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Remote work in the age of COVID-19: Case studies of knowledge workers during forced social isolation

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Abstract

It has been over a year and a half since remote work became a necessity introduced by many companies around the world to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The word necessity is key here, because probably if it wasn't for the outbreak of the global pandemic, the system of work, learning and many face-to-face meetings would never have experienced such a rapid digital transformation. The author focuses on comparing existing theories of remote management with the reality during mass social isolation. To investigate this phenomenon, the author conducts qualitative research in forms of case studies in the privacy of knowledge workers' homes. The main outcomes of the work include the creation of a new work-life balance model based on remote work that can only be applied during social isolation, further recommendations for implementing remote procedures, and overall challenges of remote workers are presented. This paper is a summary of months of work in the pursuit of understanding how existing remote management theories can be transformed into practical, individual-centered action.

Keywords: remote work, work-life balance, remote management, home-office, COVID-19

Praca zdalna w dobie COVID-19: Studia przypadków pracowników wiedzy w warunkach przymusowej izolacji społecznej

Abstrakt

Minęło ponad półtora roku, odkąd praca zdalna stała się koniecznością wprowadzoną przez wiele firm na całym świecie w celu powstrzymania rozprzestrzeniania się wirusa COVID-19. Słowo „konieczność” jest tu kluczowe, ponieważ prawdopodobnie, gdyby nie wybuch globalnej pandemii, system pracy, nauki i wielu spotkań nigdy nie doświadczyłoby tak gwałtownej transformacji cyfrowej. Autorka skupia się na porównaniu istniejących teorii zdalnego zarządzania z rzeczywistością podczas masowej izolacji społecznej. Aby zbadać to zjawisko, przeprowadza badania jakościowe w formie studiów przypadków w zaciszu domów pracowników wiedzy. Głównymi rezultatami pracy jest stworzenie nowego modelu balansu między życiem zawodowym a prywatnym opartym na pracy zdalnej, który może być stosowany tylko podczas ograniczeń sanitarnych, dalsze zalecenia dotyczące wdrażania procedur zdalnych oraz ogólne wyzwania stojące przed pracownikami zdalnymi. Niniejszy artykuł jest podsumowaniem miesięcy pracy w dążeniu do zrozumienia, jak istniejące teorie zdalnego zarządzania mogą być przekształcone w praktyczne, skoncentrowane na jednostce działania.

Słowa kluczowe: praca zdalna, work-life balance, zdalne zarządzanie, home-office, COVID-19

Introduction

It has been over a year and a half since remote work became a necessity introduced by many companies around the world to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The word necessity is key here, because probably if it wasn't for the outbreak of the global pandemic, the system of work, learning and many face-to-face meetings would never have experienced such a rapid digital transformation. It is worth noting that until now, the area of research dedicated to the phenomenon of remote working has been treated by theorists as neglected, because most experiments aimed to see only the advantages from the perspective of the employer associated mainly with cost reduction (Nilles, 1998). However, these experiments did not assume the transformation of entire companies into a system of remote operation, as the material addressing remote work was mainly focused on IT project management or management in startup environments. Consequently, the world has experienced an unprecedented event. As an observer of this rapid change and, at the same time, a knowledge worker, I saw a research gap at the often-overlooked perspective of the remote worker in the form of exploring the potential challenges faced by knowledge workers working entirely remotely.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the challenges faced by knowledge workers daily when working remotely in a pandemic. The research question was: "what are the challenges of knowledge workers in conditions of forced social isolation while working remotely?". For the creation of this paper, I have collected data through the case study strategy (Strumińska-Kutra and Kołodkiewicz, 2018). Subsequently, the overall chosen methodology was based on free-form interviews, along with an in-depth analysis in the following steps.

The first part of the paper focuses on an introduction to existing theories in remote management and presents the research gap. Second part presents the qualitative research on knowledge workers in the form of free-form interviews. Moving forward, the third part focuses on the case studies with knowledge workers with a comparative analysis. The fourth part presents the proposed model of a new approach to work-life balance under conditions of total remote work and along with further instructions for research on this topic. This paper is a summary of months of work in the pursuit of understanding how existing remote management theories can be transformed into practical, individual-centered action.

