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EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT IN REMOTE WORK[2]

Until 2020 organisations gave their employees the opportunity to work from home as a perk intended to provide for favourable working conditions. The spread of COVID-19 and the restrictions imposed by governments made organisations worldwide switch entirely and in a very short time to remote work where the nature of the job allowed it. In these new working conditions, organisations changed their policies and employee engagement became one of the most common issues in recent research. This article is aimed to study employees' attitudes of engagement with their organisation when working from home as well as the factors that could increase employee engagement. The results from the author's two-stage survey of employees in Bulgarian organisations show that their engagement with the organisation has not decreased despite the long work from home due to the pandemic and the challenges associated with it.
Keywords: engagement; remote work; COVID-19; factors affecting employee engagement
JEL: M12; M54; O33

1. Introduction

To a great extent, the success of a company is based on its employees' success, loyalty and engagement. Effective human resource management means that employees are managed as thinking subjects, which is the most significant challenge in an organisation. Employee engagement is related to the building and promotion of fruitful cooperation between an organisation and its employees, leading to the achievement of organisational goals. Employees who are engaged believe in the firm, have a desire to improve their job and their work, are willing to go above and beyond to help the firm succeed, and are inspired by its representatives.

Effectiveness and excitement are the trademarks of a dedicated worker. Disengaged employees, on the other hand, do the bare minimum, display little excitement for their work, and view work as a waste of time, to keep receiving paychecks. Employees who are disengaged are employees who have lost their passion for their job and hence, hamper the performance of the organisation. Organisations usually keep in mind that engaged employees

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lead to increased productivity at work, which in turn leads to increased customer satisfaction and, without a doubt, an increase in sales and profit for the company (Chanana, 2020).

The emergence of the coronavirus in 2020 changed dramatically the way companies work everywhere around the world. The crisis caused by COVID-19 is unprecedented in nature, because it is primarily a public health crisis, which is a complicating factor that must be taken into account (Netseva-Porcheva, 2020). The covid-19 pandemic presented serious challenges to all stakeholders: organisation management, HR executives and employees. HR managers' to-do list is growing all the time: to take care of employees' health, keep company morale high, manage remote work, to decide whether and when to dismiss staff (The Economist, 2020). Now, most employers are faced with the difficulty of organising a remote work process or limiting the concentration of people in one place by taking adequate precautions: optimising working hours and vacations and changes in the focus of the business. But despite the extraordinary circumstances, human resources are the main engine of a business and its commitment to the employer's brand, mission, vision and goals should be an ongoing process.

COVID-19 forced companies to switch to remote work swiftly. Workplace transformation definitely has a lot of benefits for both employers and employees. Company management should not underestimate the fact that there is a need for a transformation of the strategy for the management of people in order to maintain their engagement and productivity. Company goals and values should be stated clearly and the expected results should have real parameters. Communication with the personnel is of paramount importance. In times of anxiety about their health and job insecurity, employees value an individualised approach increasingly, they want their voices heard and expect support when needed.

Chanana (2020) researched how different organisations engage their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Organisations are continuously inventing a novel and efficient ways to keep employees engaged during this difficult period. Work-from-home routine engagement activities have been found to be very beneficial for both employees and organisations.

In this regard, the ***main aim*** of the present study is to investigate employees' attitudes in terms of engagement with the organisation when working remotely as well as the factors that could enhance their engagement.

The main thesis of the study is that employees are more engaged with the organisation and in remote work if they are provided with long-term security in the workplace and individualised care for their needs.

Two ***major research objectives*** are formulated to achieve the outlined research goal:

1) To systematise and present the theoretical and methodological framework of the researh;

2) To analyse the results from the author's empirical research and formulate recommendations for organisations with regard to the enhancement of their employees' engagement.

The accomplishment of the tasks set in the research is faced with the following ***limitations***:

- The term "telework" is used to describe remote work in many countries around the world, but it is not present in Bulgarian legislation and practice. The Labour Code of Bulgaria defines the concepts of outwork and remote work (or distance working). In essence, however, the term "telework" defines the conditions for remote work. For this reason, the terms "remote work, telework or work from home" are used as synonyms in this article. All these words and expressions describe an increasingly adopted practice by organisations worldwide. It should be noted that remote work does not mean outwork. (Kicheva, 2021).

- According to the Labour Code of Bulgaria, remote work is "a form of organisation of work away from the employer's premises on employment relationship by using information technologies, provided that the said work was or could be performed at the employer's premises" (Labour Code, Art. 107h, para 1) and is significantly different from "outwork" which according to the Labour Code is "manufacturing a product and/or providing a service be carried out at the home of the worker or employee or in other premises chosen by them outside the working place of the employer against remuneration by means of equipment, materials and other aid provided either by the employer or the worker/employee" (Labour Code, Art. 107b).

- "Engagement" is a term that differs from the term "satisfaction". Satisfaction is the degree to which work satisfies the employee's needs in the short term, whereas engagement is related to the goal and corporate mission and is manifested in the long term.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework of the Research

The people behind each brand are the ones who make efforts every day. Therefore, their commitment should be supported and encouraged, especially in times of crisis when employee engagement becomes increasingly more important. When a worker/employee feels insecure about their future and at work and when they do not know what the direction of their company is and what actions its leaders are taking, they feel little engagement.

