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Managing Conflict among Employees During Remote Work

Abstract: The article aims to recognise and investigate how remote work affects employees, the relations between them, and the methods of conflict resolution that are most often used by virtual teams. The conducted research made it possible to gather information and formulate conclusions. Summarizing the study results, one can state that employees appreciate remote work, however they struggle with problems resulting from the lack of a social aspect that is visible during digital work. Weaker communication efficiency and a deterioration of employee relations can lead to conflict situations. A solution that can deal with this problem may be the introduction of team-building activities by organizations which, given the survey results, are not provided by most companies. As a result, better relations can be established between employees, but also the effectiveness of communication should increase.

Keywords: conflict, managing conflicts, virtual teams, remote work.

1. Introduction

The article is devoted to the considerations of the impact of remote work on employees, digital conflicts and methods for their resolution. These are very timely topics as more and more companies are starting to offer the possibility of remote work to their employees.

The phenomenon of digital work has an impact on many aspects of our lives. It can be recognised in the economy, the psychological aspects of people and also in organizations' activities. Taking into account its wide impact, it is essential to continuously perform further evaluations of this topic. Conflict is a natural phenomenon that is an inevitable part of both professional and private life. Disputes and its consequences have drawn the attention of scholars from a wide range of fields throughout many decades. According to Hurt and Welbourne (2018), the effect of conflict have been assessed on many levels: individual, team and organizational. This can include turnover, satisfaction of team members, creativity of a team, behavioural reactions to conflict, and/or organizational commitment and company's performance. Organizational conflict is unavoidable, therefore it is essential to understand the implications of conflict for members participating in the dispute, and for the organization as a whole.

2. Literature review

In order to perform a comprehensive analysis of the topic, the narrative literature was used in the field of digital conflicts in organizations, and the techniques of their resolution. The author also studied well-known analyses regarding the process and theories applicable for this phenomenon, evaluated them and included in his own analysis. As remote work is a term that is constantly developing, some contemporary approaches were also taken into account. In the literature review, one could note many studies on conflicts and impact of digital work on the organization in general. However, there were not many publications regarding the impact of digital work on the employees and relations between them.

The research problem of the article concerned the severity of the digital conflicts and methods of their resolution. Bearing in mind the rapid development of remote work, this article attempts to predict the possible future courses of this phenomenon. The aim was to investigate how digital work affects employees, the relations between them, and what techniques are most often used in the conflict-resolution process.

In order to gather the comprehensive and objective data to help in answering the research problem, the quantitative approach was chosen. An online survey was performed as a method of the research, which enabled to collect data from many respondents without greater difficulty and cost. CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview), was used as a research technique.

3. Conflict and its types

First of all, let us look at the meaning of 'conflict'. The word itself comes from the Latin 'conflictus' which means 'clash' (see Harper, n.d). Conflict should therefore be understood as a human conflict of interest, attitudes or aspiration. Each dispute has parties that are involved in it and the object it relates to. In the organizations, parties are usually groups of people, and the object – views, attitudes, expectations and material goods.

In the literature there are many various definitions of conflict. One of the most recognizable definitions came from Stoner and Wankel (1986). They defined it as "a dispute between two or more members or groups resulting from the necessity to share limited resources or jobs to occupy a different position, goals, values or attitudes. During a dispute, members or departments of the organization endeavour to make their case or point of view prevail over the case or point of view of others".

Robbins (2005) defined conflict as "a process that begins where one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect something that the first party cares about". Robbins emphasized that conflict is not only about real hard facts but it also has an emotional nature.

