The Impact of Hybrid Work on the Quality of Interpersonal Relations in the HR Department of the Enterprise – A Case Study

Mirosław Wójcik

Warsaw University of Technology, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1167-7036

Magdalena Poroszewska

Warsaw University of Technology, Poland
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4323-5163

Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this article is to answer the question of whether the implementation of hybrid work organization results in a quality change of interpersonal relations in an HR Department.

Methodology: To achieve the stated goal, the authors decided to conduct a case study in a large, dispersed organization. Empirical data were obtained through an online research questionnaire, an individual in-depth interview, and the IT systems of the organization under study.

Findings: As a result of the study, it was shown that in the examined HR Department, the implementation of hybrid work organization did not change the quality of employee relations. The results contradict some existing sources, making us assume that the impact of hybrid work on employee relations is not unequivocal. Therefore, there are possible situations where its negative or positive effect does not exist. This opens a wide range of possibilities for applying hybrid work methods without negatively impacting the organization.

Originality/value: The literature is scarce when it comes to analyzing the impact of hybrid work organization on employee relations. Most of the available material is based on reports from consulting companies and its scientific value is impossible to examine. Even less literature addresses the issue of interpersonal relations in the post-pandemic era.

Keywords: hybrid work, interpersonal relations, relational capital, relational quality, human resources, pandemic, case study.

JEL: M100; M140; M500; M540; M590

Wpływ hybrydowej organizacji pracy na jakość relacji międzyludzkich w obszarze HR przedsiębiorstwa – studium przypadku

Streszczenie

Cel: celem artykułu jest odpowiedź na pytanie, czy wdrożenie hybrydowej organizacji pracy prowadzi do jakościowej zmiany relacji międzyludzkich w dziale HR.

Metodologia: aby osiągnąć postawiony cel, autorzy postanowili przeprowadzić studium przypadku w dużej, rozproszonej organizacji. Dane empiryczne uzyskano za pomocą kwestionariusza badawczego online, indywidualnych wywiadów pogłębionych oraz przy wykorzystaniu systemów informatycznych organizacji poddanej badaniom.

Wyniki: w wyniku badania wykazano, że w badanym obszarze HR wdrożenie hybrydowej organizacji pracy nie wpłynęło na jakość relacji między pracownikami. Wyniki te stoją w sprzeczności z niektórymi istniejącymi źródłami, co pozwala przypuszczać, że wpływ pracy hybrydowej na relacje między pracownikami nie jest jednoznacznie określony. Istnieją także sytuacje, w których taki wpływ nie występuje. Otwiera to szeroki zakres możliwości wdrożenia hybrydowej organizacji pracy bez negatywnego wpływu na organizację.

Oryginalność/wartość: literatura dotycząca wpływu hybrydowej organizacji pracy na jakość relacji między pracownikami nie jest bogata. Większość dostępnych materiałów opiera się na raportach firm konsultingowych, których wartość naukową trudno ocenić. Podobnie niewielu badaczy podejmuje problematykę relacji międzyludzkich w erze postpandemicznej.

Słowa kluczowe: praca hybrydowa, relacje międzyludzkie, kapitał relacyjny, jakość relacji, zasoby ludzkie, pandemia, studium przypadku.

1. Introduction

Although not new, hybrid work became widespread globally only in the era of the COVID-19 pandemic. Earlier cases of applying these methods should be treated rather in terms of interesting curiosities. Because of their selectivity, treating them as objects of scientific observation and sources of theoretical generalizations is difficult. Only the context of the global pandemic, which eliminated many formal, legal, or social constraints, forced or allowed organizations to widely implement solutions and tools of hybrid work, making it a common phenomenon. In the first period of the pandemic, hybrid work implementations were avalanche-like and unstructured. Organizations forced to operate under conditions of uncertainty, lacking the necessary know-how, implemented new solutions in the way they could (Al-Habaibeh et al., 2021). Thus, during this period, the effect of change materialized diversely and unevenly. For example, organizations in which more importance was given to the formal way in which work was carried out than to its results were much slower to absorb the change (Rudolph et al., 2020), as were companies that did not have a previously developed IT infrastructure (Arora & Suri, 2020). However, assessing the impact of implemented solutions should be considered not only from the perspective

of labor efficiency but also from the perspective of employee health and mental hygiene. It is telling that the COVID-19-related increase in stress indicators was higher than before the pandemic despite the stabilization and normalization of work in the "new" reality (O'Bannon, 2020). The importance of social relationships in the workplace is often explicitly recognized in studies on human motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and job design (Grant, 2007). Employees' belongingness to an organization is constructed through different resources such as their daily social interactions and exchanges with their peers and supervisors. The shift to remote work has reduced multiple opportunities for social interaction, including support and feedback (Golden & Veiga, 2008), especially during the pandemic with even fewer opportunities for FTF interactions (Hwang et al., 2020). According to Bertoni (2021), family and social factors also play a role in assessing and perceiving the work organization transition process. Changing the work organization by moving the place of performing duties to employees' homes directly affects their private sphere, including relationships (Bertoni et al., 2021). Thus, it is worth posing the question of how hybrid work affects the quality of relationships in work teams and whether this impact is positive or negative. The research problem formulated in this way touches on a research gap that is important from the work organization point of view, including the characteristics of changes in employee relations caused by hybrid work. It is worth noting that relationships in an organization as an intangible resource of a company also play an important element of intellectual capital (IC) which, in turn, is directly related to the value of the company or its ability to compete (Kuzel, 2018). Relational capital is also an element that directly affects an organization's other resources, including human capital (HC) and structural capital (SC) (Wójcik, 2021). Additionally, relationships are also part of formal and informal organizational culture, that is, the identity of the organization and the way its participants act (Shein, 2004). The issue focuses on the changes the pandemic has caused in labor relations and the sustainability of these effects when the economy emerges from the pandemic regime of operation. The purpose of the article is to determine the impact of hybrid work on the quality of interpersonal relations of HR Department employees and to support or reject the following research hypothesis:

H0: Implementation of hybrid work organization affected the quality of relationships in the HR Department.

To achieve such a goal, the authors pose the following research question:
1. Did the hybrid work deteriorate or improve the quality of the study group's interpersonal relations?

The focus on HR Department employees was due to several reasons: firstly, the accessibility of the group and the homogeneity of the group in terms of competences. Secondly, HR Department employees are more

involved than other employees in the process of establishing, implementing, and maintaining work organization systems. They are the most familiar of all employees with the rules related to the functioning of the implemented policies, which makes them more capable of consciously assessing the changes taking place. An organization is a complex structure, with different occupational groups performing different types of work. The inclusion of the HR Department in the study is interesting because this department is largely responsible for organizing and implementing hybrid solutions in the organization (Kulik, 2022). This may be crucial in the subsequent evaluation of the implementation of hybrid working solutions in an organization.

Seeking answers to the above question, the authors in the first part of the article refer to the existing state of knowledge, defining the organizational context of the studied area of ignorance based on literature review, and adopt a definitional framework of such concepts as employee relations, relational capital, hybrid work organization. On such a foundation, the authors conducted a case study of a large business organization. The choice of the theory-building research method used is related, on the one hand, to the early stage of knowledge development in this area of research, and at the same time, to the fact that two years after the outbreak of the pandemic, the evaluation of hybrid work and its impact on people is devoid of possible distortions resulting from the change effect accompanying the implementation of these solutions in the initial period of the pandemic. Thus, this is the moment of consolidation of accepted and developed organizational patterns. For this reason, it is worthwhile to undertake observation of the processes taking place in this area. The selection of the case in this study is related primarily to the criterion of data availability but also to the fact that the studied group of employees, i.e., the HR team, consists of several hundred people and works partly in a dispersed structure. In the authors' opinion, this facilitates the assessment of employee relations, which could not always be possible in small, specialized teams or single-person functions and roles. The studied organization is one of the largest Polish companies and therefore the HR Department is an experienced group of people aware of the personnel processes in the organization. The chosen object of research allows for studying hundreds of individual cases in similar conditions and a homogeneous business environment, which is an added value and constitutes an important justification for the choice made. The paper is empirical and touches on the issue of mutual employee relations in a team. Especially, the presented research addresses the sustainability of some solutions developed in the pandemic times and tries to answer questions related to the maintenance of these solutions in the new post-pandemic reality.

2. Literature Review

Although the notion of hybrid work only became widespread in the pandemic era, this form of work was also applied earlier (Williamson & Colley, 2022). It was determined either by the specifics of the employee's profession (mainly knowledge professions such as IT specialists, lawyers, and creative professionals) or by the so-called telework defined in the Labor Code (Zender-Zięcina, 2020). However, in many cases, this solution was more a form of additional benefit than a systemic workflow solution. Practically, hybrid work involves working from home and partially, as needed, at the company. The shape and form of the "hybrid", i.e., the number of days of work outside the company, the choice of these days, and the flexibility to switch them, are different in organizations and sometimes depend on the preferences of the employees themselves (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022). Hybrid work organization also means new technological solutions and a new philosophy of work related to digitalization and automation of processes or at least work without direct supervision (Gratton, 2021). These changes force organizations and employees to acquire new professional and managerial competencies. Hybrid organization also affects the company by changing the way employees live. Undoubtedly, working from home blurs the boundary between work and private life. Studies show that most people performing duties from outside the office carry out activities related to their personal lives during working hours. This is evidenced by the research of the Pracuj.pl portal (2022), according to which as many as 89% of respondents working remotely or in the hybrid mode admit that during working hours, they dedicate time to private activities unrelated to professional activity (Pracuj.pl, 2022) At the same time, research by Polzer's team (2020) indicates that remote workers spend more time at work, hold more meetings and communicate more often than they usually would. Hybrid work is therefore also a source of redefined personal goals and a work paradigm shift (Dowling et al., 2022). Observed in the United States of America and spreading through Europe, the so-called *Great Resignation* effect is largely an effect of changes in people's values also caused by remote and hybrid work. All this makes it worthwhile to analyze the impact of hybrid work more broadly and in a specific organizational context.