Especially in times of crisis, organisations appreciate the value of employee engagement as a key factor for productivity, employee retention and profits, but not all of them have a single strategic approach to the building up and maintenance of engagement. The companies that hire and retain motivated, engaged and responsive employees are more successful than those that do not.

The author of the study fully supports the opinion of Svelozar Petrov, CEO of Jobtiger, that engagement and motivation are of crucial importance for company productivity and results. Clearly set objectives, fair and accurate reporting are well received by people and give them clarity. But employers and managers, in particular, should allow enough time for individual meetings with each team member in order to hear people's fears and concerns and give them the required support where needed. People should also be convinced that not only company prosperity, but their own health and welfare are the management and owners' priority. Company reputation is markedly influenced by people's attitudes and in hard times, both its damages and benefits will be felt in the long term (Petrov, 2020).

In modern times, feedback (not only in the process of traditional annual employee performance appraisals, but also in routine work situations) is not limited to the description and justification of work tasks accomplishment, but is seen as an environment for professional communication with the team and for the provision of reasoned guidance on the development of their competences in the context of combining company and individual goals. Current and objective feedback is an essential part of the employer's brand and is a tool for attracting, engaging and retaining people in the company (Atanasova, 2019).

As a concept that has evolved in time, engagement has been defined in numerous and often controversial ways in literature and company practice. The currently available literature on employee engagement has been defined and explained from various different perspectives by various researchers and practitioners. The concept of engagement has recently received big attention from academicians and practitioners, but the frameworks used contain diverse items and measurement scales for the term Engagement (Robertson, Cooper, 2010). Engagement is seen as a multi-faceted psychological or emotional state, a way of thinking or a performing attitude.

Among the first academics who defined the concept of engagement in 1990 was William Kahn, a professor of organisational behaviour at Boston University's Questrom Business School. According to him, employee engagement is "the harnessing of organisation members' selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances". Engaged employees invest considerable personal resources in terms of time and effort for the successful completion of their tasks and Kahn states that "when employees are treated not only as staff, but also as individuals, relations become more meaningful and in the context of relationships people make the decision about their thorough involvement in their work" (Kahn, 1990).

Luthans (2002) thinks that engagement is an employee's strong desire to remain part of an organisation, belief in and acceptance of company values and goals. Maslach et al. (2001) describe job engagement as characterised by energy, involvement and efficacy. Schaufeli et al. (2002) and Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) define engagement as a persistent, positive affective-motivational state of fulfilment in employees that is characterised by vigour, dedication and absorption. Shuck & Wollard (2010) define employee engagement as an alignment of every individual employee's cognitive, emotional and behavioural state towards organisational outcomes. Other researchers share the view that employee engagement can be defined as a positive, satisfying motivational state of the welfare related to work (Wood et al., 2020). Positive antecedents, such as job resources, positive psychological states and positive leadership and perceived organisational support are routinely linked with increased levels of engagement, whereas aspects such as abusive supervision are linked with decreased levels of engagement (Bailey et al., 2017).

A lot of consultancies specialising in the management of human resources have given definitions of engagement based on their research. CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) defines engagement as the combination of responsibility to the organisation and its values and the willingness to help colleagues. It goes beyond professional satisfaction and is not just motivation (Kicheva, 2013). According to Aon Hewitt (previously known as Hewitt Associates), it is a state of emotional and intellectual involvement of employees with the company and its business. Engaged employees usually: (1) speak

positively of the company, (2) want to be part of it and (3) make additional effort and do their best for the company success. Based on employee responses to "say, stay, and strive", engagement levels can be determined and used as a predictor of business outcomes.

Despite the lack of a unified definition of the concept, employee engagement is a key business engine for the success of an organisation. The view that employee engagement has a significant and quantitative impact on company opportunities to generate revenue and accumulate profit is shared by a number of researchers and practitioners, which is the reason why more attention has been paid to it over the last years. More and more employers are realising that employee engagement is a prerequisite for success.

Employee engagement results in a number of positive outcomes for both personnel and customers (Baldoni, 2013). Engaged employees do their job with passion, work more and are more productive. They are committed to the company and approach their work with energy and enthusiasm. The best employees accept change, look for ways to improve their performance and want everyone to feel personally responsible for the achievement of results. Engaged employees lead to increased work productivity which, in turn, leads to greater customer satisfaction and undoubtedly increases company sales and profit (Chanana, 2020).

The COVID-19 challenges for the business increased the importance of the survival and prosperity of the engaged employees in the current difficult situation and in 2020, the issue of employee engagement became critical to companies. Companies were forced to adapt to new business practices, including remote work. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an incredibly worrying and uncertain scenario in which every aspect of company growth and progress has become virtually impossible. Along with organisations, the human resources involved in them have been severely affected. Due to the lockdown and other restrictions, most companies enforce a policy for remote work in order to allow their employees to work from their homes (Kundu, Nag, 2021).

