BENEFITS AND PROBLEMS OF TELEWORK DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: FACTORS OF AGE, GENDER AND TELEWORK INTENSITY

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Abstract: *This paper analyses telework, or remote working in relation to the factors of age, gender and telework intensity. We have surveyed a sample of 191 employees working on-site, in-office or combined. After eliminating dubious responses, 166 answers were analysed using the constructs of perceived benefits and problems of telework. Theoretical concepts of information technology for teleworking, organizational changes and digital transformation of organizations are given and compared to the results. The advantages and disadvantages of teleworking have been examined. Our results show significant differences in perceptions of telework benefits between employees younger and older than 35 years and between those who telework more than four days per week and those who work less. Following those results, we propose possibilities and effects of teleworking in the future.*

Keywords: *remote working, teleworking, organization, technology, pandemic, digital transformation, analysis*

1. INTRODUCTION

Telework practices intensified since the beginning of the year 2020, marked the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The coronavirus has affected all spheres of society. Individuals and business systems have been forced to adapt to the new way of life and work through many changes. This greatly affected on the organization of private and business lives. Systems that did not have the conditions and opportunities for adaptation suffered collapse and closure, and many professions were forced to reduce incomes or remain without them.

Employees in organizations that can be organized remotely have the opportunity to work remotely or hybrid, from home or from the office. Like any change, the transition from office work to working from home required adjustments. Organizations had to react urgently and prepare their business and employees for teleworking, and employees had to adjust their private and business life to work from home and the so-called new normal that is characteristic of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Information technology has enabled radical changes in organizations. Their expansive development almost daily improves operations in all spheres of society, both the individual and the most complex systems. In modern business, it is impossible to do business successfully without adequate use of information technologies.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Indeed (www.indeed.com), one of the largest worldwide employment web sites, published six different work environment types and career roles in its research. Indeed lists the working environments as conventional, enterprising, social, artistic, investigative and realistic [1]. .According to Indeed, elements of work environment are: hours typified as fixed working hours or flexible working hours, company culture which is depicted as formal or casual dressing code and committing duties of employers, benefits such as paid leave, motivation for overtime and bonuses, people who have a great role in creating a working atmosphere positively or negatively, career development which some organizations offer to their employees through courses, training and exercises, while others expect employees to take responsibility for training and workspace which can be office or coworking space or teleworking, actually work from home.

Lou Adler, CEO of company Performance-based Hiring Learning Systems, in his research about working categorization, published that there are four types of work: thinkers, that is, knowledge workers who are the main generators of ideas and creative types of people, builders who are realizing ideas and turning them into reality, improvers responsible for improving organization and achieving long term goals and producers who do jobs that keep recurring (Adler, 2017, [2]).

The term teleworking represents a wide range of jobs. The most common words associated with teleworking are online work, remote or telecommuting, home office or work from home. What everyone has in common is independence from the location of the employee who does that type of work. The two basic things needed to do remotely are a computer and Internet access. Remote working can be: fully remote, which means teleworking in its entirety, flexible job which presents hybrid work that allows an employee to work both from home and from the office, freelance or part-time work, nowadays with a popular name "online workers" who look for employment instead of are dependent on one organization, online business which is a combination of part-time and teleworking with the option of starting own business and side hustles where workers work remotely along the way and this is not their primary source of income. (Workplaceless, 2021, [3]).

Like any job, remote working has principles that should be followed for success. GitLab, a company that publicly shares research based on data from global companies, publishes a nine-point remote manifesto on its website (GitLab, [4]):

"*1. Hiring and working from all over the world instead of from a central location.*

2. Flexible working hours over set working hours.

3. Writing down and recording knowledge over verbal explanations.

4. Written down processes over on-the-job training.

5. Public sharing of information over need-to-know access.

6. Opening every document for editing by anyone over top-down control of documents.

7. Asynchronous communication over synchronous communication.

8. The results of work over the hours put in.

9. Formal communication channels over informal communication channels."

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, many organizations considered remote work is impossible. However, when the pandemic broke out, social distance was mandatory. All jobs that could be performed remotely had to be switched to remote access. Organizations that thought they had all the necessary tools and opportunities to enable their employees to work smoothly from home were faced with many obstacles, from lack of equipment and software to training employees on what to do and how to work remotely and how to meet workers' demands working remotely (Brown, 2020, [5]).

