

Smart working and the organisation of labour: smart working and internal labour markets in Poland

Country case studies

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Case study A

Introduction

The subject of the study is the work model and practices of electricians servicing the power grid using ICT for remote communication and mobile work in the field.

The work model analysed was introduced in 2016 at an electricity distribution company in western Poland, which is part of a larger state-owned capital group. The most important task of this company is to ensure continuous access to high quality electricity, including operation, maintenance, continuous expansion of the network, and repairing failures in short time. From this point of view, the role of the electricians and their work system plays a key role for the company's most important tasks. The company supplies around 20,336,150 MWh of electricity annually to around 2.7 million customers and employs around 1,500 people of which around 800 are electricians. In 2020, the company declared a decrease in power outages per year from 98 min to 77 min.

Digital solutions that allow electricians to communicate remotely and work in the field without having to return to the company base were introduced as a pilot in 2016 and have been developing in the following years. In the year of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, this model has been facilitated and extended to larger number of electricians. Currently - in 2022 - a more advanced system has been introduced to combine information provided remotely by electricians with an electronic customer service system. This shows that the system is still evolving and has not yet reached its final form.

The working model is that each electrician is equipped with a special tablet connected to the Internet with applications installed to monitor and report on all activities at work. The electricians receive information about orders in electronic form involving the rectification of faults or other activity involving the servicing of the electricity network. This notification provides basic information about the type of fault, its location and other key messages. Electricians can take the announced orders or not, arrange them throughout the day thus organising their working time and the number of orders each day. They can also report on the situation on site, the repairs carried out and communicate with the central office if necessary. Thanks to this solution, electricians do not have to visit the company's headquarters or report on the activities carried out using paper documentation. The vast majority of electricians are self-employed and bill the distribution company on a business to business basis.

Management of mobile work

The introduction of ICT technology into the work of electricians was an initiative of the company's management as a response to recent modernisation processes in the electricity sector in Poland and in Europe. The main motivations behind this initiative on the company's side were the need to move to fully digital network monitoring and servicing, as well as to facilitate the management of electricians' work. The idea was to standardise and to structure the management of the power grid. An important aspect of this process was to reduce time taken to repair faults through the flexible arrangement of servicing by electricians during the day, as well as billing electricians for their work. Prior to the implementation of the digital tool, billing for work was entirely paper-based, with electricians having to submit manually completed documents to the company's head office. It was also the intention of the company's management to avoid problems such as errors in completing documentation (which involved rewriting forms) or lost documentation.

The interviewee, representing the company, listed a number of benefits of introducing ICT tools that enable electricians to work fully remotely in the field. At the forefront of these benefits is a long-term reduction in both power grid monitoring and maintenance costs, as well as labour costs. In the latter case, savings are achieved by electricians being able to carry out more repairs during the day, as they do not have to return to base and fill out paper documentation. Prior to the introduction of the digital system, around 100,000 cards per year were used, so the benefit is a reduction in the use of natural resources. Another benefit of introducing this digital solution is increased productivity, reducing repair times. In effect, customers also experience the benefit of increased service quality resulting from a clear reduction in the length of power outages. In terms of managing a team of electricians, the company representative also highlighted the benefit of providing constant contact with workers via an app on a tablet. This makes the resolution of potential problems and also the coordination of tasks much smoother than before the introduction of the IT system.

When asked about the degree to which the goals accompanying the introduction of ICT into the work of electricians had been met, the company representative replied that it was very high, and that even the revealed benefits of this work model had exceeded original expectations.

On the challenge side, however, the company representative pointed to a number of issues that had to be dealt with. The biggest challenges came at the time of introducing the IT system and were of two types: fine-tuning the system on the technical side and those related to the human factor. The technical difficulties included handling the tablets, which – in the first versions – were easy to be broken, sizes of fonts were too small for most users. In the latter case, it was a matter of familiarising electricians with the new system and equipping them with the right skills to efficiently operate the tablets and report to a set standard. A company representative said that it was a challenge to convince some workers to use the system. This was due to a fear of novelty, but also of excessive scrutiny of the work being done and possible infringement of personal data privacy. However, the company assures that personal data is not controlled and the location of the electricians is not intentionally tracked, but only monitored to check that the job has actually been completed. It was also a challenge to train around 800 electricians, teaching them to work in accordance with the procedural standards proposed by the IT system. The company decided to implement the changes gradually. Initially, the system was tested on a small area and then on the whole company's operations field, but with a six-month transition period allowing for simultaneous paper and electronic reporting.

