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Features of social and labour monitoring in the conditions of transition to remote employment

Abstract. The paper discusses the need to develop effective tools for social and labour monitoring of personnel with regard to the transition to remote employment. It shows that the percentage of employees working remotely has increased over time. The events of 2020 only strengthened this trend and accelerated many processes associated with the digitalization of management and production processes.

The purpose of the study is to analyze and assess the features of social and labour monitoring in the context of the transition to remote employment.

Many companies use special software tools to judge the effectiveness of the use of working time. The authors have analyzed the software products most often used by companies in the transition to remote employment and identified the principles that companies should adhere to in order to effectively transform their activities in the current environment. The implementation of such systems is always associated with the ethical side of control. Therefore, finding a balance between control and trust is an important condition for effective work.

A comparative analysis of the level of technical equipment by country has been carried out. The authors have drawn conclusions about the possibilities of switching to a hybrid mode of operation for certain areas of activity in the future.

The greatest potential for remote employment remains among well-qualified workers. The article shows that the possibilities of switching to remote employment directly depend on the structure of the economy (the share of the financial sector and agriculture), as well as on the possibility of automating the type of activity that brings the greatest income to the state.

Keywords: Social and Labour Monitoring; Remote Employment; Labour Productivity

JEL Classification: O1; O4; J24

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Особливості соціально-трудового моніторингу в умовах переходу на віддалену зайнятість

Анотація. У статті розглянуто необхідність розробки дієвих інструментів соціально-трудового моніторингу персоналу в зв'язку з переходом на віддалену зайнятість. Показано, що частка співробітників на віддаленій зайнятості збільшилася з часом. Події 2020 року лише підсилили цей тренд і прискорили багато процесів, пов'язаних із цифровізацією процесів управління та виробництва. Метою дослідження є аналіз та оцінка особливостей соціально-трудового моніторингу в контексті переходу до віддаленої зайнятості.

Велику увагу приділено розгляду механізму контролю за трудовою діяльністю співробітника в умовах віддаленої зайнятості. Багато компаній використовують спеціальні програмні засоби, що дозволяють судити про ефективність використання робочого часу. Авторами проаналізовано програмні продукти, найбільш часто використовувані компаніями при переході на віддалену зайнятість, а також визначено принципи, яких слід дотримуватися компаніям для ефективною трансформації своєї діяльності в умовах, що склалися. Відзначимо, що впровадження таких систем завжди пов'язане з етичною стороною контролю. Тому важливою умовою ефективною роботи є збереження балансу між контролем і довірою.

Проведено порівняльний аналіз рівня технічного оснащення по країнах і зроблено висновки про можливості переходу на гібридний режим роботи в майбутньому для окремих напрямків діяльності. Найбільший потенціал віддаленої роботи зберігається серед висококваліфікованих працівників. Дослідження показують, що можливості переходу на віддалену зайнятість безпосередньо залежать від структури економіки й можливості автоматизації того виду діяльності, який приносить найбільший дохід державі.

Ключові слова: соціально-трудова моніторинг; віддалена зайнятість; продуктивність праці.

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Особенности социально-трудоваго мониторинга в условиях перехода на удаленную занятость

Аннотация. В статье обсуждается необходимость разработки действенных инструментов социально-трудоваго мониторинга персонала в связи с переходом на удаленную занятость. В исследовании показано, что доля сотрудников на удаленной занятости увеличилась со временем. События 2020 года лишь усилили этот тренд и ускорили многие процессы, связанные с цифровизацией процессов управления и производства. Целью исследования является анализ и оценка особенности социально-трудоваго мониторинга в контексте перехода к дистанционной занятости.

Большое внимание уделено рассмотрению механизма контроля трудовой деятельности работника в условиях удаленной занятости. Многие компании используют специальные программные средства, позволяющие судить об эффективности использования рабочего времени. Авторами проанализированы программные продукты, наиболее часто используемые компаниями при переходе на удаленную занятость, а также определены принципы, которым должны следовать компании для эффективной трансформации своей деятельности в сложившихся условиях. Отметим, что внедрение таких систем всегда связано с этической стороной вопроса контроля. Поэтому важным условием эффективной работы является нахождение баланса между контролем и доверием.