Since the employees who are teleworking are physically and psychologically separated from their workplaces, they tend to identify themselves with workplace organisation less strongly (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999), perceiving themselves as more independent (Guimaraes, Dallow, 1999). Besides, as the degree of remote work is increasing, there might be fewer noticeable reminders of their affiliation with the organisation (Wiesenfeld et al., 1999) because the physical signs such as symbols, premises and office ambience are increasingly absent from their daily routine. This suggests that with extensive remote work, engagement will decrease.

According to the author of the study, more than 20 years after the findings of the cited researchers, they are no longer fully relevant, because, although physically separated from the workplace, modern employees are not necessarily psychologically separated. New information and communication technologies and platforms such as Teams, Zoom, Google Meet and others allow employees to make video connections in real time, which psychologically integrates them into the work, even though they are not physically in the company's office. In addition, more and more employers are providing opportunities to psychologically connect with their employees through a variety of innovative initiatives such as virtual operatives, video links and even virtual coffee drinking with their employees through the above platforms, etc.

Both positive and negative aspects of remote work are enumerated in the literature. According to the author of the study, one of the positive aspects is that remote work gives employees a greater opportunity to focus on their work tasks. Teleworking employees can reduce contact with their colleagues significantly. Studies reveal that remote work is associated with fewer interruptions (Bailey, Kurland, 2002). Furthermore, remote work is often associated with greater flexibility in the work schedule. Some employees are more productive when they work in the morning, whereas others are more productive late at night.

As Tuyo (2020) reports, research of University Credit Union shows that the employees who are given greater flexibility at work, actually become more productive team members. If a team member needs to leave their desk at home for a personal reason, it will not actually have a negative impact on their productivity on that day. Flexibility on a workday helps teams feel happier (regardless of everything else going on in their lives) and improved communication helps guarantee the completion of all tasks for the day. Remote work makes teams focus on common goals, which facilitates effective task coordination. Since no one supervises teleworkers physically, they have more freedom to decide how, under what conditions and sometimes when to accomplish their work tasks (Kossek, Thompson, 2016).

However, remote work is a challenge to employees as well, for they cannot feel the organisational climate at home, they often lose concentration because of interruptions by family members, which leads to a conflict between work and personal life. According to Chaudhary et al. (2021), numerous studies show that remote work results in serious problems in employees' personal lives caused by the elimination of the clear distinction between working time and family time. Misunderstandings and conflicts between employees and their families rise and such conflicts are not easily solved in this situation. The same authors also find that employee engagement is negatively affected by the number of employee children, i.e. the bigger the number of employee's children, the more difficult it is for them to focus on their work and thus, their engagement declines (Gilpin-Jackson, Axelrod, 2021). According to the author of the present study, it is not the number, but rather the age of the children that negatively affects the engagement of employees. Employees with younger children logically have lower engagements, as these children require more parental attention and this prevents employees from focusing on their work tasks. Employees can hardly remain enthusiastic at work in such a situation and, as a result, productivity and performance are affected, which leads to negative results.

Another weakness of remote work is that some employees do not have the necessary equipment and devices at home, such as a computer, a mouse, printers, scanners, headphones, a web camera, a broadband Internet connection and a special workspace. These inconveniences hamper communication and work completion, which affects employee engagement (Gilpin-Jackson, Axelrod, 2021). According to the author of the study, these inconveniences can be easily overcome if the employer provides the necessary equipment for employees working from home.

In the last two years, some employees have been worried and anxious about their health. Due to the lockdowns and numerous restrictions that were imposed, employees have been working under pressure, in more stressful conditions and duration of work, without long-term job security, and are anxious when working from home, etc. After the big lockdowns had been withdrawn, the business started to return to their offices step by step, but a great number

of employees are still working remotely. All this has changed the ways employees maintain their effectiveness and involvement at work, especially when teams are scattered – some work entirely or partly remotely, others work in the offices. In the conditions of teleworking, companies had to come up with new ways of enhancing or at least maintaining the same level of employee engagement. Companies are trying to reduce their employees' stress and compensate the loss of their social lives through various activities. A lot of organisations encourage their staff to keep the balance between work and family life.

Data from a survey carried out by KPMG (May 2020) reveal that over 75% of organisations have redefined their employees' engagement as well as their organisation's communication strategies in order to guarantee high employee engagement in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the survey, it is understandable that due to the exclusion from the office environment, employees get bored more easily and cannot maintain the quality of work. These are the reasons why the human resource managers of the surveyed companies have taken care of their employees through telephone and video chats and by providing the necessary assistance to make them feel a vital part of the organisation. In addition, employees have been reassured about their job security, financial security, company financial status and the future action plan for workforce retention (Sarmah, Chaudhuri, 2021).

According to Chaudhury et al. (2021), activities such as online practices for family involvement; online training and development programmes; assessment sessions; video conferencing during lunch; online training aimed at developing new skills; online consulting to cope with stress and anxiety; virtual game sessions; brainstorming sessions; etc. help employees significantly to cope with the loss of enthusiasm and inspiration for work as well as to reorganise and improve their personal and company goals. There are various determinants of employee engagement and leadership is one of the important ones. It is beneficial, especially when it comes to assistance and feedback. Regular communication between employees and leaders matters to employees in terms of receiving adequate support. Leaders should hone their skills for human resource management in times of crises, for identification and provision of the necessary resources for their teams and for strengthening the relations between teams in order to exchange additional knowledge and skills.