It is noteworthy that in the initial phase of running the mobile work, one manager pushed for a high pace of implementation, which was met with a lot of dissatisfaction from a large part of the electricians. Pushing for change led to mental exhaustion and a feeling of being unneeded by some workers. Informed of the workers' dissatisfaction, the trade unions reported the matter to the company's management, who decided to remove the manager from her position and introduce a more realist pace of change adapted to the workers' adaptability.

The first experiences were quite difficult: the tablets were getting damaged (because this is technical work, not in the office). Lessons were learnt from the pilot, the devices were replaced with ones that were easier to use, with larger digits, better protected by a case against damage. After these improvements, I can say that mobile work is a good solution if a worker knows and can use the device and as long as the data in the system is reliable.

(Trade union representative)

The new system is now digital-only, with the company representative declaring it fully operational and highly efficient. During the interview, however, he indicated that the company still faces management challenges. One of these challenges is the difficulty for some workers to adapt to the procedural standards required by the system and to "try to bypass the system". Sometimes electricians take an order and then fail to complete it for some reason without reporting it. Another problem is that higher-paying orders are accepted while lower-paying orders wait longer in the queue to be completed.

Impact of COVID-19 on managing mobile work

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was a shock to the energy sector as well, with companies and workers having to adjust to the sanitation regime and new work organisation from day to day. Working from home during the lockdown period was only possible to a very limited extent in the energy sector - mainly among office workers. It did not apply at all to the work of electricians, which takes place in the open air in the field. The introduction of a mobile working system using ICT tools even before the COVID-19 pandemic ensured that the work of electricians was not overly burdened. Had this not happened, it would have been a major challenge to maintain the sanitation regime during paper reporting, which would have required electricians to be present at the company's base every day. According to a company representative, the introduction of mobile working and remote reporting saved the company from grid servicing bottlenecks and the threat to critical infrastructure. The introduction of ICT solutions played a key role in this process.

Thanks to this system, we were able to function fairly normally, otherwise services would have stopped for some customers. The ICT system saved us.

(Representative of the electricity company)

According to the company's representative, the 'stress test' resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic verified positively the digitalisation of power grid monitoring and mobile electricians introduced. No modifications to the system were needed. Only new sanitation regime rules resulting from nationwide regulations were necessary to be followed. Contact with customers was also reduced to a minimum and some elements of power grid servicing control were suspended. The company is now operating according to pre-pandemic rules.

Working conditions in mobile work

Both workers and company representatives observe the positive impact of the digitalisation of the power grid and the introduction of mobile work on working conditions in general.

Among the biggest benefits for workers are the increased flexibility of working hours and the arrangement of tasks during the day. These elements contribute to greater worker autonomy. Electricians can accept a repair call in the area to which they are assigned and then schedule it in such a way that they can be reached successively, economising the route and travel costs. Depending on their needs, the number of assignments per day can vary, allowing electricians to shorten or extend their working day according to their preferences. In between assignments, workers can take a break to

carry out their personal duties if they plan their assignments accordingly. An important benefit for workers is also the replacement of paper documentation with electronic reporting that takes place in real time. As a result, workers do not have to return to the company's base every day, hand over documentation and account for them. In addition, electricians declare their framework working hours, outside of which orders are not sent to them (the prototype of the right to disconnect). However, if a situation arises where there are more orders compared to the electricians' availability, orders outside the designated framework working hours are placed. Such excess orders are priced higher. In practice, however, this situation rarely occurs. In an interview, the employee representative felt that this flexible arrangement improves the balance between life and work.

The digitalisation of power grid monitoring and the introduction of geolocalisation has also meant that electricians do not need paper maps to identify the location and nature of faults. The tablet contains information about the location and name of the node or cable that needs repair. This has reduced the time to reach the fault location, and also means that electricians have full information about the type of fault before they reach the site.