Проведен сравнительный анализ уровня технического оснащения по странам, и сделаны выводы о возможностях перехода на гибридный режим работы в будущем для отдельных направлений деятельности.

Наибольший потенциал удаленной работы сохраняется среди высококвалифицированных работников. Исследования показывают, что возможности перехода на удаленную занятость напрямую зависят от структуры экономики (доли финансового сектора, сельского хозяйства) и возможности автоматизации того вида деятельности, который приносит наибольший доход государству.

Ключевые слова: социально-трудоваго мониторинг; удаленная занятость; производительность труда.

1. Introduction

In 2020, many enterprises experienced the need to restructure their activities. In this regard, it was necessary to transform most of business processes, both related to production and management activities. Employees had to find new ways to effectively communicate, plan and control work tasks. Not all companies have effectively coped with this issue. Therefore, searching for tools that allow companies to minimize risks is an urgent task.

2. Brief Literature Review

The use of the theory of ecological systems to diagnose personnel by J. N. Cleveland, Z. S. Byrne and T. M. Cavanagh (2015), D. Renwick et al. (2016), D. Jamali, A. El Dirani, and I. A. Harwood (2015) are of particular interest.

In the article «The trap of flexible work schedule: how unusual working patterns influence the work-life balance of freelancers», D. O. Strebkov and A. V. Shevchuk (2019) discuss the distribution of working time in the conditions of remote work.

In the article «Mapping the future of occupations: Transformative and destructive effects of new digital technologies on jobs», F. Fossen and A. Sorgner (2019) consider the transformation of the employment structure under the influence of digitalization, as well as changes in the content of professional activity in different areas.

In «Coworking spaces: Windows to the future of work? Changes in the organizational model of work and the Attitudes of the Younger Generation», I. Krause analyzes how the organization of work has changed since the 1990s including the emergence of digital forms of employment (Krause, 2019).

Much attention is paid to the issues of labour precarization in a pandemic. In particular, in the article «Precarisation of labor as a growing form of employment of young specialists in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic» (Koksharov et al., 2020), V. A. Koksharov, G. A. Agarkov and A. D. Sushenko consider the specifics of telecommuting, including freelancing, outsourcing and part-time work, as forms of precariat. In the article «Precarious employment: Methodology of measurement», A. V. Kuchenkova focuses on indicators that allow determining the precarization of labour activity (Kuchenkova, 2019)

In his critical review «Digital capitalism» and the old fairytale about lost time», E. Safronov studies the impact of digital technologies on the distribution of working time, assessing the contradictory impact (Safronov, 2020). On the one hand, digital communications facilitate interaction in distributed teams, while on the other hand, they lead to unproductive loss of working time.

3. The purpose of the study is to analyze and assess the features of social and labour monitoring in the context of the transition to remote employment.

4. Results

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for the inevitable process of switching to remote operation. The share of employees who work remotely at least part of the time had been steadily increasing even before the start of the pandemic. The statistics for European countries are shown in [Figure 1](#).

If earlier the process of employees' transition to remote employment used to be conditioned by the interests of both employees and employers and carried out by agreement as soon as both parties of the labour relationship were ready, then, in 2020, such transition took on an avalanche-like character, largely due to external rather than internal factors. Transferring workers to work from home became the only legal opportunity for companies not to suspend their activity during the pandemic.

In such conditions, the possibility of transforming business processes was largely due to the technical equipment not only of enterprises, but also of employees. In the most developed countries, the process of transition to remote employment was much easier. [Figure 2](#) presents statistics on remote employment of workers before and after COVID-19 in the United States.

McKinsey research shows that the greatest potential for remote work remains among highly skilled employees. Without reducing labour efficiency, it is possible to increase the number of remote employees by 20% in all types of activities.