Taking into account the range of conflicts, one can notice four main areas in which they occur. Relations between friends, siblings but also co-workers, supervisors and employees are included into the interpersonal area. The second crucial category can be observed in groups or teams, also including project team members, family and class members. Disputes in those specific areas have been studied in detail and offer many conflict situations to analyse (Folger, Poole, and Stutman, 2017). Another fundamental area for conflict is the organization. Most organizational conflicts can be resolved by recognising that one or more of the following four types of difficulties are present (Blank, 2020):

- Interpersonal conflict involves a conflict between two or more individuals and occurs usually due to the fact that people are different from each other in various aspects.
- Intrapersonal conflict occurs within an individual. In this type, psychological aspects are more visible.
- Intragroup conflict is a sort of conflict that occurs within a group of people. It results from misconceptions of team members.
- Intergroup conflicts occur when there is a misunderstanding among different teams in the organization.

As can be seen, there are many types of conflict. They differ from each other in terms of parties involved in the conflict, subject of a dispute and conditions in which they occur.

4. Development of digital work

In everyday life, one can easily observe that the world around us is constantly changing and rapidly developing. The pace of technological development is vast and very quick compared to a dozen or so years ago. All organizations must adapt to such circumstances as well and as quickly as possible in order not to lose their competitive advantage on the market. That may be why most of the companies introduced the possibility to work remotely, to facilitate the work of their employees in line with their preferences. This also enables employees to work from different places in the country, or even in the world. However, it should be borne in mind that the possibility of working remotely is still a fresh and dynamically developing concept that has a number of consequences on the daily operations of organizations. It can also cause various conflicts, which may turn out to be even more dangerous for companies than conflicts arising during the standard working mode; that is why it is crucial to constantly monitor the remote work phenomenon. This will allow to explore the essence of this working mode, its effects, and conditions, and as a result enable organizations to maximise the benefits from implementing this system of work.

As already stated, the development of remote work was a response to changes in the labour market, technological development, and also the general pace of

modern life. Surprisingly, teleworking is not a breakthrough discovery of our times, as this phenomenon was known much earlier. The first appearance of remote work was in America in the 1960s, where the pace of life become increasingly fast as the United States was in a boom phase. This resulted in a large number of office buildings and companies operating on a large scale. Remote work was a response and solution for this rapid development, as Americans could avoid wasting many hours commuting to work thanks to the telework phenomenon. In 1972, J. Nilles began to explore the possibilities of remote work, and was the first to create the basic concept of teleworking known to this day. According to Nilles, teleworking is "a form of work organization consisting in providing work outside the employer's organizational unit by means of electronic communication" (Nilles, 1994). There is also another well-known definition of telework by P. Lyon Mokhtarian (1991) from the Georgia Institute of Technology, where telecommuting is used interchangeably with remote work, and is defined as "working at home or at an alternate location and communicating with the usual place of work using electronic or other means, instead of physically travelling to a more distant work site".

Those scientists created a general concept of telework, but also began to define the principles of operation in this mode of work. Many countries are still developing when it comes to remote work. Initially, entrepreneurs did not have sufficient knowledge of this topic, which was why they were not willing to hire remote workers. Nowadays, year by year the number of professions that can be performed remotely is constantly increasing, due to the wider awareness, knowledge and also individual preferences of people who appreciate the possibility of working remotely.

5. Impact of remote work and conflict

The phenomenon of remote work is a topic comprehensively researched, and in spite of its dynamic rapid technological progress, one can indicate its most important advantages and disadvantages. Moreover, teleworking is not a new type of job or profession, but rather a new form of work organization based on the constant execution of tasks away from the place where the result is expected. It is also crucial to look at the disadvantages and advantages of remote work from the perspective of employer as well as employee.

Among the most important advantages from the employer's perspective, one can distinguish:
- The possibility of hiring employees from different regions, where labour costs are lower. Thanks to remote work, organizations can hire people from anywhere the world. This is also connected with the process of hiring specialists in specific fields. This is much easier as they do not have to relocate, and in the long term it improves the efficiency and results of companies.
- Increasing productivity by reducing the number of people who are not working because of sickness, and those who are late for work. Remote work enables

workers to perform their duties from home even if they do not feel well. They do not have to worry about commuting to work.

