

# **Human Capital Management in the Wandering Context of Events – Challenges for the Managerial Staff**

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## Chapter 4

# VIRTUALIZATION OF SOCIAL RELATIONS IN THE ORGANIZATION FROM THE EMPLOYEES' PERSPECTIVE

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### 4.1. Introduction

Social (interpersonal) relations in an organization, generally speaking, refer to employees' behavior as a manifestation of their attitudes towards each other. Interpersonal relations and the quality of them constitute a component of everyday life for every employee. These are connections between individuals or groups of people, expressed through different ways of sharing knowledge, information, thoughts, feeling, emotions, attitudes, values and beliefs, between two or more participants of the interaction. At work, this can be described as making use of one's personality, competencies and experience in creating and maintaining relationships with others. It is a complex process and the foundation of it is intrinsically connected with the fact that it is achieved through communication (Jakimiuk, 2015, pp. 55-63).

Remote work led to the virtualization of relations between employees. The phenomenon of virtualization of employees' relations is quite widely discussed in English literature, but to a much lesser extent in Polish publications (Brzegowy, 2021, pp. 133-243). In addition, many of them relate to the situation of virtual work that is planned and voluntary, whereas during the pandemic, a remote way of working was imposed on employees for reasons of social distancing, and was not pre-planned. From this perspective, relations between employees in the virtual world were in general not always voluntary.

This study, focusing on the development of interpersonal relations and employees' opinions about virtual relations between co-workers, can help to deepen understanding of this phenomenon and to detect certain patterns that could serve as

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a basis for improving remote work set-ups and relations between employees in the future. Most of the research conducted so far has focused on the costs and benefits of remote work, and on the problems that it involved (not only those related to social aspects of working). Nevertheless, some researchers pointed out certain aspects of remote work, such as the influence of isolation during remote work on physical and mental health, on relations and organizational coherence, which require special interest and further study. The presented review aimed to address these demands, as it is devoted exclusively to interpersonal relations – which makes it unique.

**The goal of this chapter** is to present the effects of virtual work on the formation of relations between people at their places of employment. To achieve this goal, the structure of this part of the monograph was shaped as follows. At the beginning, based on a review of literature, the authors constructed the theoretical assumption of employees' social needs in the virtualizing working environment. Next, they presented their own research results in this area, preceded by a description of the methodics of empirical research carried out. Finally, a concise summary of the research findings is accompanied by a presentation of the most important conclusions.

## **4.2. Theoretical foundations for the employees' social needs in virtualizing working relations**

In both Polish and foreign literature, there are many references to remote work, especially to its positive and negative aspects (Dolot, 2020, pp. 35-43; Feitosa and Salas, 2020, p. 2; Hauziński, 2018, pp. 11-16; Oberländer and Bipp, 2022, pp. 1-9; Salas, Tannenbaum, Kraiger, and Smith-Jentsch, 2012, p. 2; Sęczkowska, 2019, pp. 10-16; Yang, et al., 2022, p. 43; Zhang-Zhang, Rohlfers, and Varma, 2016, pp. 40-46). The literature review in this area leads to the conclusion that the problem of relations between employees is one of the issues addressed by both Polish and foreign authors.

It was also pointed out that in the contemporary world of work marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a clear increase in demand for digital communication and cooperation (Oberländer and Bipp, 2022, p. 2), and as a result, the competencies that are directly related to them have gained in importance. Competencies in the field of digital communication are defined as the ability to use appropriate channels of digital communication with the aim of communicating with co-workers, supervisors and business partners. Employees with high skills in digital communication proved capable of choosing the best means of (digital) communication and adequately transmit their message (Oberländer and Bipp, 2022, p. 2). Regarding competencies in the field of digital cooperation, they are defined as the ability to use media and digital programs for business cooperation, for instance with colleagues, supervisors, business partners and clients. Competencies in digital cooperation enable employees to interact with other people. Employees with high skills in digital cooperation can swiftly access important information and share it with other team members (Oberländer and Bipp, 2022, p. 1).

