Sustainable work at the home office

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Udržitelná práce v domácí kanceláři

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Abstract

Digitalization brings pros and cons to labor relations. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, digital well-being has become a topic for human resource departments due to telework risks at the home office. Some employees work for longer hours, face higher demands, and become unable to switch off. So, they get under stress and suffer from musculoskeletal disorders. The paper aims at the impact of the home office on employees' well-being and outlines which practices can be used to maintain work-life balance and digital well-being at the home office. The paper uses a combination of on-the-desk analysis of secondary sources, a questionnaire survey in the Czech Republic in 2022, and one case study based on semi-structured interviews with human resources managers about several aspects of sustainable work at the home office in 2023. Findings show that it is essential for employers and employees to work together to ensure a safe and healthy home office environment. Regular communication, training, and adherence to occupational safety and health guidelines can help mitigate risks and promote well-being for remote workers. As technology becomes more integrated into daily lives, it is crucial to establish healthy boundaries and habits to avoid the harmful effects of excessive screen time and digital overload. Human resource management identifies practices and accents training to promote sustainable work at the home office, like setting boundaries between home and work tasks, time management, and physical and mental health care.

Keywords: teleworking; home office; human resource management

Abstrakt

Digitalizace přináší do pracovněprávních vztahů klady i zápory. Od pandemie COVID-19 se digitální pohoda stala tématem pro útvary lidských zdrojů kvůli rizikům práce na dálku v domácí kanceláři. Někteří zaměstnanci pracují déle, čelí vyšším nárokům a nedokážou vypnout. Dostávají se tak do stresu a trpí onemocněním pohybového aparátu. Příspěvek se zaměřuje na dopad práce v domácí kanceláři na pohodu zaměstnanců a uvádí, jaké postupy lze použít k udržení rovnováhy mezi pracovním a osobním životem a digitální pohody v domácí kanceláři. Při zpracování tématu využívá kombinaci analýzy sekundárních zdrojů s dotazníkovým šetřením v České republice v roce 2022 a případovou studii, která vychází z polostrukturovaných rozhovorů s personalisty o vybraných aspektech udržitelné práce v domácí

kanceláři v 2023. Zjištění ukazují, že zaměstnavatelé a zaměstnanci musí spolupracovat na zajištění bezpečného a zdravého prostředí domácí kanceláře. Pravidelná komunikace, školení a dodržování pokynů pro bezpečnost a ochranu zdraví při práci může zmírnit rizika a podpořit pohodu distančních pracovníků. Technologie se stále více začleňují do každodenního života, a proto je zásadní vzdělávat k vytvoření zdravých návyků, které mohou přispět k eliminaci nadměrného času stráveného před obrazovkou a digitálního přetížení. Řízení lidských zdrojů má vytipované praktiky a akcentuje další vzdělávání na podporu udržitelné práce v domácí kanceláři, jako je nastavení hranic mezi domácími a pracovními úkoly, řízení času a péče o fyzické a duševní zdraví.

Klíčová slova: distanční práce; domácí kancelář; řízení lidských zdrojů

Introduction

Digitalization brings pros and cons to labor relations. The social distancing measures introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic forced many people to work from home. A large proportion of employees was faced with changing patterns of work – including working from home. In 2019, approximately 1 in 20 (5.5%) employed people aged 15–64 years in the EU usually worked from home, which share remained constant at around 5% over the past decade (Eurostat, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 was apparent as this share more than doubled in 2020 to 12.3%. To a lesser extent, there was a further increase in the share of people usually working from home in 2021, reaching 13.5% (Eurostat, 2022).

Since the COVID-19 crisis, digital well-being has become a topic for human resource departments due to telework risks at the home office. Some employees work for longer hours, face higher demands, and become unable to switch off. So, they get under stress and suffer from musculoskeletal disorders. Sustainable work at the home office pays attention to various aspects of working conditions, incl., digital well-being that refers to optimal health and happiness in one's digital life. It encompasses mental and emotional well-being, mindful technology use, digital detoxification, and maintaining a healthy balance between online and offline activities.

The paper aims at the impact of the home office on employees' health and outlines which human resource management (HRM) practices are recommended to sustain a work-life balance and work satisfaction while working online. It is based on a combination of on-the-desk analysis of secondary sources, a questionnaire survey in the Czech Republic in 2022, and a case study using semi-structured interviews with human resource (HR) managers about working conditions at the home office.

1. Theoretical background

1.1 Telecommuting terms

To clarify the statements, the theoretical part about the home office may begin with telecommuting terms. Home office and telework are two terms often used interchangeably, but they have slightly different connotations between the two.