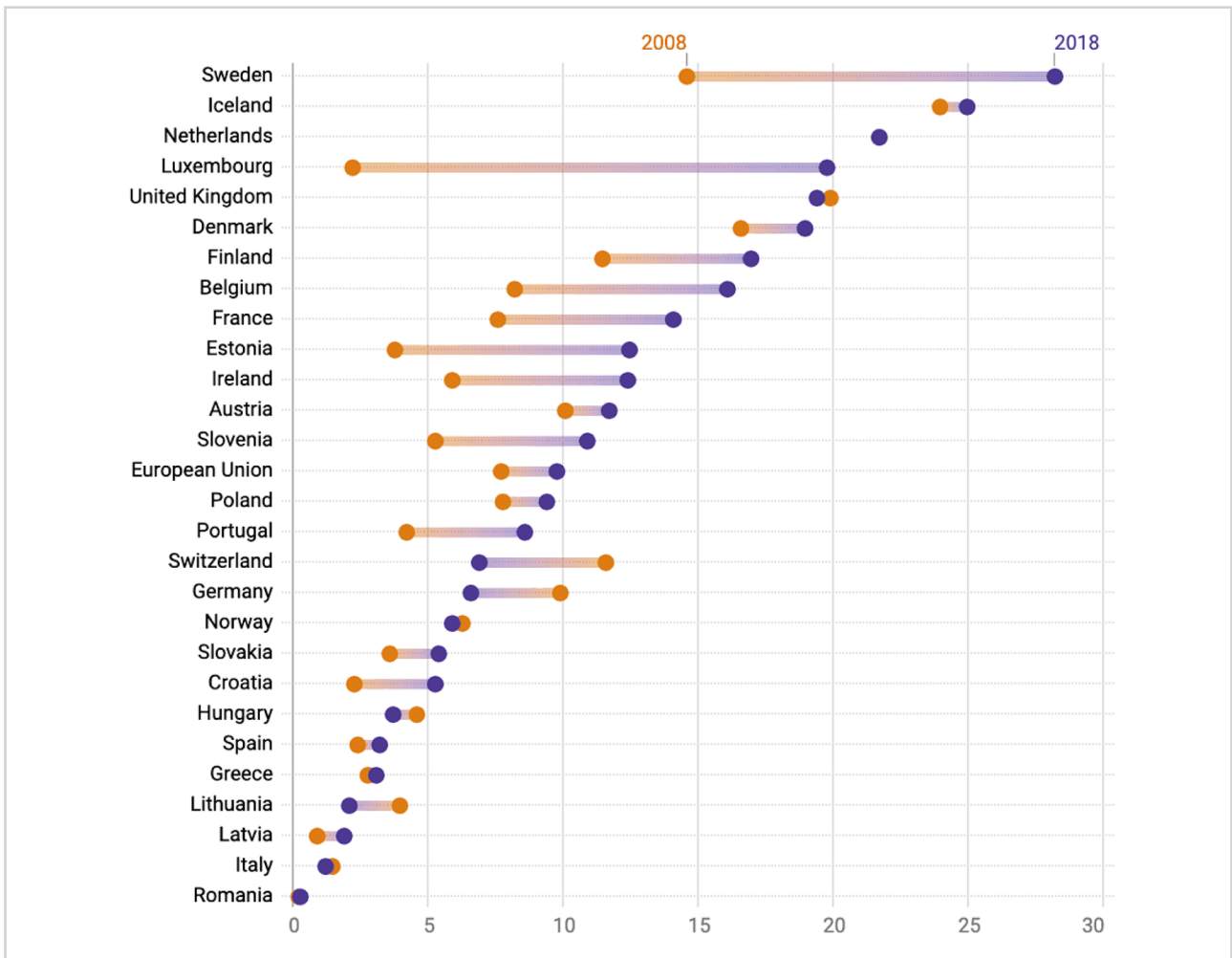


Figure 1:
 Change in the share of European labour force that is at least occasionally working from home as a percentage of the total labour force
 Source: Eurostat (2020)