In the present tense time of anxiety and insecurity resulting from COVID-19 and when companies are forced to save money, Mani and Mishra (2020) explore the non-monetary factors that HR experts could use to enhance employee motivation and engagement. HR managers who used to rely on monetary incentives such as pay rises and other monetary privileges to inspire their employee, now have to rely on non-monetary incentives such as recognition and career development to maintain employee engagement. Implementing measures assisting staff in the balancing between work, professional and private life has a positive effect on employee engagement.

Puneet Kumar (2021) suggests five fundamental components of employee engagement, namely value, voice, variety, virtue, and vision, which HR managers can readily avail of to enhance employee engagement in these perilous times. This 5-element structure can be attributed to both individuals as well as organisations. The model requires very little to no monetary investment, yet it demands a high degree of attention and focus on being able to gain benefits from the application of this model.

Experts worldwide predict that the COVID-19 crisis will not end soon and it will probably take years to go back to some normality and the natural flow of the business will probably take years to recover. In these conditions, organisation HR managers become extremely important for the maintenance of employee engagement.

The major research question is: Which are the factors that would retain employees in an organisation and would engage them with its goals and values in the conditions of remote work? The answer to this research question is given on the basis of an empirical study whose results are presented in the following part of this article. Two working hypotheses are formulated to prove the main research thesis:

1) Employees working remotely for a longer period feel less engaged with the organisation.

2) The flexible working time and the work-life balance in remote work increase employee engagement.

Table 1

Respondent distribution by gender, age, educational degree, place of residence, average monthly income and size of the company respondents work for

Demographic criterion	Number of persons	Relative share (%)
Gender		
Men	49	34
Women	95	66
Total	144	100
Age		
Aged 19 – 29	30	20,8
Aged 30 – 49	96	66,7
Over 50	18	12,5
Total	144	100,0
Educational degree		
Doctoral degree	6	4,2
Higher education	98	68,0
Secondary education	39	27,1
Lower than secondary education	1	0,7
Total	144	100
Place of residence		
Capital city	99	68,7
Big (district) city	19	13,2
Small town	20	13.9
Village	6	4,2
Total	144	100
Company size		
Up to 50 people	46	31,9
Between 50 and 250 people	27	18,8
Over 250 people	71	49,3
Total	144	100
Average monthly income (optional question)		
Up to 1000 lv.	22	30,1
Between 1001 and 2000 lv.	38	52,1
Between 2000 and 3000 lv.	9	12,3
Over 3000 lv.	4	5,5
Total	73	100,0

In order to test these hypotheses, the results from the author's two-stage survey of employees in various Bulgarian organisations are used. The first stage of the survey was carried out in April 2020. It included 144 employees of over 19 and working in public and private Bulgarian organisations of different size (see Table 1).

The first stage of the study was conducted through social media – Facebook and LinkedIn. The sample of the survey is unrepresentative, conducted with the help of volunteers. For that reason, the obtained results should not be generalised for all Bulgarian employees and concern the appraisals and predisposition only of the people who took part in the survey.

The first stage of the study was carried out through an anonymous survey in which respondents could leave their e-mail addresses if they were interested in receiving the survey results. Prior to the conduction of the second stage of the research, the respondents who had left their e-mail addresses were contacted by e-mail. It turned out that as of November 2021, 76 of them continue working remotely all the time or with regular visits to the office. The second stage of the research was carried out with these 76 respondents who kept working remotely (see Table 2).

Table 2

Respondent distribution by gender, age, educational degree, place of residence, average monthly income and size of the company respondents work for

Criterion	Number of persons	Relative share (%)
Gender		
Men	21	27,6
Women	55	72,4
Total	76	100
Age		
Aged 19 – 34	15	19,7
Aged 35 – 55	51	67,1
Over 55	10	13,2
Total	76	100,0
Educational degree		
Doctoral degree	1	1,3
Higher education	61	80,3
Secondary education	14	18,4
Total	76	100,0
Place of residence		
Capital city	57	63,5
Big (district) city	9	11,5
Small town	10	25,0
Total	76	100,0
Company size		
Up to 50 people	25	32,9
Between 50 and 250 people	20	26,3
Over 250 people	31	40,8
Total	76	100,0

Since the time of the second survey is almost two years after the beginning of the pandemic, the research assumptions are that: people have already gotten accustomed to the situation, they are not very stressed, they have gone back to a relatively normal way of living and

working and their perceptions of their engagement and their predisposition towards their employers would be more objective compared to the first survey.

In order to achieve the main goal of the research and to test the main thesis and working hypotheses, basic questions were asked to the respondents (Table 3).

Table 3

Questions included in both stages of the research

№	Question
1	Are you working remotely now?
2	Would you recommend your organisation as a good place to work to friends, relatives and acquaintances?
3	Are you considering leaving your organisation?
4	Do you think you are an engaged employee?
5	Which factors affect your engagement while you are working remotely?
6	Which factors enhance your engagement while you are working remotely?
7	Which factors would increase your engagement with your organisation after the end of the pandemic?
8	Would you like to continue working remotely after the end of the pandemic?