Evaluating hybrid work organization is a difficult task and brings with it social challenges. This is confirmed by the dynamically changing results of employee opinion surveys conducted throughout the pandemic. According to Dolot's 2020 survey, which was conducted at the beginning of the pandemic, the implementation of remote work was met with many negative assessments. Nearly 30% of respondents expressed fear of losing their jobs as a result of implementing remote work. More than 60% of respondents cited lack of interpersonal contact and isolation as the most significant negative factors directly related to the concept of relationships. Respondents did not perceive

significant positive aspects of this change when comparing opportunities and risks, while significantly emphasizing negative elements. About 40% of respondents expressed a desire for occasional remote work in the future (Dolot, 2020). In comparison, a survey conducted the following year by Ernst & Young (2021) indicated that after the pandemic ended, nearly 90% of respondents would strongly demand flexibility in terms of when and where they work (Ernst& Young, 2021). Similar data is presented in a study by the Pracodawcy RP organization. Before the pandemic, about 47% of employees, regardless of company size, had a positive attitude toward hybrid work. After the pandemic outbreak, the percentage of positive evaluations exceeded 66%. The attitude of employers towards this form of work has also changed. Before the pandemic, 39% presented a positive attitude towards employees performing work duties from home. In contrast, after implementing this form of work, the percentage of positive responses exceeded 67%. (Pracodawcy RP, 2021). According to a survey conducted by Antal and Corees Polska (2021), employers rate the effectiveness of remote work very highly – according to 92% of them, it is good or very good. The lowest ratings are given to issues such as integration and collaboration (35% negative indications) and employee onboarding (29% negative indications). Similar results were presented by PwC (2021), indicating that 83% of employers and 71% of employees consider implementing remote work a success for the organization (PwC, 2021). Changing the organization of work constitutes not only fear and apprehension of change but also transformations in interpersonal relations. According to Antal (2021), 65% of respondents noticed a weakening of relationships in the work environment, and 54% experienced a hindrance in external and/or internal cooperation (Antal, 2021). According to the Hays Poland (2021) survey, 76% of respondents positively viewed their relationships with their bosses and appreciated their efforts during the pandemic (Hays, 2021). On the other hand, 48% of respondents to the 4ClickMeeting (2021) survey believe that the lack of direct supervision and remote contact with the boss translates into greater work efficiency. Along with forming new relationships, the perception of this change is also changing (4ClickMeeting, 2021).

Despite the identified difficulties, hybrid work positively impacts employee motivation and attitude. The survey conducted by Pracuj.pl (2022) paints a picture of employees as more confident, less worried about their professional future, making precise demands for their employers, and, thanks to the lessons learned during the pandemic, choosing their workplace more consciously. The introduction of remote work has not only affected the expectations of employers but has also changed employees' lifestyles. The survey results indicate that employees recognize the benefits of remote work, such as staying at home when they feel unwell or when someone close to them needs support. Working in a hybrid work arrangement certainly makes it possible to meet both work-related and, to some extent, personal needs at the same time (Pracuj.pl, 2022).

Market reports (mentioned by the authors above) assessing the impact of hybrid work on employees' efficiency are part of an ongoing discussion about the future of organizations. More and more attention is being paid to the concept of employee well-being, health, motivation, and relationships with other employees. These issues can be framed through the prism of physical, mental, and social well-being. As it turns out, it is possible to define a catalogue of factors associated with hybrid work which positively or negatively affect well-being in each area mentioned (Tabor-Blazewicz, 2022). In the context of the conducted research, the issue of the social well-being of employees, i.e., their interpersonal relations, seems to be particularly crucial.

At this point, it should be emphasized that the literature on the subject lacks conceptually unified definitions and developed methods for measuring and studying relationships. This fundamentally hinders research in this area. According to the Dictionary of the Polish Language, a relationship is a relation or dependence between objects, concepts, quantities, or a relation occurring between people or social groups. To paraphrase Gulati (2010), relationships in an organization are crucial to its functioning. The processes of cooperation and, therefore, the materialization of relationships are increasingly becoming a source of value in the management process. The notion of relationships in organizational theory is both linked to the resource approach, which refers to the strategic role of intellectual capital within which relationships should also be identified (Martin de Castro, 2019), and considered in the context of an organization understood through the prism of networks in which relationships are the connections of individual network units. In this view, it is also important to mention the formal and informal dimensions of relationships, which, regardless of their entrenchment in the organization, shape and are shaped by its participants. In the intellectual capital based view, relational capital is its component and, in conjunction with HC and SC, determines the organization's ability to compete and gain a competitive advantage (Ujwary-Gil, 2020). Thus, changes within relationships determine the ability to compete. Given the practical nature of the phenomena studied and the need to analyze their context each time, it is worth transferring the discussion to the organization's operational level. Thus, the assessment of the external factors impact, hybrid work and its tools in this case, seems to be naturally included in the current positive and negative management research. The dichotomy and apparent contradiction of the observed phenomena blurs this division and betrays the characteristics of apparentness. As stated earlier, the effects of the examined changes in the organization can take on both negative and positive deviation characteristics for the same variables since it is not the nature of the change that determines its evaluation but also its context. What may be a benefit in one company may be a non-issue in another (Sidor-Rządkowska, 2020).