There are certain features of the virtual environment that could be indicated as positive for relations between employees in the context of remote work. Thanks to technologies such as ICT and IT, it is possible to maintain contact with other people, even if they reside in different places (a-spatiality). When it comes to the fact that communication does not need to happen in real time (a-synchronicity), it may contribute to giving employees the choice of when to consult a message and probably integrate it better (Hauziński, 2018, p. 9). Thanks to telecommunication technologies, such as videoconferencing, employees have the possibility to work anywhere in the world, to comfortably deliver the effects of their work and to exchange information in a timely fashion (Zhang, 2016, p. 40).

In view of the fact that virtual societies rely mainly on text, they are also free from stigmatization – since features such as race, sex, age and physical appearance are less important than in the real world (a-corporeity). Anonymousness (yielding the freedom of expression) and a-corporeity (meaning that in virtual societies, text, symbol and record have more importance, while gestures, clothing, facial expressions and tone of voice – less) may contribute to better relations between employees (Hauziński, 2018, p. 9). Additionally, when there is a strong connection between people, it is easier to share information (as there is a higher probability that they have common perspectives, that they trust each other, cooperate with each other and undertake efforts in order to make sure that the message they want to convey is properly understood) (Yang et al., 2022, p. 43).

Interpersonal processes may be reinforced when teams communicate through virtual media, provided that managers create the appropriate conditions for the employees in this respect, such as setting new standards, maintaining transparency in decision-making and enabling employees to participate in decision-making processes (Feitosa and Salas, 2020, p. 2). Based on literature studies one can also conclude that, in the majority of cases, the virtualization of social relations is perceived negatively, as disadvantageous for relations between employees as they do not have the possibility to meet in person and get to know each other, and do not talk about private matters. It is irrelevant who the person is, it is important how they do the work. Lack of comfortable social settings stifles the development of interpersonal competencies. Employees can be confronted with feelings of isolation and loneliness. In contacts between employees, barriers related to distance and time, hierarchy and cultural differences may gradually fade away. Virtual relations between employees make it difficult to create systems of reciprocal relations, to correct behavior and provide feedback, and it may favor e-mobbing and e-molestation (Hauziński, 2018, pp. 11-15).

In the virtual world, one can also observe the phenomenon of the digital social divide and informational exclusion. Age and generational differences as a determinant of professional effectiveness and general adaptability have noticeably gained in importance. Employee solidarity tends to disappear, just as master-disciple and senior-junior relationships, thus we are witnessing a decline of authority and role

model figures. Personal relations between employees are becoming weaker, whereas autonomous communication within information networks is gaining in importance (M2M, the Internet of Things). The understanding of in-team relations is changing (Hauziński, 2018, p. 16). Furthermore, the concept of teleworking leads to a situation where employees' social needs do not get fulfilled, especially in the case of people for whom their workplace is the only place of social encounters (Zhang, 2016, p. 41).

A sense of isolation is another negative consequence of working in a remote office. The isolation of an employee in the workplace is usually a result of their conviction that they have no opportunity for interaction with co-workers, that they do not belong to the group and cannot obtain support or recognition from co-workers. Being part of the group is perceived by employees as the ultimate indicator of their integration into the organization and being successfully adapted. Physical and social isolation constitutes a source of stress and difficulties in contemporary organizations, and it is interrelated with the main function of a group, which is the socialization of an individual within the organization. Membership helps to find out certain norms that are necessary to understand organizational behavior and to diminish anxiety in times when an employee expects to require support. The sense of belonging contributes to improving employees' results and makes it easier to achieve objectives by leveraging support from co-workers and supervisors. Working away from a traditional office deprives employees of the opportunity to adapt to the organization. Those working in a virtual office lack training in their workplace, miss out on the informal ways of communicating values and lose the possibility to become accustomed with organizational culture, social clues and other information, which would otherwise allow to interpret the reality and interact with their co-workers (Zhang, 2016, p. 43).

The fact that remote work diminishes contacts with co-workers, which as a consequence leads to difficulties with the execution of assigned tasks, was also mentioned in (Dolot, 2020, p. 37). The author also stressed that working away from the company's office can trigger a sense of isolation, loneliness and alienation, mainly due to the impossibility to develop informal relations (Dolot, 2020, p. 37).

Over a period of working from home, co-workers are 'driven apart'. Such distancing between employees means that the possibilities of experiencing mutual support in other life situations also become limited, which further aggravates the stress. Diminished contact with supportive co-workers is a stumbling block of remote working, triggering negative experiences related to it (George, Atwater, Maneethai, and Madera, 2021, p. 6).