Home office[1] refers to a designated workspace within a person's residence for professional or work-related activities. It typically involves having a specific area or room in one's home exclusively used for work. A home office for online working may include a desk, chair, computer, and other necessary equipment and supplies. Working from a home office implies a more permanent or long-term setup where the individual has a dedicated workspace within their home.

Telework[2], on the other hand, is a broader term encompassing any work done remotely or outside of a traditional

office setting. It refers to using telecommunication technology to work from outside the employer's physical premises. Telework can involve working from a home office, but it can also include working from other remote locations like co-working spaces, coffee shops, or traveling. Telework may be occasional or regular, depending on the arrangement with the employer. A teleworker is often geographically closer to the central office than a remote worker.

The main difference between home and telework is that home office refers to a specific workspace within one's home. In contrast, telework is a broader concept encompassing remote work from anywhere. A home office is more permanent and dedicated, while telework can be temporary or flexible, allowing individuals to work remotely from various places.

1.2 Literature review

Home office and digital well-being have become essential aspects of modern work-life balance. They have become increasingly popular recently (Coonerty and Neuner, 2013; Fried and Hansson, 2013), and the need for dealing with the online working conditions had rapidly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has immensely impacted HRM as numerous employees have experienced lower work productivity, lessened motivation, increased stress, and poorer mental health (Toniolo-Barrios and Pitt, 2021). Work has been transported to virtual space, and the future will be characterized by hybrid models which open a few questions, like teamwork functioning, adjustments in education and learning programs, a new role of leaders, assuring mental health, and promoting resilience (Eikenberry and Turmel, 2018; Hazafi and Kajtar, 2022). While the home office offers flexibility and convenience, it is essential to consider occupational safety and health measures to ensure the well-being of individuals working from home.

When setting HRM practices, it emphasizes prioritizing self-care, setting boundaries, and being mindful of technology usage to ensure a healthy and fulfilling home office experience (Eickemeyer et al., 2021). It requires to consider several points:

Workstation setup: The home office should be set up in a quiet and dedicated space, preferably a separate room or area free from distractions. It should have adequate ventilation and temperature control to ensure comfort.

Electrical safety: Employees should be mindful of electrical safety in their home office. They should avoid overloading electrical outlets, use surge protectors, and ensure that all electrical equipment is in good condition and properly grounded.

Fire safety: Working from home requires adhering to fire safety guidelines. Employees should have functioning smoke detectors in their homes, know the location of fire extinguishers, and have a clear evacuation plan in an emergency.

Maintaining proper ergonomics is crucial to prevent musculoskeletal disorders and discomfort (Black and St-Onge, 2022). Employees should have a well-designed workstation with an ergonomic chair, an adjustable desk, and appropriate lighting. They should be encouraged to maintain good posture, take regular breaks, and perform stretching exercises. However, Wutschert et al. (2022) show the need for ergonomic working conditions for home-based teleworkers. Furthermore, their findings underline organizations' need for more awareness regarding home-based policies, ergonomics programs, and the health-related consequences of the absence of ergonomic support. Regular communication, training, and adherence to occupational safety and health guidelines can help mitigate risks and promote well-being for remote workers.

Isolation and blurred boundaries between work and personal life can impact mental health. Boegheim et al. (2022) indicate employee mental health concerning workplace design and indoor environmental quality (IEQ) when working from home. They argue that subjective and objective IEQ conditions, workplace suitability, and distraction affect employee mental health in the home workplace similarly to the office. Satisfying the noise level increases concentration, self-reported well-being, and engagement. High sound pressure levels (>58 dB) increase tension or nervousness. However, some investment into HR processes may encourage employees to maintain a healthy work-life

balance, take regular breaks, and engage in activities that promote relaxation and well-being, incl. providing health and wellness programs.

Specific consideration should give to communication and cybersecurity for establishing clear communication channels to keep employers in touch with remote workers. Regular check-ins, virtual meetings, and support networks can help address employees' concerns or challenges. Employees must learn cybersecurity practices to protect sensitive company information and personal data. It includes using secure internet connections, regularly updating software and passwords, and being cautious of phishing attempts.