3. Research Methods

To answer the research questions posed and support or reject the research hypothesis, the authors decided to conduct a case study of a large organization with a dispersed organizational structure. The object of the study became the HR Department of the biggest logistic company in Poland with its facilities in 17 regional locations. In the conducted study, several research tools were used: a questionnaire addressed to the employees of the studied area, an interview with the department's senior management, and an HR KPI analysis.

Although the study looked at changes over time, a longitudinal study was abandoned for several reasons. Firstly, a longitudinal study, as Stańczyk--Hugiet (2014) points out, must be conducted over an extended period on a fixed, predetermined sample. The occurrence of the pandemic and its consequences were impossible to predict, so it would also have been impossible to plan such a study in advance, select a sample and then measure it before hybrid work occurred, during its implementation and during the stabilization period of the implemented solution. Secondly, given the unusual circumstances of life- and health-threatening factors, there was a significant risk that the selected group would not be maintained over time and that other, not identifiable external factors would affect the obtained results. Consequently, it was decided to conduct the study using a single survey questionnaire whose questions focused not on assessing the quality of interpersonal relations at the time of the survey, but on assessing the change that hybrid work had generated in the quality of these relationships since implementation. The choice of a single questionnaire in this type of study is not an isolated case and is applicable to other contemporary research in social sciences. It is worth citing here the research of Smith and team (2022) on interpersonal interaction patterns of students during COVID-19 or the paper of Gorzelany-Dziadkowiec (2020) on Changing Consumer Behaviour in the Era of COVID-19.

The survey research was conducted using the authors' survey questionnaire for the design of which the model of interpersonal relational quality proposed by Szostek and Glinska-Neweś (2017) was used. In this model, the quality of interpersonal relations was captured through the prism of 4 categories:
1. Task performance, which includes, among other things, an individual employee's willingness to perform tasks, motivation, cooperation with other employees.
2. Organizational climate within which the work atmosphere, team activities, conflict resolution efficiency, and job satisfaction are defined.
3. Management style, which includes, among others, the ability to communicate, listen, plan and delegate responsibilities, fairness in approaching employees, and openness to their problems.

4. Personal closeness includes, among other things, personal contact between employees, sincerity, trust, affective relationships, and helping each other in private matters.

The model in question additionally contains a common ground for all areas, including relationship-building tools, and touches on each category indicated earlier. All sorts of elements can be shown here, such as communication tools, rules of cooperation, integration initiatives, compensation policies, etc. Based on the assumptions of this model, a research questionnaire was designed, divided into four parts: task performance, organizational climate, leadership style, and personal proximity. The survey contained 23 primary questions and a metric (questions used in the survey are attached as Appendix 1). The main questions were based on a 5-point Likert scale where answer 1 meant strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 have no opinion, 4 agree, and 5 strongly agree. The 22 questions were phrased in such a way that a higher answer meant strengthening a specific characteristic and a lower answer meant weakening it. In the case of one question, this rule was changed, which required reversing the scale at a later stage of coding the answers. Thus, it became possible to make the following assumptions:
1. Answers at level 3 mean that there is no impact of hybrid work on a given aspect of interpersonal relational quality,
2. Answers at a level below 3 mean deterioration of the quality of these relationships,
3. Responses at a level above 3 mean strengthening the quality of interpersonal relations.

The developed survey was conducted in June 2022. The survey yielded 124 responses, 79 of which were complete and suitable for further analysis. The remaining responses were incomplete. The percentage of correctly completed surveys accounted for 12% of the total population of the HR Department of the surveyed company. In the studied sample of 79 people, 78% were women and 22% were men, which largely corresponds to the gender structure of the HRs of the surveyed organization. The predominant group among the respondents (53%) were those with premises that allowed them to work comfortably from home. The largest group separated according to the criterion of work experience was the group with more than six years of seniority (76%). Most respondents (63%) worked in non-managerial positions. 35% of respondents performed mainly individual, analytical work, 33% performed work in which contact with internal customers predominated, 10% performed work with predominant contact with customers outside the company, and 22% performed work related to managing people.

The survey questions designed for each study area were verified for internal consistency using the reliability coefficient – Cronbach's alpha. The selected coefficient can take values from 0 to 1, with its correct and commonly accepted value being at least 0.6, while the best-case scenario

strives for a value of 0.9. Reliability indicates with what accuracy a dimension measures what it measures. High-scale reliability is indicated by values of this coefficient greater than 0.7.

Table 1

Cronbach's Alpha for Each Part of the Survey

Questionnaire	Cronbach's alpha
Part 1	0.87
Part 2	0.85
Part 3	0.88
Part 4	0.82

The alpha values obtained (Table 1) were above 0.8 in each surveyed case, which confirms high accuracy of the prepared tool.

The second stage of the survey was an indicator analysis of the surveyed area to confirm whether the statistical analysis results were confirmed by the dynamics of the fundamental analytical indicators. For this purpose, data on employment, absenteeism, and staff turnover were analyzed. To calculate the absenteeism rate, data on all employee absences were used, regardless of their length. The value of the index was taken as the percentage of working time lost due to absenteeism to the nominal working time in the period. For the retention rate, the total number of employees who left work during the periods under study was taken. The period covered by the analysis of the indicator is 2019–2021.