1. Literature Review on Remote Work

The Origin of Concept

Remote work has been successively implemented and transformed since the 1970s. The pioneer of the concepts and one of the first researchers to promote this new philosophy of work and life was the scientist Jack Nilles, who in the early 1970s studied the impact of commuting on the deepening problem of air pollution during the oil crisis in 1973. As a result, he distinguished two terms: **telecommuting**, i.e., replacing business trips by staying at home with appropriate technical equipment enabling work, and **teleworking**, i.e., periodic remote work outside the company's premises at least 1 day a week (Nilles, 1998). During his research, Nilles distinguished the characteristics of the ideal remote worker which are: (1) self-motivation and self-discipline; (2) professional skills, flexibility, sociability, and (3) the right stage in life with an internal pressure (Nilles, 1998; p. 21)

Until now, many academics have paid attention to measuring the **effectiveness of implementing a short-term remote work solution**. However, subsequent studies began to consider the long-term effects on the operation of companies in remote conditions. Studies have shown that there are **four factors affecting the remote work**: job complexity, problem solving, level of independence and social support. Before the outbreak of the pandemic, remote management textbooks mentioned that not every employee is suitable for remote work, and the process of selecting the right people for a remote team requires time and preparation (Nilles, 1998; Nickson and Siddons, 2004). However, the reality forced change.

Types of Virtual Work Environments

We can distinguish three **types of virtual organization environments**. Internal, where one company bases its internal operations on virtual teams, network used mainly by smaller and medium-sized companies during short-term projects, and outsourcing, which involves outsourcing most of the activities to other suppliers (Riemer and Vehring, 2012). Before the outbreak of the pandemic, the process of preparation for the implementation of remote work was called systematic planning (Breaugh and Farabee, 2012). The first stage of this process should be to present the program to the employees and

their managers, followed by training for all participants. Later, a simulation of some of the volunteers and an evaluation of the effects and progress of the work (Wells, 2001).

Forming Virtual Teams

New employees should attend regular meetings frequently to get to know their colleagues. When managing the career of teleworkers, it is extremely important to pay attention to frequent job rotation, training, and regular justified feedback. Maintaining ties with the office should be based on constant contact. Short phone calls, informal meetings or notes should be sent to everyone. Often underestimated aspect is the early recognition of teleworkers' problems and efficient response. Obvious signals include reduced efficiency, increased absenteeism, communication problems and less involvement in meetings (Nilles, 1998, p. 35–36)

There are eight remote (Nickson and Siddons, 1998, p. 7) working implementation conditions: (1) Home/Remote Office as it should be a convenient space; (2) Technology and Security to ensure the right resources for the job; (3) Logistics and Support to ensure smooth work; (4) Remote Worker Skills; (5) Management Skills; (6) Risk Management to minimize the negative outcomes; (7) Processes and Procedures to keep the order of action; (8) Monitoring and change necessary for successful implementation. The **employee costs at the home office** include but are not limited to: (1) Preparation of a place for work, eg. a separate room or zone in the apartment; (2) Rent, charges for internet access, water and heating; (3) Equipment such as a desk, chair, adequate lighting, computers, monitors and mobile phones; (4) Insurance (Nickson and Siddons, 1998).

The Organizational Discontinuity Theory (Crowston, 2015) was developed to provide a better tool for analyzing the challenges of individuals in remote teams and span boundaries while working assuming the separation of the virtual environment from its influence on virtual work. Discontinuity could be described as the negative effects such as: language, organisational discipline, or national culture (Watson-Manheim *et al.*, 2012). In further research, Crowston (2015) suggested that effective communication and arranging face-to-face meetings can have a good impact in tackling discontinuity.

