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*The Workplace and Work-Life Balance during
the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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Abstract

Theoretical background: The article presents the results of research on the relationship between the workplace and work-life balance experienced by employees. In the article, the workplace is understood as a physical space where employees are located. The first part of the article presents the results of the analysis of the literature on the subject related to the key issues. The subsequent part focuses on presenting the opinions collected by the authors during the empirical research conducted with the use of a questionnaire among professionally active people. The subject matter of the research was the workplace of the respondents in the context of work-life balance. The experiences of the respondents before and during the COVID-19 pandemic were analysed statistically.

Purpose of the article: The aim of the article was to identify the relationship between work and private life experienced by employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research methods: The theoretical part of the article was created as a result of the analysis of the literature on the subject which was conducted in the period between December 2020 and April 2021. The empirical part of the article presents the results of a survey conducted with the use of a questionnaire, in which the people from a number of enterprises took part as respondents.

Main findings: It was found that there is a relationship between the workplace and work-life balance experienced by employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be emphasized that under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to achieve work-life balance has become much more difficult.

Introduction

Adults perform many roles related to their membership and sense of belonging to a variety of groups, which, *inter alia*, include the roles as employees and those related to private areas of their lives, especially the fact of belonging to the family. Due to limited resources, including time given to humans, it is not always possible to achieve balance between these roles. During the pandemic, significant changes with regard to the manner of performing those roles were observed, the direct cause of which was the change of the place where employees were located. An example of a role transformed in this way is the role of an employee. Therefore, the aim of the article was to identify the relationship between work and private life experienced by employees during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the term “workplace” can be understood in two ways, as the employment relationship and the space of work performance, it should be clearly indicated that the latter meaning has been adopted in this article. The workplace understood in this way was considered, *inter alia*, in the context of remote work. The definition of “remote work” and related terms varies in different countries, due to the legal provisions binding in particular countries. Due to the fact that the empirical research was conducted in Poland, the definitions resulting from the Polish legislation have been adopted herein.

The theoretical part of the article was created as a result of the analysis of the literature on the subject which was conducted in the period between December 2020 and April 2021. The Polish- and English-language publications, monographs, scientific articles, as well as legal acts were applied.

The workplace and its location during the pandemic – literature review

The technical and technological progress which has been taking place in recent decades leads to significant transformations in terms of working conditions. As a result of the pandemic, these transformations have become more dynamic, which is reflected in a significant percentage of people working in places considered atypical for working. At the same time, those changes exposed the inadequacy of the previously used definitions of concepts and solutions for the pandemic reality. “Workplace”, one of the key terms in this paper, is an example of this inadequacy, especially when this term refers to the space in which work is performed (understanding the workplace as an employment relationship cannot be attributed to inadequacy).

In terms of space, the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the workplace in two ways: Convention No. 155 (Art. 3) states that “workplace covers all places where workers need to be or to go by reason of their work and which are under the direct or indirect control of the employer” (ILO, 1981). In *Guidelines on Occupational Safety and Health Management Systems*, the ILO stated that the workplace (worksite) is a “physical area where workers need to be or to go due to their work which is under the control of an employer” (ILO, 2009). As the definitions refer to employees, the workplace has been reserved only for people working as part of an employment relationship, moreover, primarily in a stationary manner, within the space controlled by their employer, and, therefore, located on the premises of the workplace. These characteristics are questionable, as they exclude certain categories of space where employees are found or located while performing their professional duties. Moreover, the workplace in a physical and communication aspect, may be of a permanent (stationary) or mobile (non-permanent) nature (Książek, 2013, p. 48).

Problems regarding defining the workplace result, *inter alia*, from the fact that more and more often enterprises limit their physical areas by encouraging employees to work from home (this trend has significantly increased due to the pandemic), or by refusing to assign some specific workplace to employees (sometimes employees have the option to choose, e.g. a company branch where they want to work during the days). The space outside the workplace often becomes a place where regular (permanent or systematic) work is conducted, which is referred to as “telework”.