To identify more thoroughly the studied problem and to clarify any inaccuracies that might materialize during the research, the method of individual in-depth interviews with managers in charge of the company's HR area was used. This method was chosen because, according to Konecki (2000), the interviewer is free to set the sequence of questions, formulate questions, adjust the language of communication with the respondent, which, in this case, is an advantage and allows effective communication with the respondent. It should be emphasized that the respondents were not researchers and the issue under investigation was so new that previously unplanned topics might have emerged during the interview.

A semi-structured formula was chosen in which reference was made to pre-prepared questions (Appendix 2), but at the same time the possibility was left to formulate additional questions during the interview. These questions were grouped according to the structure of interpersonal relationship quality model proposed by Szostek and Glinska-Neweś (2017), which was adopted in the paper and described previously. In addition to the questions, several dispositions were formulated which represent important issues in the area under study: digital tools, processes automatization, continuity of operations,

quality and timeliness, stakeholders' comments, conflicts, reaction to change, communication, knowledge sharing, teamwork, responsibility and formal competence, guidelines, delegation of powers. These interviews aimed to precisely outline the organizational context of the hybrid solutions applied and clarify any interpretive doubts that may have arisen during the first two stages of the study. Three managers responsible for the HR area including HR Controlling, HR Development and HR Administration took part in the interviews. The interviews were conducted according to a prepared script and consisted of three parts: an introductory part, the main part, and transcription and data analysis. In the introductory part, the interviewer introduced the participant to the research topic, presented its objectives, and explained the methodology. Then, the main part of the interview was conducted following the proposed structure (Appendix 2), where respondents' answers were collected using a questionnaire. The questionnaire also allowed participants to assign an evaluative variable (positive, negative, neutral) to the discussed issues regarding their impact on the quality of interpersonal relationships, which proved helpful in the further stages of the study.

For example, during the transcription phase, the statement „In practice, it has become possible, even so, for an employee to work 100% remotely or from the office" was categorized as „work flexibility" according to the structure presented in Appendix 2, specifically under the „management style" category and with a „positive" degree of impact on the observed change. Overall, within the 13 indicated provisions in the transcription process, a total of 24 elements were identified and parameterized in 4 categories: IT tools, task performance, organizational climate and personal proximity, and management style. Additionally, each category underwent individual assessment. The collected data were compiled in a collective matrix and analyzed at the level of specific categories. Although interpretations of individual elements varied in the survey results, identical results were obtained at the aggregated category level.

4. Findings

As a result of the interviews, it was determined that the personnel function in the organization under study was carried out by a specialized, organizationally separate intra-enterprise organizational structure. Within this structure, it is possible to distinguish its central component and 16 regional components that provide services to employees working in each province. The central component is responsible for creating personnel policy, analytical, and planning functions, while the regional components are responsible for the operational service of employees.

The dispersed organization of the personnel function is related to the dispersed structure of the entire company, which has more than

6,000 workplace locations and employs nearly 80,000 employees. The scale of the business means that, despite the regionalization of HR services, most interactions and contacts between HR staff and employees are carried out through electronic channels of communication, by phone, or by mail.

Employees work in teams each of which has a manager. At the regional level, managers are responsible for organizational aspects, while at the central level, they are also the source of guidelines and interpretations of existing regulations. The hybrid work organization was successively implemented in March–May 2020 and operated until the end of the first quarter of 2022 after the pandemic restrictions ceased. Although stationary work has been restored, most of the solutions created and adopted for hybrid work have been maintained and used in the organization. Such solutions include some digitized HR processes, such as issuing electronic leave requests and electronic attendance records, eliminating the need for paper documentation. Videoconferencing systems were popularized and began to be used as a standard, e.g., for meetings with trade unions, periodic meetings of HR managers, recruitment processes, and everyday communication between employees.

The interviews also confirmed that the most significant barriers to „enter" into hybrid work organization were hardware problems, lack of previously digitized processes, and employee competency gaps. Hardware problems mainly manifested in insufficient portable equipment and lack of additional accessories such as microphones or webcams. Likewise, processes previously operated in the paper form could not be effectively implemented in a work-from-home situation. The successive IT systems development and partial digitalization of the activities minimized the barriers. The final element posing an organizational challenge turned out to be employee competence. The need to suddenly switch to new solutions in the sphere of communication, meeting planning, teamwork, and organization of one's work simultaneously, was, in the opinion of managers, a serious obstacle for employees with less developed IT and computer competences and for managers not used to such organization of work. Those barriers became the cause of unusual way of implementing hybrid work in the organization. The company left a great deal of authority to the operational managers to decide how to divide and organize the work of their teams. The minimum percentage of people who could at the same time provide work from home was determined, and a rule was established that at least one person should always be available on a stationary basis. In cases of individual needs or employee preferences, it was even possible to work 100% remotely or in the stationary mode. In addition, the hybrid system was implemented for three months consecutively in individual locations.