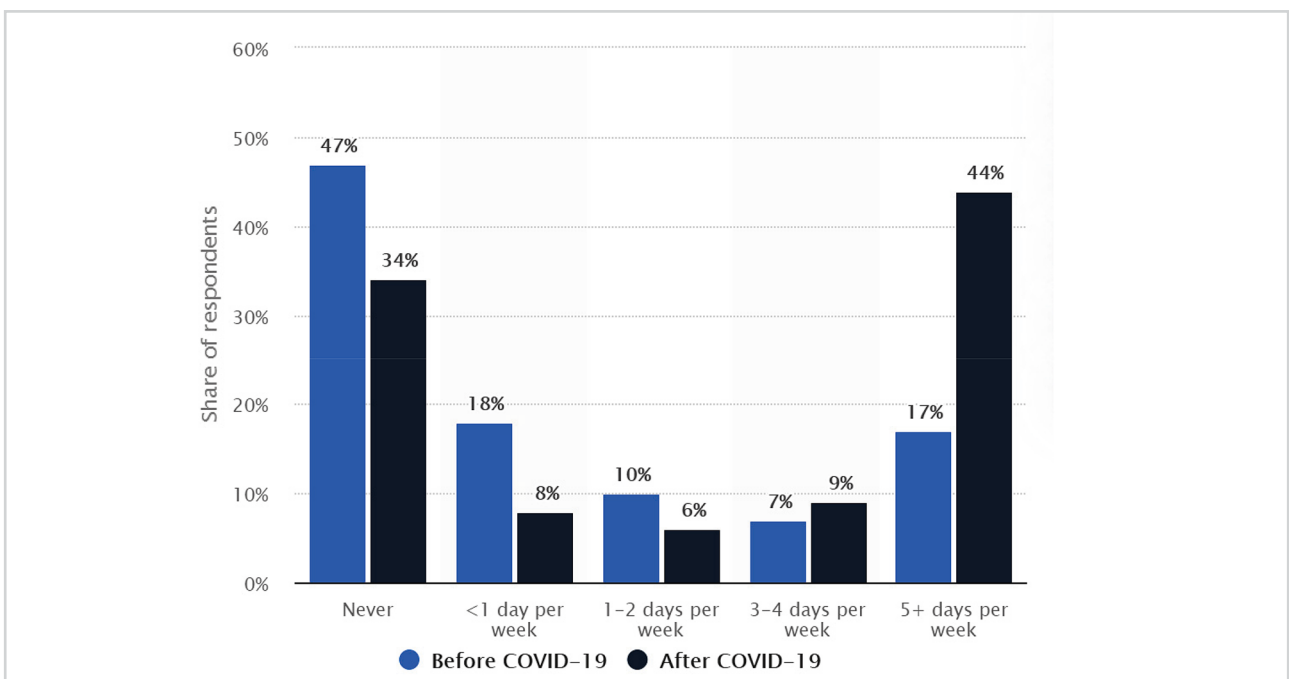


Figure 2:
 Remote work changing trends due to COVID-19 in the United States, 2020
 Source: Statista (2020)

In total, the study analyzed 2,000 types of activities in more than 800 professions and defined which of them have the greatest opportunity for the transition to remote employment (Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows that the finance and insurance sector has the greatest growth potential, since 75% of the working time, according to experts, is spent on activities that can be performed remotely without reducing labour efficiency. Management, business services and information technology also have high potential. In these activities, almost half of the working time is spent on work that can be effectively done remotely. The listed industries are characterized by a significant number of highly qualified workers.

The ability to work remotely across countries as a whole is determined by the structure of the economy. Thus, for the UK economy, business and financial services make up a significant share. Respectively, the potential for remote work is quite large. In developed countries, this figure is up to 30-40% (the amount of time employees can spend working remotely without losing productivity) (Figure 4).