The decision to introduce the concept of telework is taken in a complex environment and is determined by technological conditions resulting from the type of work performed, organizational conditions, but also institutional conditions (Illegems, Verbeke, & S’Jegers, 2001, pp. 277–278). Due to the latter, and in particular due to legal provisions regulating the nature and methods of implementing telework, it differs in particular countries. And even though the term “telework” was introduced by Nilles in Poland as a direct translation in the sense of “any kind of substitution of work-related travel with information technology (e.g. telecommunication and computers); transferring work to employees instead of employees to work” (Nilles, 2003, p. 21), it is defined otherwise, which results from the fact that the term “tele-

work” was introduced into the binding Polish Labour Code (Art. 675), which explains its meaning as work performed “on a regular basis outside the workplace, using electronic means of communication within the meaning of the provisions on performing services by means of electronic communication” (The Act...). The teleworker, depending on the type of telework, may be in various places such as, for example, the place of residence (home teleworking), in telelocations – co-working spaces (teleworking performed in remote offices), while travelling, at the client’s (mobile, nomadic teleworking) (Spytek-Bandurska, 2015, pp. 29–31; Strońska, 2012, p. 72). As Spytek-Bandurska (2015, p. 28) noticed, telework as a new form of employment revolutionizes work organization in three aspects, one of which is space, as it relativizes the physical workplace.

With regard to telework, employers have little or no control over the place where employees stay while working, especially when it is a private space of their residence. The Labour Code (Art. 67¹⁴) provides that employers are entitled to inspect the teleworker at the workplace, but with the employees’ prior consent, and the first inspection is conducted at the employee’s request, prior to the work commencement. However, despite no employers’ control, is the space in which employees stay while performing work not their workplace?

Employers have greater control over the workplace of teleworkers when their permanent workplace is a telelocation, i.e. a third place located neither in the employer’s office nor at the employee’s home, but in a shared space, in line with the concept of co-working (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2021, p. 107).

When defining the term “coworking”, the authors emphasize the specificity of the manner of working or organizing the work space (*ibid.*, p. 108). In the latter case, it may mean various forms of contemporary open workspaces that provide shared offices and infrastructure for people from different professional backgrounds, employees of various enterprises, but also freelancers and entrepreneurs (Bouncken, Aslam, & Qiu, 2021, p. 121). Usually, a shared space is equipped with high-quality work tools, but also with additional amenities improving work comfort (*ibid.*, p. 123). One of the reasons for companies to use coworking space may be the desire to shorten the work-home journey for their employees.

Also in the case of remote work, a physical area in which employees stay is not controlled by their employers, although with no doubt, it is their workplace. Although in the literature on the subject, the relationship between remote work and telework is perceived differently (these forms of work are considered equivalent), following the opinion of specialists in the field of labour law (Krzyszowska-Dąbrowska, 2020, p. 10), this study has adopted that the term “remote work” is meaningfully broader than “telework”, including telework (regulated most comprehensively), occasional remote work (the so-called home office, homeworking, working from home), and nowadays also remote work under conditions of counteracting COVID-19.

Occasional remote work, which is the result of the agreement between employers and employees (according to which employees may receive a number of days when

they work outside the employer's office), is not regulated by Polish law (*ibid.*), as remote work in Poland, as in other countries (Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2020, p. 2) was rarely used before the pandemic – it was considered a luxury good reserved for office workers and relatively wealthy people, however, the number of people performing work in this way systematically increased (*ibid.*). Meanwhile, as a result of the pandemic, remote work became in many organizations a necessity both in Poland and all over the world. Therefore, in Poland, remote work, other than telework, was introduced to the legal system in March 2020 thanks to the Act of March 2, 2020 on special solutions related to preventing, counteracting and combating COVID-19, other infectious diseases and crisis situations caused by them. In Art. 3 of this Act, it was stated that “employers may order employees to perform, for a specified period of time, work specified in the employment contract, outside the place of its permanent performance (remote work)”. Contrary to telework, remote work resulting from coronavirus regulations can be implemented without employees' consent, does not have to use electronic means of communication, and its effects can be delivered to employers in person or by mail (Krzyszkowska-Dąbrowska, 2020, p. 16, 17).

Although the most frequently indicated Act constitutes the ground for changing the workplace from stationary in the employer's office to stationary one selected by employees (e.g. a private space which is the place of residence), it also allows for a change, for example, from a non-stationary place to a stationary place in the employer's office (e.g. a serviceman of household appliances so far repairing equipment at customers' location, who during the pandemic is working in the employer's office, where customers deliver broken equipment). Taking account of the presented limitations, the workplace will be understood in the further research as a physical space and area in which employees stay while working.

The essence and instruments of work-life balance – literature review

The literature on the subject indicates that the concept of work-life balance (WLB) emerged at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, simultaneously in the United States and Great Britain. The development of this concept was associated with the intensification of workaholism and occupational burnout (Tomaszewska-Lipiec, 2018, p. 65).