The results of the survey indicated a strong diversity of opinions. Neutral answers „3" were present in only 24% of all answers, which means that

in 76% cases, respondents perceived positive or negative effects of the change in question. Changes related to sources of motivation or effective communication were clearly emphasized. The overwhelmingly positive opinion of respondents concerned such issues as increased motivation (52%), easier planning and organization of work (68%), positive change in the work atmosphere (45%), increased commitment (58%), and satisfaction (47%). The number of conflicts at work also decreased, according to 56% of people. As for negative opinions, attention was drawn to the difficulty of obtaining data from other employees (55%), receiving support from others (53%), scheduling meetings (47%), and teamwork (60%). Most respondents also noted the insufficient competence of their supervisors in remote working conditions. Particular attention was paid to problems in delegating tasks (40%), issues in individual communication (49%), and low awareness of the duties performed by employees (39%).

Table 2
Basic Statistics for the Results Obtained in Each Category and for the Total

Measure	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4	The entire questionnaire
number of questions	6	6	6	5	23
standard deviation	5.23	5.31	4.67	4.06	4.26
average total	18.76	19.15	17.41	14.18	17.37
average on question	3.13	3.19	2.90	2.84	3.02

When choosing a method for testing the hypothesis, it was assumed that the distribution of employee opinions in the organization was normal. Given that the sample size and the population's standard deviation were unknown, it was decided to test the null hypothesis using a small-sample *t*-test at a significance level of a = 0.01. For hypothesis H0 stating that hybrid work organization affects the quality of interpersonal relations in the HR Department to be true, the expected value (m_0) of the average response to the survey question for the entire population would have to be in the range corresponding to 1; 2 and 4; 5 because only such a result means a change in favor or to the disadvantage of interpersonal relations.

It was assumed that to reject the H0 hypothesis, the *p* value for every expected value (1, 2, 4, or 5) must be lower than a = 0.01. A statistical test value and *p* value was calculated for each category (Table 3). The test result showed that regardless of whether a category or the whole survey were considered, the *p* value for every expected value got lower than 0.01.

Table 3

*The Result of the T-Test and P-Value for Each Expected Value
in Each Category and the Total*

Expected value	The result of the statistical test p value				
	Part 1	**Part 2**	**Part 3**	**Part 4**	**The entire questionnaire**
1	21.66649803 <0.001	22.0011742 <0.001	21.6932919 <0.001	20.06533479 <0.001	24.23498884 <0.001
2	11.47808526 <0.001	11.9640649 <0.001	10.2808387 <0.001	9.133186869 <0.001	12.24615826 <0.001
3	**1.289672501 0.201**	**1.92695559 0.058**	**-1.13161456 0.261**	**-1.79896105 0.076**	**0.257327679 0.798**
4	-8.89874026 <0.001	-8.11015374 <0.001	-12.5440678 <0.001	-12.731109 <0.001	-11.7315029 <0.001
5	-19.087153 <0.001	-18.1472631 <0.001	-23.9565211 <0.001	-23.6632569 <0.001	-23.7203335 <0.001

The *p* values for an expectation value of 1, 2, 3, or 4 took on a value less than 0.001 and so the probability of making a grade one error because of rejecting hypothesis H0 is less than 0.1%. The statistical test result is significant at the significance level a = 0.01 and allows us to reject hypothesis H0 in favor of the alternative one which states that hybrid work in the studied organization did not affect the quality of interpersonal relations.

Indicator analysis of the studied area showed that during the studied period, i.e., from March 2020 to the end of Q1 2022, there were significant changes in employee turnover and absenteeism (Table 4). The sharp increase in the absenteeism rate by more than 3% quarterly was caused, as it turned out, by the exponential rise in employees' use of the right to paid childcare in the first lockdown period, at a time when the solutions of the hybrid work organization did not yet cover the entire area of the personnel function. In 2021, an increased number of leavers was also noticeable, which, according to the information received, was mainly the result of the Voluntary Leave Program launched at the company at the turn of 2020/2021. Taking the above into account, the indicator data on absenteeism and turnover do not indicate any sudden deviations that could affect changes in interpersonal relations caused by hybrid work. Thus, the obtained analytical indicators provide an additional argument confirming the statistical test's results.

Table 4

Turnover and Absenteeism Rates in the Personnel Area in 2019–2022

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Absenteeism (Monthly average)				
2019	7.41%	6.65%	6.19%	6.94%
2020	9.39%	7.67%	5.22%	6.64%
2021	5.49%	6.12%	6.67%	9.25%
2022	5.51%	6.05%		
Leavers (HR Department – FTE)				
2019	17	9	19	24
2020	8	5	12	52
2021	48	16	22	48
2022	35	25	0	0

The results of the survey, as well as data from selected organizational metrics, indicate that there was no significant impact of the changes in question on the quality of interpersonal relationships. This is confirmed by the interviews conducted, which found that factors minimizing the potentially negative effects of the change, such as the need to provide hybrid work in the absence of physical conditions for the provision of such work, appeared to be significant factors in maintaining the existing quality of interpersonal relations in the Department. These factors have become:

• Delegating to managers the competence to select people working in the hybrid model

"Unions agreed on the need for flexible scheduling of hybrid work patterns in such a way that employees who do not have the conditions to work from home can continue to do so in the office. Such a solution made it necessary to ask line managers to schedule and plan work accordingly."