Due to the increased flexibility in working time arrangements and time savings, the union representative estimates that the intensity of work as well as stress has decreased. At the same time, employee productivity has increased. On the other hand, the routine nature of work and its systematisation has increased, which is due to the need to adapt to the standards of procedures that are defined by the digital system.

The workers' representative also indicated that the system for receiving orders is simple. Orders are visible in the system and are assigned to a region, for which a defined group of electricians is responsible. Before the digital system was introduced, it was very time-consuming and required additional work for dispatcher to reach the right electricians, in the right area, and determine the acceptance of order. Nowadays, orders are automatically generated by the power grid monitoring system and sent to the electricians in the area, who can take or reject them. The execution of orders and their values are digitally recorded. As a result, also the billing and calculation of the monthly remuneration is considerably simplified and automated, and the transparency of these processes is also increased.

Digital power grid monitoring also allows much more information about grid status and faults to be available to the head office and the electricians. The electricians therefore go to the site of the fault better prepared with information and also know what equipment they need to do the job. One result of increasing the knowledge base of the network is also a reduction in the number of accidents at work and improved health and safety conditions.

The vast majority of electricians are self-employed, with only a small proportion working under an employment contract. In this way, the working time regulations under the Labour Code do not apply and management of working time remains fully with the self-employed. In practice, out of a group of 800 electricians, there are people with different preferences in this respect. The vast majority work full-time, but there is also a proportion of electricians, e.g. retired, who only incidentally or to a small extent take on assignments to supplement their income while retirement. There are usually slightly more electricians assigned to an area than the demand for servicing the power grid would suggest. In this way, the company copes with the problem of refusals when distributing orders. The risk of this solution is that, at a critical moment, the self-employed may collectively refuse to carry out any orders, which could lead to power cuts.

Despite the huge scale of the use of self-employment and the risks to workers and the company that it entails, both workers and employer representatives said that job stability and job security were high. The introduction of digital systems has not changed this situation. Similarly - digitalisation and the

introduction of ICT managed mobile working has not affected wages according to the union and company representative.

Still, not all electricians have agreed to mobile working using ICT tools and are functioning in paper mode. These are individuals who have had difficulty learning how to use a tablet and digital applications. However, this is a small group of workers.

Impact of COVID-19 on working conditions

As outlined already above, the COVID-19 pandemic has only had a moderate impact on the working of electricians using ICT tools. The mobile working system had already been developed before the pandemic, and since 2020 only more electricians have chosen to adopt it. Mobile work allows for an operation that does not require physical contact with other people and, in particular, a return to the company's base, while maintaining the fluidity of servicing and full operation of the power grid. For some workers who did not want to shift to a mobile working model for various reasons, operating during the COVID-19 pandemic was a challenge. This was mainly a group of older workers or workers reluctant to digitise in general.

The company only introduced general regulations mandating personal protective equipment and social distancing, limited direct contact with customers and some elements of on-site performance monitoring.

Skills in mobile work

The introduction of mobile work using ICT tools required to provide some digital skills to workers. Alongside the digitalisation process, the company carried out a system of appropriate training. In the first instance, training was offered to a group of electricians in which the new solution was being tested on a voluntary basis. When the first experience of working with the new system became more positive, the trained workers taught their colleagues in the on-job training modus. Then, systematically with the expansion of the scale of mobile work, the company delivered training to further groups of employees. Eventually, training was available to all electricians across the company.

The system was initially introduced for those who were willing, so as not to force anyone, because there is no worker from a slave. And then the employees learned from each other when performing tasks. In the last phase, online training was available to all employees.

(Trade union representative)

The training took the form of e-learning, accompanied by short tutorial videos showing the details of using the app and tablet. The training only covered the use of the tools and did not include an introduction on general digital competence.

Both workers and company representatives said that the main challenge was to break down the psychological barrier and convince the first electricians of the benefits of mobile working with ICT tools. There was a certain barrier to entry consisting of different levels of development of general digital competences. Implementation into the new working model came for those with a general

understanding of the digital world and working with mobile devices. In contrast, those who were exposed to tablets and digital apps for the first time found the training more challenging. These people also started their mobile work later.