- Significant reduction of company operating costs, by eliminating or limiting the cost of rent, office equipment and maintenance. The cost connected with electricity and office facilities are also smaller thanks to remote work mode (Felstead and Henseke, 2017).

Despite the advantages of remote work from the employer's perspective, it is also crucial to reconsider some disadvantages that organizations are facing:

- Limitation of direct control over employees and a reduction of employee identification with the company. Employers do not have any possibility to supervise the work of their workers as well and as closely as they could during the standard work mode (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). The employees' identification with the organization is reduced as they are not so often in the office, and the only connection that they have with the company is just performing their duties remotely.
- Increased employee attrition. While working remotely, people can switch their jobs more easily as they can work for many more companies operating remotely. As employees are not required to relocate, they can lok for a job not only in the city they are living in, but also in different areas of the country. Such a situation makes it harder to keep employees in one place for a longer period of time.
- The possibility of technological failure. Remote work requires from the company and its employees a broader involvement of the technological aspects which can be the cause for many failures.

Yet, it is also crucial to consider employees' perspectives as they are the most important during remote work. The most important advantages include:

- Time saving. It is possible to save a lot of time as employees do not have to commute to work. Long commutes can be extremely frustrating especially in big cities during peak hours.
- Flexible working time. This is the aspect that is extremely desired by employees, as they can easily adjust their working duties to their private issues and preferences. This does not only improve the efficiency of the work but also the wellbeing of employees. Naturally, as with any other issue, this flexibility should be kept in moderation in order not to be abused.
- According to Bailey and Kurland (2002), job satisfaction and productivity increased thanks to the possibility of digital work, as staff can achieve a work--life balance and the adequate functioning of work and home.
- No office distractions during remote work. In the stationary mode of work there is always someone who wants to discuss the latest episode of their favorite series, or just take a break from work. Such behaviour can be frustrating as sometimes one just wants to get the job done as fast as possible, but unfortunately because of those distractions it is not possible to focus on tasks. While working remotely, employees can fully concentrate on the implementation

and execution of tasks (Smith et al., 2018). Note that this issue applies only to the situations when employees are home alone. Nowadays, more employees work remotely which means that at home there are usually more people than before. In such cases, during remote work there might be much more distractions than in the traditional mode.

However, remote work also has its disadvantages, but fortunately employees together with their employers can minimise their impact, and thus fully benefit from working remotely thanks to the usage of appropriate tools and techniques. The most recognisable drawbacks of telework from employees' perspectives include:

- Lack of regular face to face contact with team members. This reduces their professional development, as employees are not able to consult about their work or concerns with others. Working in the office enables employees to build relations with their colleagues, which can significantly expand their circle of friends; remote work limits these possibilities (Torten et al., 2016). In addition, it is difficult to create a collaborative culture in a company that uses telework. In a well-coordinated team, what matters is the common good and the development of the company. During remote work, there are more employees who only care about their own benefits, as they do not feel a common purpose with other team members and company.

- The disturbed balance between work and private life. According to the "Working from home" survey conducted by CBRE (2020), 46% feel that their work-life balance is negatively influenced by remote work. This can cause many problems e.g. worse organization of work as employees cannot see a clear border between work and their private lives.

- Problem with stable motivation to work. After a longer time spent working remotely, employees can start to feel bored with the monotony of their work as they cannot meet with others and have relaxed conversations with others. It is normal that in stationary working mode there are more and various activities which somehow make the day more interesting than only sitting at home in front of the computer for the whole day.

On balance, remote work has many advantages as well as drawbacks. Although there are known disadvantages of remote working, they are outweighed by the advantages when job satisfaction is concerned (Smith, Patmos, and Pitts 2018). Considering all the advantages one can be sure that the phenomenon of telework is not something to be be afraid of. Companies should pay a lot of attention to monitoring the situation and the wellbeing of their staff during remote work, as being left without any control can have a negative impact and cause various conflicts within the company.