• Establishing percentages of employees who can be in the office at any one time.

"Once individual needs were taken into account, a certain percentage of employees would be kept in the office at any one time."

"In practice, it has become possible, even so, for an employee to work 100% remotely or from the office."

Managers pointed out that the dynamic implementation of hybrid working had also exposed them to serious communication problems. Improving and streamlining remote communication therefore became a priority.

"In order to ensure the proper circulation of information and contact, weekly video meetings were established with the main purpose of sharing experiences, problems, good practices and mutual support. During the first meetings, it became apparent that some employees were not actively participating in the meetings. After a few weeks, it came to light that some of these people were not equipped with cameras, and some did not have microphones. Once the equipment was replenished, the number of people taking an active part increased."

"For some employees, the opportunity to have a 'face-to-face' video meeting was their first opportunity to see their colleagues. In this respect, hybrid working has paradoxically helped to reduce the distance. Meeting and video communication has in many cases become a standard form of communication."

Complementing the electronic means of communication was the automation and digitization of selected operational processes, which fundamentally increased the comfort of performing work. A big problem at the beginning of the pandemic and hybrid work organization was the paper workflow. There were cases when employees carried out some of their tasks at home, but the rest of their work had to be completed in the office by their colleagues or by themselves at another time. It was only when these processes were digitalized that the workload started to be reduced.

"Replacing paper-based workflows with various electronic forms made it possible to fully exploit the potential of remote working. This has been an important requirement for keeping the morale of employees at the expected level."

An important factor raised by respondents seemed to be the fact that before video communication was launched, some employees working in a geographically dispersed structure had no contact with each other except by email or telephone. The organization of video meetings, the work of online project teams and other similar examples of new practices allowed the existing quality of relationships to be maintained despite the even greater dispersion of employees.

"The mere fact of doing work away from other colleagues was not a problem. Our employees are used to working in different parts of our organization, in dispersed and geographically diverse structures."

"Work mobility is written into our DNA."

5. Discussion of the Results

As a result of the statistical test, hypothesis H0 was rejected, which means that for a=0.01, the alternative hypothesis according to which the implementation of hybrid work pattern does not affect the quality of interpersonal relations in the organization is true. The obtained result may stir emotions from the ongoing discussion on the future of work organization and the ongoing dispute about the benefits and risks of implementing hybrid work in organization. However, when analyzing the obtained data, it is necessary to keep the organizational and social contexts in mind. The case study concerned a large organization operating in a distributed structure. Working remotely, customer service through communication channels other than direct and team members sometimes located in different corners of the country are the daily work of the respondents, which can certainly affect the perception of hybrid work and the ability to find themselves in the new conditions of the pandemic period. The type of work performed may also be of significance. In most cases, HR tasks are done individually and do not require team decision-making or doing other things together. As a result, HR employees work in conditions of far-reaching competence delegation, characterized by a high degree of independence and a sense of strong responsibility for their work. It is worth mentioning that almost 80% of the employees in this area are people with more than 10 years of experience in the organization, which largely testifies to the quality of interpersonal relations, as well as the close personal intimacy between these employees. Particularly noteworthy is the critical and not entirely positive assessment of managers, resulting from the survey and confirmed in interviews with executives. As it turns out, the change in the rules of organizing the work of teams particularly affected managers who, according to the surveyed employees, had significant communication problems, did not cope with the precise delegation of tasks, and were unaware of the duties carried out by their subordinates. Thus, a change in work organization affects the expected structure of managerial competence model.

Based on the presented research, what can be done is to point out that under certain conditions, hybrid work does not necessarily affect the quality of interpersonal relations in a team. This is confirmed by the research of Boyer O'Leary, Wilson, and Matiu, according to which the quality of interpersonal relations at work does not depend on the physical distance between them but on the subjective perception of this proximity and how people feel in contact with the other person (as cited in Wilson et al., 2005). In the case at hand, it is also important to note the original and unprecedented approach to hybrid work implementation where a rigid mandatory number of days of work at home and the office was not set, and only the percentage of employees staying in the remote mode was determined. The managers made the final decision based on employee preferences. This approach offset the negative

impact of the sudden change and allowed more conservative employees to adjust to the change in their own time.

Likewise, some of employees who did not have the conditions to work remotely from home could continue to work in the stationary mode. This way, external factors that could negatively affect employees' opinions were eliminated. Thus, the individual approach to every employee can be considered in this case as one of the success factors in implementing hybrid work in the studied organization. This case also confirms the findings of the Shirmohammadi team's work-life balance study, according to which allowing employees to make the decision to work remotely significantly reduces the negative effects of a change (Shirmohammadi et al., 2022).

6. Conclusions

As stated earlier, the finding of no impact of hybrid work on the quality of employee relations is likely controversial. It is an important voice in the ongoing discussion on the future of work. It is even more important because the results of the conducted survey contradict the official positions of the largest recognized companies, such as Microsoft, Netflix, and Tesla, which strongly declare a return to standard stationary working conditions, justifying it, among other things, by the need to build and maintain the right level of employee relations. However, it should be emphasized that the study concerned a specific case and a specific, clearly defined professional group. This fact prevents the authors from making a broad generalization, but at the same time, indicates that the same generalization cannot be the opinion disseminated by some market players about the negative impact of hybrid work organization on employee relations.