The degree of engagement of employees in the organisation was studied based on their subjective sense of engagement and their attitudes to remain part of the organisation and recommend it as a good place to work for relatives, acquaintances and friends (tested by questions 2, 3 and 4 – see Table 3). According to the author, the engaged employees would stay to work in the organisation and, when possible, would recommend it as a good place to work to their relatives and friends. Attitude is the readiness of the individual to act or react in a certain way. It is always related to evaluation or some expectation. Attitudes in the present study were measured using a one-dimensional method using rating scales. The one-dimensional method is suitable for the study because the aim is to cover the affective components of the attitudes of the respondents' engagement in the study. Additional questions were asked about the reasons why employees would or would not recommend their organisation to relatives and friends and would continue to work in it or leave it, which according to the author, will enrich the results of the study.

The respondents were asked the questions in Table 3 in both surveys to see if there was a change in their attitudes to work and their organisation at the beginning of the pandemic and the introduction of the state of emergency and while teleworking. The present study covers only the subjective attitudes of employees' assessment of their degree of engagement with the company. The survey did not examine the employer's opinion and objective indicators such as level of employee performance, increase in customer satisfaction, improvement in the working climate in the organisation and in employee cooperation, etc., which could be seen as results from employee engagement. Research results are related to the particular group of surveyed respondents and cannot be generalised to all Bulgarian employees. In this regard, the results cannot be used for making universal decisions. However, they can serve as the basis for a more extensive study conducted by organisations and focused on the degree of employee engagement and the methods to enhance it during and after the pandemic, regardless of the mode of work.

3. Analysis of the Results from the Empirical Research and Formulation of Recommendations for Enhancement of Employee Engagement

The results show that 68.1% of the respondents who participated in the first stage of the research were working remotely at the moment of the survey conduction, entirely or with short visits to their office. It is noteworthy that in both stages of the research, the percentage of female employees working remotely is higher, most probably because the number of women who participated in the surveys is considerably bigger compared to that of the male respondents. The highest percentage of employees working remotely as of November 2020 are people living in Sofia (the capital of Bulgaria) and in the big district cities. The author sees the reason for this in the fact that in the smaller places, most of the respondents have jobs requiring more physical presence, while in big cities, most people do jobs in offices and their work can be done from home as well.

At both stages of the research, the predominant part of the respondents say that they would recommend the organisation they work for to their friends, relatives and acquaintances, with the results from the survey conducted in November 2021 showing a higher percentage – 68.4% compared to 49.3% from the survey conducted in April 2020. This can be explained by the efforts made by employers during the last year and a half of the pandemic to make their employees feel secure and valued by the organisation, regardless of the critical situations the organisation encountered when some of the work restrictions were introduced. At the beginning of the pandemic, employees seemed more reserved with regard to recommending their organisation as a good place to work because their organisations had not yet adapted to the new situation and had not adjusted their policies for human resource management, which made employees feel more insecure. Nevertheless, only 8.3% of the respondents in April 2020 and 5.3% in November 2021 say that they will definitely not recommend the organisation they work for as a good place to work (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Respondents' attitudes to recommend their organisation as a good place to work to their friends, relatives and acquaintances
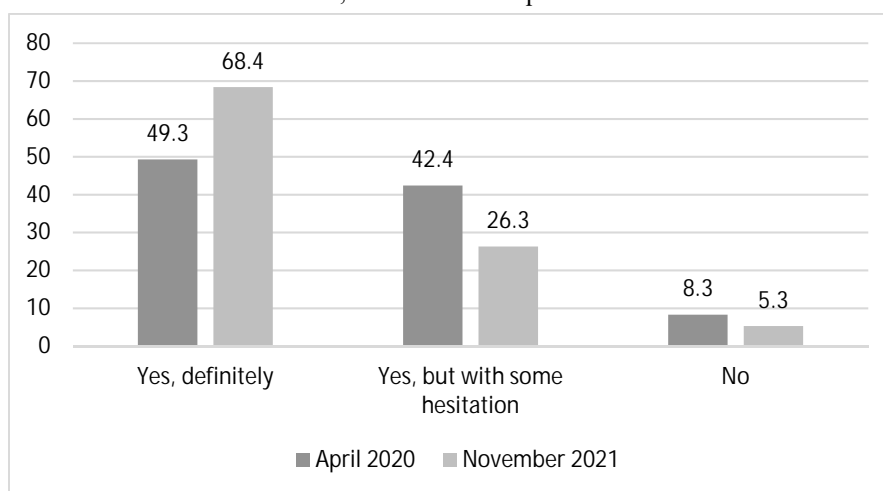
In April 2020 a total of 16.7% of the respondents say they are considering leaving the organisation they work for different reasons: lack of employer's empathy with regard to the introduced state of emergency, income reduction, bad forecast for the organisation's development or because this was the organisation's intention before the pandemic. Over half of the respondents, 55%, confirm that they would not leave because they like their work and organisation, 24.2% – because they are happy with their salary, 15% would not leave because they are afraid that they would hardly find another job in the looming crisis. The respondents who are not considering leaving are mostly graduate employees working in big organisations (over 250 people), which in the author's opinion is most probably due to the fact that these employees are in higher positions in their organisation and are satisfied with their remuneration and working conditions. The results from the survey conducted in November 2021 show that the percentage of the people who are not considering leaving their organisations for different reasons remains almost the same as the one for the previous stage of the research – 54,5% of the respondents like their work and their job, 28.8% are satisfied with their salary, 13.6% are afraid to leave because of the crisis and only 13.1% have considered leaving their organisation. A considerable proportion of the respondents surveyed in November 2021 (22.7%) would not leave their company because they felt their employers' support and concern. In April, this percentage is lower – 14.2%.[3] In the author's view, the similar values in the answer sat the two stages of the study are due to the fact that despite the health and economic crisis in the last two years, employers have been trying to maintain their employees' income and working conditions in order to retain them in the organisation. Providing individualised assistance tailored to each employee's needs has strengthened employee engagement with the organisation.

