.

Keywords: telework, remote work, work from home

The theoretical background of remote work

Before the pandemic, remote working was not part of widely used working practices. Both in the USA and Europe, the number of employees that fully worked from home was between 2-8% (Wang et al., 2021; Bick et al., 2020). However, during the pandemic, 40% of all workers started working remotely on a full-time basis, and for many of them, this was the first time they teleworked (ILO, 2020). For employers this flexible working arrangement was not a voluntary decision, but rather a response to lockdown policies, so neither employees nor organizations were adequately prepared for what became known as the "new normal". Nevertheless, remote working has soon been found an attractive new practice to organizations and individuals as it allowed space savings, the opportunity to use a global labor market, reduced commuting times and pollution, was family-friendly, work-life balance policy, etc. (Baruch, 2000; Aloisi & De Stefano, 2021; Licite-Kurbe & Leonovica, 2021). For example, employers belonging to traditional industries have realized that their employees can be equally effective by using Zoom or other videoconference meetings instead of face-to-face meetings which would make great savings on travel expenses and save time.

When the lockdown restrictions were lifted, some employers immediately called their employees back into regular workplaces, whilst others rely on working from home to this day. For instance, the majority of small and medium enterprises have abandoned remote work as soon as the public authorities allowed for it (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2021), while IT-supported companies like Meta Platforms (formerly known as Facebook), Airbnb or SAP announced that they will permanently implement remote work.

The success of flexible working arrangements, including remote work, is largely dependent upon the social and economic context (Bessa & Tomlinson, 2017). The pandemic was an external force that severely modified labor markets and workplaces, however, organizations were the ones that should adapt and implement such flexible working practices. Dingel and Neiman (2020) argue that some 37% of jobs in the USA can be performed entirely at home, but among other economies,

with lower income, this percentage is lower as the share of jobs that can be done at home correlates with country's level of economic development. Having all this in mind, it is necessary to question the future of remote work by synthesizing and analyzing past experiences with remote work.

Benefits and drawbacks of remote work

Although remote work has been known for several decades, it must be emphasized that before the pandemic remote work was often voluntary and reserved for most valuable workers, while during the pandemic it was a compulsory requirement irrespective of employee preferences (Wang et al., 2021). All prior-pandemic findings have this limitation and must be analyzed in such a context. During these prior-pandemic times, when remote work has been mostly used for elite workers, the major benefits of remote work were increased productivity and job satisfaction (Bloom et al., 2015). For example, it was believed that the more flexibility individuals have in terms of work location, the greater their work-life balance, job autonomy, and well-being (Ter Hoeven & Van Zoonen, 2015). In addition, other benefits of remote work included more positive work attitudes such as increased organizational commitment and identification, performance improvements, decreased stress-related outcomes, or decreased withdrawal behaviors (Allen et al., 2015; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Individuals were able to better schedule work and family arrangements (Allen et al., 2015). Remote work has been found to have reduced commute times and fewer sick days (Bloom et al., 2015). Equally, as an example of a supportive work environment, remote work reduced attrition rates and increased employee engagement (Bloom et al., 2015; Lee & Kim, 2018). Some have found that just being eligible to telework significantly increased employees perceived fairness of the organization's activities (Lee & Kim, 2018).

Some experiments showed that, compared to office work, home working led to a 13% performance increase, due to fewer breaks and sick days and a more peaceful working environment (Bloom et al., 2015). Job satisfaction was strongly related to remote working (Troup & Rose, 2012; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Specifically, some research found that job satisfaction was highest among those workers that have a moderate level of distance work, as opposed to those that have small or extensive remote work (Virick et al., 2010). Also, levels of job satisfaction were highest among remote workers with lower levels of task interdependence and/or higher levels of job discretion experienced (Golden & Veiga, 2005). Research by Lee and Kim (2018) showed that non-teleworkers, when given choice to work remotely, showed significantly higher levels of positive work attitudes than teleworkers, although they did not necessarily work remotely, whilst De Menezes and Kelliher (2017) verified that remote work established through an informal process appears to enhance performance more than the formally supported one. In other words, allowing employees to have more choices and freedom to work remotely was sufficient to stimulate their positive work attitudes.