Conflicts can play an important role in the organization as they affect its level of effectiveness. They can have a destructive or a constructive effect on the organization and on people working there. The constructive impact includes motivational,

innovative and identifying effects as conflict in the organization forces people or groups involved to look critically both at themselves and at the functioning of the organization. Conflicts signal irregularities or matters that the organization has to deal with, and they also stimulate employees, preventing them from apathy and dullness of their routine. They can also create the need for change or be a source of new interesting ideas and social progress, as thanks to conflict, people become aware of their own attitudes and values, and are also able to notice the differences in attitudes of other people and accept them. This allows employees to rationally manage their behaviour and procedures, which can result in increase of employee involvement in organizational matters, and finally an increased effectiveness of the organization. While appreciating the constructive effect of conflict, it is important not to forget about the negative aspects which must not be underestimated. Conflicts which are left unresolved for a longer period can lead to an escalation, and transform into more serious disputes which will have a destructive effect on the organization. As emphasized by Dana (1993, p. 33), "uncontrolled conflicts are one of the most important sources of increase in organizational costs. […] The decline in productivity and quality of work is due to tensions between employees, not a lack of qualifications or motivation to work". For the organization, the level of a conflict's escalation plays a crucial role, as when it is very low, the organization is at risk of stagnation, while if it is high, the danger of the organization collapsing may arise. According to Wankel and Stoner (1986), the level of the conflict in the organization may be either too high or too low. Each of these extremes makes it harder to maintain the effectiveness of the organization at a good level. Optimal-level conflict is one that will prevent stagnation but not strong enough to hinder coordination of actions taken. In this dimension, conflict will stimulate creativity, help to relieve tensions and initiate change. Different organizations have various levels of conflict tolerance. For some companies a small number of conflicts, even with a minor intensity can be a threat, while for others such disputes can be extremely easy to manage – it strongly depends on the employees of the organization. Everyone is different, and for some people even the slightest conflicts can be felt very deeply, which is reflected in their wellbeing and work efficiency. Such situations can also lead to the escalation of the conflict, and finally to the worsening efficiency of the organization. To sum up, it is extremely important to monitor the situation between the people in the organization, as lack of recognition of the conflict can be very dangerous for the company and its workers. The tools and methods of conflict resolution should be adjusted to the current level of the conflict as the dispute can be used in a constructive way, but it can also have a destructive effect. It is also worth mentioning that the effectiveness of working in a team, as well as in the organization, strongly depends on the technique of dispute resolution. That is why the monitoring and broad knowledge about the types of conflict and methods of its resolution is crucial for managers in the organization.

6. Managing conflict during remote work

As conflict is an inevitable part of digital work, companies must remember to approach it appropriately. Managers should remember that without the proper monitoring of the situation in their team, conflict can be extremely destructive and that is why it is crucial to closely watch and analyse the work and relations among the employees. When building and managing a remote team, employees should start with establishing the rules that will be obeyed within the team. At this stage it is necessary to take into account the possibility of conflict, hence the manager's role should be to educate employees about the risks and differences between traditional and dispersed teams. Being properly understood is another challenge, because conflict does not have to result from negative will, as most often a misread intention is a reason, therefore when communicating, employees should make sure their messages are simple and clear for everyone. During remote work, finding out that conflict has arisen among the employees is a real challenge, that is why managers should ensure that their relations with employees are based on trust and should always be able to find time for a one-to-one conversation with them. Whenever a conflict has arisen, one should approach every party involved individually, as different persons can have various feelings about specific situations.

There are some specific actions and activities that can be implemented in order to prevent the conflict in the organization or make it weaker, as eliminating all conflicts is impossible due to their nature. It is crucial to analyse those actions from the perspective of both the employer and employee, as both can have various views on the conflict. The most important aspects that can help during remote work from the manager's perspective are:

- Mutual trust, which can be reached by creating an environment in which managers are open and approachable for their workers. According to Choi and Cho (2019) trust is one of the most important factors that affects the effectiveness of remote work due to the lack of face-to-face interactions.
- Setting clear expectations may reduce the uncertainty and inconveniences among the employees, which sometimes are the starting point for disputes.
- Managers can also help their teams align and find common ground. This is crucial for conflict resolution as differences between employees' values, interests and priorities are the reasons for many disputes and arguments. By finding a shared goal, the negative impact of a conflict may be weakened or prevented (Tucker and Panteli, 2003).