When asked directly if they find themselves engaged employees, 61.2% of the respondents in April 2020 and 70.9% of those who participated in the survey in November 2021 were positive, 10,7% in April 2020 and 7.3% in November 2021 considered themselves disengaged and the rest are not certain how they feel. The results from the answers to this question give a reason to reject the first working hypothesis, according to which employee engagement decreases with the increased duration of remote work.

The respondents who participated in both surveys clearly realised which are the positive and the negative factors for remote work. Their views on the factors hampering engagement differ significantly in the survey in April 2020 and then in November 2021. At the same time, they are more unanimous with regard to what contributed to their increased engagement during the period of their remote work (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

At the beginning of the pandemic, the surveyed employees had less information about company goals and plans compared to a year and a half later. The reason for this can be the confusion and the lack of clear goals and plans in organisations when the state of emergency and the restrictive measures were introduced. Naturally, much fewer of the employees surveyed in April 2020 (30.2%) felt a lack of personal contact with their colleagues and managers compared to the November 2021 survey (58.3%) when employees had been

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[3] *The total of the percentages is more than 100 because the respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer to the questions about the reasons for considering or not considering leaving the organisation.*

working remotely for more than a year. It is quite logical that more conflicts arise in a team after a long period of remote work, which was reported by 48.9% of the respondents in November 2021 compared to 19% of the respondents who participated in the April 2020 survey. When remote work was introduced, many more of the surveyed employees found it difficult to draw clear boundaries between their private and professional lives (64.9%), whereas over time, they learned to do it.
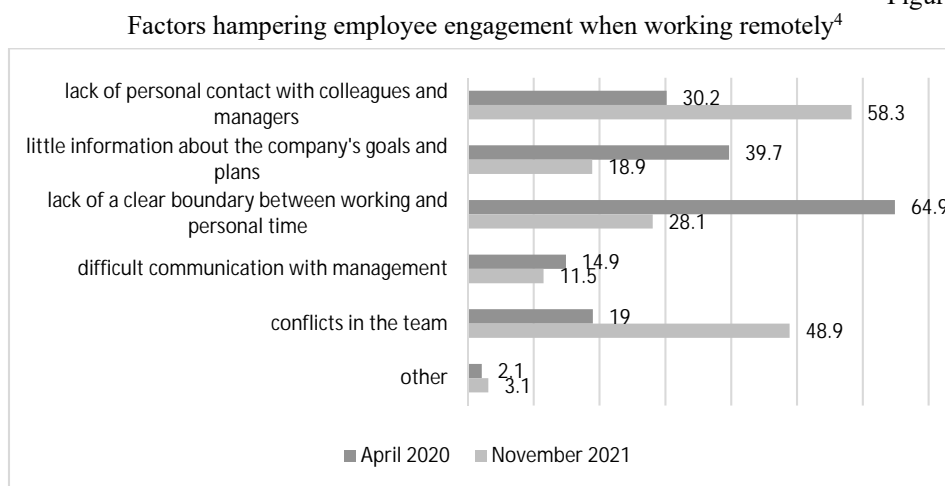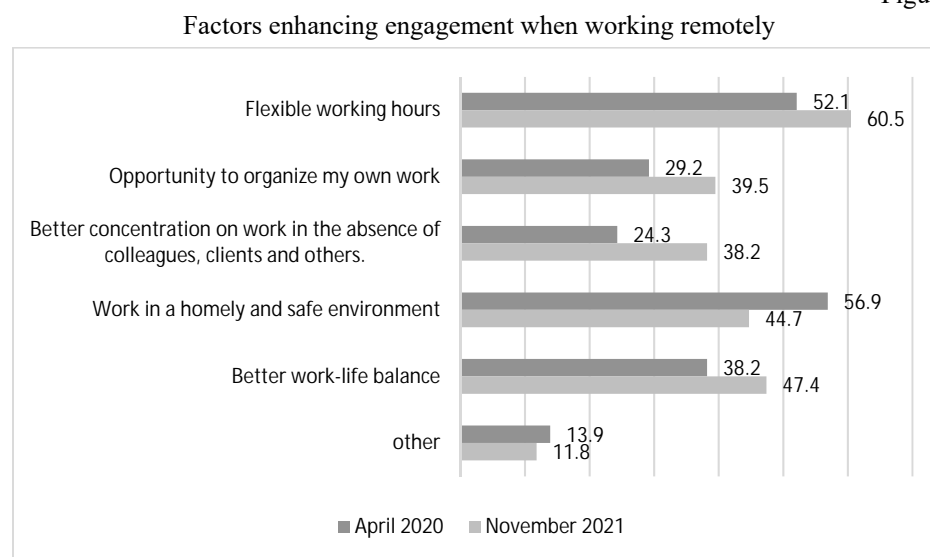
Figure 2