Other researchers also argue that social support considerably diminished during the period of imposed remote work. Such a decrease could have been caused by the difficulty to conduct informal conversation at work, while working from home. Compared to countless occasions on which employees meet in office buildings, while working from home they have to devote much more time and energy for intended informal discussions with colleagues (Oberländer and Bipp, 2022, p. 8).

Earlier research already demonstrated that a move from office work to virtual work has led to the non-fulfilment of the need for social bonding and lack of social support (Zhang, 2016, pp. 40-46). The outbreak of the pandemic forced employees to avoid meeting face to face, which undermined the importance of social support. Another explanation that could be provided, is fatigue with Cloud-based online video conferencing tools, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet being the most popular. Employees are exhausted by the number of programmed meetings and they think twice before starting another conversation in order to ask for social support (Oberländer and Bipp, 2022, p. 8).

The analysis of reports on remote working shows that, according to the employees, the biggest disadvantage of remote work consists in the lack of possibility to meet new people joining the company (over 57% of negative opinions) and in the affected quality of social life (for example no lunch together – 54% of negative opinions). Regarding analyses carried out by the Antal enterprise, 65% of respondents noted that: relations in the workplace became weaker, external and/or internal cooperation became more difficult (54%), cascade communication within the organization became less effective (32%) (*Aspekty pracy zdalnej...*, 2021, pp. 6-7). Staff working from home point out that communication is not transparent, that the flow of information is disturbed and that there are fewer opportunities to develop knowledge (*Jak wykorzystać szansę...*, 2020, p. 10).

The benefits and costs of working in a virtual environment are contextual by nature. They should be assessed differently in a situation of remote working that is undertaken voluntarily, as opposed to the period of the pandemic when it became a necessity. The analysis of this latest experiences (enforced remote work) can serve as a ‘source of knowledge’, which will shed more light on the relations between employees in virtual reality.

### **4.3. The empirical research methodics**

**The goal of the empirical research** was to determine whether remote work changed in some significant way interpersonal relations between employees during the pandemic, and if so – in what way. It was a time when the remote way of working was imposed in many companies, and as a consequence relations between employees became virtualized.

The research questions presented to the respondents were as follows:

1. What do you pay attention to in your interpersonal relations at work?
2. Has remote work influenced and changed the relations between employees (in comparison to how they were before the pandemic, in a stationary work mode)?
3. If so, what kind of change was it (positive, negative) and what did it affect?

The study was conducted with the use of the descriptive research technique (written expression) with open-ended, non-directional questions (Lutyński, 1994, pp. 120-122). This particular research technique allows to refer to situations from employees’

lives and for their subjective attitudes to be expressed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2000, p. 169; Lutyński, 1994, p. 126-128). The choice of this particular technique was directed by the fact that written expression (as opposed to direct interview) provides a sense of anonymousness, which increases the probability of gathering reliable information. At the same time, it allows for opinions to be spontaneously expressed, without suggesting what the subjects should write about or how.

In order to obtain answers to the research questions, the authors analyzed work provided by 165 respondents – students of extramural studies in the field of Management at the Department of Management Studies of the University of Lodz. The study was conducted in January 2022.

The students were asked to specify in what mode they worked (stationary or remotely) and to present situations from their professional life in the form of autobiographical description. The asked questions stimulated the respondents to share their observations and experiences.

The obtained answers were then coded and subjected to analysis. The first stage consisted in selecting from all the provided answers those whose authors declared not having worked remotely during the pandemic. Thus, in their descriptions they did not relate to relations in the virtual workplace; instead, they described relations between employees in traditional work conditions. The remaining pool was divided into those in which the respondents noticed a change in relations between employees during remote work (in comparison to relations from before the pandemic, in stationary work conditions), and those who did not. Lastly, descriptions stating that there was a change were divided based on whether the change was assessed as positive or negative.

In the process of carrying out the research, the authors endeavored to respect the rules of conducting qualitative studies (Czarniawska, 2018; Glinka and Czakon, 2021, pp. 173-200; Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2014, pp. 9-17).

