



Sustainability and sustainable development

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4.

REMOTE WORK AT INTERNATIONAL ENTERPRISES



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Abstract: The aim of the chapter is to initiate discussion on the positive and negative aspects of remote work in Polish branches of international enterprises.

In 3 short case studies presented in the text, situations that made organizations' managements allow their employees work remotely are discussed. In each case, different reasons initiated a decision: plant relocation, hiring a specialist living far from the plant and a threat of pandemic.

There is a common opinion on employees in many countries (including Poland) that they are not flexible enough when searching for a job, they expect it to be "round the corner", whilst it is not only them but also employers that should present a more flexible approach, also in terms of remote working. On the other hand, it must be stressed that such solutions have both advantages and disadvantages and sometimes cannot be available for certain roles in an organisation.

Keywords: pandemic threat, plant relocation, remote work, work-life balance.

4.1. Plant relocation

An international group manufacturing installation equipment with a number of companies in Poland decided to merge 2 of them by moving the smaller one to the bigger one's location. It was decided to optimise production and logistics costs, as well as to let the smaller company operate in a facility belonging to the group instead of renting buildings from a 3rd party at the original location.

Employees of the smaller company (mainly living in surroundings of its first location) were not enthusiastic about the change as the distance to the new factory required over an hour-drive in one direction, which was quite significant. It was obvious that a number of them would decide to leave the organisation because of relocation. To minimise this risk, various benefits were provided in order to encourage people to stay, and some of them were also offered work at the plant 4 days a week and 1 day at home.

The main advantages of the remote work proposal showed people that their work was appreciated by management and, of course, gave them the possibility of smooth transition from working close to home to travelling to work. That was supposed to prevent the organisation from losing key employees. It is obvious that to make that function smoothly, it was extremely important to coordinate home-office days in such way that most people would not do that on the same day of the week, but it must be stressed that all team members managed the time schedule very well. This case allows to confirm that the same effects may be obtained when communication is electronically mediated as well as transmitted directly (Kelloway, Barling, Kelley, Comtois, & Gatién, 2003, p. 169).

One of the disadvantages was that home-office working was available only for some sales or back office employees, whilst it could not be offered to those working in logistics or production. That generated risk of some frustration among those who might have thought they were being treated unfairly. Another weak point was that not only people but also the organisation were in a period of transition (daughter company starting operations at the location of the parent one), and one home office day per week meant 20% less time to become integrated.

The final result was that despite many efforts, the organisation did not manage to keep all of its valuable employees. Some of them decided to search for work close to home. Nevertheless, many key people stayed at the company or postponed their decision to leave, which also helped to manage the transition smoothly.

4.2. Hiring a specialist from a different location

When searching for specialists, many enterprises seem to shift focus too much on candidates' location. They expect their future employees either to live in the neighbourhood or to express the will to relocate to it immediately. At the same time, a potential

employee that is expected to move his/her whole family to a new place, receives no guarantee that she/he will get the chance to work at the company for a long time.

An international group, operating in the environmental protection business, opened a new plant in Poland. After a few years that were dedicated to introducing products to the Polish market, it became clear that change of sales management was necessary to move the company to next stage in which its position on the market would be strengthened. After a review of commercial managers available in the environmental protection industry, the group's board decided to search for candidates from other branches that could come up with a "thinking outside of the box" approach. Since the group was always focused on candidates' qualifications rather than their location, the person finally chosen lived ca. 500 km (a 6-h drive in one direction) from the company's office. In order to help that person maintain the best work-life balance possible, the following agreement was reached: each week, the manager would visit his office and some customers, apart from that, he would have the possibility to work from home on some days. Proportions of each of the above-mentioned solutions were not defined, as the employer relied on the manager's maturity.

For the manager, that had already experienced working for far away from home in the past, the biggest advantage was that he could spend the whole weekend (Saturday and Sunday) with his family as usually Monday was his home office day (in the past, when working away from place of residence, he had to start his journey to work on Sunday to be at the office by Monday morning). Apart from that, he could plan home-office work whenever he needed to be at home right after work in the afternoon. An advantage for the enterprise was that the employee, seeing flexibility of his supervisors, was also flexible in terms of his working hours (usually operating longer than was expected). That confirms Felstead's and Henseke's (2017, p. 197) opinion that flexible (e.g. remote) work is a type of working arrangement providing a degree of flexibility on how long, where, when and at what time employees work. A similar opinion has been expressed by Hardill and Green (2003, p. 218), mentioning that by not restricting work to a particular place or time, home-based telework may increase the flexibility of accomplishing work.