Factors hampering employee engagement when working remotely[4]

Figure 3

Factors enhancing engagement when working remotely

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[4] *The total of the percentages is more than 100 because the respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer.*

It should be noted that at the beginning of the pandemic, employees strongly appreciated the opportunity to work in a safe and comfortable environment, which can be expected given the strict restrictions imposed with the state of emergency as well as the initial shock and anxiety about personal health. Flexible working hours are important for employees both at the beginning of the pandemic and in November 2021. The opportunity for better concentration with remote work is more appreciated by the respondents in November 2021, which according to the author, is due to the fact that at the beginning of the pandemic, schools were closed and the presence of children at home prevented employees from concentrating on their duties. The balance between work and private life as a factor for enhanced employee engagement is found important by the respondents in both stages of the study. After the initial confusion caused by the emergence of the virus and the high appreciation of the opportunity to work in a safe homely environment, increasingly more respondent employees who were surveyed in November 2021 consider this balance particularly significant for the enhancement of their engagement. To sum up, it can be said that the results obtained for this question of the survey confirm the second working hypothesis stating that the flexible working hours and the balance between work and private life when working remotely increase employee engagement.

When asked about the factors that would make respondents more engaged with their organisation after the pandemic, their answers reveal that at the beginning of the pandemic long-term job security and the opportunity to work remotely are most appreciated, which could be due to employees and organisations' insecurity because of the introduced restrictions and the anxiety about employee health (See Figure 4). The November 2021 survey shows that most respondents would feel more engaged if the remuneration was higher and the opportunities for development were better. At the time of the survey, almost two years had passed since the beginning of the pandemic, and respondent employees must have become accustomed to the new working conditions and were already thinking of their future development. Given the serious rise in the prices of electricity and all goods in general, it is not surprising that higher remuneration turns out to have a greater impact in the future as part of the tools for employee engagement and retention.

Figure 4

Factors providing for greater employee engagement with the organisation after the end of the pandemic
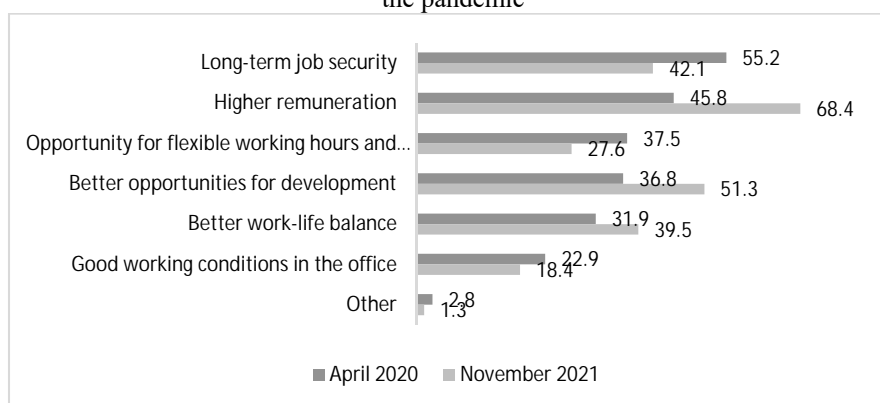
The COVID-19 pandemic has already led to significant changes in the attitudes of both employees and employers. It might change the way companies work worldwide in the future. According to experts in the field of human resources, the business world is ready for a hybrid mode of work, combining work in the office with remote work. The employees who participated in this survey confirm this view. Only about a third of them are not ready or unwilling to work from home in the future. The rest would like to work remotely, though not all the time (See Figure 5). It is noteworthy that the initial enthusiasm of the surveyed employees with regard to remote work in the future has diminished within a year and a half after the beginning of the pandemic – 31,8% in April 2020 and only 19.8% in November 2021 indicate that they would definitely like to work remotely after the pandemic. The reason might be the fact that while teleworking, employees have faced some problems and, over time, they have started missing the personal contact with their colleagues in the office more.