Employees who thought working from home was ideal encountered many obstacles and problems in work and private life. Since the beginning of the pandemic, many authors and researchers have studied the field of remote work and how it changes over time.

Lina Vyas and Nantapong Butakhieo from Hong Kong university analyzed the impact of working from home during Covid-19 on work and life in Hong Kong. Research has shown that working from home, although previously thought to be a benefit and motivation for the workers, is extremely unfavourable for the most workforce in Hong Kong. It turned out that the organizations were not ready for the permanent transition from office to remote work, and employees did not have a clear view of how to organize work from home. (Vyas, & Butakhieo, 2020, [6]).

Santa Berzina, head of the macroeconomic analysis division of the monetary policy department in Latvia, dealt with whether remote work was a forced experiment during the Covid-19 era or a lasting value. She concluded that teleworking increases productivity under normal circumstances, helps to balance work and life, contributes to social security during the corona virus pandemic, that its organization differs from country to country, is not accessible to all and that social interaction and weak IT skills are obstacles to working remotely (Berzina, 2021, [7]).

Kimberly Mlitz, a research expert covering the IT services industry, published an article about changing remote work trends due to Covid-19 in the United States in 2020. She analyzed the frequency of remote working before and during the pandemic. The result of her research shows that before the corona virus pandemic, seventeen per cent of employees in the United States worked from home five or more days a week, and that percentage increased to forty-four during the pandemic. She also explains that information technologies that support teleworking have increased the demand, and video conferencing companies have increased profits, so organizations had to consider new communication techniques and resources. Kimberly states that many employers see the benefits of remote working, including positive results in employee health surveys and potential office space reductions. Many employees also plan to work from home more often in organizations where it is allowed and feel motivated about it. (Militz, 2021, [8]).

Australian IT Company Traqq published SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis if permanent remote work is sustainable. By identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to a company offering software products, they provide an answer if a business system like that is ready to work remotely. They conclude that leaders in companies should organize and support telework, that the key to the success of remote work is effective communication between all team members and that they must be motivated and rewarded for successfully completed tasks (Traqq, 2020, [9]).

In an online article, McKinsey lists the activities and occupations that can work from home to better understand teleworking. The potential for telework or work that does not require interpersonal interaction or physical presence in China, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States was analyzed. More than two thousand tasks in more than eight hundred jobs were analyzed and it was determined which activities and occupations have the greatest potential for teleworking:

" *Activities with the highest protentional for remote work include updating knowledge and interacting with computers.*

The finance, management, professional services, and information sectors have the highest protentional for remote work.

Labor forces in advanced economies can spend more time working remotely than workforces in emerging economies.

While most of the workforce cannot work remotely, up to one quarter in advanced economies can do so three to five days a week. "

According to McKinsey's article, "*hybrid models of remote work are likely to persist in the wake of pandemic, mostly for a high educated, well paid minority of the workforce*" (McKinsey, 2020, [10]).

Thomas A. Limoncelli, site reliability engineering manager at Stack Overflow Inc., a company working remotely since the beginning, published an article about remote work techniques. He states that forty per cent of the company worked remotely before the Covid-19 pandemic, and one hundred per cent worked remotely during the pandemic. He explains the best practices for remote working:

"*Meetings should be one hundred per cent physically or one hundred per cent remotely; no mixed meetings.*

Chat status should be away when the person is away and available when the person is available; no fake status.

Conversation should be started to a quick way.

In a videoconference room coworker should be working silently together.

Social events should be created specifically for remote workers." (Limoncelli, 2020, [11]).

Hive (www.hive.com), the platform for remote teams, researched how the pandemic impacted remote work. Survay says that seventy-two per cent of participants like remote work, sixteen per cent of responds were indifferent

and twelve per cent of remote workers don't like working from home.