A home office needs close cooperation between employers and employees to consider key points necessary for a safe and healthy home office environment. It means to design and train in the following practices (Neeley, 2021):

- Dedicated workspace: Set up a designated area solely for work to create a physical and mental separation between work and personal life. Ergonomics: Ensure the workspace is ergonomically designed to minimize strain on the body. Invest in a comfortable chair, an adjustable desk, and proper lighting.
- Establishing a routine: Follow a consistent work schedule to maintain productivity and create structure.
- Minimizing distractions: Create a quiet environment by reducing noise, setting boundaries with family members or roommates, and using noise-cancelling headphones if necessary.
- Taking regular breaks: Break up the workday with short breaks to relax, stretch, or engage in activities that promote well-being.
- Staying connected: Use technology to connect with colleagues, attend virtual meetings, and collaborate effectively.

2.Empirical part

2.1 Questionnaire survey

The analysis of job satisfaction and work engagement of workers aged 18-65+ uses data collected by a Google questionnaire survey among Czech employees from January to September 2022. The questionnaire was designed by the team from SGH Warsaw School of Economics, Institute of Human Capital, Department of Organizational Behavior for solving "the Sustainable Human Resource Management – Cross-Cultural Empirical Study project" led by Agnieszka Wojtczuk-Turek (Principal investigator). The Polish team managed the researchers from 54 countries who participated in collecting data about their local, sustainable HRM and signed an agreement to get at least 200 respondents.

The questionnaire consists of seven parts and metrics identifying respondents´ characteristics. The first part covers 26 questions identifying sustainable HRM, the second one includes three questions dealing with green HRM, the third one – three questions about job satisfaction, the fourth one - eight questions illustrating workplace well-being, the fifth one – six questions about organizational identification, the sixth one – three questions demonstrating work engagement and the seventh one has got 21 questions describing values, i.e., total 70 questions. In Czechia, in January and February, the questionnaires were distributed to email addresses stored in a company database; however, the return was low. So, in the second stage of the survey, the questionnaires were sent to respondents who previously cooperated with UCT researchers mentioned below in the Acknowledgment. A preliminary request was that respondents work at the home office at least two or three weekly workdays. Finally, respondents were 205, of which 62% were female. Survey participants worked in small-, medium, and large organizations where HRM practices are developed and implemented. Among the respondents, 37.6% worked in large companies (251– 1,000 employees), 42.4% worked in medium-size firms (51–250 employees), and 20% worked in small-size firms (10–49 employees). Most were university-educated, i.e., respondents with higher education 84.9% and secondary ones 15.1%. All respondents worked full-time and had been in their current position for at least six months; 80% of respondents worked with their employer for over ten years. A managerial position held 55.6% of respondents and non-managerial 44.4%.

Table 1 provides insight into how they perceive selected aspects of sustainable HRM regarding working conditions. Figure 1 subsequently shows these aspects, as well. In general, respondents mostly tend to evaluate them positively. So, they value the promotion of work-life balance and occupational health and safety positively to a medium or high degree. Nevertheless, they express fewer optimistic feelings about whether working at home is promoted, getting skills training programs and continuous learning that support employees´ employability, and minimizing psychological and physical work risks.

Subsequently, Table 2 and Figure 2 display satisfaction with workplace well-being by focusing on the work environment and personal relations. Positive feelings exist when respondents describe their attitudes to the work environment as they feel close to the people in their work environment, connected to others within the work environment, and see a purpose at their work. Most respondents consider that work is significant for them and can continually develop as a person in their job. It builds a good ground for accepting new HR policies and practices that may improve digital well-being.

QUESTIONS	NO	YES, TO A MINIMAL DEGREE	YES, TO A MEDIUM DEGREE	YES, TO A HIGH DEGREE	YES, TO A VERY HIGH DEGREE	TOTAL
	%	%	%	%	%	%
We promote working at home.	15.1	22.0	23.4	21.0	18.5	100.0
We promote work-life balance.	5.9	15.6	32.2	30.7	15.6	100.0

We provide safe and healthy work environment conducive to the physical and moral wellbeing and growth of employees.	4.4	7.3	27.3	34.6	26.3	99.9*
We have skill training programmes and continuous learning that support workers' employability.	13.2	19.5	23.9	23.4	20.0	100.0
We minimize psychological and physical work risks.	5.9	13.2	35.6	28.8	16.6	100.1*

Tab. 1. How do you feel that it is in your company? (Questions asked in the questionnaire) (Source: Author)