There are also activities that can be performed by the employees in order to weaken the conflict or prevent it, the most crucial being:

- Double-checking all outgoing from employees is also a good idea, as most of the conflicts are usually caused by miscommunication.
- Burnout concerns is something that employees may experience. Openness and honesty in expressing themselves in such situations with bosses or colleagues,

may result in lowering the tension which could be the source of conflict in the future (Bell and Bryman, 2006).

- Asking questions which enable employees to foster an environment in which everyone is equal and on the same level.

Summing up, clear communication, online team meetings, common ground and mutual trust have a huge impact on conflict resolution among remote teams. They not only enable companies to notice the conflict from the very beginning, but also to discover the root causes of the disputes and address the suitable solution to them at the right moment.

7. Research methodology

In order to gather comprehensive, critical and objective data for the analysis, the narrative literature review supported with the scoping review was used, to allow to fast map the research area. The next type of the review (as the support one) that was used was a snowball literature review, thanks to which the author was able to find suitable references and citations.

The research gap that was identified during the literature review was the severity of the conflict during remote work and managing the conflicts among the employees during such a working mode. Based on this a research question was formulated: how does working from home influence the conflict situations in organizations? Consequently, the research aim was to investigate how remote work affects employees, relations between them, and what conflict resolution methods are most often applied.

A quantitative approach was chosen in order to gather the results through an online survey. The data for this study was derived from 22 survey questions answered by 59 voluntary participants. The population examined in this study involved students enrolled at a public university and colleagues employed in the same company. Purposive sampling (non-random) and convenience methods were used in order to select respondents out of the targeted population. The participants were students approaching their Bachelor's degree completion. The students were employed in various positions and most of them had the possibility to work remotely. Regarding the work colleagues, they were working in a hybrid mode, and with experience gained when working remotely for different companies.

Thanks to this quantitative approach, a statistical analysis could be performed, providing concrete, factual and straightforward numerical data which enable the suitable visual graphics incorporating the results of the research. This approach also eliminated the need for direct observation and allowed for the responses to be kept anonymous.

8. Findings

Taking into account the results of the research, one can observe that conflicts are not only an inevitable part of the standard work mode, but they also accompany remote work – 90% of the survey participants who had the possibility to work remotely, indicated that they have experienced remote disputes. Based on the survey results, it can be stated that the communication during remote work is less efficient than during the traditional working mode, which can lead to misunderstandings and lack of knowledge. These are the most common reasons of conflict in digital teams – 31% of the survey participants indicated them as the main reason for conflicts in virtual teams. Another crucial aspect was that the vast majority of the respondents (73%) stated that digital work negatively influenced their wellbeing and work-life balance. For the next question, 88% claimed that working remotely makes it difficult to build new relations in a team and maintain them. These factors merely show that most of the employees are heavily influenced by remote work and miss the social aspect present during stationary working mode. What is also interesting is fact that 78% of the respondents indicated that their companies are not providing them with any kind of team-building activities, which also does not aid efficient communication and establishing relations between employees.

Regarding the attitude of employees during the conflict situation, two approaches were most often chosen: striving to clarify the situation and attempting to objectively assess the situation, and helping to solve it by managers or a person not related to the conflict – respectively 31% and 37%. Both ways of solving the conflict require good communication with the others in order to gain relevant knowledge about the specific disputes, that is why it is especially hard for the employees during remote work. Regarding the methods of conflict resolution that are most common for the companies of survey participants, cooperation and compromise are most often employed.

