

Remote work is here to stay – are HR practices in your organization up to date?

The aim of this study is to bring together literature concerning remote work and well-being-oriented human resource (HR) practices. The Covid-19 pandemic introduced remote work on a large scale and changed permanently the way we work. Several organizations, which rolled out remote work at short notice, are shaping their HR practices. At the same time, organizations that were remote working before the pandemic are forced to re-evaluate their HR processes. Thus, bringing together knowledge about remote work and HR practices is relevant.

Remote work research has focused on exploring how remote work affects employees and what should be done in organizations in order to make it beneficial. Depending on how remote work is implemented, it can either improve or impair work-life balance, performance and job satisfaction. Additionally, harm to social interaction and career prospects can be expected if these potential outcomes are not considered. The research literature reveals recurring aspects that require attention when benefits of remote work are pursued: sufficient resources for adoption of remote work, supportive management culture, organizational climate of trust, effective formal and informal communication, autonomy in work and suitable job design.

Well-being at work has gained attention during the past decade, as the fast-changing global work environment and knowledge-intensive work cause stress and health problems. Consequently, the discussion of relationship between HRM and performance has changed its focus from organizational to individual level: organizational goals should not be pursued at the cost of employee well-being. When organizations go for mutual gains, well-being is not regarded as means to achieve performance but an end in itself.

As a response to the scholarly discussion, Guest (2017) introduces an HRM approach promoting employee well-being. Guest's model includes provisionally five sets of HR practices that represent antecedents to employee well-being and a positive employment relationship – two domains influencing individual and organizational performance. These five bundles of HR practices from the perspective of remote work are discussed below.

The first set of HR practices, ***investing in employees***, addresses recruitment, selection, training, development and career support. Regarding remote work, investments in training of both managers and employees are needed: managers have to improve their e-leadership skills, whereas employees should train self-leadership and time management. Remote work competencies required from both managers and employees should be considered in recruitment and selection. Weakened career prospects belong to drawbacks of remote work. Thus, HR practices should ensure that working “out of sight” does not impair career opportunities.

Secondly, ***providing engaging work*** is necessary for wellbeing, which is enhanced when employees are allowed to design their work, empowered to make decisions and able use their skills. Similar autonomy and skill utilization are necessary in remote work, where managers and subordinates work at distance from each other. Additionally, suitability of tasks should be addressed in remote work; job design is required to ensure that remote work does not burden office-based colleagues and weaken their job engagement.

Thirdly, HR practices supporting communication, employee health and safety and employment security promote ***a positive social and physical environment***. Intensive internal communication, that prevents professional and social isolation, is vital in remote work and requires more effort than face-to-face communication at the office. Formal knowledge sharing enables collaboration and innovation, while informal communication between co-workers is needed in order to develop relationships and enhance organizational commitment. In addition, ergonomics can be improved by providing employees computer equipment and office furniture to their remote office. In emergency situations such as pandemics, natural disasters and terrorist threats, remote work ensures business continuity and thereby provides employment security.

The fourth set of HR practices, including e.g. two-way communication and employee surveys, refers to ***voice***: employees have a say in decisions affecting them. A feeling of being heard and getting sufficiently information builds trust and creates foundation for effective communication in remote work.

The fifth set of HR practices focuses on the **organizational support** covering supportive and participative management and organizational climate, flexible work arrangements and developmental performance management. Rolling out a remote work program requires many kinds of organizational support, for example investments in ICT infrastructure, development of HRM and sufficient resources for training and tools. To overcome the main barrier for remote work, i.e. managerial attitudes, management culture requires adjustment. In a desirable organizational climate, managers trust that remote workers are doing a good job and remote workers trust that they are treated equitably despite their physical location. Finally, performance management in remote work should be based on results.

To summarize, remote work should be embedded in organization's all HR practices; otherwise, negative outcomes of remote work, such as job dissatisfaction, job loneliness and lower job engagement, are expected. Well-being-oriented HR practices offer a path to individual well-being and organizational performance arising from remote work.

References

Guest, D. E. (2017). Human resource management and employee well-being: Towards a new analytic framework. *Human Resource Management Journal*, 27(1), 22-38.