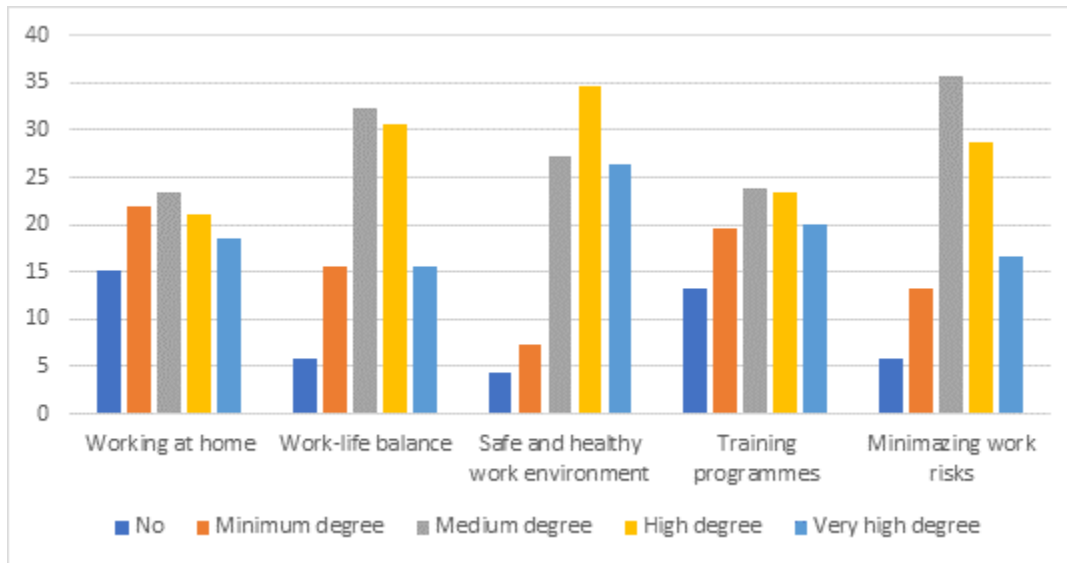*The difference to or above 100.0 is due to rounding.

Fig. 1. Selected aspects of sustainable HRM (Source: Autor)

QUESTIONS	I STRONGLY DISAGREE	I DISAGREE	I NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	I AGREE	I STRONGLY AGREE	TOTAL
	%	%	%	%	%	%

Among the people I work with, I feel there is a sense of brotherhood/sisterhood.	2.0	10.7	32.2	44.4	10.7	100.0
I feel close to the people in my work environment.	2.0	3.4	18.5	57.1	19.0	100.0
I feel connected to others within the work environment.	1.5	4.4	22.0	54.1	18.0	100.0
I consider the people I work with to be my friends.	2.0	8.8	34.1	39.0	16.1	100.0
I am emotionally energized at work.	2.0	11.2	28.8	41.0	17.1	100.1*
I feel that I have a purpose at my work.	0.5	2.4	11.7	51.2	34.1	99.9*
My work is very important to me.	0.5	3.4	12.7	39.5	43.9	100.0
I feel I am able to continually develop as a person in my job.	1.5	3.4	13.7	42.4	39.0	100.0

Tab. 2. How are you satisfied with your workplace well-being? (Questions asked in the questionnaire) (Source: Author)

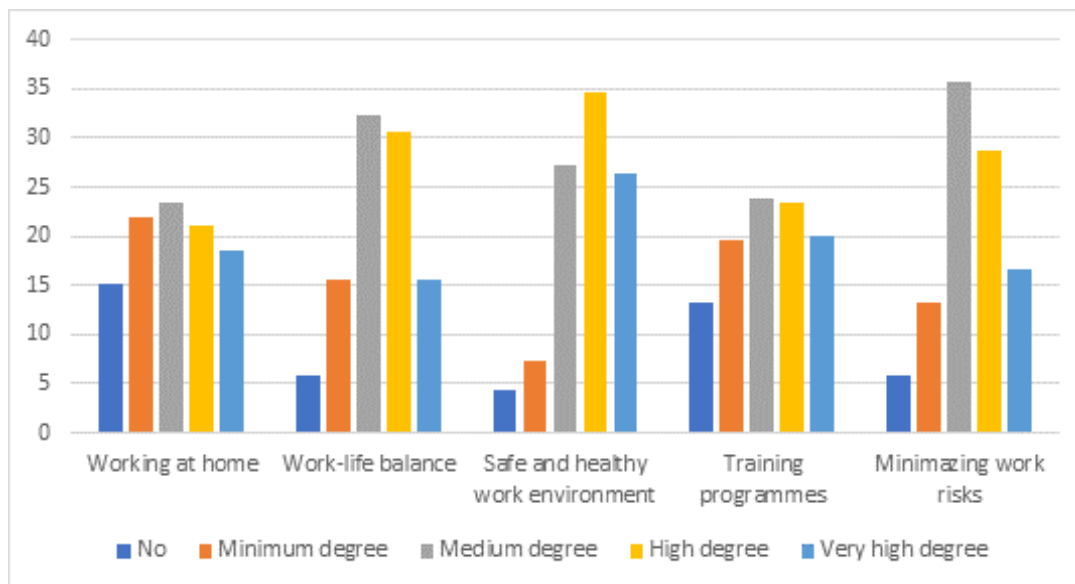* The difference to or above 100.0 is due to rounding.