Work-life balance is defined as an efficient action and satisfaction in both areas (professional and private), as a result of minimizing conflicts existing in each of these areas, as well as those related to crossing the borders of the professional and private area (Clark, 2000, p. 747). This concept is also understood as the degree to which a person is evenly involved in his/her role at work and in the family, and the degree of his/her satisfaction with these roles. Understood in this way, it includes three elements: a time balance, a commitment balance, and a satisfaction balance resulting from fulfilling all of these roles (Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003, p. 510).

The essence of work-life balance is, therefore, the state in which an individual deals with the potential conflict between the various requirements for his/her time and energy in such a way that his/her sense of well-being and fulfilment is satisfied (Clutterbuck, 2005, p. 26).

Noteworthy is the fact that work-life balance is a multidimensional concept which takes place when work does not take over the non-work area, and private life is not conducted at the cost of work. It is, therefore, a skilful combination of a professional activity with other aspects of life, including family, home, health, social activities, hobbies. As Borkowska (2011, pp. 18–20) points out, identifying work-life balance only with a proportional division of the time spent on professional and private life is not entirely correct. Above all, one should consider the actual time of work performed for the employer or on one's own account, regardless of the place and time work is provided, the time spent on commuting and returning, the time related to family obligations, time for professional and personal development, and also free time. Moreover, the negative effects of disturbing the work-life balance, which are also caused by other factors, not only by working time, should be taken into account (*ibid.*).

Instruments supporting work-life balance can be classified into four basic groups including (Głogosz, 2008, p. 40): 1) flexible forms of work, 2) leaves and benefits, 3) support in taking care of dependent family members of the employee, 4) bonuses from the employer. Among the key instruments used to maintain the work-life balance, one can indicate, *inter alia* (Chudy-Laskowska, 2019, p. 53; Hildt-Ciupińska & Pawłowska-Cyprysiak, 2019, pp. 4–8; Sęczkowska, 2019, p. 11):

- solutions which make it possible for employees to take care of dependent persons, i.e. children, the elderly and disabled family members,
- granting longer maternity or parental leaves in response to the employee's request,
- assisting employers in organizing and financing institutional care for employees' children, e.g. nurseries, kindergartens, children's clubs, day carers, nannies,
- limitations and restrictions regarding overtime,
- educational programs covering such areas as health, law and culture,
- flexible forms of employment and organization of working time, e.g. individual working time schedule, variable hours of starting and finishing work, equivalent working time, task-based working system, shortened working week, weekend work, part-time work, job sharing, job rotation, telework, on-call work, home-based work, employee leasing (temporary work),
- providing support from non-professional areas in the form of access to cultural and recreational events, pro-health programs, additional medical care,
- planning individual career paths which take account of combining professional work with family responsibilities.

Moreover, in the subject literature, there is highlighted that work-life integration is related to work-life balance (Abele & Volmer, 2011, pp. 184–185; Grady & Mc-

Carthy, 2008, p. 601; Wepfer, Allen, Brauchli, Jenny, & Bauer, 2018, pp. 730–732). The concept of work-life integration relates the synergies between the work and life sphere. Work-life integration is defined as merging the different work and life domains without affecting the efficiency to enable individual to achieve the obligations of both domains. It is worth emphasising that work-life integration looks fully diverse from the work-life balance where both domains are treated in a different way without overlapping each other (Munjal, 2017, pp. 3–4).

Research methods and sample

The aim of the research was to determine the relationship between the workplace (understood as a space in which employees stay at work) and work-life balance experienced by employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research questions that this study seeks to answer are as follows:

- How has the employers' approach to the possibility of remote work by employees changed as a result of the pandemic?
- Where do employees most often work during the pandemic?
- What are the benefits and nuisances of work location during the pandemic?
- Is it possible to achieve work-life balance during the pandemic?
- Does the workplace contribute to work-life balance during the pandemic?
- What instruments are most often used to maintain work-life balance during the pandemic?

The research results were based on the opinions of 120 respondents of the online survey conducted in March and April 2021. The questionnaire contained 13 main and 7 reference questions. All questions were close-ended. In 11 questions, it was possible to add your own answer to the list of answers. The questionnaire was prepared in an electronic version with the use of Google Forms. The actual survey was preceded by a trial survey, which was aimed at checking the correctness of the survey questionnaire structure.

