

THE CHALLENGES OF HR DEPARTMENTS IN HYBRID WORK CONDITIONS

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Purpose: The aim of this paper is to present the challenges faced by HR departments in the hybrid work system. In particular new tasks set for HR departments in the conditions of hybrid work organization and competencies necessary for HR professionals to effectively deal with new tasks and challenges caused by the hybrid work settings were analyzed.

Design/methodology/approach: A systematic review of world literature was carried out using the following databases: Proquest, EBSCO, Emerald, JSTOR, Science Direct and BAZEKON. The results were supplemented with conclusions from two research conducted by the author on samples of over 100 companies operating in Poland.

Findings: A list of tasks anticipated for HR departments as a result of the introduction of a hybrid work system was created. A set of competences necessary for the effective performance of tasks was also proposed.

Research limitations/implications: The limitation of research is a very short research time span and large differences in the specificity of companies making it difficult to propose a universal model for each company.

Originality/value: The paper presents list of tasks and set of competences necessary in new conditions created by the introduction of hybrid working systems. It can be valuable for researchers and practitioners.

Keywords: hybrid work, HR department, HR professionals.

Category of the paper: research paper.

1. Introduction

The concept of remote work or hybrid work, where stationary and remote work is combined, is not a new idea. Already in 1974, the term “telecommuting” was used to describe work performed using ICT tools (Nilles, 1974) and in 1983, remote work was defined as organizational work, performed outside the normal boundaries of space and time (Olson, 1983). The possibility of so-called teleworking allowed for temporary work at home, for various reasons. However, as a result of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has

changed dramatically, due to the fact that it was mandatory to switch to remote work, and thus somehow force employees to perform work from home. Adhering to new work arrangement was not the same in different EU countries, depending on their level of adaptability (Iordache et al., 2021). Nevertheless, HR departments everywhere had to implement new procedures even though there were yet no legal regulations available (Zaręba, 2021), office work had to be reorganized and other challenges such as: balancing multiple stakeholders needs, tensions between strategic and operational roles were faced (Collings et al., 2021).

The necessity to create new models for hybrid work is another step in the process of evolution of HR function (Ramlall, 2009), and this step requires creating a list of new tasks and acquiring by HR professionals appropriate competences (Bell et al., 2006), allowing them to effectively meet new challenges. Research gap concerns exact tasks and competences needed by HR professionals in this new circumstances. Thus, the aim of this paper is to present the challenges faced by HR departments in the hybrid work system. The following research questions were formulated:

1. What new tasks have been set for HR departments in the conditions of hybrid work organization?
2. What competencies are necessary for HR professionals to effectively deal with new tasks and challenges caused by the hybrid work settings?

2. Methods

To achieve the goal of this paper, a systematic review of world literature was carried out. The methodology of systematic literature review involves the implementation of several specific stages (Czakoń, 2011) which was shown in Table 1. In the first phase, the above-mentioned purpose of the research was defined. Initially, the basic literature was selected using a review of the following databases: Proquest, EBSCO, Emerald, JSTOR, Science Direct and BAZEKON. In the next step, the selection of publications was made by searching for the following keywords in abstracts: "hybrid work", "remote work", "Human Resources", "HR", "HR department" in a group of scientific articles published since 2019 in Polish and English. It was decided to narrow down to the last three years, due to the desire to obtain the latest research results, showing the impact of changes caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this phase of the study, 114 articles were obtained for analysis.

Search results were developed by checking possible repetitions of articles or non-scientific articles and verification of the content of abstracts. It was decided to remove 59 articles. It should be underlined that many papers covering this subject are published in non-scientific journals which shows interest in the issue but lack of reviewed research. In the next stage, an analysis of the full content of the articles was carried out and on this basis it was decided to remove another 28 articles with content inadequate to the area of research. As a result, 27 studies were obtained. It is worth mentioning the limitations of the method used related to limited access to certain content. It was decided to choose the databases to which the author had access at least in part full-text, and the search mechanism made it possible to select the title and abstract. Data on the selected articles are included in the bibliography. The selection of publications was carried out in June 2022. In the next phase, a content analysis was carried out. Subsequently, the results of the research were developed.

Table 1.
Research methodology

Stage number	Description					
Stage 1.	Defining the purpose of the research					
Stage 2.	Selection of databases: PROQUEST, EBSCO, EMERALD and BAZEKON					
Stage 3.	Selection of articles with criteria as follows: a scientific article, published after 2019 in English or Polish. Keywords: hybrid work, remote work, HR, Human Resources, HR department					
Stage 4.	Selection of 114 articles:					
	Proquest 37 art.	Bazekon 5 art.	EBSCO 37 art.	Emerald 7 art.	JSTOR 17 art.	Science Direct 11 art.
Stage 5.	Removal of 87 articles (including 2 repetitive, 28 inadequate, 57 unscientific)					
Stage 6.	Analysis of the remaining 27 articles' content					
Stage 7.	Conclusions, summary of research					

Source: own study.