The study's object was a large organization with a dispersed operations structure. It is hard to resist the impression that hybrid work organization is similar to work in distributed structures. In both cases, employees provide work in different locations, and the element of the physical presence of co-workers, or rather the lack of it, seems to be irrelevant in many cases. The individual characteristics of the organization and its distributed nature may therefore be the reason for the lack of severe changes in the quality of interpersonal relations after introducing hybrid work rules. The study identified the problem of the competence gap that was placed in a group of managers. Perhaps the reluctance of some organizations to hybrid work is somewhat due to the fear of this gap and is nothing more than an expression of the limitation of the rationality of decisions made by the management.

A limitation of the research carried out is the specific nature of the group studied. First and foremost, these are employees who, as stated above, prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, worked largely in a dispersed structure. The ability to function independently and to communicate remotely is certainly an important characteristic of the group. For many of those interviewed,

hybrid work meant only a change in the place of work provision, but minimal impact on interpersonal contacts. Another limitation is also the awareness of the function performed by these employees. HR staff were responsible for establishing and then implementing and maintaining hybrid work organization. Having such knowledge limits the negative effect of the change, which can undoubtedly be significant in the context of the research objective pursued.

Hybrid work, regardless of emerging opinions, will remain a permanent part of the landscape of many companies after the pandemic, and the solutions developed will stay with us permanently. However, it is worth noting that the current challenges for successful implementation of new solutions are not so much about technical issues, but about aspects of building and strengthening teams, such as cooperation, communication, motivation. It seems that a key element of the change will direct special attention to people and social relations, which no technology can replace nowadays. The new reality that has dawned on the work environment also requires employers to develop soft skills, including managerial skills, which are essential in managing distributed teams and maintaining a high level of commitment and efficiency among employees. Of course, the problem seems to be much more complex, and the research carried out points out new issues that would be worthwhile to study:

1. What is the impact of hybrid work on organizational structures efficiency?
2. Are teams in distributed organizations more resistant to the effects of remote work than teams in companies with a centralized structure?
3. Does the type of work performed make any difference in hybrid work?
4. Will hybrid work lead to the provision of work by an employee to different employers?

Answering all those questions will help to understand the process of another change, the change of relationship between employees and employers. And this is probably the most important and interesting case in the era of new normality.

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Appendix 1

Primary questions of the questionnaire on the quality of interpersonal relations

Category	Question
Task performance	1.1. In a hybrid working environment, I feel more motivated to perform tasks. 1.2. Under hybrid working conditions, it is easier for me to obtain necessary information from other employees. 1.3. Under hybrid working conditions, it is easier for me to plan my working time and schedule tasks to be performed. 1.4. In a hybrid working environment, it is easier for me to get help from colleagues to complete my tasks. 1.5. Under hybrid working conditions, it is easier for me to plan contacts and meetings with colleagues. 1.6. In a hybrid working environment, it is easier to identify co-workers who play a major role in the completion of my tasks.
Organizational climate	2.1. The implementation of hybrid working has had a positive impact on the working atmosphere. 2.2. Being able to carry out work tasks from home results in increased commitment to work. 2.3. Hybrid working makes it easier to perform team tasks. 2.4. Hybrid working reduces the number of conflicts at work. 2.5. Hybrid working positively influences the professional image of the team. 2.6. Hybrid working increases the sense of job satisfaction.
Management style	3.1. Hybrid working has increased the effectiveness and quality of managers in my company. 3.2. In a hybrid working environment, my supervisor better organizes and defines my tasks. 3.3. In a hybrid work setting, my supervisor better communicates to me the importance of my responsibilities and their impact on the performance of the whole team. 3.4. In a hybrid working environment, my supervisor is more aware of my responsibilities and the tasks I perform 3.5. Meetings in our team are more effective than before the introduction of hybrid working. 3.6. Hybrid working facilitates individual contact with my supervisor.
Personal proximity	4.1. Hybrid working has a positive impact on team integration. 4.2. Hybrid working strengthens relationships between employees. 4.3. Hybrid working weakens existing inter-employee relationships. 4.4. Hybrid working strengthens the sense of trust in colleagues. 4.5. Hybrid working formalizes inter-employee relationships.

Appendix 2

Form of key questions and dispositions of the in-depth interview

Category	Key Questions	Dispositions
IT tools	Was this implementation extended to the whole organization at one time or not? What IT solutions have emerged in the organization?	• digital tools • processes automatization
Task performance	How did the performance during pandemic change?	• continuity of operations • quality and timeliness • stakeholders' comments
Organizational climate and personal proximity	Has hybrid working increased the number of conflicts in the organization to any extent? Does hybrid working make it difficult to interact with employees and subordinate teams? Do you perceive a change in the quality of relationships between employees?	• conflicts • reaction to change • communication • knowledge sharing • teamwork
Management style	Who is responsible for organizing hybrid work in teams? How was the implementation of hybrid working carried out in the organization?	• responsibility and formal competence • guidelines • delegation of powers