In developing countries, where the share of agriculture and manufacturing is high, the emphasis is shifting towards professions that require physical and manual work. In such sectors, the growth potential of remote employment is about 12-26%. Depending on the size of the population working in these sectors, the potential for shifting to remote employment also differs. In India, for example, employees can spend as little as 12% of their time working remotely without losing productivity. While India is known for its high tech and financial services, the vast majority of its workforce, that is 464 million people, is employed in such spheres as retail trade and agriculture that cannot be done remotely (McKinsey, 2020).

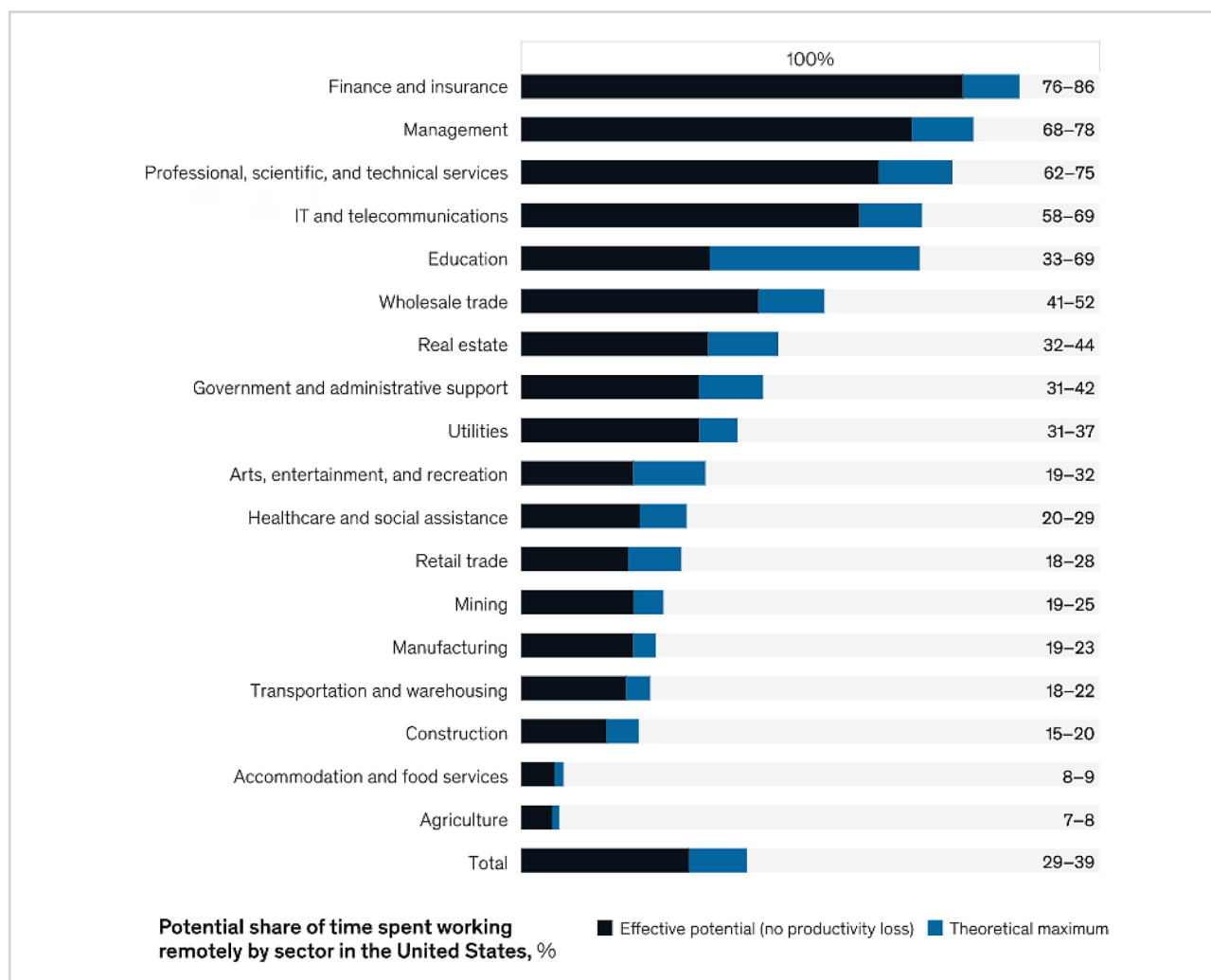


Figure 3:
 Remote work growth potential by type of activity in the United States, 2020
 Source: McKinsey (2020)