Survey results show top five remote work advantages are:
"*Saving time without a commute – 88%,*
Flexible work hours – 66%,
Spending less money – 59%,
Spending more time with family at home – 56%,
Fewer distractions at home – 38%."
Also, there are top five remote work struggles:
"*Trouble unplugging from work – 63%,*
Feeling lonely or socially isolated – 47%,
Feeling pressure to work longer – 33%,
Feel disconnected from organizational goals – 31%,
Trouble staying focused without an office – 30%."

Hive found that ninety-one per cent of remote workers use video conferencing tools (Hive, 2020, [12]).

Aja Frost, freelance writer, in her book "*Work from Home Hacks*" describes the ways how to be productive and organized and have a balance between life and work during remote working. She states how to (Frost, 2021, [13]):
"Set up a home office,
Build routines and schedules,
Create new communication habits,
Overcome distraction,
Have meeting remotely,
Manage team remotely,
Maintenance work-life balance."

Karen Mangia, Vice President of Customer and Market Insights at Salesforce, American software company, in her book "*Working from Home*" writes about possibilities, rituals, routines and boundaries of working from home. Her book is "*the handbook for thriving in the new normal*". Karen teaches readers how to: create a home office and work productively in it, have personalized time management routines, deal with technologies for remote working, discover how to build great virtual presentations and career impact online. She says that her story "*explains in detail how to turn even the smallest of living spaces into the ideal remote work environment*" (Mangia, 2020, [14]).

M.J. Fievre and Becca Anderson, in their book "*Your Work from Home Life*" write about reorganization and optimization life in non-traditional and remotely working conditions. They state the pros and cons of working remotely. According to them, the pros are the ability to work anywhere, flexible work hours, no commute and savings, better work-life balance and communication skills, and the cons are isolation, loneliness, anxiety, technological and cybersecurity issues (Fievre, & Anderson, 2021, [15]).

GitLab in Remote Work Report 2021 gives an overview of tips and tactics for remote transition. In the survey, eighty-two per cent of remote workers agreed that teleworking is the future of work, and about eighty per cent would recommend working remotely (GitLab, 2021, [16]).

Harvard Business Review Guide to Remote Work in 2021 is about being more productive, setting boundaries, and connecting with coworkers in teleworking. In the survey many authors write about remote work during Covid-19 pandemic. They give an overview and advice on how to: be focused and productive at the home office, work from home when children are near, set limits between personal and work time, handle technology and collaborate with the virtual team (Harvard Business Review Press, 2021, [17]).

Karin Reed and Joseph Allen, in their book "*Suddenly Virtual*" write about making remote meetings work. They discuss problems and challenges that the new normal brings in the business meeting. They also reveal the best practices for virtual meetings as: "*turn on camera, leverage the right technology tools, be social, safety first*" (Reed, & Allen, 2021, [18].

"*Remote, Inc.*" by Robert Pozen and Alexandra Samuel is about strategies and tools for making remote work effective and efficient. In the opinion of authors, the critical success factors for remote work are: focusing on outcomes, setting rules for communications in the team, balancing professional aims and personal priorities, creating routines, organizing workspace and using technology in the right way (Pozen, & Samuel, 2021, [19]).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

Data for this research has been collected between July and September of 2021. A questionnaire was developed following the usual methodological guidelines [20]. It had two parts, the first is focused on demographic traits of the respondents, and the second is on their perception of telework. In particular, there were two telework constructs:

Four item scale "Benefits of telework" consisting of items:

- I do not have to travel to work
- I can work from anywhere
- I do not have to see other colleagues
- I have more time for myself and for my family

Seven item scale "Problems of telework" consisting of items:

- Bad internet connection
- Organization of workspace
- Taking care of the children
- Organization of private life
- Feeling anxious
- I do not have all information and documents I could access at the workplace
- I cannot communicate with colleagues as I used to

According to the instructions from the literature, there were several control questions aimed at diminishing measurement error [21]. In total, 197 responses were gathered. The whole questionnaire in Serbian language is available at the given link: https://forms.gle/qkgK31Tsyj9SuTJe9 .