Advantages of Remote Work

For employees with demanding duties, a low level of independence and those with a low level of social support, remote work can have a positive impact on their productivity (Golden and Gajendran, 2018). As discussed earlier, among positive aspects of is the reduction in commuting to the company's office. The employee saves time and money because one does not spend hours in traffic jams, and on the other hand, benefits the environment by reducing the emission of pollution (Nilles, 1998). An important aspect for parents is spending more time with their family, while this might affect especially single parents (Breugh and Farabee, 2012). Possible increased work efficiency, but it depends on the position and duties performed (Golden and Gajendran, 2018). Going further, the possible number of smaller distractions during work, but this depends on the remote environment of the employee (Bailey and Kurland, 2002).

Looking at the **positive aspects from the employer's point of view** for the implementation of remote work, one can mention the increase in work efficiency, but it is positive for both sides (Golden and Gajendran, 2018). Limiting the demand for office space will reduce the real estate costs resulting from the limited need of physical presence. Greater company flexibility and faster response time is also a win-win aspect where both parties benefit. From an environmental perspective, the restriction in the movement and carbon emission should lead to a reduction in society's dependence on fossil fuels (Nilles, 1998).

Drawbacks of Remote Work

There are fewer research results about negative effects, however, the often-discussed matter not only in the field of management but also in psychology is the social isolation. However, the research was conducted before the pandemic, but it was already noticeable by both employers and employees (Bailey, Kurland, 2002). Another negative aspect is the feeling of stagnation in development and career resulting from less frequent interactions with superiors and the blurring of boundaries between work and home, i.e., work-life balance (Breugh and Farabee, 2012).

Regarding **the possible negative effects** there are five aspects from the employer's perspective. The first ones include the costs related to the purchase of equipment for remote employees, training, and provision of new operating procedures in a virtual environment. The following ones include supervisor resistance, which may be characterized by a sense of workload among managers, and problems with monitoring work. An important and controversial aspect of remote work is the security of information, i.e., the flow of secret information in the organization and legal assumptions regarding the safety and possible compensation in the event of an accident (Breugh and Farabee, 2012).

Companies should pay attention to supporting their employees in achieving the target work-life balance from the perspective of ethics, caring for well-being and gender equality. Understanding the term quality of life is an extremely important component of the division into work and life, so that they do not conflict with each other (Sullivan, 2012). However, when one partner exaggerates responsibilities, the other, in studies mostly a woman, may feel injustice, inequality and stress related to such behaviors (Claffey and Mickelson, 2008). Studies have shown that a twenty-first century woman spends fewer hours looking after the house. However, there is still a large disproportion between partners, as it is still almost half the time more than their husbands (Bartley *et al.*, 2005). Scientists and healthcare workers claim that the second pandemic in the current pandemic has arisen, i.e., a massive influx of mental illnesses, which include: fear for one's own health and family health, fear of financial insecurity and fear of exclusion among company employees. In connection with the above, it is extremely important to pay attention to the mental state of employees and to strive to introduce procedures for help and support (Karim, 2020).

One of the key challenges of remote work is **maintaining work-life balance** (AlHazemi and Ali, 2016). It is portrayed by academics as maintaining discipline in self-generated boundaries and can contribute to the creation of conflict between goal achievement and the pressure of professional achievement (Khateeb, 2021). However, a recent study of workers navigating a virtual environment says that for teleworkers between the ages of 18–44, a key challenge to maintaining life balance is disconnecting from business digital devices outside of work hours (Lonska *et al.*, 2021).

Synthesis and Research Gap

Based on the literature review, I conclude there are three clear changes in the context of forced social isolation that are taking place in the eyes of theorists and practitioners.