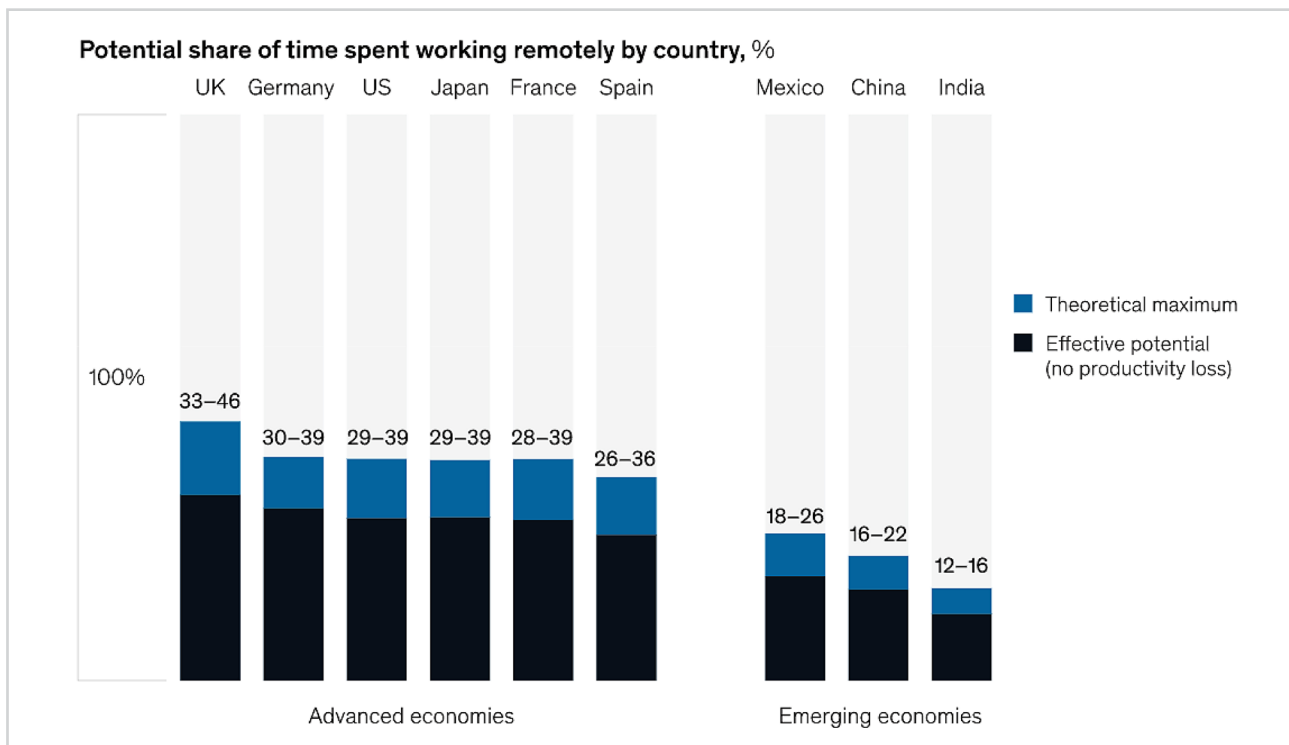


Figure 4:
Remote work growth potential by country, 2020
 Source: McKinsey, 2020

It should be noted that the possibility of introducing remote employment is largely due not to the profession, but to the nature of the work performed. For those specialties whose functional responsibilities require specialized equipment (medicine, chemical laboratories, etc.), a complete transfer to a remote work format is not yet possible.