No significant disadvantage of such a work model could be identified for the company. The only negative aspect appeared on the end of the employee. His remote working was confusing for his family who was used to the fact that, in the past, when being at home, he usually had time for them. That made the children a bit frustrated when their father was not available until the evening, although he was at home. However, according to recent studies, telecommuting should reduce work-family conflicts by offering job autonomy and flexible scheduling (Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk, & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009, p. 65).

Such an approach of the enterprise gave the company a possibility to choose the right manager from a wider group of candidates, whilst the employee could minimise the negative effect of distant work on his/her family life.

4.3. Threat of pandemic

According to estimates, from late 2019, slightly more than 5% of employees worked remotely on a regular basis. But as COVID-19 spread across the globe in 2020, and shelter-in-place orders were issued by governments, many companies initiated rapid and wholesale shifts to remote work arrangements, at least for knowledge-intensive work (Leonardi, 2020, p. 1). The pandemic threat was experienced by people in many countries. Safety measures and business activity limitations introduced by governments in order to reduce virus transmission affected many businesses. The impact was not that severe for enterprises that could continue their activity devoid of face-to-face meetings with their customers for some time, e.g. those in the B2B sector. Nonetheless, such companies needed to change the model of their operations to adjust to new situations. One of main changes introduced by many organisations was remote work that helped reduce the number of people staying in companies' facilities at the same time.

The enterprise that has been described in the previous case study introduced most safety measures relatively quickly, both for production and logistics employees that had to work in the factory (hygienic and protection equipment), as well as for sales and back-office employees. Before any government restrictions were introduced, salesmen were advised to avoid visiting their business partners' facilities that did not seem to be secure from a hygienic point of view. Shortly after that, also back-office employees started working at their homes.

The biggest disadvantage of remote work for the sales team was the fact that they operated in the public sector that required organising purchases by tenders. Luckily, when the pandemic came, electronic public procurement processes had already begun. Thanks to that, managers of the company were equipped with digital signatures and could smoothly manage sales among those customers who organised electronic tenders. However, even some of those customers who had introduced electronic public procurement were not willing to sign contracts in the same way—they expected paper documents, not to mention those not prepared to organise digital tenders at all. In such a case, courier services still appeared to be indispensable.

In the case of back-office employees, the biggest challenge was that most of them were equipped with desktop computers, but this was firstly solved by their good will to use their home appliances and then, the company-bought laptops for all of them. Another disadvantage was the fact that logistics employees did not feel well that they could not work at home although that was partly solved by introducing a kind of shift system that let them stay at the home-office on some days.

The advantage of remote work for employees was the reduction of virus transmission risk (for them and their families), as well as the possibility to take care of their children also staying at home with remote classes. What must be stressed is

that the enterprise benefitted the most from temporary changes in the working model. Despite its location in one of the most COVID-19 affected areas, no case of infection had been identified at it. The sales team (supported by people in other departments) generated the highest turnover ever as a project in one of the biggest Polish cities had to be managed in the middle of pandemic lockdown. Despite these challenging circumstances, the process went very smoothly.

Questions / tasks

1. Do you agree with the opinion that employees in many countries (e.g. in Poland) are not flexible enough when searching for a job, that they expect it to be “round the corner”, or is it also the enterprises that are not flexible enough to be open to employees living in other parts of the country? What does this situation look like in your country?
2. In the case of a company moving to another location—was it the right decision to let some key employees work partly at home? What other solutions would you propose in such a situation?
3. One of the case studies is about a commercial manager that does part of his work at home. Would it also be possible for the production manager to follow the same pattern?
4. Do you think that the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the way people will cooperate in the future? Analyse this both from the employer-employee relation point of view as well as from the perspective of business-to-business relations.
5. Imagine you are working at home and need to participate in a video conference call. When you are doing that, your 8-year-old child comes into the room and starts talking to you. Although you try to ignore him/her, the child interrupts you again and several times, always doing the same: talking to you and sometimes even appearing in front of the camera. What do you think the other meeting participants’ perception of the situation is?
6. Does a home-office guarantee the best possible work-life balance alone or are there other factors influencing it? What causes children to sometimes fail at understanding that, although their mother/father spends more time at home than before, she/he cannot be available for them whenever they want?

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