First, the role of a manager that requires not so much redefining as adding additional aspects to the job. From now on, superiors are liaisons between the organization and the rest of the employees that are not able to reject the fact about the existing barriers accompanying work. On the contrary, managers should react quickly to them. Crowston's (2015) research on ODT theory only highlighted how necessary effective and fast communication is to overcome the boundaries of remote work that may exist in different organizations. It is extremely important to recognize these boundaries in advance through communication with the team. In addition, tasks such as planning or distributing tasks across the team must necessarily be enriched by observing reality, which should go hand in hand with the manager's high awareness of the role of psychology and motivating his or her team. On the other hand, the organizations themselves should move with the times and transform their knowledge transfer based on the activities of born global organizations (Prys-tupa-Rzadca, 2014).

Second, the definition of a remote worker has changed over the years. It is not only about the amount of remote work, but about the appropriate selection of a person. The reality shows that knowledge workers, after all, can work from home with different possible outcomes. There are necessary changes to the legal procedures for naming remote work in contracts between companies and employees that have not been mentioned in textbooks because there have never been imposed massive restrictions by countries before. Stable employment with well-established procedures in terms of insurance or providing appropriate equipment for the employee would contribute to increasing the sense of security based on equal conditions for all employees.

Third, managing the virtual workers, reduction of feelings of isolation among employees, and cultivation of a proactive culture is perceived as the one of the main challenges that contemporary companies must face. (Kirkman *et al.*, 2002). When day by day remains unchanged from the previous one, problems with motivation, anxiety or reconciling home life with work may constitute recurring patterns of problems in the life of knowledge work-

ers. Unfortunately, the research conducted so far on remote work has focused mainly on measuring effectiveness. There is a research gap regarding the negative aspects and problems of working remotely. Most of the theoreticians and textbooks focus on the positive aspects and savings for the employer after remote work implementation.

As for my suggestions for further research on this topic, I would like to focus on changes that took place under forced social isolation behind the problems of knowledge workers working remotely, so that organizations, managers, and employees themselves can respond quickly enough and introduce changes to improve not only processes but general satisfaction with professional life that does not interfere with private life.

2. Research Methods

Research Question

The main objective of this paper was to analyze the daily challenges faced by knowledge workers when working remotely in conditions of forced social isolation caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the research question was:

What are the challenges of knowledge workers when working remotely during forced social isolation?

It should first be noted that never in the history of the world has the entire global society experienced the introduction of massive restrictions by governments to prevent transmission of the virus. Following the definition of Nilles, a **remote worker** performs his work outside the office, including the selection of occupations better suited to remote work. A **knowledge worker** is a person who uses highly mastered analytical, theoretical, and creative skills acquired through appropriate education, training, or experience to carry out his work. Its greatest advantage is knowledge (Drucker, 1959). The topic of interest in challenges during remote work seems to be extremely fascinating since I have checked whether the existing solutions in the management of processes, people and entire organizations work in the new conditions of digital life and, above all, how to adapt the function-

ing between work and private life to new conditions. Paragraph below represents the methodology used in the study.

Methodology

I have decided to focus on the case study strategy (Strumińska-Kutra and Koładkiewicz, 2018) that requires interviews, based on which an in-depth analysis of the specific phenomenon under study should be conducted. The case study method places emphasis on understanding the context. The main object of the study was to understand new challenges of remote workers under the new context of forced social isolation. It is worth emphasizing that a feature of this strategy is the observation of the situation in their natural environment. In this case, homes of the participants (Strumińska-Kutra and Koładkiewicz, 2018). One of the most frequently used methods in the context of conducting research referring to the case study is the theoretical approach to describing the topic in the first place. After checking the existing theories and determining the research gap, it is possible to proceed to the second stage of research, i.e., collecting empirical data and conducting research. Additionally, the case study provides a detailed description of events in a chronological order, which in turn adds an in-depth description of the phenomenon under study (Stake, 2005).

Data Collection & Analysis

The basis for this work was to conduct five interviews in pairs in the knowledge workers' homes. The selection of study participants and their placement in pairs was caused intentionally, as the interaction in one home space provided a key insight into one of the work-life balance spheres studied. In total, I spoke to 4 pairs and a one person live. Unfortunately, one interview was conducted without one partner due to personal matters.

