THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF HOME WORK ON EMPLOYEES IN THE CONTEXT OF CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

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Abstract: *The coronavirus pandemic has reached every part of our society, causing major restrictions at global, regional and local level. The labor market is characterized by an intensification of factors such as stress, uncertainty and anxiety, employees work more and more from home, and most of them are concerned about keeping their jobs in the future. The current pandemic is a source of intense stress for the whole of mankind and has led to millions of job losses worldwide. Research shows that home work has a series of psychological effects on employees such as: concerns about how the economic situation will evolve - technical unemployment, decrease earnings, job security -, increase depression, anxiety, stress, decrease self-esteem, sleeplessness, irritability, physical and mental tiredness, depression disposition, concentration problems etc. Employees around the world expect the companies they work for to provide more mental health support. Furthermore, they consider that if such aid is not provided, it will have a profound impact on overall productivity, as well as the personal and professional life of the global workforce. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is identify and analyze the main psychological effects that work from home has on employees in the context of the coronavirus crisis.*

Key words: coronavirus, psychological effects, employees, stress, workplace, mental health.

JEL Classification Codes: M51, M21, I1.

1. INTRODUCTION

2020 was the most stressful year in history for the global workforce. According to a study carried out on more than 12,000 employees, managers, human resources leaders and C-level executives in 11 countries, conducted by Oracle and Workplace Intelligence - a human resources research and consulting firm, the COVID-19 pandemic has grown stress, anxiety and exhaustion for people around the world.

Alongside the new expectations related to working from home and the unclear boundaries between personal and professional life, the degree to which COVID-19 has affected mental health is significant for employees in all fields and countries. The pandemic has brought mental health to the foreground - it is the biggest workforce problem today and it will continue to be for the next decade.

Before the pandemic, when it was a choice and not a necessity, remote work - whether carried out at home or elsewhere - had plenty of benefits. Research indicated the fact that it gave employees a 'boost' in terms of productivity, morale, involvement and health. 2020 is the year when working from home has become normality for many employees. Globally, four out of five CEOs expect remote work in their companies to continue in the long run, after realizing that their fears related to productivity decrease during the lockdown proved to be ungrounded.

2. HOMEWORK AND / OR TELEWORK - PART OF THE EMPLOYEES LIFE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the foreground the problem of expanding telework, as one of the methods aimed at organizing the production and services within companies, and implicitly employment. It is important to take into consideration several teleworking situations. Thus, such form of employment can be used constantly or occasionally.

In the context of the steadily increasing spread of the Covid-19 virus, in order to ensure a balance between protecting health and reducing the economic and social impact, employers and employees may agree, where possible, that the employees can provide work from home or on a telework basis.

Next, we will capture the main differences and similarities between the two concepts: work from home and telework. The two varieties of distance work are closely related, but they involve some differences. *Work from home* represents, according to the title itself, the fulfillment of the specific duties of a position at the employee's domicile, namely, where s/he has his/her main residence. *Telework* is that form of organizing work by which the employee, on a regular and voluntary basis, fulfills the duties specific to the position, job or occupation s/he holds, in a place other than the work organized by the employer, at least one day a month, using information and communication technology. Therefore, the main difference between the two varieties of remote work is given by the aspect of territoriality, in the sense that in the case of telework, the place of work may be not only home, but also any other place chosen by the teleworker (any employee who carries out his/her activity in a telework regime), outside the workplace organized by the employer. If an employee works at his/her own domicile and uses information and communication technology equipment for this purpose, practically his work meets the characteristics of both types of work, without one prevailing over the other, especially since there are no major content differences between their corresponding regulations. In this hypothesis, from a formal point of view, the employee can be included both in the typology of work from home, as well as in the typology of telework depending on the specification in the individual employment contract / addendum, if the employee works in a telework regime or from home. The degree of extension of telework depends on a complex number of factors, among which a key role belongs to the agreement between employees and employers. Undoubtedly, in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, telework represented a way of maintaining the activity of an important part of human capital, as well as continuing the implementation of new information and communication technologies.

One of the conclusions of the study conducted by the market research company Wisemetry Research is that 37% of the respondents who have experienced both office and home work say that they work more, in terms of time allotted, when they work from home, 35% say they did not notice a difference between the two situations, and the fewest, 28%, think they work more from the office. The study also reveals that, compared to men, women are more likely to work more when they telework. Moreover, among those who are interrupted from their work duties in order to do household chores, 78% are women and only 22% are men. On the other hand, working from home has clear psychological disadvantages. The study shows that 31% of the employees have more frequent anxiety conditions when working from home, compared to only 25% who feel more anxious when they work from the office. In addition, many employees experience feelings of alienation in the absence of physical interaction with others and difficulties in separating personal and professional life. And yet, despite the fact that, from a mental point of view, it seems more difficult to manage work from home, more than a third of those who practice teleworking during the pandemic say they will continue to work from home even after the end of the pandemic.