Despite the benefits of remote work, there have been claims that it does not motivate all employees and that it encourages laziness (Bessa & Tomlinson, 2017), just as not all research results are consistent about the positive effects of remote work on performance (e.g. see Lee & Kim, 2018; Charalampous et al., 2019; De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Reduced face time with their managers or less close supervision may hamper performance for some employees (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Not surprisingly, many managers were reluctant about enabling lower-level employees to work from home due to concerns regarding the lack of adequate equipment with technology, unsupportive work culture for remote work, lack of trust, productivity, and underperformance (Williamson et al., 2018).

The prerequisite for the successful implementation of remote work is equipping employees with laptops, phones, and secure software and remote work training (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2021; Pokojski et al., 2022). In addition to the increased initial cost of equipment necessary for remote work (Pérez et al., 2002), some of the drawbacks of remote work during the pandemic included technological issues and distractions at home, although these could be resolved with sufficient preparation. For example, many workers needed to adapt to technologies that they did not use before, while distractions at home were the consequence of lockdown and closed schools (Ozimek, 2020; Wang et al., 2021). For example, in pre-pandemic times remote work actually had proven beneficial effects on work-life balance.

From an employer perspective, challenges associated with remote work were controlling employees, challenges associated with managing teamwork, and ensuring information exchange (Licite-Kurbe & Leonovica, 2021; Pérez et al., 2002). Reduced team cohesion was identified as a potential obstacle to remote work, but its importance was rated lower than the other obstacles (Ozimek, 2020). Problems with ineffective communication and the time cost of ICT communication have also been identified as a work challenge (Wang et al., 2021). For example, it is questionable how remote work impact teamwork and informal interactive learning that happens spontaneously among peers (Pérez et al., 2002). However, it is very likely that as technology is evolving, tools will be developed to overcome these issues.

Some employees, while working from home, showed problems with self-regulation, or procrastination (Allen et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021). Loneliness, or lack of possibilities to meet colleagues, was another issue related to remote work (Bloom et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021), so supportive management practices and communication might be especially important in the remote context.

Employees' chances for promotion might be negatively affected by remote work, possibly due to less on-the-job training from team leaders and "out of sight, out of mind" issue, but also professional isolation (Allen et al., 2015; Bloom, 2015; Charalampous et al., 2019). Such professional isolation might be experienced as a part of lacking interpersonal networking with colleagues and consequentially insufficient information sharing. To eliminate the promotion 'discrimination' penalty

of remote work (Bloom et al., 2015), managers should be trained to adequately manage performance and promotion options for remote workers.

Often recognized benefits and barriers to the use of remote work, both for the employer and employees, have been further summarized in Table 5.1.

Benefits, costs, and barriers of remote work

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Table 5.1

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	Employer	Employee
Benefits	Increased productivity Increased job satisfaction Decreased attrition rates Office space and office costs savings Less absenteeism Management by objectives Competitive recruiting advantage	Increased employee performance Flexibility and autonomy Personal freedom Cost savings and less commuting time
Costs and barriers	Equipment costs Task selection mistakes Difficulties with coordination and organizing work between remote and office workers Information security Compatibility with existing organizational norms/culture	Difficulties related to teamworking Decreased promotion possibilities Psychological problems Perception of status loss

Source: Author's work after Pérez et al. (2002)

Remote work is usually related to an increased workload (Wang et al., 2021). Therefore, it is important to increase the effectiveness of remote work. Previous evidence indicate that the effectiveness of remote work depends upon factors such as social support, job autonomy, monitoring, and workload (Wang et al., 2021). Job autonomy and the possibility to autonomously decide when and how tasks will be accomplished can have beneficial effects on organizing daily activities and work-family balance (Wang et al., 2021). Although the effects of monitoring have not been explored too much in the context of remote work, Wang et al. (2021) argue that a certain level of monitoring can have beneficial effects as it reduces the tendency for procrastination once it is used for the general workforce. Data indicates that tracking software was really in much-increased demand in 2021 compared to 2020 (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2021).

Some personality traits, for example, self-discipline, can also impact the outcomes of remote work, thus in the case of selection for remote workers, it should be among the selection criteria (Wang et al., 20219). Likewise, self-motivation, good time management, or the ability to work independently should be important for the success of the remote worker, which leads to the conclusion that individuals with a high need for supervision will be unfit for remote working (Charalampous et al, 2019).