The study participants were aged from 23 to 47, mainly working in specialist or managerial positions, and lived in various residential areas in Warsaw. The first participant was Andrew (27), who sells IT projects in a medium-sized company. The next participants were Julia (26) who works in a boutique marketing agency and Casper (29) who is a financial controller. The nature of his company is to create solutions conducive to the management of sales, mar-

keting, and business operations. The third participants were Beatrice (42), an IT implementation manager and Peter (47), director of the data analysis department, who work together in the same company. The fourth couple were Victoria (23), who works as a marketing manager, and Oscar (24), who works in a marketing agency. The last were Natalie (25) who works at SEO optimization, and Alexander (29), who is a senior financial analyst.

Each of the interviews was recorded, transcribed, then coded. The entire study was compiled, then analyzed in a comparative form based on three environments: work, home, and overall well-being. The open-ended technique facilitated the interviewees to express their feelings, where they could freely develop their thoughts without the sense of being questioned. The form to conduct interviews in pairs was carefully thought out to combine the method of individual interviews with interviews in the focus group. The system of questions has been specially divided into three aspects of their lives (work, home, and wellbeing), which have been additionally arranged in a chronological context: from the beginning of the outbreak, time during the pandemic and the future after the pandemic. As a result, the questions arranged in chronological order allowed for a broader view of functioning and working during isolation, and the couples themselves admitted that the conversations in pairs had a therapeutic effect on them.

Table 1. Free-form Interviews Data Collection

Data type	Description	Date of interview	Total
Free-form Interviews in pairs	Interview with Andrew (Case 1)	8th of January 2021	56 minutes
	Interview with Julia and Casper (Case 2)	15th of January 2021	1h 15 minutes
	Interview with Beatrice and Peter (Case 3)	16th of January 2021	1h 34 minutes
	Interview with Victoria and Oscar (Case 4)	17th of January 2021	50 minutes
	Interview with Natalie and Alexander (Case 5)	20th of January 2021	1h 21 minutes

Source: own work.

Limitations

Due to the progressive epidemiological situation, I had a limited field to choose participants willing to devote some time. As the questions concerned personal relationships between partners, I decided to interview people from my close circle of friends and family. The limit in the context of qualitative research was a small research sample and a limited time to read all the materials related to remote work. Additionally, I see a limit in the actual examination of the negative impact of isolation on human functioning because the pandemic is not over yet. The appearance of materials on the Internet in the form of fake news allowed me to effectively research the origin of the information, but it was sometimes time-consuming.

3. Findings and Comparative Analysis

The research carried out for the purposes of this work consisted, inter alia, of conducting five interviews with knowledge workers in the privacy of their homes. Together with the participants, we focused on three areas that I raised in the conversation about remote work: the work environment, the home environment and overall wellbeing. Case studies based on individual interviews with the participants along with the comparative analysis are presented below.

Work Environment

With the introduction of remote work and the first lockdown, all the couples I surveyed admitted to having anxiety about uncertain financial situations and possible illness or loss of loved ones, which directly affected their work performance.

“For the first few days I played games while working because I couldn’t find myself in the new reality.”

Quoted participant: Oscar

Participants working in small and medium-sized enterprises talked about a smooth and well-coordinated transition to the home-office, while partici-

pants working in corporations pointed to a lack of crisis management and clear procedures, which added to feelings of anxiety.

“The only positive that the company provided us was a voucher worth PLN 1000 for the purchase of necessary office equipment for employees”

Quoted participant: Alexander

Remote form of communication based on instant messaging, such as Slack or MS teams prevails among participants due to easier distribution of information, although it becomes disruptive when too much information is sent.

“Communication is better remotely because it reaches everyone. In a situation where there are 100 people in the office, it is difficult to fit in one room.”

“Every Monday I spend on 50 e-mails with information that does not interest me”

Quoted participant: Beatrice

The vast majority of participants wryly indicated that with remote work, relationality disappears, which directly affects overall job satisfaction and feelings of social exclusion. Being less affiliated with the company causes frequent job rotations.