The results were supplemented with conclusions from the research conducted by the author on samples of over 100 companies operating in Poland. Details of the research have been presented in Table 2.

Table 2.
Details on empirical research

No.	Number of respondents	Respondents' characteristics	Main area of research	Research tool	Year
1.	102 HR professionals (managers, specialists)	large organizations operating in Poland and representing 10 industries	Impact of COVID-19 on HR activities	CATI interview	2020
2.	103 HR professionals (managers, specialists)	large and medium organizations operating in Poland and representing 10 industries	Wellbeing in HR strategy	CATI interview	2021

Source: own study.

3. Results

3.1. New tasks set for HR departments in the conditions of hybrid work organization

Performing teleworking resulted in an obligation for the employer to provide the employee with appropriate equipment with insurance, training in its operation and technical assistance (Gierszon, 2021; Pokojski et al., 2022). Meanwhile, it was only in 2020 that the remote work (or so-called home office) began to be regulated. Further legal regulations in this area should be expected, while tasks related to ensuring appropriate working conditions at home are usually performed by HR departments. There may be debates around discrimination, infringement of human rights and breach of contract claims thus employers should implement policies to uphold non-discriminatory practices in home-working system (Nath, Lockwood, 2021). Organizations preparing for hybrid work (managers, HR professionals, staff members) should take into account the risk of creating inequality in employee's visibility which may influence work assignments (Macke et al., 2022).

It seems though that the very first task of HR in cooperation with the management boards of companies in the post-pandemic era is to determine which model of work organization to adopt. Numerous ideas emerged lately e.g.: fully onsite (with or without rotating teams), hybrid/partially remote (with onsite "anchor" days and "flex" days or fixed in and out) or primarily remote (periodic – onsite once per month, seasonal, fully fluid where an employee decides about the location or the model with no possibility of working onsite) (BCG, 2021). Many factors should be taken into consideration such as, the industry, specifics of job position, performance effectiveness (Aslan et al., 2022) and employees characteristics: gender, position (Wong et al., 2021) and age (Murphy, 2021), which makes the tasks complex and difficult to implement. According to research the majority of employees are expecting changes of work settings voting for flexibility and the hybrid model (Diab-Bahman et al., 2020) seeing this as a benefit for a better work-life balance, greater responsibility for working time and independence.

Telework and hybrid work models affect i.e. reduce the building occupancy and raise new questions about office space, and energy consumption (Duarte et al., 2022). As telework grows, it is important to address also energy efficiency and CO₂ emission and that will also be work performed by HR departments. For HR employees, this can be a completely new area of activity that they have not dealt with before.

An important task that will be carried out in a hybrid way by HR departments is the acquisition and onboarding of new employees. A large part of the recruitment process may be automated and organizations may use tools based on artificial intelligence, analytics, augmented or virtual reality, such as: ATS (applicant tracking systems), CV screening, first screens with chatbots, online tests which were a novelty to many before COVID but may stay as "new-normal" for good (Kuzior et al., 2022). A virtual helpdesk in the form of multilingual

chatbots may be very supportive not only for candidates but also for employees (Gatan et al., 2021). The readiness of candidates – especially of different ages – to use this type of technology in recruitment in a separate issue.

During the COVID pandemic, internships were carried out online or in e-learning form by some employers, which was met with positive opinions of students (Grzeszczak, 2021). However, such process requires from HR creating new online programs and implementing them properly considering candidates' and company's needs (AlGhamdi, 2022). Another issue is the onboarding of new employees as the key issue of creating bonds with the organization may be weakened due to the lack of direct contact with employees and the office. Nevertheless, HR professionals should design the process in such a way to respond to changed expectations for more personal, digital, timely and rewarding experience (Jeske, Olson, 2021). Flexible work may result in the need of implementing novel approach based on bi-level modeling in recruitment when flexible and hybrid work plans are offered for candidates.

Another area is implementing and operating HRIS, i.e. Human Resource Information Systems which was increased as a result of pandemic. There are numerous advantages that HRIS is offering such as improving service quality, calculating efficiency, speed, bringing value to the position of HR in organizations and saving costs (Vahdat, 2021). For different organizations COVID has acted as a “technological catalyst” in HR departments (Tursunbayeva, 2021). Apart from recruitment and onboarding, which have already been mentioned also employee training, employee data management, tracking attendance, payroll management, expense management, maintaining compliance, exit management and performance management are listed as HR processes that may be automated (Turcu, Turcu, 2021).

The issue which is often risen is wellbeing of employees working remotely (Juchnowicz, Kinowska, 2021; Rożman et al., 2021; Wierzchowska, 2021). Both researchers and managers discussed such challenges as: managing work-life balance (Yang et al., 2021), lack of social relations (Tuzovic, Kabadayi, 2021), problems with effectiveness, time and tasks management, so called “always-on” life (Risi, Pronzato, 2021), and others. At the same time, HR departments implementing activities supporting the wellbeing of employees report the following challenges: lack of employees' involvement (33%), treating the idea of well-being as a temporary fashion (32%), lack of financial resources (28%), lack of legal solutions (13%), lack of managers' involvement (10%), pressure on quick results (5%) (Tabor-Błazewicz, 2021).