Role of social partners in ensuring workers' rights and decent working conditions in mobile work

The initiative to introduce mobile work supported by ICT tools was taken and implemented by the employer in the most common top-down model in Poland. The digitalisation plans were not consulted with trade unions, other forms of employee representation present in the company, or directly with workers. Although the process of implementing the change was in several stages and involved getting feedback from electricians on how elements of the system were working. This is the pattern followed in this company (and many others in the energy sector). For example, digitalisation issues are not subject to collective agreements or collective bargaining.

Trade unions take on a reactive role in such a model, which is expressed in communicating to the employer the voices of discontent related to various elements or stages of the implementation of mobile working. The demands for improvement in this area, however, were cosmetic changes and did not concern the very idea of the system. One of these was pay increases for undertaking mobile work due to the new digital competences that workers had to acquire. However, this demand was not accepted by the company.

The unions did not play a subjective role in the planning and implementation of digital solutions, and workers participation was reduced to a minimum. Nevertheless, the trade unions - due to the benefits for workers and the company mentioned earlier - have a positive view of both the idea and the functioning of the mobile work model.

According to the trade unions, the introduction of mobile work using ICT tools has not affected in any way the access to trade unions and collective bargaining, as well as on the access to information, consultation and participation rights.

Conclusions

The introduction of mobile work using ICT tools by the electricity company in a top-down model is viewed positively by both the company itself and trade union representatives.

The multiple benefits include both the management of electricians' work and the improvement of working conditions. On the management side, these include financial savings, increased labour productivity and smoother work organisation, increased information on the state of the power grid, including failures, which is available in real time, and reduced power outages. Electricians, on the other hand, appreciate the flexible working time arrangement schemes and the reduced work intensity, the greater transparency of wage settlements, more information about tasks, as well as greater safety at their workplace.

Among the main challenges was the problem of equipping all electricians with the digital competences necessary to work in a digitised environment. Concerns were raised about the threat of excessive control of electricians, including their geo-location and personal data, which arose especially during the first period of implementation of ICT solutions. The challenge now is to fully adapt the way electricians work to the procedural standards defined by the new system. The form of employment of

electricians - self-employment - exacerbates the fragmentation of work, but according to the trade unions this does not affect job stability and job security.

The introduction of mobile work has allowed the COVID-19 pandemic, which, by its very nature, allows people to work at a social distance, to pass smoothly. Apart from the introduction of general sanitary regime rules, other changes in the organisation of mobile work were not needed. On the contrary, the pandemic period only accelerated the development of the mobile work model.

Trade unions were not consulted on the introduction of mobile work, but only made some postulates during the implementation phase. The level of worker participation in this process was low. The unions have played an important role in adapting the pace of ongoing digitalisation to the adaptability of electricians.

Case study B

Introduction

The subject of the second case study is the process of implementing hybrid working in one of the large financial institutions. This company is one of the largest universal banks in Poland (third place both in terms of the number of local branches and the size of assets), employs around 10,000 people in the country and has a long history of ownership transformations and restructuring. It was established on the eve of the economic transformation in late 1980s and for a number of years was a sole shareholder company of the State Treasury. Subsequently, as a result of privatisation, it became the property of foreign capital, with the owner of the majority stake changing over the past several years. Initially, it was an Irish group, then a Spanish financial institution took over the company. Particularly in its early days, the bank took over a number of other, usually regional, domestic companies, resulting, among other things, in a rather heterogeneous organisational structure with groups of employees of varying experience, age and job tenure.

Two main company divisions can be distinguished, each employing around 5,000 employees. The first, which will be generally omitted in this report, is the network of local branches that provide typical financial services to 'regular' customers. At a branch, they can withdraw or deposit cash, open an account, etc. The second division, also employing around 5,000 people, is the broadly defined company's head office. It provides a range of key services such as e-banking, ICT infrastructure, corporate and premium customer support, as well as supporting local branches.

The initial situation, which still existed for a short while before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, was the practical absence of a work from home throughout the company. Some few exceptions were the occasional use of remote working at the head office for the most valuable and highly qualified employees, generally for no more than one day per week or even less frequently. The employer's representative admitted that during the recruitment interview, literally on the eve of the first lockdown, she was told about the possibility of working from home once a month. In general, this kind of work performance was incompatible with the company culture and not allowed by managers as a rule. At the same time, some employees provided ICT-based mobile work, as a result of the nature of their tasks. Examples of groups of employees providing this type of work were ICT specialists going to local branches for technical support or advisors to institutional or premium customers. However, the interviewee representing the employer's side emphasised that from a formal

point of view this was not regarded as remote work of any kind. Employees went to the place of work off-site on the basis of a business trip delegation.