The real encouragement and support of the employees' initiative is a beneficial attitude for the development of the employee and the teams no matter where they carry out their activity, and in order to achieve this a space to allow initiatives to manifest within each position can be introduced in the development strategy. During this period it is necessary to identify the needs of the employees. Among the existing possibilities, there are the settlement of services such as dance classes, individual psychotherapy, sports, psycho-emotional development workshops with specific themes and requested by the employees, tent outings with a mountain guide and team buildings focused on activities that can be carried out this way. Employers can also offer the possibility to choose working time at the office and remote, keeping a balance between the two, and taking into account employees' needs. This sustained balance is necessary, as it is easy to be attracted by the convenience of remote work for both the employee and the employer, but human relationships need practice to be maintained, and distance can have an effect on the teamwork dynamics. At the same time, the effects of professional dynamics can extend over personal dynamics and close relationships, precisely in the same way they conversely inter-influence.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON EMPLOYEES WHO WORK FROM HOME AND / OR TELEWORK

Throughout the pandemic, psychopathological phenomena have been reported, especially: ***insomnia, nervousness/irritability, unmotivated physical/mental fatigue, panic, catastrophic expectations related to the pandemic, increased appetite, depressive mood, easy crying, ideas of uselessness or lack of self-worth, problems with concentration, anhedonia, the feeling that life is meaningless, drowsiness, numbness in the hands or feet, palpitations, physical pain without an organic cause.*** These symptoms are recent and can be largely attributed to the stress induced by the coronavirus crisis, given that only 3% of the respondents admitted to pre-existing mental disorders. It is noted, during this period, a reduced addressability to psychological or psychiatric assistance services and the reliance on personal methods meant to cope with the symptoms; self-medication for sleep, coffee for drowsiness, alcohol for anxiety etc.

When the person did not know the importance of carrying out an activity for himself/herself only, the separation from the group or team, unconsciously felt as a rejection, lead to feelings such as relational avoidance or, on the contrary, the feeling of loss of meaning, fear or evasion of rules, sudden change of state, psychosomatic feelings, bodily experience of unrecognized or denied emotions, the development of extremely repetitive thoughts or behaviors, as a form of protection against another possible loss or rejection. The competitive spirit can now manifest itself towards family members. It can be identified when the person does not focus on the solution or loses sight of the common benefit and expects others to fulfill the imperative desire, even if they have another need at the time. Anger and aggression can now be revealed by the impossibility of expression and burning in the active professional environment and collegiate competitions. And the manifestations of addiction are along with depression the most important effects of this period of people's global adaptation. When family members were not accustomed to providing space to each other or did not know how to allot some time to themselves, delimitation of time and space for the profession can be difficult to achieve at once. This is one of the reasons why it is and it has been so challenging to adapt and carry out your work from home, when children did not understand why their parents were next to them, but their attention was directed towards something else. Later on, when it was time to pay attention, the children would behave refractory or in opposition to the requirements they previously used to accept and fulfil. Personal time, considered proportionally with the time given to each family member and to all together, is also necessary for the further development of a relationship based on mutual respect and unconditional acceptance of oneself and of the others. This way, addiction and

depression can be reduced by developing this habit in children's lives, through the example provided by the parents. Other parents may become overactive and overprotective of their children, which, professionally speaking, might lead to attention deficit disorder or anxiety. This can eventually lead to sleep problems, acute stress and decreased professional performance. As a result of these feelings, a sentiment of invalidation may be reborn, which before the beginning of the pandemic the person had managed to dress in exceptional professional manifestations, from which s/he received the necessary validation, both during work breaks from colleagues, as well as from subordinates. People who need validation also fulfill this need within informal, face-to-face discussions.

In terms of communication with those outside the household, a series of aspects were identified, as follows: the feeling of lack of privacy associated with physical, direct communication; concerns related to how the economic situation (technical unemployment, working from home with an income decrease, or even the lack of secure support), as well as the social situation (separation from the group of colleagues, neighbours, friends) will have an impact over the person itself and the family; emotional balance (the acceptance of objective data and of the change in the communication paradigm); capitalizing on current resources (using time constructively, mediated communication to reconnect with old friends and relatives with whom they have not spoken for a long time, etc.).