After the analysis, two of the control questions were used to eliminate inconsistent responses. First, respondends were asked for a number of days working weekly on-site/teleworking, before and after COVID-19 pandemic. New variables were calculated, subtracting the total days worked on-site after and before and after the COVID-19 pandemic; the same was performed for telework. Since the population aimed by this research were full-time workers if after adding those two values result was larger than the absolute one, responses were eliminated as reckless. Differences of -1 or +1 days were tolerated as acceptable

changes in work schedule organization. After that, 166 (86.24%) responses were acknowledged as valid and analysed further.

According to the previous analysis, we have posted three hypotheses:

H1: There are significant differences in perception of benefits and problems of telework between older and younger population

H2: There are significant differences in perception of benefits and problems of telework between different genders

H3: There are significant differences in perception of benefits and problems of telework between mostly remotely engaged employees and employees who still mostly work on site

To measure the scale reliability of our two constructs, we have used Cronbach's Alpha test. Afterwards, we have checked the stated hypotheses by the independent samples t-test, following the given methodological guidelines in business and management research [22,23,24].

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First analysis has shown the reliability of our scales. Using the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients, according to acceptable value range [25] all constructs in this study have acceptable consistency. As elaborated by the Bland & Altman (1997), as well as in the later analysis by DeVellis (2003) weights between 0.7 and 0.9 are deemed most reliable [26,27]

Table 1. Telework scale reliability

Variable name	***Cronbach's Alpha***	***Items***
Benefits of telework	0.789	4
Problems of telework	0.779	7

In the further text, we will present differences according to participants age, gender and telework intensity.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for groups differing by participant's age

	Participant's age	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Benefits of telework	>= 35.0	77	3.1916	1.1319	.129
	< 35.0	89	3.7556	.946	.1009
Problems of telework	>= 35.0	77	2.7012	.9033	.103
	< 35.0	89	2.5490	.9348	.0999

Table 3. Independent samples t-test telework perception differences according to the participant's age

	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig. (F)	t	df	2-tailed sig.	Mean Diff.	Std.Err. Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Benefits of telework	4.419	.037	-3.497	164	.001	-.5641	.16128	-.8825	-.2456
Problems of telework	.136	.713	1.064	164	.289	.1523	.1432	-.1305	.4352

Levene's F statistics suggest equal variances between observed groups for problems of telework variable (F=0.136, P=0.713), while for the benefits of telework variable, equal variances cannot be assumed (F=4.419, p=0.037), so we have an interesting significant difference in variances for this variable, also. Data from our research suggest no statistically significant difference in problems of telework t(164)= -1.064, p=0.289. However, there is a statistically significant difference in perceived benefits of telework between two groups of participants – older and younger than 35 years. Benefits of telework perceived by those of less than 35 years old (M=3.76, SD=0.95) and participants more than 35 years old (M=3.19, SD=1.13) is larger (mean difference 0.56) and significantly different t(164)= -3.497, p=0.001.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for groups differing by participant's age

	Participant's gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Benefits of telework	Male	77	3.5357	1.0472	.11934
	Female	89	3.4579	1.0957	.11615
Problems of telework	Male	77	2.6493	.9679	.1103
	Female	89	2.5939	.8824	.0935

Levene's F statistics suggest equal variances between observed groups both of our variables. Data from our research suggest no statistically significant difference in benefits telework t(164)= 0.386, p=0.7, or the problems of telework t(164)= 0.466, p=0.642 between different genders of participants, as presented in the table 5.

Table 5. Independent samples t-test telework perception differences according to the participant's gender

	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig. (F)	t	df	2-tailed sig.	Mean Diff.	Std.Err. Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Benefits of telework	.297	.587	.466	164	.642	.0779	.1671	-.25205	.4078
Problems of telework	1.824	.179	.386	164	.700	.0554	.1437	-.2282	.3391

Regarding the intensity of telework, Levene's F statistics suggest equal variances between observed groups for problems of telework variable (F=0.141, p=0.708). In contrast, for the benefits of telework variable, equal variances cannot be assumed (F=5.534, p=0.020), Data from our research suggest that there is no statistically significant difference in problems of telework t(164)= -0.345, p=0.73 between intensive and non-intensive telework group. However, there is a statistically significant difference in perceived benefits of telework between two groups of participants different by the intensity of telework. Benefits of telework perception by those of who use it intensively (more than four days per week (M=3.72, SD=0.94) is larger than perception of participants who work less than four days per week (M=3.24, SD=1.15) (mean difference 0.48) and difference is statistically significant t(166)= 2.945, p=0.004.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics for groups differing by participant's age