“I felt uncomfortably alone for the first four months because I had not had a single conversation with anyone”

“Validation and attention – I always left the office as a better person.”

Quoted participant: Peter

The lack of acquiring the knowledge necessary to perform their tasks caused overtime to personally search for answers to questions that would be explained by colleagues in office conditions. The overall sense of professional development has experienced stagnation.

“I am angry that I cannot be in the office because my job is to create extensive analyzes, where sometimes I need to ask more experienced colleagues for advice.”

Quoted participant: Alexander

To maintain constant motivation, frequent feedback from work, clear presentation of development paths and consistent execution of plans turned out

to be necessary. Looking at the future of work after the pandemic ends, vast majority of participants prefer the hybrid mode of work.

“I believe that a model other than a hybrid does not make sense, before the epidemic, I thought that the stationary model is a relic.”

Quoted participant: Peter

Home Environment

The couples I studied spent 24 hours a day with each other while simultaneously working remotely with varying work intensities. Given the different apartment layouts and limited space, most of the participants did not have a separate room or desk to work. Mostly the role of a desk was replaced by a dining table.

“A separate home office space and I could work like this for the rest of my days.”

Quoted participant: Andrew

One of the biggest downsides was found to be keeping order and inequality in sharing household responsibilities. However, gender trends could not be identified. Other couples have managed to better plan the division of household chores by spending more time together.

„At first, I was able to enter the living room where Alexander works and I didn't see him, only the monitors and a pile of mugs. Now that has changed, but the beginnings for a person who prefers cleanliness were difficult.”

Quoted participant: Natalie

The most important and, at the same time, the most difficult aspect in the study was unanimously admitted by all participants that it constituted a balance between work and home, i.e., work-life balance. Each couple tried to create a balance in a different way by dressing differently when they were working, separating work time between predetermined times of meals (breakfast and dinner) or establishing specific furniture and areas only for work.

“I believe that the tracksuits were a mistake in keeping my mental harmony. You should dress differently for work and home.”

Quoted participant: Andrew

Most of the participants admitted that it was the closeness of family or partner that got them through difficult times. The biggest advantage of working remotely was more time spent with loved ones.

“When there were moments of crisis, we could feel the support between us. For me, it is an apocalyptic vision that I am going through with my partner, hand in hand.”

Quoted participant: Beatrice

Overall Wellbeing

The participants found that one of the greatest advantages of remote work is the lack of onerous commuting in traffic jams, which could take up to two hours daily. Additionally, in the case of participants who often had to travel to meetings and workshops with clients, they appreciate that long journeys have been replaced by video conferences.

“No tiring commute in traffic jams in the morning and afternoon is an extra two hours of life for me every day”

Quoted participant: Julia

Other positives include greater flexibility and independence in deciding where to live, working hours and increased creativity resulting from not spending eight or more hours in the office. However, blurring the line between work and life is hazardous to health.

“It’s very difficult to disconnect from work, it’s a big mental battle because there is no physical boundary.”

Quoted participant: Peter

By far one of the biggest drawbacks that couples mentioned with concern was the effect of isolation on their well-being. Not leaving the house, forced by government restrictions, resulted in high mood swings, anxiety, limitation in meeting new people and the disappearance of physical activity in all participants.

“The isolation took away not only my sense of work, which is mostly about relationships, but more importantly a part of me. I have changed, now I have anxiety and before I was unflappable.”