Under the introduction of remote employment due to COVID-19, not only the nature of work has changed, but also the consumption pattern. This has a significant impact on the transport system and consumer spending. Thus, according to Deloitte research, during the pandemic more than 70% of respondents noted a decrease in purchasing of clothes and shoes, 57% reduced their spending on cosmetics and perfumery, and 45% reduced their spending on ready-made food (RBC, 2020). Also, according to the forecast by the DigitimesResearch agency, the laptop market approached twofold growth in 2020, and this trend will continue in 2021 (cit. by RBC+, 2020).

In the context of the transition of an increasing number of people to remote employment, questions arise relating to reimbursing employees' expenses concerning paying for the Internet, instant messengers, depreciation of personal equipment, etc. In Russia, as of December 2020, the employer was obliged to compensate for the use of equipment, software and hardware, information security and other means belonging to the employee or leased by him, as well as to reimburse the costs associated with their use (Federal Law, 2020).

Organizations that had not previously practiced remote interaction faced a number of organizational problems. One of them was the problem of control.

The basic way to control workers in the conditions of office employment is to control working hours. The specific measures are used, depending on the traditions and technical equipment of the enterprise: for example, registers in which employees sign when entering and exiting the organization's territory can be used, or electronic turnstiles that read individual employee cards. In the context of the transition to remote employment, control of working time is transformed, not abandoned

If an employee has an hourly wage agreement, or if the employee is to be available within a specified period of time, specialized software is used (International Labour Organization, 2020). A fairly loyal option is to control the speed of response to messages in instant messengers, however often it is not limited only to this. Popular time tracking systems use indicators such as:

- logging time;
- analysis of open applications and sites (with the possibility of dividing them into the so called productive ones, i.e. related to work, and unproductive ones, i.e. those that distract from the work process);
- analysis of the activity of pressing keys on the keyboard and using the mouse (situations are revealed when an employee opened an application included in the list of productive applications or sites and left the computer);
- control of presence near a computer using a webcam and face recognition, a fingerprint scanner and other biometric indicators (Shulgina & Maltseva, 2019).

Among the frequently used time tracking programs are the following: Jira, Toggl, Upwork, RescueTime, SkypeTime, Hubstaff, YawareTimeTracker, Bitrix 24, personal software.

The most important principle when working remotely is the balance between control and trust. In addition, the costs of carrying out control activities should be taken into account - they should cover the potential losses from identified unproductive waste of working time. Therefore, in many companies, the collected data is accumulated, but not reviewed on a daily basis. A close analysis is carried out if the employee does not complete the assigned tasks within the agreed time frame. In this case, the manager can check what the subordinate was doing during working hours (Sharovатов, 2020).

A common stereotype and one of the key factors in employers' negative attitudes towards remote work is that in this case the amount of time spent by employees working at home is less than in the office. According to a study conducted by OwlLabs, 51% of the respondents work more than 40 hours a week, with 53% for remote employees and 45% for those on the territory of the organization. The motives for reworking are also different:

- because it is required by supervisors - 38% of the remote workers and 40% of the office workers;
- because they enjoy themselves and do not want to be interrupted - 40% of the remote workers and 17% of the office workers;
- to catch up - 33% of the remote workers and 25% of the office workers;
- to meet unrealistic expectations - 24% of the remote workers and 22% of the office workers (Owl Labs, 2019).

The effectiveness of working remotely can be checked by the degree of adherence to tasks and completion of plans. Collective planning and task-sharing systems have also become widespread during the pandemic. Among the planning systems, the following are often used: Jira, Trello, Redmine, Github, Basecamp, Asana, Wrike, Megaplan, Youtrack, Google Docs, and Bitrix 24.

5. Conclusions

Remote employment has shown a positive trend over the past 10 years. The pandemic has accelerated the digitalization of a number of jobs, which has also contributed to the growth of the number of people working in a similar mode. The potential for the transition to remote employment is largely determined by the structure of the economy and the ratio of specific types of activity. For developed countries, it is higher than for developing ones.

Analyzing the difficulties faced by companies in the transition to a remote mode, the authors have singled out the problem of organizing an effective system of social and labour monitoring as the main one.

