DISRUPTIVE CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK
IN THE CONTEXT OF E-SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to analyse the workplace disruption caused by the paradigm shift due to the digital transformation process and the context of hybrid/remote work. The authors analyse benefits, challenges and approaches companies are facing within the segment of workplace regulation as well as e-leaders' tactics for remote work performance, result-based metrics, and performance indicators. The authors have noticed huge discrepancy between research on remote work subjects in business and teaching and learning industry sector (in business there's a lot of pros, and in the education especially during the pandemic, cons). Remote work represents one of the most important segments, especially in the segment of teaching, that also affects the satisfaction level in the process, which is often neglected by setting out the focus on the technologies or/and teaching methods in the e-learning environments and performance, and at the same time dropping out from the focus working conditions, policies, and institutional support for workers/teachers. In this paper authors analyse challenges and benefits of hybrid/remote work in general by observing possible applicability to various sectors of e-Society.

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation has influenced workplace disruption by digitizing processes and enabling communication and cooperation between employees and managers in a remote or hybrid work model. Hybrid/remote work model has become so relevant for employees that majority is ready to change an employer if current does not offer an option to work in hybrid/remote model. On the other hand, the lockdown generated by the COVID 19 pandemic has forced European universities to move their teaching activities to the online environment. This ad hoc shift to digital environment resulted in emergency remote teaching which is a different concept than the e-learning. Unfortunately, by the majority of the teachers and management there is not a clear understanding of the difference between these two concepts creating difficulties in moving towards a proper digital transformation. It is evident that questions about the preparedness, designing and effectiveness of e-learning is still not clearly understood (Muthuprasad, 2021). From the body of the research, we can see that teachers as employees working inside disruptive models in higher education industry need a clear definition and guidance. Only this way can we have a truly modernized education. But how do we reach this, where do we learn from? Could flexibility that other industries have achieved become something that could open different approach to teaching and learning thus enabling full digital transformation of educational environment. Could we learn from the business environment regarding the remote work and what are obstacles and advantages.

2. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION INFLUENCE ON WORKPLACE DISRUPTION

The digital transformation has been mainly driven by global trends, such as changes in customers' expectations that demand 24x7 availability from product and service providers, higher speed of execution, close to real time, and clear preference for digital channels for many of the customers. The superb digital experience some of the

industries are providing has created demand from other industries to do the same, although that might be a much higher challenge, hard to realize. Globalization and digitalization have made products and services easily available anywhere in the world, creating additional competitive pressure even for those companies that do not operate globally. Not only that products and services became globally available, the workers too. More and more companies have people employed across the globe and operate as one team regardless of their geographical dispersion. These companies have started applying remote work model as pioneers, but many more joined the same path because of Covid-19 pandemic that significantly speeded up both digitalization and adoption of remote and hybrid work models. Technology pace is increasing and is fundamentally changing the nature of job tasks, resulting in many new job roles that were created in the last decade, while others have become obsolete and fully automatized by robots, artificial intelligence, machine learning, chat bots and other digital technologies and solutions. By 2025 machines and humans will be equal in terms of how tasks will be divided (Zahidi, 2020).

2.1 Hybrid/Remote Work History Context

Some form of remote work model was here for more than 50 years, slowly developing as new technology were entering the workplace. In 1973, Nilles working on decreasing pollution and improving air quality questioned the necessity of daily travel to office without the real need (Nilles, 1998). First adopter of remote work were technology companies. Cisco, launched in Silicon Valley in 1993, had one of the first systematic remote work programs where employees could work either fully remotely or were offered flexible working hours and communicating via broadband technology. 10 years later, after a decade of working under remote and hybrid model, Cisco reported an increase in employee productivity and savings in 2003 of 195 mill $ (Neeley, 2021). Back in 1991, Drucker declared that in the future "office work, rather than office workers, will do the traveling" (Drucker 2020). Many international companies started to introduce telework as possible working conditions, like American Express, IBM, AT&T. The European Union realized in the year 2002 how the increase of information technology is changing working habits and requirements. In July 2002 a European Framework Agreement on Telework was concluded, the act that regulates employment and working conditions, health and safety, training, and collective rights of teleworkers (Eurofound, 2005). The USA Government in 2010 issued Telework Enhancement Act by which telecommuting officially was more secure and effective for Federal employees (Allied Telecom, 2022). From 2015 many fully remote companies were born, like GitLab, Toptal, DuckDuck Go, WeWorkRemotely, etc. In 2015 19% of EU employees worked from home remotely or in a hybrid model using collaboration technologies, where Scandinavian countries were leading with 30%-38% working in remote or hybrid model (Samek Ladovici, 2021). According to a study by the International Labor Office from Geneva from 2019, 40% of US workers work remotely occasionally (Lister & Harnish, 2019). Since 2017 remote working started to be a common working option possibility, required by employees. Since the Covid-19 pandemic outbreak, telework (fully remote or hybrid) became the new normal, where almost 50% of all the employees all over the globe during some point worked remotely and continues to do so. "Flexible work is here to stay" according to findings done by Microsoft in 2021 (Microsoft, 2021).