Quoted participant: Andrew

Table 2. Comparison of the interview results

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5
Work Environment	Effective virtual communication and operations provide space for development	Lack of knowledge sharing, and communication leads to work withdrawal	Effective virtual operations and communication provide space for development	Crisis management, too high frequency of communication	Lack of knowledge sharing decreases employer attachment, and leads to possible change of jobs
Home Environment	Increased satisfaction with being together, overtime at work, Equal distribution of household chores	Appreciation of the partner, overtime at work, Unequal distribution of household chores	Partner appreciation, support, overtime at work, Equal distribution of household chores	Being too much together, not being able to adjust your work and living together, Equal distribution of household chores	Appreciation of the partner, support, overtime at work, Unequal distribution of household chores
Overall Wellbeing Environment	No commuting, greater work efficiency, mood swings, stress, anxiety, boredom, lack of exercise, no networking	Greater independence, no commuting, creativity, social withdrawal, and lack of exercise	Workplace independence, no commuting, mood swings, no networking	Creativity, flexible working hours, mood swings, stress, nervousness, boredom	No commuting, flexibility, depressive states, mental overload, lack of exercise, no networking
Work-life balance boundary	The boundary is created by changing clothes	The boundary is created by a separate work area	The boundary is created by putting the equipment in an invisible place and being in separate confusion	The boundary means preparation of meals at the same time	The lack of the ability to separate the boundary

Source: own work.

For the purpose of presenting the results in the table above, the following numbering has been used. Case 1 is an interview with Andrew, Case 2 is Julia and Casper, while Case 3 is Beatrice and Peter, Case 4 dedicated to Victoria and Oscar, and Case 5 Natalie and Alexander.

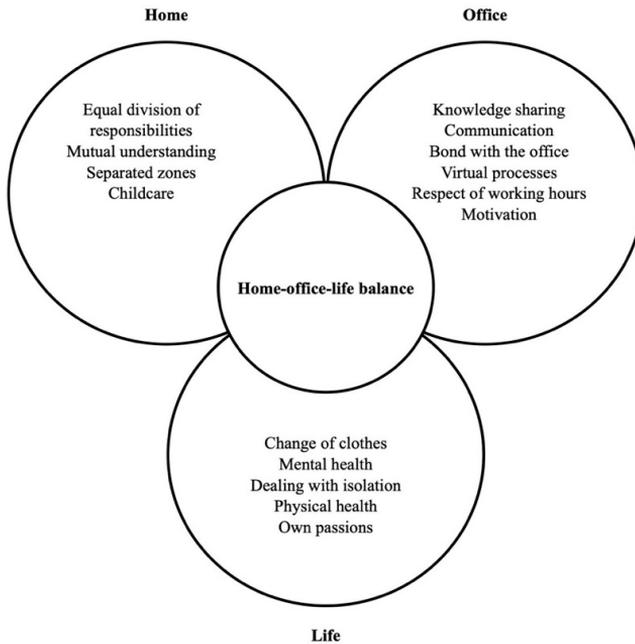
In conclusion, it is also worth to summarize how couples perceived each other's work. For some, it was a matter of convergence in tolerance for messiness. For others, in the case of those creating complex analyses, it was often

the case that couples could not see each other for several hours a day while staying in the same space. However, it is worth noting that all couples agreed to the fact that working together remotely helped them get through the difficult time associated with social isolation.

4. Discussion

Based on my literature review on remote work and the research I have prepared an empirically grounded model of a new approach to work-life balance.

Model of a new approach to work-life balance in the pandemic era



Source: own work based on the analysis results.

As previously outlined in the literature review, one of the biggest challenges teleworkers face to maintain work-life boundaries (Sullivan, 2012; AlHazemi and Ali, 2016; Lonska, 2021).

Previous studies and manuals have focused on measuring the effectiveness of remote work, the positives of its implementation and the reduction of costs related to operations (Nilles, 1998; Nickson and Siddons, 2004). However, it

is worth noting that these studies were conducted on the assumption that remote work may be an interesting experiment for an organisation or constitute only a part of employees working outside the office. This means that forced remote work was not assumed due to safe sanitation, especially the complete remote operation of companies. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, the studies conducted on remote work have not focused on the negative aspects of not maintaining a boundary between work and personal life. Studies compiled during the pandemic highlight the importance of staying disconnected from the world of virtual work (Lonska *et al.*, 2021).