Management of out-of-office work

The introduction of work from home at the company's headquarters (located in three major cities) was closely linked to the restrictions introduced as a result of the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic in the early spring of 2020. As a result of the introduction of the first lockdown, very abruptly, the vast majority of head office employees (according to the union representative, around 95%) were directed "overnight" to work from home. In the case of the local branch network, some employees also started to work in the home office formula, albeit excluding those with tasks requiring cashiering. Priority was given to employees at particular risk of coronavirus infection, such as those over the age of 50. Some were directed to the client acquisition division – they performed tasks from home, having been given a list of telephone contacts to potential clients.

I was recruited in March 2020, so at the very beginning of the pandemic, and during my interview I was told that remote working was possible one day a month if something important was going on - and then I practically worked from home for two and a half years exclusively remotely.

employer's representative

Drastically everything has changed since the beginning of the pandemic, specifically since March. (...) 95% of all (head office) employees were sent to work remotely overnight. (...) [with regard to] A number of jobs in the bank's branches, at the so-called cash register, it wasn't so easy to redirect this person to remote work overnight. What would they be doing?

trade union representative

The initial period of implementation of working from home was as much forced by circumstances as it was highly spontaneous. In a very short time, employees had to learn to work from outside their employer's premises and managers had to learn to manage them effectively. The usual problems of adaptation to change, employees' management of their own time and their control by managers arose. Initially, technical and logistical issues were important to both parties. Computers and laptops had to be handed over to the employees and they had to be equipped with the appropriate software. As the employer's representative indicated, the company had to incur unexpected costs for the purchase of videoconferencing software licences – initially, many employees only had Skype installed on their company computers, without even being authorised to make video calls (they could only use chat). In turn, the trade union representative noted that the initial phase of the implementation of working from home was somewhat of a test for the bank's operation with modern digital technologies. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, the company's management promoted the image of the bank as a national leader in digitalisation, suggesting that the importance of employees would significantly diminish over time in favour of e-banking tools. However, it turned out that many especially older customers need face-to-face contact with employees and digital solutions are not sufficient to serve them properly.

The implementation of remote working at a later stage consisted, among other things, of training of employees, especially managers (in general, the company strongly bases its policy on the work of managers, who are left with a relatively large amount of freedom to manage their teams). Training was given on new techniques for managing teams remotely, including respecting employees' time and placing trust in them, and providing conditions for them to work as effectively as possible. An informal code of good practice – the so-called Golden Rules for Remote Working – was developed, including the

rule that work should not extend beyond typical working hours. This includes not being obliged to attend meetings organised after working hours. Training was also offered to employees on managing their time, planning their own schedule and planning their breaks. The trainings were preceded by a survey and a diagnosis of employees' needs. The training programme was modified over time according to current needs.

At the same time, the company significantly reduced office space, with interviewees differing in their assessment of how much this reduction amounted to (between 40 and 66%). Additionally, a hot desk and an app for booking desks (as well as parking spaces) were introduced. According to the interviewees, this brought about a significant cost reduction on the part of the employer. At the same time, the trade unions called for the introduction of refunds for electricity and telecommunication fees, but the company only decided to provide a one-off refund for the purchase of the necessary equipment, at the end of 2020. The reimbursement of the remaining costs will undoubtedly be introduced, once its principles have been agreed with the trade union side, after the Labour Code amendment comes into force in spring 2023.