Fig. 2. Satisfaction with the workplace well-being (Source: Author)

2.2 A case study

The semi-structured interviews used the questions mentioned in Tables 1 and 2 as a basis. The characteristics of interviewees copy with the respondents´ structure in the survey to get an overview of the current stage of sustainable HRM at the home office focusing on working conditions provided to highly qualified workers. So, three HR managers (female) and one partner (man) of a consultancy company work with a local subsidiary of a multinational enterprise. One company is large, two medium-sized and a small one. Interviewees are 45+, university-educated, and have held managerial positions for at least three years. The interviews aim to identify HR practices accepted as effective and motivating for work at the home office. Interviews were in May and June 2023, and each lasted 45 minutes. The questions include the same areas analyzed in the questionnaire survey, i.e., sustainable HRM, work-life balance enlarged by digital well-being practices, and employee engagement. Interviewees agree that since the COVID-19 crisis, employers have emphasized employees' mental health and well-being and taken care of digital communication, which means being accessible to employees, having empathy, and providing long-term support in online training and development for employability.

Comparing findings from secondary sources with the HRM practices described by interviewees, it is evident that the reality of managing highly skilled staff corresponds with globally known practices used at the home office. However, they agreed that working conditions for improving work-life balance at the home office remain on the edge of the current agenda due to the macroeconomic situation and even qualification gaps in the Czech labor market. They believe it must become essential to innovate the employer branding strategy and provide incentives for highly qualified workers aged 55+.

They see digital well-being as a conscious and balanced use of technology to maintain a healthy and productive lifestyle. As technology becomes more integrated into daily lives, they believe to establish healthy boundaries and habits to avoid the harmful effects of excessive screen time and digital overload. They believe that in uncertain times employees are looking for a reliable and supportive environment in which HR departments must design programs to ensure well-being and benefits to cope with new life situations, such as paid recovery leave and health prevention, employee assistance programs, mental health support service. When working at a home office, specific attention must receive implementing effective practices for distance team building and employee engagement. They believe that promoting digital well-being requires to

- Set boundaries: define specific time limits for using digital devices and establish designated "tech-free" zones in home office.
- Take breaks: schedule regular breaks from screens to rest eyes, stretch, and engage in physical activity.
- Disconnect: practice digital detoxes or periods without the Internet and social media to rejuvenate and reduce distractions.
- Prioritize sleep: avoid screen time before bed to promote better sleep quality.
- Seek offline activities: engage in hobbies, outdoor activities, or social interactions without technology.

Conclusion

Digitalization will transform labor relations between employers and employees, impacting health and safety protection or the reconciliation of work-life balance. Telework can positively affect health by reducing stress, improving work-life balance, and providing flexibility. It can also contribute to decreased exposure to workplace illnesses and increased physical activity. However, being aware of potential challenges such as social isolation, sedentary behavior, blurred work-life boundaries, and ergonomic issues is crucial. By addressing these challenges and adopting healthy habits, teleworkers can promote their overall well-being while enjoying the benefits of remote work.

Employers and employees must work together to ensure a safe and healthy home office environment. Regular communication, training, and adherence to occupational safety and health guidelines can help mitigate risks and promote the well-being of remote workers. Digital well-being refers to the conscious and balanced use of technology to maintain a healthy and productive lifestyle. As technology becomes more integrated into our daily lives, it is crucial to establish healthy boundaries and habits to avoid the adverse effects of excessive screen time and digital overload. HRM provides some recommendations regarding training to promote work-life balance and digital well-being, like setting boundaries between home and work tasks, time management, and physical and mental health care.

Acknowledgement

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[1] Home work is defined by the ILO's Home Work Convention (No. 177) and Recommendation (No. 184), 1996, as "work carried out by a person … (i) in his or her home or in other premises of his or her choice, other than the workplace of the employer; (ii) for remuneration; (iii) which results in a product or service as specified by the employer, irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs used" (ILO, 2021, 9).

[2] ILO provides the definition of telework or remote work as a form of organizing and/ or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employers premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis (Santos, 2020, 8).

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