Since maintaining a work-life boundary is a key aspect positive work environment, the model presented above is my **contribution to current remote management theory**. According to the model, in conditions of forced social isolation, while working, resting and being with the family in the same place, it is extremely easy to lose the balance between the three spheres of life. Suddenly, there is either work or only household chores and childcare, while losing mental and physical wellbeing. There have been **distinguished three separate aspects of life between** which knowledge workers must balance: **home, office, and own life**. To maintain home-office-life balance, it is assumed that individual factors from three spheres must be met. In the case of the home sphere, it is equal sharing of household chores, mutual understanding of the intensity of work, organization of separate spheres for living, and joint care for children or animals. The office sphere includes enabling the expansion of employee competences, good communication in the company, maintaining ties with the office through activities integrating people, creating efficient virtual processes, respecting the employee's working hours and working on motivating teams. The last sphere of life involves taking care of own wellbeing, that is changing clothes for work and rest, pursuing own passions, taking care of physical movement, caring for mental health and, above all, fighting against social isolation.

Based on my research with knowledge workers, the vast majority agreed that one of the biggest risks of remote work combined with social isolation is the loss of balance between combining work with family life and focusing on personal pleasure or development. Among the possible negative effects of losing this balance are depressive conditions, mood swings, and a deterioration in overall quality of life. Since the pandemic is not over, it is difficult to predict what steps the companies will take. It is possible that some of them

will return to their previous functioning, but the way and habit of working remotely will remain in the society to some extent. Therefore, maintaining a balance that has been specially developed for people working remotely will be one of the key topics to be further researched and addressed in the future.

In addition, the research I have done proves that another aspect so far reserved for born-global organizations, which as a rule have limited financial resources, are knowledge sharing strategies that affect the quality of employee satisfaction and competences (Prystupa-Rzadca, 2014). After the research, it was the effective sharing of knowledge that turned out to be crucial for knowledge workers working both in corporations and smaller local enterprises, who consciously make their career decisions based on this driving force. Additionally, the existing definitions of a remote worker indicated only certain professions that could work from home (Nickson and Sidons, 2004). The pandemic reality has proved that even professions based on accounting, finances or complex analyzes can be transferred to the privacy of homes, changing the current mindset of companies to introduce remote work.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this work was to identify the challenges faced by knowledge workers while working remotely in conditions of forced social isolation caused by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. So far, many academics have focused on remote work as an addition that could diversify the lives of employees, supporting their work-life balance. The sphere of remote management itself has not been an area on which the academic community has been massively focused by passing knowledge to students, and employers have treated this subject neglective. The reality in 2020 has shown that the existing textbooks are not practical, because the level of technological transformation is at a much higher level than several years ago.

The results of my research include that remote work can be effective in isolation. With the closure of knowledge workers in their homes, three separate spheres of life have arisen between which workers have to balance that are their separate challenges. The existing concept of work-life balance has been expanded to include another area of home, because the very aspect of life cannot be reduced to the home environment. In these exceptional conditions, I conclude that maintaining the balance between three spheres affects the

overall quality of our life. In conditions of isolation, it is impossible to escape between work and home. To achieve balance, it is necessary to understand both families, employers, colleagues, and willingness to act. As mentioned earlier, remote work itself can be effective but it is isolation that could bring mental and physical problems that in the initial stages are unnoticeable for a human. In addition, the main challenges of knowledge workers include allocating a separate workplace, equal division of responsibilities between household members, childcare, caring for their own mental health, and remote work itself, where problems may arise at the level of processes, communication, acquisition new knowledge and motivation.

As for practical recommendations for further research, I recommend that future researchers should focus on how knowledge workers define their boundaries by creating own balance between work, home, and private life. An interesting aspect is also the sharing of household chores and possible discrimination in terms of gender and work intensity among household members. In addition, I would focus on exploring the existing theories regarding the implementation of remote work, which should be introduced based on the culture, size, and level of digitalization of the organization. When examining, it should first be remembered that remote work will never be a rigorous scientific area theoretically due to the high flexibility in its performance and rapid technology advancement.

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