Research on HR Business Partners tasks conducted by the author has shown changes caused by the COVID pandemic. The introduction of changes and building relationships with employees were indicated as most important both before and during the pandemic. On the other hand, the order of importance of these tasks has changed and the essence of introducing changes by HRBP has definitely strengthened (“implementing changes”, indicated as the first priority by 52% of respondents and the second priority by 46% of respondents). The process of “building relationships with employees” fell to the second place, but was still important for

organizations (34% indicated it as the first priority, and 28% as the second priority) (Tabor-Błażewicz, 2022).

3.2. HR professionals' competencies necessary to deal with new tasks and challenges

Digital competence is the first group of competences necessary to carry out tasks related to the hybrid workplace. The need to carry out many personnel processes using ICT tools, organize virtual onboarding, develop employees using e-learning platforms, or support HRIS programs resulted in a rapidly accelerated development of digital competences, as employees were forced to learn how to use digital work tools and work platforms (Chafi et al., 2022; Vahdat, 2021). In this context, the attitude of employees, especially their willingness to cooperate with machines is also important. For some people, the possibility of algorithms taking over some of the tasks may pose a perceived threat to work safety.

Secondly, there is a need to possess legal competence concerning new rules and regulations implemented as a result of new working models. Changes in the law occur very quickly and these competences must be updated on an ongoing basis. Certainly, there will be a need to organize trainings for HR employees covering the scope of legal changes and ways of implementing them in business practice.

In the contemporary business environment, analytics play an increasingly important role understood as providing management boards with specific calculations of the costs and benefits of the actions taken. The HR department or HR Business Partner is often involved in this role. As a result of the adoption of the hybrid model, the competences related to analyzing the effects and calculating the results of the transition to remote work will gain in importance (Diab-Bahman et al., 2020; Radonić et al., 2021).

Last, but not least, it is propose to implement skunks works approach in HR departments as a response to non-routine people-related challenges and the need to operate quickly and effectively. Skunks works structures are understood as flexible, self-driven teams of employees empowered to work rapidly with minimal management constraints and achieve innovations (Biron et al., 2021).

4. Discussion and conclusions

The review of the literature resulted in listing a framework of tasks anticipated for HR departments in connection with the introduction of hybrid work. The most important element is to decide in cooperation with the management boards which model of hybrid work is suitable for a given organization. This task is not easy, due to the changing economic, social and personal conditions. The future may show that the chosen model is not entirely suitable and needs to be re-adapted, taking into account the attitude of employees and new circumstances.

Next, it is necessary to review personnel processes and introduce automation and support for two groups of employees: those staying in the office and working remotely. In this situation, we are dealing with two separate groups of employees, which is also not beneficial from the point of view of building organizational ties, an atmosphere of trust and cooperation between employees.

On the basis of the tasks, an outline of competences necessary for employees of HR departments has been created. Digital competences, which are necessary to perform tasks in a hybrid work organization, play a special role. This can lead to inequality among HR employees caused by lower digital knowledge by older employees who have been working in HR departments for many years and their possible negative attitude towards such changes. It is necessary to train these people so that they can fully effectively carry out the tasks entrusted to them and give them support in the process of changes.

There are research limitations caused by:

- a very short period of time of observation,
- multiplicity of approaches to the hybrid work system due to the characteristics of companies, workplaces and employee needs, which results in problems with creating a universal set of tasks,
- differences in the “starting position” of companies – some organizations have already introduced the possibility of remote work for years and had well-established rules and procedures, while for some companies hybrid work was a complete novelty, requiring a comprehensive change in the organization of work,
- dependence on organizational culture and national culture influencing the willingness of employees to switch to hybrid work, managers' approach to employee control, and HR's ability to propose and implement changes.

The research contributes to filling the research gap considering the next phase of the development of the personnel function resulting from the transformation of the work organization from a stationary to a hybrid model. They point to changes in the traditionally understood HR function and its modernization and adaptation as a result of external changes.

In practical business terms, research contributes to a better understanding by companies what roles HR can play in the transformation to a hybrid work system, what tasks can be assigned to HR and HRBP and of what competencies should be required of candidates for positions in HR departments so that they can fully effectively carry out new tasks.

Further research are needed to recognize other aspects of implementation of hybrid work system, especially how wellbeing of employees changes over time while performing work in remote way.

Summary

The article presents challenges faced by HR department resulted from implementation of the hybrid work system. The systematic review of literature along with results of research made it possible to create a list of tasks and set of competencies required from HR professionals. The most important task is to decide which model of hybrid work would be appropriate for the organization. Then, which personal processes may be automatized or performed in a hybrid way. Thus, digital competences play a crucial role in managing HR issues. The problem is new and further research are needed to recognize different conditions for implementation of hybrid work systems.

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