#### **4.4. The empirical research findings**

Out of the 165 participants that provided their contributions, over half were women (96, i.e. 58%). During the pandemic, one person in three did not do any remote work (53, 32% – 32 women and 21 men). Out of the 112 respondents (100%), who worked remotely:

- 48 (42%) – 31 women and 17 men – did not notice any change in relations between employees,
- 33 (29%) – 17 women and 16 men – evaluated perceived changes as positive,
- 31 (29%) – 16 women and 15 men described perceived changes as negative.

When referring to relations between employees, the terms most frequently used by the respondents (165) were: cooperation, colleagues' support, mutual help, sharing information with each other, communicating, direct contact, free expression



of opinions, employees' attitude towards each other, solving problems together, sharing knowledge, good atmosphere.

One of the female respondents described relations between employees in the following way: “when someone has got a problem, they can always fall back on more experienced colleagues, who never refuse to provide thorough assistance, when someone in the team gets promoted or receives an award, they are congratulated on their success and nasty comments are avoided, we join forces, when someone has a good idea, they share it with the team and do not keep it for themselves as if they cared only for their own results, when someone makes a mistake, colleagues do not report that immediately to the manager, so that the person does not get into trouble, instead they try to help to remedy the situation” [k-13].

The 64 respondents who argued that the relations changed as a result of moving to the remote way of working considered that: cooperation (64) and mutual help, as well as colleagues' support (59-29 women and 30 men) were the most important indicators of relations between employees.

One of the female respondents described cooperative relations in the following way: “employees can freely express their opinions and ideas without being afraid of consequences, when a problem comes up, the team tries to resolve it together with full involvement of the manager. All that in a friendly and calm atmosphere. During remote work, the team is even more willing to help, to understand. There are meetings being organized, during which we can freely discuss problems, aware that we would get support” [k-77]. Others add that “nobody is putting obstacles in your way” [m-15]; “employees like and respect each other, are willing to help” [k-31].

**Table 4.1.** Examples of statements by respondents who assessed the changes in relations when working remotely as positive

Dimension of social relations	Statements provided by the respondents
Cooperation	“During the pandemic, employees started to support each other, help each other in adapting to a new situation” [k-84] “During remote work, employees started to pay more attention to cooperation, not just concentrate on themselves, but also on others” [k-100] “Every morning, we meet at Teams platform and discuss progress; we agree on a common strategy of sales, we monitor each other and give advice” [m-15]
Communication	“When we worked in the office, we were scattered on different floors, now the contact between employees has become easier, thanks to messaging systems. Rapid calls can be recorded and we can come back to them when necessary, which makes it significantly easier to share information” [k-31]
Support	“There is a big emphasis on supporting new team members for whom starting a job in a remote way of working represents a bigger challenge” [k-13]
Attitude towards each other	“Employees are nicer to each other, more tolerant” [k-9]

Source: own empirical research.

All respondents (33) who assessed perceived changes in relations as positive felt that after moving to remote working the spirit of cooperation strengthened. The majority claimed that communication between employees became more effective. Messaging systems such as Skype, MS Teams, Zoom, phones or smartphones made it easier to stay in contact. Nobody from this group of respondents mentioned a sense of isolation or loneliness. Examples of statements made by this group of respondents are presented in Table 4.1.

The respondents who assessed changes resulting from a “move to remote work” as negative (31-16 women and 15 men) mainly pointed out the following aspects: lesser frequency of contacts between employees, difficulties in communication, reduced cooperation, or even the emergence of competition, as well as tensions and conflicts. The statements presented below illustrate these views:

- “Before we used to talk more about ourselves and meet after work” [k-12].
- “Remote work loosens bonds. I am relying more on myself now than on advice from my colleagues” [m-35].
- “Cooperation between people is not so good, they communicate remotely, there is no real conversation, exchange of experience, mutual help” [k-117].
- “Over the last two years, the team changed, there are people that I have never met and this undermined the bonds and cooperation. I simply don’t know them” [k-133].
- “Remote working made it more difficult to cooperate, we cannot meet” [m-42].
- “The quality and quantity of communication deteriorated, it was not possible to directly ask for advice” [m-76].
- “There is no integration, the company does not organize meetings thanks to which we used to have a sense of unity, there are no quarterly meetings where you would get all the information, communication deteriorated” [k-96].
- “Cooperation has lost part of its importance, it has become more competitive due to the lack of contact; if we stay closed at home, we are not able to get to know another person” [k-125].
- “Cooperation has become more problematic. It is difficult to fit into another person’s availability, you need to call everyone individually, because everyone has a slightly different schedule” [k-140].
- “During remote work, the whole team drifted apart, no-one cares about any sort of interaction, assistance, cooperation” [k-160].
- “Employees really don’t care about the image they have among others, employees do not have direct contact and don’t need to worry about being accepted by co-workers; everyone relies more on themselves, people have become competitive” [k-141].
- “People are unnerved by the situation, they are anxious about their employment and tensions are there more often” [m-81].
- “Conflicts appeared between employees working in production and office workers, remote work has been abandoned” [k-111].

What seems to dominate in these statements is paying special attention to the weakening interpersonal ties, the decreasing level of social integration and the decreasing desire to cooperate, which are accompanied by lower interest in image and intensifying conflicts between employees.

#### 4.5. Final conclusions and research summary

The authors are aware of the limitations of the adopted methodology of the empirical research, just to mention a small pool of subjects, the fact that respondents were mostly young people (up to 30 years of age), as well as the respondents' reluctance to share their experiences, and as a result, variance in the degree of detail in the provided descriptions, however this study has also significant cognitive values. At the same time, the authors were able to achieve the goal of this research, which was to determine whether remote work changed in some significant way interpersonal relations between employees during the period of pandemic, and if so – in what way. Finally, one can conclude that from the entire pool of respondents, 81 either did not notice any particular change while working remotely (48) or pointed out positive aspects of forming virtual relations (33). Negative aspects were indicated by 31 persons (approximately one-fifth of all the respondents). Differences of opinions were visible despite the fact that the group was homogenous in terms of age. According to the report *The voice of the European workforce 2020* (2021, p. 3), “traditional demographic data, such as age, is not a good indicator that would allow to predict what the employees actually think. Therefore, employers need to accept that employees are a complex group and require rules and actions that truly take into account their characteristics and needs.”

All the above also entitles the authors to recognize that the goal adopted in this chapter was achieved, namely, based on the collected data it was shown that virtual work can significantly affect interpersonal relations in the workplace. It is worth noting that the considered context is very specific; the period of pandemic is a time when many organizations try new solutions in organizing work and learn to implement remote ways of working (Radziukiewicz, 2021, p. 423). Thus, this research confirmed what was already mentioned in the literature, i.e. that opinions on virtual relations in the workplace vary. Some people do not notice any differences in relations between employees, whether the work is done stationary or remote. Others claim that remote work has a positive influence on bonds between people at their workplace, whereas another group of respondents assess virtual relations negatively.

The research results also enabled the authors to formulate certain recommendations for business practitioners. Hence, if managers wish to make use of remote work, they ought to realize that employees' needs are diverse. They should also ensure that the relations between employees are formed and maintained, as they enable swift and effective communication and promote mutual trust and cooperation. It is

important to define, communicate and respect the rules and procedures governing the course of work. The research results presented in this chapter and those referred to in the literature review (e.g. Oberländer and Bipp, 2022, p. 9) all indicate that it is particularly important to support employees working from home so that they do not feel isolated, to encourage them to maintain social contacts with other people at work. As long as employees do not have the opportunity to meet in the office, there will be a need to create other possibilities of entering into informal dialogues and contacts with colleagues at work. Managers should be aware of this and create social support systems, especially for those employees who already consider that the social support is insufficient. This is crucial in view of the fact that the virtual work environment has become more and more common, and in all probability remote work from home will remain in place after the pandemic has ended. In the study *Decoding Global Ways of Working* (Strack et al., 2021, p. 8), as much as 89% of the respondents were convinced that at least part of the work will continue to be done remotely, and 24% that it will be so totally.

According to the authors of this chapter, it would be interesting to conduct further research on work set-ups that involve new technologies, on the problems that may arise with regard to the virtualization of relations, and on the question of the humanization of work in the virtual environment. It is important to continue such research after the end of the current pandemic, which forced implementing certain solutions in order to deliver work. Further research will help to determine the long-term consequences of working remotely and of work in the virtual environment.

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