2.2 Challenges and Benefits of Hybrid/Remote Working

Hybrid and remote work do not come without challenges. Management typically questions if employees will be fully engaged without continuous monitoring, while there is a challenge of work-life balance, sense of loneliness and isolation on employees' side, as well as lack of socialization with their colleagues. According to 2020. BCG research, success of hybrid/remote work depends on several factors like transparent remote-work vision, selecting right operating model, enhancing trust-based management, establishing the technological foundation and solutions (BCG, KRC; José Ferreira, Pablo Claver, Pedro Pereira, and Sebastião Thomaz, 2020). Leadership proved to have a key role in motivation and communication among employees. Additionally, without a company culture built on trust and clear goal settings, it is hardly possible to successfully introduce hybrid and remote working models. According to BCG survey from 2020, 24% of managers believe that it's harder to control and drive productivity while working remotely vs in-office work, 39% of managers believe it is harder to ensure team engagement and connection, and 30% of managers believe in less innovation while working remotely. Global Workplace Analytics survey (Lister, Kate; Kamouri, Dr.Anita, 2020) points out that 35% of managers believe that main struggle of remote work is employee engagement, 34% believes that the main struggle is a lower performance of teamwork and cohesion among team members, followed by lower creativity and innovation and lower availability of manager's control over employees work performance. 2021 research from

Gartner shows that employees were very engaged in remote/hybrid model even when their work had not been under constant company control and monitoring. According to research data of 2.865 participants, 70% of leaders confirmed that remote work performance was the same or better as on-site (in office) work (Kamouri, Anita, PhD; Lister, Kate, 2020). BCG study from 2020 shows that two major employees benefit in hybrid/remote work are work-life balance (mainly related to less commute time which allows extra time to be spent for their personal needs and family) and cost reduction of living costs (mainly due to lower cost of commute, cost of meals, etc.). OWL Labs study from 2021. shows that more than 80% of respondents considers that main benefits of remote working are more time with their family 86%, that they are happier 84%, better able to handle work-life balance 83% and that hybrid work is better for their mental health 82% (OWL, 2021). Main **benefits for employers/companies** are (Florentine, Sharon, 2020): employee engagement and productivity increase, retention, morale, expanding talent pool, cost reduction. BCG survey from 2020 shows that companies have the following benefits from hybrid/remote work model: cost saving, talent attractiveness, productive workforce. Applying hybrid/remote working model allows companies to employ experts from any geography, allowing them to choose the best talents, but also surveys as a way to expand their business in new geographies. What comes across all research and surveys investigated as common **benefits of hybrid/remote working for employees and employers** are following: work/life balance for employees; more personal and family time for employees; cost reduction for both employees and employers; increased flexibility and autonomy for employees; development of digital competences for employees; higher performance in well managed hybrid/remote work for both employees and employers; improved work satisfaction and expanding talent pool for employers. On the other hand, research has shown many **challenges** of this type of work, such as: sense of loneliness and isolation on employees' side, as well as lack of socialization with their colleagues and losing team spirit; no clear boundaries between work and home time; too much of virtual communication; difficulty focusing on fully remote work model; staying motivated especially in fully remote work model; new colleagues onboarding; and appropriate communication with managers and team members.

McKinsey Global Survey on digital transformation from 2018 lays down five characteristics of successful digital transformation as prerequisite for successful remote / hybrid work: leadership by having the right, digital-savvy leader in place, capability building for the workforce of the future (engaging integrator and technology-innovation manager who would support employees to bridge the gap between traditional and digital parts of business - they will translate and integrate new digital methods and processes into the existing way of working), empowering employees to work in new ways, continuous upgrading of tools used for collaboration and process digitalization, frequent communication via traditional and digital ways (McKinsey & Company, 2018). In a new remote and hybrid work model, relationships between manager and employees have become more important than ever, while through manager employee validate employer as well (Kropp & McRae, 2022). Important criteria for successful remote work and productive teams are (Neeley, Tsedal, 2021): delivering results, individual growth facilitation, building team cohesion. For productive remote and hybrid team, there are tactics for successful leading remote workers (Neeley, Tsedal, 2021): a) minimize location differences - leaders should not make differences in leading people who are working on a different location, no matter if locations are geographically different, or on site or off site working; b) strengths, not status emphasize - leaders should emphasize individual strengths, not working status for remote workers, common purpose promotion vs faultiness – key for leaders is to promote group-level identity and stress out that each individual represents one part of a team (chain link); c) create structure – predictability is important for remote workers, leaders should give clear direction to each team member with direct communication and clear job description and responsibilities; d)give feedback – in order to motivate team members, leaders must give appropriate and constructive feedback as an individual support for career development no matter if working in office or remotely; e) promote engagement, but not avoid conflicts – bonding of remote and hybrid workers through informal parts of the meetings in order to encourage engagement and fruitful discussion.