The future of remote work

The new era for the development of remote work has surely started with the pandemic outbreak. Remote work has enabled the continuity of operations in an emergency for many organizations. Even with the increased popularity of remote work (ILO, 2020), not all jobs have an equal opportunity for remote work. Those jobs that are physically portable or can be performed online have the highest chances of being performed remotely, especially in professional, scientific, and management-related sectors and in industries that involve information, finance and insurance, and services (Allen et al., 2015).

Equally, not all employee groups will likely have the same preference for remote work, for example before the pandemic when remote work was largely voluntary, it was more present among women, high-income workers, and adults without children at home (Brick et al., 2020; Dingel & Neiman, 2020). Also, not all employees will be equally successful in remote working, so it would be beneficial to list the competencies required for effective remote work and utilize them in the selection processes.

Remote work is not homogenous among industries and companies as they differ in the number or percentage of firms that offer remote work, and the number or percentage of employees who are entitled to remote work (Allen et al., 2015). Employers will have several scenarios of remote work to choose from; (1) all employees work fully on-site in the office, (2) employees can work both in the office and at home (e.g. half-time or some other fixed number of days remotely and the rest in the office) or (3) fully remotely (Licite-Kurbe & Leonovica, 2021), each with its benefits and disadvantages.

For example, combining office and remote work may be beneficial in the cases of mild illnesses or for some personal reasons that prevent an employee from coming to the office, but could instead work remotely, which subsequently increases employee productivity and job satisfaction. Also, it allows remote workers to remain "visible" in the office and prevents them to stay isolated from their peers or social aspects of the working environment (Pérez et al., 2002). Still, Johnson and Suskewicz (2020) emphasized that the future of remote work is contingent upon every organization and the objectives it strives to achieve. The comparative analysis for the different scenarios of remote work is shown in Table 5.2.

Benefits, risks, and application of remote work options

Table 5.2

	Benefits	Risks	Application
Option 1: All employees work in their offices eight hours/day	No additional expenses on assessments of work environment risks in the employee's home Easier to communicate with employees More effective employee control Easier to troubleshoot various technical problems	Employee productivity	Most suitable for companies providing no possibility to perform many or all work tasks remotely
Option 2: Employees work both in their offices and remotely	Some savings in electricity costs Increase in work productivity and employee job satisfaction Possible higher level of on-site communication and employee control	Additional expenses on the provision of employees with equipment to work from home	More appropriate for companies to provide the possibility to perform many work duties remotely, yet some specific duties could only be performed from the employer's offices
Option 3: All employees work 100 % remotely	The largest financial savings are from lower rent, reduced electricity, and other costs	Employees must also be provided with equipment to work from home It is not so easy to control employees, so employers need to set clear goals and objectives for their employees	Appropriate only to the companies that have the automation of tasks at a high level Companies in which their employees perform their duties individually

Adapted after: Licite-Kurbe & Leonovica (2021)

Despite all mentioned benefits of remote work, new problems might arise in case it is used for less-disciplined people (Wang et al., 2021, p. 30). As has been stated previously, remote work had a positive impact on performance among experts/managers that do not need direct monitoring, while it is questionable what will be its long-term effect among those employee groups that can be indolent without monitoring. Another important point for the more extensive use of remote work will be its legal treatment. In some countries, aspects of remote work have been covered with regulation (e.g. Telework Enhancement Act in the USA), albeit in the future it is necessary to unanimously regulate the terms and conditions of employment for remote workers (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2021). Finally, in the future new forms of remote work may be developed, suited to employer needs. Airbnb is already using the concept of work-from-anywhere (WFA) to increase its talent pool (Airbnb, 2022), for which Choudhury et al. (2021) showed that further increased productivity by 4.4% compared to work-from-home. All evidence suggests that in 10 years this might be the dominant working practice, but it is yet to see whether this is just another fashion management technique or a true revolution in the world of work.

Case of remote work in an IT company

Combis Ltd. is a high-tech Croatian ICT company focused on the development and integration of ICT solutions, management of ICT infrastructure, and ICT support. With the integration of advanced technology, it provides complete business solutions, tailored to the specific requirements of customers, according to the "turnkey" principle. Since it was established in 1990 in Dubrovnik, it has completed thousands of complex projects in Croatia and abroad. In 2010 it was acquired and became a member of the leading telecommunications provider in Croatia – HT Group, a member of Deutsche Telekom group (Combis, 2022). Therefore, Combis is today a flexible and agile company, able to respond to market impulses, but also a company that pursues high international corporate standards which makes it an ideal partner for large companies. It is listed among the top 10 Croatian ICT companies by revenue (ICTBusiness, 2022).