9. Research discussion

Previous research also showed that virtual teams are struggling with conflict more often than stationary teams due to less efficient communication (Ortiz de Guinea, Webster, and Staples, 2012). This is the factor heavily influenced by remote work, as team members do not have a direct possibility to talk with the others and the efficiency of such communication is much lower, which is also connected with the social aspect that is missing during digital work. Based on other studies, it can be also seen that communication through electronic media reduces the social cues that support building relations (Lin, Standing, and Liu, 2008). Although the results obtained by many researchers, including the author, show that there are more

conflicts during remote work, there are some which demonstrated a negative relation (Wakefield, Leidner, and Garrison, 2008). It is worth adding that even though some researches do not suggest that remote work has a negative influence, they state that in the case of digital work there is a clear potential dynamic with workload which can lead to mental health problems (Ng and Feldman, 2008; Virtanen et al., 2011). Taking into account all the studies, one can state that there are many advantages of remote work, as well as disadvantages. Nevertheless, it is crucial for companies to remember about aspects that are heavily influenced by virtual work in order to sustain or gain the competitive advantage on the market, and satisfy the needs of their employees.

10. Conclusions

The phenomenon of remote work influences many aspects of our lives. The effect of it can be noticed practically anywhere. Taking into account such a wide and strong impact, it is crucial to consider a further evaluation, as to whether it affected the whole industry positively or negatively, and how it is perceived by the relevant stakeholders. The results obtained during this research confirmed that digital work did have an enormous impact on the organizations and the people working for them. The study also showed that disputes are not only an inevitable part of the stationary working mode, but are also present during digital work. Based on the survey results, the root causes of digital conflicts are: worse communication, lack of face-to-face meetings, and lack of team-building activities. These are also the factors that are fully covered by the social aspect during the stationary working mode. As mentioned before, the vast majority of the respondents claimed that their companies are not providing them with any kind of team-building opportunities. This does not help employees in efficient communication and establishing relations between them, which may lead to conflict situations. Most of the survey participants also indicated that remote work disturbs their work-life balance, negatively influences their wellbeing and building new relationships. These are aspects that organizations should address with much more attention, while providing the possibility to work remotely. The ways of managing conflicts that employees most often use require good communication between co-workers in order to successfully benefit from those techniques.

Summing up, it can be stated that the research results contribute to the development of managing conflicts in organizations from the perspective of remote work. Remote work is an opportunity which is appreciated by employees, as based on the research results, there are many benefits arising from this mode of work. It would be beneficial to repeat the study, however using a bigger sample which would enable to gather more information about the unresolved issues. Companies

should also think about factors that are present during the stationary working mode, and not necessarily during digital work. Team-building activities will not only create stronger relations between employees, but will also increase the efficiency of communication. Thus, most of the issues connected with remote work that employees are facing will be addressed, and digital work will become even more attractive for organizations.

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Zarządzanie konfliktami pomiędzy pracownikami w warunkach pracy zdalnej

Streszczenie: Artykuł ma na celu rozpoznanie i zbadanie, w jaki sposób praca zdalna wpływa na pracowników i relacje między nimi, oraz wskazanie metod rozwiązywania konfliktów, które są najczęściej stosowane przez zespoły wirtualne. Przeprowadzone badania pozwoliły na zebranie informacji i sformułowanie wniosków. Podsumowując ich wyniki, można stwierdzić, że pracownicy doceniają pracę zdalną, borykają się jednak ze związanymi z nią problemami wynikającymi z braku aspektu społecznego, który jest oczywisty dla standardowego trybu pracy. Osłabienie efektywności komunikacji i pogorszenie relacji pracowniczych prowadzi do sytuacji konfliktowych. Rozwiązaniem tego problemu może być wprowadzenie przez organizacje działań związanych z budowaniem zespołu, czego jednak – co wynika z badań – większość firm nie robi. Dzięki temu mogłyby zostać nawiązane silniejsze relacje między pracownikami, jak również wzrosłaby efektywność komunikacji.

Słowa kluczowe: konflikty, zarządzanie konfliktami, zespoły wirtualne, praca zdalna.