Taking all of the challenges employers and employees are facing in full remote work, hybrid work model seems to be more widely adopted by majority of employers, where applicable. It is considered that the optimum balance could be around two to three days of remote work a week (Samek Ladovici et.al., 2021) giving possibility to the worker to organize work to maximize benefits of both options (in office and home office).

2.3 Measuring Work Performance

Hybrid/remote work model requires defining of measurable targets (Key Performance Indicators - KPIs) for achieving its purpose which will provide clarity about the goals and boost engagement of employees to achieve targets. The Performance Management must be adapted to a new way of working through (BCG, 2020): 1) Trust-based management – as a first enabler for successful hybrid/remote work, means shifting towards

measuring workers' output (e.g., achievement of settled KPIs and quality and timeliness of the work); 2) KPIs and OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) – use measurable targets, which should be equally accessible and fair for both remote and onsite employees, by providing tools and information that enable reaching targets, and provide reporting for regular tracking of performance; 3) Coaching and feedback – important in driving employee's individual development and managing employee expectation, which could be very challenging in remote work model. New flexible working models require new practices and routines which could improve efficiency in daily tasks.

3. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION IN EDUCATION

Starting from the context of the pandemic and the reflection it had on the education system, the short-term transition to a completely online/remote way of working, according to the many research papers, often has negative context or repercussions. This negativity is also influenced by the fact that some segments of the process and human resources were not ready for a complete transition to the online/remote way of working. However, e-learning and digital tools were already in use, planned and integrated 20 years ago and as such quite successful, which indicates that only certain segments could be the one giving the online learning/working a negative context, and they, on the other hand, can be easily detected by conducting quality performance measurement metrics. Digital transformation of educational institutions should therefore be viewed in a comprehensive context as companies tend to do by analysing all the segments, which is much broader than just delivery of teaching and learning with the use of technologies but integrating all its processes with all stakeholders (and also using the capabilities of AI bots to help personalize communication, especially in communication with external stakeholders (including the wider social community). Digital skills are becoming indispensable competencies that the labour market requires today. Education that prepares employees for this digital market is also changing attitudes towards 21st century skills development. The University, as the umbrella institution of higher education, is also expected to act proactively. Digital transformation in higher education was one of the key strategic priorities of the International Association of Universities (IAU, 2020) and their policy wish sets out key principles and values that are key to shaping the digital transformation of higher education and human-centered, ethical, inclusive and holistic transformation for the common good. If we are to develop future workers that are employable the disruption emerging in the educational environment needs to be recognized and solved.

The project DIGITOOLS - Innovative Tools for Enhancing E-Learning Solutions in Universities (the Erasmus+ KA 226 Partnerships for Digital Education Readiness Project. Project Number: 2020-1-IE02-KA226-HE-000781) is aimed at introducing enhanced digital tools and methods to help university staff deliver quality education through online means. It supports and cultivates innovative pedagogies and methods for teaching, learning and assessment, encouraging educators and learners to use digital technologies in creative, collaborative and efficient ways to help them to quickly adapt to this fast evolving and complex situation caused by this global pandemic. In particular, the project promotes effective digital-age learning and digitally competent educational organisations actively building on the European Framework for Digitally Competent Educational Organisations. Digital technologies are enablers of a step change in learning and teaching practices. The project is effectively tackling skills gaps and mismatches particularly with regard to preparedness to remote work, learning and teaching in the digital environment promoting more flexible and innovative learning. (DIGITOOLS, 2022).

4. CONCLUSION

Digital transformation with many disruptive models has been successfully applied in many industries in the last decade (e.g. media and entertainment, retail, financial services, telecommunications, hospitality and travel, transportation, insurance, manufacturing, healthcare, utilities, wholesale, etc.). Research shows that most employers and organizations still feel more in control of the work process when it takes place on-site than when it's been organized hybrid/remotely despite the fact that by implementing certain performance measurement methods and techniques the same effect can be achieved. Flexibility is a positive thing that both sides, employers and employees emphasize, which then consequently has an impact on all other processes of the system as a

whole (for example, education, library's, healthcare etc.). Digital transformation experienced in the labour market definitely have influence on the education institutions that represent central place in preparing students for their future jobs and their flexibility to work in the context of different working models and simultaneously remotely connected to wide segment of e-Society.

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