	Intensity of telework (days per week)	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Benefits of telework	>= 4.0	87	3.7241	.93854	.10062
	< 4.0	79	3.2405	1.15362	.12979
Problems of telework	>= 4.0	87	2.5961	.9496	.1018
	< 4.0	79	2.6456	.893	.1005

Table 7. Independent samples t-test telework perception differences according to the participant's intensity of telework (days per week)

	Levene's Test		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig. (F)	t	df	2-tailed sig.	Mean Diff.	Std.Err. Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Benefits of telework	5.534	.020	2.945	150.596	.004	.48363	.16423	.15914	.80812
Problems of telework	.141	.708	-.345	164	.730	-.0495	.1435	-.3328	.2338

According to our results, telework is changing the perception of benefits and problems of work, in line with the constant change of our business environment [28]. Results align with the transformative nature of telework, observed even between its prevalence during the COVID-19 pandemic [29]. These changes can be considered as broader digital disruption, which has been observed in some industries [30].

While the change of working environment is relatively accepted, existing literature does not agree on the perceptions of telework. Our results partially confirm our H1: There are significant differences in perception of benefits and problems of telework between older and

younger populations. While the younger population is slightly less perceptive of the problems of telework, the differences are not statistically significant. On the other hand, younger employees perceive the benefits of telework on a much higher level, and the differences are statistically significant. Younger employees (less than 35 years of age) perceive benefits of telework 17.55% higher than the older employees. This result is in line with the research in the field stating that younger employees have more appreciation for telework, before [31,32] and after COVID 19 pandemic [33].

Contrary to those results, we can reject the H2: There are significant differences in perception of benefits and problems of telework between different genders. Our results show no significant differences between genders regarding the perception of telework benefits and problems. Compared to the study in Austria, which finds that engagement in telework is still significantly higher for male than for female employees [34], we can argue that our study has roughly engagement between genders.

Our following hypothesis can be of most practical use. We can partially confirm H3 that there are significant differences in perception of benefits and problems of telework between mostly remotely engaged employees and employees who still work in office for more than two days per week. Intensive use of telework (more than four days per week) gives increased perception of benefits, while the problems are perceived relatively equally by both groups. Telework has been perceived beneficial for organizations, but not as much by the decision-makers, as noted in the pre-covid research [35], this finding can encourage its implementation.

5. CONCLUSION

Our research brings new insights into telework perceptions by the employees. While the young employees perceive more benefits of teleworking, there is no difference in the perception of problems of teleworking, between the employees younger and older than 35 years. It might be useful as the motivation factor of young employees, which have been more prone to job-hopping [36]. This points towards the conclusion that problems of teleworking are converging to general issues, not related to the age of employees. No difference between genders can be explained by the limitations of our research sample or by bridging the gap between gender use of telework, which was biased toward male employees. While previous research finds that telework employees are mostly male [34], our sample shows a roughly equal distribution. The final result of our study was that intensive use of telework is associated with a higher perception of its benefits. We can say that there is a learning and adoption curve and that the employees "get used to" telework. Also, observed phenomenon can be explained by the "either / or" nature of benefit manifestation concerning telework intensity. Four or more days per week of teleworking brings a substantial change in the lifestyle and private sphere of employee activity, and it might be observed as a threshold where the perceptions of telework benefits are beginning to take hold substantially. So the companies might consider that while the problems remain at the same perceived level, complete or near-complete transition to telework will increase the perception of benefits by the employees.

Research limitations are mostly related to the sample, which has been based on the researcher's contact network. Respondents are from Serbia or nearby countries. While it is questionable if it is representative of the general population, it consists mainly of educated professionals and can be considered for inference in Serbian or even similar emerging economic environments. Further research can be aimed at examining separate factors of benefits and problems of telework and the difference in job and life satisfaction related to different aspects and forms of telework.

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