The results of the study conducted by Oracle and Workplace Intelligence (2020) showed that the pandemic has had a negative global impact over the mental health of employees, as follows:

- 70% of them were more stressed and anxious this year than in any other year;

- this increase in stress and anxiety had a negative impact on the mental health of 78% of employees globally, causing more stress (38%), a lack of work-life balance (35%), and exhaustion. 25%), depression due to the lack of socialization (25%) and loneliness (14%);

- the new pressures stemmed from the global pandemic have overlapped with daily stressors at work, including pressure to meet the performance standards (42%), management of routine and difficult tasks (41%) and juggling difficult-to-manage work tasks (41%).

Furthermore, the study conducted by Oracle and Workplace Intelligence (2020 also revealed that the global pandemic has exacerbated employees' mental health problems, as follows:

- 85% of them believe that mental health problems caused by telework (for instance, stress, anxiety and depression) affect their personal lives;
- the most common repercussions were sleep deprivation (40%), poor physical health (35%), lack of involvement and joy at home (33%), dysfunctional family relationships (30%) and isolation of friends (28%);
- since the boundaries between personal and professional life have become increasingly blurred due to the fact that people work from home, 35% of global employees work with more than 40 hours extra each month, and 25% of them were exhausted due to overwork;
- Despite the perceived disadvantages of working from home, 62% of people think that working from home is a good choice, stating that they now have more time to spend with family (51%), that they can follow a sleep routine (31%).) and meet their deadlines (30%).

Employees all around the world expect their organizations to provide them more mental health support. Furthermore, they consider that the failure to provide such support will have a

profound impact on global productivity as well as on the personal and professional life of the global workforce:

- 76% of the employees believe that the organization they work for should do more to protect their mental health;
- 51% mentioned that the organizations provided them with mental health services or assistance as a result of COVID-19;
- 83% of the global workforce would like their employer to provide the necessary technology to help them maintain their mental health, including subscription-based access to health resources (36%), on-demand counseling services (35%) %), proactive health monitoring tools (35%), access to wellness or meditation applications (35%) and computer programs designed to simulate conversations with human users answering health questions (28%);
- 84% of the employees face various challenges: the biggest factors being the inability to distinguish between personal and professional life (41%) and facing increased mental health challenges, such as stress and anxiety (33%);
- 42% of employees stated that stress, anxiety or depression at work causes their productivity to decrease, and 40% said that these negative factors lead to an increase in the probability of making inappropriate decisions.
- 85% stated that work-related stress, anxiety and depression affect their personal lives.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic has radically changed the way we live. Ranging from the way we work to the way we interact with each other - everything goes by rules that no one would have thought possible a year ago. Before the pandemic, when it was a choice and not a necessity, remote work - whether carried out at home or elsewhere – had plenty of benefits. Research indicates that this gave the employees a '*boost*' in terms of productivity, morale, involvement and health.

Stanford University economics professor Nicholas Bloom states there is a danger of a real global mental health crisis caused by working from home. According to him, there are several factors that lead to a significant decrease in productivity and the condition of employees working from home. First of all, a large number of employees who work from home are isolated in their homes with their spouses and children who were normally at work or school. Thus, concentration becomes a problem when all sorts of family situations arise at every step. Another problem is the experience of working from home itself. People should have a well-delimited space for the office, where they should be isolated when they work. But the vast majority of people work either in bed, on the kitchen table, or on the sofa This further blurs the line between work and personal life. Another factor is the personal choice. According to Bloom, some employees want to work from the company's registered address, and if they are forced to work from home, they have poor productivity.

Working from home has advantages and drawbacks: it can increase the level of job satisfaction, but at the same time people may face feelings of alienation in the absence of physical interaction with others and difficulties in separating personal life from professional life. First of all, it should be mentioned that working from home and/or telework represents an option rather for certain categories of employees - we are talking about those workers called white-collars.

Working from home means that all the roles that a person performs daily - employee, partner, parent - interfere, that there is no clear delimitation, which puts a lot of pressure on the

individual. Now, all these 'hats' overlap throughout the day, in the same space. In addition, the period of travel to and from work has disappeared, which functioned, most of the times, as a "buffer zone" between the position of family member – with its specific requirements and load - and that of employee, with the tasks corresponding to the job description. Therefore, during this trip, whether it was done by personal car or public transport, people could disconnect from the environment they had just left and they could prepare themselves for the next 'role'.

On the medium and long run, working from home is not sustainable and poses major risks to the mental health of employees. The limitation or even the disappearance of social interaction is one of the worst consequences of the pandemic, and the sooner the companies understand this, the better they will be able to support their employees through assistance and support programs meant to maintain their well-being until things will come back to normal. The high degree of stress, the worry of tomorrow and the social pressure, accentuated by the pandemic, make it necessary to invest in the area of mental health both by companies, as well as the state.

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