The company has 400 employees operating in nine locations in Croatia and several locations in the region. During the pandemic, most of the employees worked remotely, but what makes Combis unique is the point it was the first large Croatian company that decided to permanently implement remote work in 2020, in this way also serving as a pilot program for HT and Deutsch Telekom groups (Ivezić, 2020). The new working arrangement was called Smart Work, and its essence was the permanent implementation of hybrid work – combining office and remote work. As the company CEO puts it: "What is more important than the location is whether job assignments have been completed or not" (Laslavić, 2020). Even before the implementation of remote work, Combis was the leader in adapting working practices, as it was among the first companies to use open-space office plans. As Combis CEO announced in an interview, as remote work has become a trend it was logical for ICT companies to introduce it, and then transfer experiences, new solutions, and good practices to other companies (Laslavić, 2020).

Before the implementation of remote work, the company took steps to technologically prepare for a smooth transition. When the lockdown started, Combis developed technological solutions for remote work for many other large Croatian companies, within extremely tight deadlines. For that purpose, in just two days they have adapted some of their existing ICT solutions for the new circumstances, so users could access their workspace documents and apps from any device, tablet, phone, or computer in a very user-friendly manner (Večernji, 2020).

The implementation of remote work post-pandemic was motivated by the results of the internal survey conducted during the lockdown, where the survey showed that 84% of employees consider that they can efficiently work from home (Laslavić, 2020). Combis has offered its employees several models that combine work from the office and home, with the condition that work from home cannot be more than 50 percent of the working time. In this way, most employees have the right to work from home up to 12 days a month, mostly in one of the typical work schedules in the new model: (1) 2 days from the office/3 days from home, (2) 3 days from the office/2 days from home, (3) 4 days from office/1 day from home, (4) 1 week from office/1 week from home, (5) 2 weeks from office/2 weeks from home, although other work schedule combinations are possible (Laslavić, 2020). However, there have been defined positions, mostly in technical assistance to customers, for which remote work was not possible. To assure a smooth transition to Smart Work, there were some other requirements, including that all larger meetings are expected to take place online, and they should not take place during lunchtime or after 5 PM.

Some additional activities were taken to increase the success of remote work. For example, one of those is supporting communication between employees. To support communication all employees were invited to an online "All Employee Meeting", to which the feedback was excellent, so new gatherings of this type are planned for the future. With respect to future plans, the company CEO stated: "We introduced SmartWork as a long-term way of our functioning, and we will keep it as long as we maintain a satisfactory level of productivity and there is an interest of our employees in a combined way of working from the office and occasionally from home" (Laslavić, 2020).

This flexible working model aims to achieve the best balance between work and private obligations. However, Combis is aware that by the implementation of remote work employees will spend less time commuting, which has other side effects such as less pollution and other benefits. When the new model was tried out, feedback from employees was positive, and the overall work in the company has turned out to be more productive and digital, or as the company CEO stated: "We want our employees to be satisfied and fulfilled, creative and motivated" (Ivezić, 2020).

Questions/Tasks/Debate topics for classroom discussion

- It is expected that the number of employers using remote work will increase in the future. It is still unclear what long-term effects will it have on companies, employees, and societies. After reading this chapter students should debate about the following:

- Five years from now, what percentage of workers will work remotely? Compare it with the current situation.

- What must change for more people to be able to work remotely?

- How will vulnerable groups, e.g., ethnic minorities, unskilled workers, or women, be impacted by remote work?

- How will remote work impact individuals' possibilities of promotion?

- What will happen with current company offices and what will they look like in the future?

- If employees do not have to work in person (on-site) to be effective, could their jobs be outsourced?

- To what extent will remote work affect where people live?

- How will remote work affect pay?

Further reading

- Bloom, N., Liang, J., Roberts, J. & Ying, Z. J. (2015). Does working from home work? Evidence from a Chinese experiment. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 130*(1), 165-218.
- For a full analysis of remote working impacts on job satisfaction: Charalampous, M., Grant, C. A., Tramontano, C. & Michailidis, E. (2019). Systematically reviewing remote e-workers' well-being at work: A multi-dimensional approach. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, *28*(1), 51-73.

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