The authors have identified the following basic principles on which control should be based when working remotely.

1. Focus on support and results

The employee should understand and share control objectives. If employees feel excessive pressure, they will begin to spend efforts not on solving the tasks facing the organization (high-quality performance of his job duties), but on finding ways to bypass control measures. For example, one can put their photo in front of the webcam and go away from the computer; run a script that simulates typing, etc.

The employee should understand that the supervisor, first of all, seeks not to catch the subordinate on a violation, but to identify problems and help to optimize the work process in order to increase efficiency.

2. Timeliness and regularity

If control is not carried out on a regular basis, employees relax. There is a false impression that no one notices the actions being taken and does not track inaction. This reduces the value of the work being done and weakens motivation. The final analysis should not be postponed: it should be carried out at the moment of obtaining the results on the task. If the task is long-term, the assessment is carried out in stages, for logically separated solution steps or calendar periods (week, month). It is advisable to set reporting dates for communication. If the work is of a team nature, one needs to combine individual and team communications. The application of this principle does not exclude the possibility of unscheduled control measures at a time unknown to the employee in advance.

3. Balance between control and trust

Not all employees have sufficiently developed self-control skills. With a lack of external control, they may relax, postpone solving tasks and completing work until the last moment, and, as a result, may not be able to catch up in time. Excessive control generates unproductive expenditures of working time (when writing a report on work takes more time than performing the work directly), a desire to «cheat the system» and a decrease in the level of motivation. Another point in which it is important to maintain a balance is the individualization of the approach and the equality of requirements for different employees. On the one hand, a well-reputed employee can be given more trust, and a regularly delinquent employee can be controlled more tightly. On the other hand, differentiation of requirements may lead to conflicts in the team.

4. Support for initiative, responsibility and self-organization

If, when working in an office environment, employees are constantly in the sight of the manager and colleagues, external control is carried out automatically, and when they work remotely, internal control comes to the fore. At the same time, the task of the leader is to develop the subordinates' skills of self-organization and to teach them self-control and self-discipline.

5. Priority role of preliminary and current control

Without diminishing the importance of the final control, it should be noted that one cannot be limited to it only. If an employee is given a task and, until the summing up, remains alone with it, there is a great risk of misunderstanding the requirements, incorrect allocation of resources and overestimation of knowledge. When these miscalculations are identified at early stages, the supervisor has an opportunity to adjust the action plan, i.e. to clarify the statement of the task, involve other employees in the work and redistribute the workload. Subsequently, it is more difficult to do this, since high costs are required. Task trackers, regular individual and team communications can become convenient tools for monitoring, an example of which is presented in Table 1.

6. Active introduction of modern information and communication technologies

It is important to take into account the level of competence of employees. If the team does not have enough knowledge, the leader should initiate training.

Table 1:
Options of organizing working meetings online

Type of meeting	Key objectives	Frequency	Format
Operational team meeting	1. Analyze the progress since the previous meeting. 2. Prepare an action plan for the next meeting.	Weekly or daily, depending on the nature of the tasks to be solved.	Audio or video conference (Skype, Zoom, Discord)
Individual communication between a supervisor and a subordinate	1. Set tasks. 2. Assess the current status of problem solving. 3. Determine the role in the project. 4. Assess work efficiency.	Daily, in the background	Audio, video, text messengers (Telegram, WhatsApp), telephone calls
Coordination team meetings	1. Exchange information. 2. Carry out short-term planning.	As needed	Video, audio conferencing, task tracker sharing
Status meetings	1. Outline the terms and stages of completing tasks. 2. Appoint responsible persons. 3. Determine the evaluation criteria.	Weekly	Audio or video conference (Skype, Zoom, Discord), shared document repositories
Informal interaction of colleagues	1. Exchange experience in solving tasks. 2. Ensure engagement.	Daily in the background.	Messengers, social networks.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data of Deloitte (2020)

The analysis of software products used by companies in the transition to remote employment has been carried out; the basic principles of organizing employees' activities on a remote basis have been revealed.

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