At the time of the interviews in late summer 2022, after the lifting of the epidemic, the employer announced that head office staff would work in a hybrid mode. This assumes a certain number of days per week working from home (usually two or three; particularly highly skilled professionals can negotiate a higher number of days working from home). It is up to managers to determine the exact number of days. In order to facilitate this decision for them, a solution has been introduced to conduct workshops with the team. During these, employees are first asked to refer to specific statements about their preferred place of work (e.g. 'I miss meeting colleagues in person' or 'I value the peace and quiet I have at home'). A Likert or similar scale is used, and the aim is to find out the needs and preferences of the employees who make up the team as to how and where work is done. In a second step, the team creates a matrix of the tasks performed in their daily work, divided into those that can only be done in the office, those that can be done from home but are performed better when done in the office, and those that can be done from home without any problem or loss of quality. This allows a relatively objective determination of the necessary amount of time that team members should spend in the office. The interviewee stressed that it is important for employees to feel that the defined amount of time spent working from home is not the result of an arbitrary decision by the manager.

This approach is needed to build a sense of meaning at work, and also this human approach, which is a very important factor for engagement and job satisfaction.

employer's representative

An important effect, from the managers' perspective, of the introduction of working from home was, after a period of initial difficulties, an increase in employee productivity. It can be linked to the issues discussed in the section on working conditions. At this point, it should only be pointed out that managers' initial fears of a decrease in employee productivity (on which annual bonuses depend) did not materialise, although no benchmarking based on objective indicators was conducted – this assessment, although positive, is subjective in nature. The replacement of traditional team meetings with online meetings and new collaborative tools has also, in the opinion of the employer's representative, improved 'democratisation' – previously, group discussions were dominated by the loudest and most talkative person, now more people can present their point of view, even if they are more introverted.

There were, or still are, some previously unmentioned management issues associated with the introduction of working from home and then hybrid working which, at the time of the survey, had not

yet been resolved. One is the unnecessarily large number of online meetings held by employees – in the opinion of the employer representative, many of the minor issues could be resolved by a quick exchange of emails. Another problem is the decrease in productivity in the office after the introduction of hybrid working. This is due, in the opinion of the interviewee, to 'catching up' with colleagues who are missing out on work-from-home days. In general, relationships in the company are based on numerous meetings (so-called collisions), during which valuable information is exchanged or quick feedback is obtained. It turns out that these are so frequent that working days at the office bring a drop in productivity compared to those spent at home.

It should be noted that at the time of the survey, there were still no regulations on hybrid working introduced into the company's employment regulations. This was due to the early stage of implementation of this form of work, but also – in the opinion of the trade union representative – to the lack of general provisions in the form of a relevant amendment to the Labour Code, which could be a point of reference for the company. This will change in April 2023, when the amendment finally comes into force.

Impact of COVID-19 on managing out-of-office work

It is not possible to separate the issue of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting restrictions from the implementation of remote work in the company, as the latter was strictly a result of the former. Hence, many of the threads related to the pandemic have already been discussed above as part of the description of the complex process of implementing work from home and then hybrid work. The main point to note here is that the pandemic made the process forced and the company was not prepared for the situation in the first place. Hence, the implementation of work from home, especially at the initial stage, was spontaneous and fraught with uncertainty. It posed a challenge both for managers, who had to change their habits and ways of working, and for employees, especially those less familiar with digital technologies and (usually) older ones. In addition, employees during lockdowns were particularly psychologically strained as not only the way work was delivered changed. The mobility of the Polish population was restricted periodically, and many services (including those for recreation) were unavailable. Many suffered from a sense of isolation and disconnection from their previous working environment, where typical collegiate relationships were present. The trade union representative admitted that some workers rented flats and created "hubs" in them, rather illegally, where they worked together, thus protecting themselves from isolation and benefiting from the advantages of being together as workers (exchanging information, giving each other feedback).

Working conditions in out-of-office work

The impact of work from home/hybrid work on working conditions and employee well-being has changed over time, but should generally be considered positive. This is supported by the results of research conducted by the company's HR department, according to which, in the initial period after the introduction of fully remote working due to the pandemic, employees declared that they would like to work from home for two to three days, while from autumn 2021 onwards they already wished to work only one day in the office, or to perform their duties exclusively from home. The assessments of the two interviewees differ slightly, with the union representative being more critical and highlighting the inconvenience of working from home for certain groups of employees, primarily parents of young children and/or those without convenient housing conditions. However, this interviewee also generally agreed with the thesis particularly highlighted by the second interviewee, that for many employees with adequate conditions, the introduction of work from home is a very beneficial solution. It saves a considerable amount of time by eliminating commuting (which is all the more important as the company's headquarters are located in three large cities, where traffic jams are often considerable). By saving up to two hours a day, they have more time to spend with their families, caring for children or other dependents, but also for entertainment or recreation. They are often more rested, satisfied and motivated to work.