Figure 5

Employees' attitudes towards remote work after the pandemic
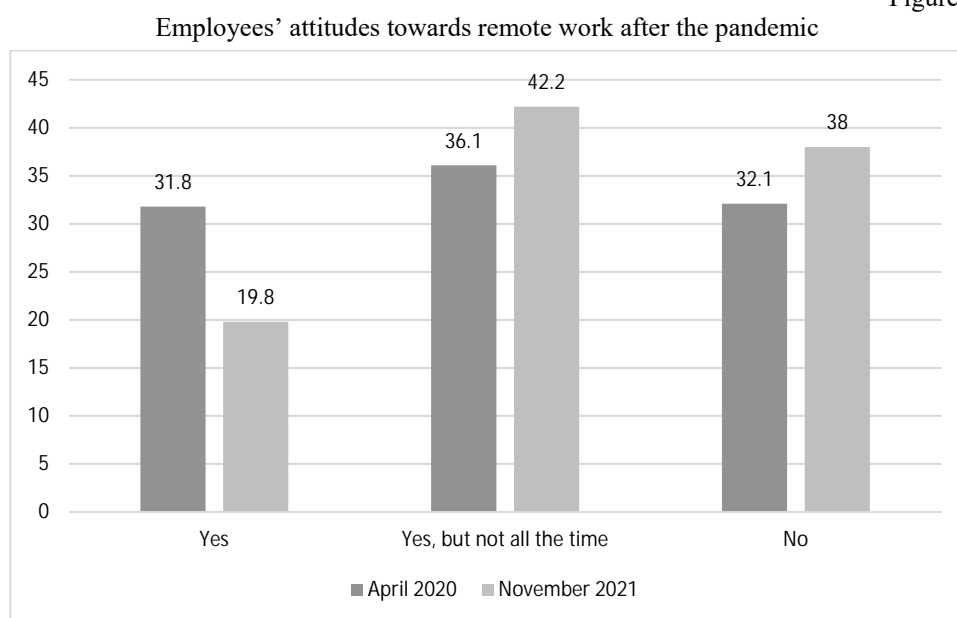
In this situation, employers will have to find the appropriate tools to engage their employees. They will also need a new set of leadership skills. Employee engagement and retention become a top priority – the way of management is a key factor for employee effectiveness. Research results provide for the formulation of several major conclusions and recommendations to employers for enhancement of employee engagement in the future, when some employees will work remotely, others – in the office, and others – in a mixed mode:

1. In the future, remote work will not be perceived by employees as a perk, but as a reality. More and more employees will be interested in flexible working hours and will be requiring to work remotely for at least one or several days a week. Flexible working hours,

including the opportunity for teleworking, would retain valuable staff in a company. However, the transition to a hybrid mode of work requires not only the necessary company tools and infrastructure for remote work, but also substantial changes in security and structural adjustments, which employees should be well aware of. A set of clear guidelines are needed in order to help employees get accustomed to this new way of working. To cope with the challenge of remote work, companies need to plan long-term decisions and adapt their company culture to the new reality.

2. Among the most serious challenges of remote work indicated by the respondents and preventing them from being engaged with their organisation is the lack of personal contact with their colleagues, the difficult communication with managers and the insufficient information about the company goals and plans. To increase employee engagement, companies have to reconsider their communication strategy and focus on the improvement of personal communication. No matter whether employees work remotely or in the office, they should be well informed about company goals and future, the changes planned, company mission, vision and values. Communication needs to be not only sufficient, but also regular. To improve team effectiveness in remote work, companies should encourage staff cooperation and team spirit. Company leaders should pay attention to the impact of the lack of physical contact and to spend enough time for both team meetings (real and virtual) and individual conversations with each team member in order to hear what employees' problems and fears are as well as to provide the necessary support. Employees should be convinced that along with company success, their personal health and welfare are also a company priority. People engage with their work and organisation if they feel supported, so leaders should find a way to support their teleworkers as well.

3. Another significant challenge the respondents working remotely are faced with is the blurred line between work and private life. For an employee working remotely, it is more difficult to make a difference between their working time and family (personal) time. In pandemic times, increasingly more people say that at home, they spend much more time working than in the office and they cannot spend enough time with their families. Hence, employers should actively invest in initiatives facilitating the balancing between employee work and private life. Managers and human resource departments should communicate with employees about their welfare in the workplace. To maintain employee engagement, caring for employee welfare should become part of organisational culture. The good practices for keeping the balance between work and private life when working remotely include: employee's requirement for a daily schedule with particular work tasks, counselling employees on how to organise their workspace at home, and providing individual and professional support for employees. The work-private life balance is different for each employee. This is why company managers should talk to each team member and find out what their personal responsibilities (children, pets, hobbies, etc.) are and give them support so that they could organise their work from home in a way that would help keep the balance between work and private life. Implementing measures facilitating employees to maintain the balance between professional and private life has a positive impact on the level of employee engagement.

Conclusion

Employee engagement is of paramount importance, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic. In difficult times, organisations realise that engaged personnel is of critical importance for their success. The trends for remote work accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic are unlikely to disappear because employees find teleworking more productive and attractive. The organisations willing to avail of the enhanced employee engagement and experience should give their staff the opportunity for remote work even after the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The current study highlighted the main challenges for engaging employees working from home. The main goal of the study was achieved – to assess the extent to which the surveyed employees feel engaged in their organisation when working from home and what are the factors that could increase their engagement

The results from this research showed that employees engage when they feel that their organisation is concerned about their well-being. They give direction to the employers, despite the financial challenges posed by the serious rise in prices in Bulgaria, to continue investing in their employees – not only financially, but also in attitudes and non-monetary incentives to make their employees happy and committed through various programs aimed at enhancing employee engagement. The potential beneficiaries of this study are HR practitioners, internal communicators and managers in various sizes and fields of activity of Bulgarian companies who could improve their communication with employees, identify the factors that engage their employees and make them "ambassadors" of their employer brand, recommending the company as a good place to work for his relatives and acquaintances. The results of the present study could be used as a starting point for further large-scale and representative research in the field of employee engagement in Bulgaria.

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