The questionnaires were sent to the respondents with a request to complete them online, by means of personal (e-mail) and impersonal communication (groups on social networks), providing the anonymity of the survey respondents. The sample selection was based on the method of accessibility of the respondents, who were professionally active people. A detailed description of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the surveyed respondents

Answer	Number of answers	Percentage of answers (%)
Gender		
Female	85	71
Male	35	29
In total	120	100
Age		
Up to 25 years old	13	11
25–34	37	31
35–44	42	35
45–54	25	21
55 and over	3	2
In total	120	100
Employment form		
Employment contract for an indefinite period	93	78
Employment contract for a definite period	14	12
Civil-law contract (contract of mandate, of specific work)	8	7
Management contract	3	2
Other (employment contract for a trial period, contract for the duration of a specific task/work)	2	1
In total	120	100
Work experience with the current employer		
Up to 6 months	10	8
6 months – 3 years	29	24
3–10 years	33	28
Over 10 years	48	40
In total	120	100
Education		
Higher	109	92
Secondary	8	7
Basic vocational	3	2
In total	120	100
Size of the organization		
Up to 10 employees	6	5
10–49 employees	19	16
50–249 employees	17	14
More than 250 employees	78	64
In total	120	100

Source: Authors' own study on the basis of the research results.

Results

Less than half of the respondents, i.e. 41%, indicated that before March 2020, employers had created the opportunity to work remotely, while 68% of this group of respondents occasionally worked remotely, and only one third (32%) has telework pursuant to the provisions included in the employment contract. 75% of all respondents confirmed that as a result of the regulations on counteracting the pandemic,

the places where employees work have changed in the organization employing them. In the case of 78% of this group of respondents, this change mainly involved work from home. 6% of this group of respondents confirmed that they can work remotely from a shared (coworking) space. Another 6% of the respondents who previously had mobile work or worked with clients, can now do it in the employer's office, and another 6% of this group of respondents can perform their work in a private space, e.g. at home.

More than half of the respondents (54%) stated that during the pandemic, the place where they most often stay is a private space which is their own place of residence. Only 16% of the respondents most often work in the employer's office during the pandemic. In turn, only one respondent indicated that he/she most often used someone else's place of residence, however, almost 16% of the respondents work occasionally in someone else's place of residence. Interestingly, none of the respondents indicated coworking as the place where they stay the most often while performing their professional duties.

The five most frequently indicated benefits of working in a private space during the COVID-19 pandemic include: the possibility to juggle various activities and life responsibilities more easily, time and cost savings, sense of security, a better work quality. On the other hand, the benefits of working in the employer's office most often indicated by the respondents include: a well-prepared and equipped workplace, good contacts with colleagues, conditions which favour and enable focusing on work, the possibility to juggle various activities and life responsibilities, and cost savings.

On the other hand, among the five most common nuisances related to work in the place of residence during the COVID-19 pandemic, the respondents included: a difficulty to focus on work, problems with equipment (tools, the Internet), a difficulty to juggle various activities and life responsibilities, difficult communication with the supervisor, subordinates and co-workers, and unsatisfactory work efficiency. While working in the employer's office, the most frequently indicated nuisances include such factors as: a fear of infection, difficult communication with the supervisor, subordinates and colleagues, a difficulty to juggle various activities and life responsibilities, a difficulty to focus on work and costs (commuting, flat maintenance, etc.).

The fact that 68% of the respondents are able to achieve the work-life balance should be assessed positively. About one third of the respondents (27%) are not able to juggle activities in various areas of their lives in a satisfactory manner. On the other hand, in the case of 5% of the respondents, achieving balance is rather difficult and not always possible, and this is mainly due to the nature of their work. In addition, 67% of the respondents believe that during the pandemic, the ability to achieve work-life balance has become more difficult. In turn, about a third of them (30%) said that the process was much easier than in the period before the COVID-19 pandemic, and 3% of the respondents did not have their own opinion in terms of this aspect.

When replying to the question whether the place where they work during the pandemic affects their work-life balance, 43% of the respondents held the opinion

that it makes it easier to achieve it. On the other hand, 27% of the respondents had the opposite opinion, indicating the option “yes, it makes it difficult to achieve the work-life balance”. On the other hand, 28% of the respondents did not notice any relationship between the workplace and work-life balance. 2% of the respondents stated that this dependence was rather due to the number of duties, and the workplace itself is of no importance in this case, and the key in this matter is the intensity of actions taken and the need to modify the current ways of working and turn entirely to work with the use of means of distance communication. An in-depth analysis of the respondents’ answers indicates that 31.4% of them believe that private space facilitates achieving the work-life balance, and 11.6% of the respondents indicate that the employer’s office is best in terms of achieving this goal. In turn, 18% of the respondents negatively assessed one’s private space as the workplace taking account of the possibility to achieve work-life balance. 9% of the respondents indicated that working in the employer’s office negatively impacts their work-life balance (Table 2).