The possibility to work in a comfortable environment, in one's own home, in a space arranged to one's liking and in conditions that allow freedom, also has a positive impact on workers' well-being. This, in turn, can contribute to greater work efficiency and a higher quality of output, which is especially true for those doing conceptual work.

This ability to focus in a comfortable position on the sofa, with music that suits us and with peace and quiet from people walking around also makes us do these things better.

employer's representative

On the other hand, both interviewees agreed that remote work results in an expansion of working hours while blurring the boundaries between working time and time for home activities and private life. The employer representative acknowledged that, at least in the early days of the implementation of remote working, employees were logged on for up to 12-13 hours a day to the company's IT systems. She assessed that this was due to a sense of obligation to compensate for interruptions in their duties caused by the interweaving of domestic responsibilities (laundry, childcare) with work. Although, as already mentioned, managers were trained to respect statutory working hours, according to the trade union representative, about one third of them tend to expect employees to be available during extended hours. Consequently, the issue of the impact on work-life balance is also complex and variable over time. Initially, there was a major imbalance to the detriment of private life. However, even the union representative acknowledged that training for managers has improved a lot in this field, which in turn contributed to a better mental condition of employees.

With regard to occupational health and safety, quite surprisingly given the complete change in the working environment and the lack of statutory regulations on working from home, interviewees did not indicate any significant problems related to this sphere. They were limited only to occasional situations where an employee needed more ergonomic equipment for the workplace. In such cases, the trade union intervened. However, if one considers the OHS sphere more broadly, taking into account psychosocial risks, isolation (intensified by lockdown) and stress caused by lack of feedback from colleagues or technical problems with the computer were sometimes problematic. However, the introduction of hybrid working should significantly reduce these problems. No significant impact of the introduction of remote/hybrid working on the social protection of employees, security and stability of employment or the status of employees is observed. The majority of workers are employed on the basis of a job contract, the employment relationship is regulated in detail by the Labour Code and the change in the place of work provision did not bring about any change in this respect. On the other hand, in the opinion of the union representative, integration within the workforce has deteriorated, although the introduction of office days should significantly alleviate this problem, as should the difficulty also mentioned by the interviewee in attracting new members to the union.

Impact of COVID-19 on working conditions

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced the whole process of transitioning to remote working, also made it more difficult from the workers' perspective. The speed of the process was the cause of increased stress and feelings of uncertainty. This was accompanied by problems specific to the time of pandemics and lockdowns, such as isolation or fear of contagion. One consequence of isolation was the aforementioned lack of feedback from colleagues and opportunities to exchange information with them. Lockdowns further aggravated the mental state of some workers due to the lack of recreational opportunities (e.g. fitness clubs). In addition, it was particularly difficult for parents of children to adapt to work from home since they had to combine work and care responsibilities due to the temporary closure of schools and kindergartens in 2020 and 2021.

Skills in out-of-office work

In addition to the obvious skills related to working with new digital tools (especially video conferencing software), interviewees stressed the importance of skills related to self-organisation of their work, time management and self-discipline. According to the trade union representative, especially at the initial stage of implementing work from home, there was a lack of support from the employer – no training or other forms of support were provided for the transition to the new way of performing duties. Those who experienced problems had to cope on their own, possibly asking for advice from colleagues or superiors, if they trusted them enough. The training that was later provided, as also admitted by the employer's representative, was mainly addressed to managers and focused on how to organise the work of the team with respect for work-life balance, so the rank-and-file employees were indirect beneficiaries. An additional skill that employees had to acquire was how to communicate effectively at a distance. The employer's representative noted that initially the increased communication by email or chat did not always run smoothly. There were various minor misunderstandings due to the impersonal nature of written communication, when, for example, someone felt that the tone of a colleague's message suggested that they were impatient or offended (which was not necessarily true). One also had to get used to the fact that sometimes a reply to a message would take a couple of hours to arrive. These issues have been contained, while there is still a lack of effective management of online meetings – as mentioned earlier, there are too many and they are not always needed.

Related to the issue of skills are two more interesting observations from the interview with the employer's representative. Firstly, high-level professionals with rare skills can now even count on more freedom to arrange their working hours from home than is the case for other head office employees, who work as much in the office as they agree in the course of the above-mentioned workshop with their manager. This included an interviewee who, at the time of the interview, only had to come to the office once a week. The second issue also relates to the same group of most valuable employees. The introduction of remote working has made it possible for employers to seek talents away from the large cities where the company headquarters are located. This is particularly important because there is a serious shortage of top specialists and they have very high salary expectations. This is therefore a favourable circumstance for the employer, but also beneficial for many ambitious and highly qualified employees from smaller towns. The interviewee, representing the employer, suggested that it is a situation enjoyed by her friends from her home town also working in the financial sector (so it does not only apply to the company included in this case study). The interviewee herself, moreover, was able to move to her hometown, some 100 km from the company's headquarters, thanks to the introduction of remote working.

Role of social partners in ensuring workers' rights and decent working conditions in out-of-office work

Generally, social dialogue in the company functions relatively well when compared with many other companies in Poland, especially in the private sector and services. There are five trade union organisations, two of which are large in terms of membership and have the status of representative organisations. There is no collective agreement in force, but consultations on employment regulations are conducted, as required by Polish law. The trade union representative admitted that the manner in which social dialogue takes place in the company is not fully satisfactory for the trade union side. At the same time, it should be noted – as mentioned earlier – that the company has been subject to quite intensive restructuring in recent years, which has involved difficult decisions that are unfavourable from the employees' perspective, such as the implementation of group redundancy programmes. The trade unions, as declared by their representative, have been able to negotiate relatively favourable terms and conditions, which was especially the case with the previous collective redundancy

programme (the programme being implemented during the period when the survey was conducted was no longer so favourable for the redundant employees).

As for the role of trade unions in the implementation of work from home/hybrid work, it has been relatively modest. The reason for this is largely due to the relative weakness of the unions at headquarters – they mainly cover workers employed in the local branch network. Due to the nature of the process of implementing work from home (spontaneity, pandemic-induced necessity), the union's activities largely amounted to some concrete actions of an ad hoc intervention nature. This consisted, for example, of reporting the need to send an elderly person concerned about his or her health due to the risk of COVID-19 infection to work from home, or to better equip a workplace at home. This kind of activity is made possible by the existence of internal mechanisms to ensure ad hoc dialogue – union representatives can comment on labour issues, in on-going contact with employer representatives. They are, in the opinion of the employee representative, treated correctly and not discriminated against (which is not always obvious in Poland). The employer's representative indicated that, from the conversations she has heard between managers, it appears that union representatives are treated seriously by them and they are convinced that the issues they address should be dealt with.

On the other hand, up to the time of the survey, the union had not been directly involved in the creation of guidelines for remote working, nor had it been presented with draft amendments to the employment regulations regarding hybrid working. The latter is due to the aforementioned refrain of the management to amend the regulations in the absence of legislative changes at the national level.

Conclusions

The above case study is an example of almost revolutionary changes in the field of company's human resources management, necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and legal restrictions it caused. The company, which was initially reluctant to allow employees to work from home, with managers conservative on the issue, had to adopt the solution overnight. This made the implementation process spontaneous and a considerable shock to both managers and rank-and-file employees. This caused temporary problems, notably stress and increased work intensity and hours, accompanied by inconveniences due to the restrictions introduced by the government in connection with the pandemic. Over time, however, the company has successfully adopted the new way of working and managers have learned to supervise employees in a new way, respecting their work-life balance. In the summer of 2022, once the pandemic state was lifted by the government, the company began to introduce a hybrid working model, as the benefits of reducing costs on the employer's side while improving employee wellbeing and efficiency were recognised. A large proportion of workers value the flexibility offered by hybrid working, the time savings resulting from not having to commute to the office, or being able to work in a home environment that is tailored closely to their needs. It should be emphasised that the changes have been made permanent for employees at the company's headquarters, not at local branches. We are therefore talking about half of the staff, or 5,000 people. Trade unions, although present in the company, did not play a key role in the implementation of remote or hybrid working, but supported individual employees if they experienced problems arising from the new situation.



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