Table 2. Assessment of the impact of the workplace on work-life balance

The most frequently selected workplace during the COVID-19 pandemic	Assessment of the impact of the workplace on work-life balance	Percentage of the answers given (%)
The employer’s office	Yes, it makes it easier to achieve work-life balance	11.6
	Yes, it makes it difficult to achieve work-life balance	9
	No impact	16
A private space: own place of residence	Yes, it makes it easier to achieve work-life balance	31.4
	Yes, it makes it difficult to achieve work-life balance	18
	No impact	12
Other (mobile work, at the client’s location, etc., in someone else’s place of residence)	Yes, it makes it easier to achieve work-life balance	1
	Yes, it makes it difficult to achieve work-life balance	1
	No impact	0
In total		100

Source: Authors’ own study on the basis of the research results.

The respondents indicated that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the most frequently used instrument to maintain work-life balance is an individual manner of adjusting the hours of starting and finishing work, as well as individual work time schedule and task-based working time banking (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Number of the respondents using instruments aimed at achieving work-life balance

Source: Authors' own study on the basis of the research results.

In addition to these solutions, medical packages for employees are also often applied. Less common instruments in the surveyed group of employees include: additional leaves related to a non-business situation, subsidies for nurseries and kindergartens located outside the workplace, counselling regarding work-life balance, programs supporting employees who take care of a child or children. The instruments which incidentally support the achievement of work-life balance within the surveyed group of respondents include: programs supporting employees who take care of the elderly, programs supporting pregnant women, nurseries/kindergartens located at the company, planning individual career paths by taking account of work-life balance, as well as additional instruments such as meditation, stress management techniques, week planning and outdoor walks. However, the fact that 36% of the respondents do not use any instruments to maintain work-life balance is disturbing.

Discussion and conclusions

To sum up, it might be concluded that there is a relationship between the workplace (understood as a space in which employees stay while working) and work-life balance experienced by employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. It should be emphasized that under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ability to achieve work-life balance has become much more difficult. One third of the respondents are not able to juggle activities from various areas of their lives in a satisfactory manner. Despite remote work (often performed in a private space which is the place of residence), whose implementation is supported by the possibility of individual adjustment of working hours, as well as individual work schedule and task-based working time banking, the above-mentioned solutions do not make it easier for the respondents to achieve work-life balance. Our findings are consistent with the literature devoted to the issue of remote working. For example, Kniffin et al. (2020, p. 66) indicate that:

Yet as large numbers of workers are forced to work from home, many face challenges due to such fundamental issues as not having space in one's home to attend to work. For example, employees who live with others also face a larger set of challenges than those who live alone because they need to navigate others' space as well.

Wang et al. (2020, p. 30) also wrote that while scholars and managers usually believe that remote work can help employees alleviate conflicts between work and family, their research shows that remote workers struggled with work-at-home disruptions as the main challenge, and disruptions to working from home in this context cannot even be mitigated by the autonomy of remote working. The observations from 15 years ago by Golden, Veiga and Simsek (2006, p. 1346) are also confirmed that the more people work remotely, the less their work interferes with family life, and the more the family interferes with work.

It is significant that the respondents in our study considered the same factor, namely the possibility to juggle various activities and life responsibilities, both as a benefit and nuisance associated with the workplace. However, the fact that nearly 40% of the respondents do not use any instruments aimed at maintaining work-life balance is disturbing. Although the posed research questions have been answered, the conducted research has some limitations which mainly result from the limited scope of the research (the questionnaire was completed only by 120 respondents). Therefore, these results cannot be generalized and their analysis should be critical.

Further interesting research on the discussed aspect might be concentrated on identifying the reasons why employees do not use instruments aimed at maintaining work-life balance and on determining whether it is caused by the pandemic, a lack of awareness of their rights, or any faults or misconduct of their employers. Therefore, the prospect of enriching the present analysis is another research challenge. Contemporary challenges facing labor market indicate that it is also reasonable to analyse work-life integration phenomena in Polish organizations.

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