
The Concept of Improvements in Management of Public Administration Officials Working from Home in Selected Educational Units

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Abstract:

Purpose: The main goal of the paper is to present specific recommendations and guidelines for managers in charge about how to manage the remote work of public administration officials in selected educational units.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Based on extended interviews with principals, and surveys carried out among 30 administrative staff members, a concept of improvements in management of administrative staff working from home during the pandemic has been elaborated. This article also employs the value network analysis developed by Verna Alee, which allows to identify essential value flows in the implementation of remote work.

Findings: As a result of the research, a concept of improvements in the management of administrative personnel working remotely was developed. The quantitative and qualitative analysis led to the development of guidelines for the managers of educational units.

Practical Implications: The proposed concept shows how to organize remote work, how to motivate and control administrative staff. However, the value network analysis enables its implementation in any kind of educational unit.

Originality/Value: This study examines an important issue in remote work arrangements among administrative staff. It is based on quantitative and qualitative analysis, namely a survey method, in-depth interview, and value network approach by Verna Alee.

Keywords: Telework management, management of public administration, value exchange.

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1. Introduction

In many EU countries more than half of the workers who have started working from home since the pandemic had no prior experience with teleworking (Report: The European Commission's Science and knowledge service, telework in the EU before and after the COVID 19: where we were, where we head to, 2020; Prochazka *et al.*, 2020). According to the report "Teleworking 2019. Privilege or upcoming standard?", in 2019 Poland was at an early stage of teleworking implementation. The number of fully remote companies was low, whereas many organizations had not even started to work on the implementation of the new model yet. The coronavirus has suddenly made many Polish start working from home and an "emergency" implementation of this solution has become a burning issue for many organizations (Łojewska, 2020).

Many people began working virtually to prevent the spread of disease and to maintain business continuity (Bennett and McWhorter, 2021). The period of quarantine and home office posed a challenge for both employees and their superiors, who were forced, very often overnight, to manage a dispersed team. Managing a dispersed team, remote communication, task delegation and coordination became a considerable challenge for managers and company owners (Wong, Cheung, and Chen, 2020; Kobierska, 2020; Report: International Labour Organization. A practical guide, 2020).

The purpose of this article is to draft a concept of improvements in management of telework. The concept is dedicated to school principals and managers supervising administrative staff. The aim of the article is to provide principals and managers with examples and guidelines concerning telework management, the usefulness of which have been empirically proven.

The empirical research consisted of two stages. The first one encompassed a case study survey on a sample of 30 administrative staff members subordinate to the school principals. The respondents assessed various functions of HR management, such as motivating, control, telework organization and submitted their tips/suggestions concerning improvements in telework management. The second stage included standardized, extended quality interviews with principals of 7 secondary schools in the Province of Wielkopolska. The results of the above research were applied in the development of a value network in remote work by Verna Alee. The result of the carried-out research was the elaboration of a concept of improvements in management of public administration officials in selected educational units. The presented concept shows specific steps which should be followed by principals and managers managing home-based administrative workers.

2. Management of Home-Based Workers

The global pandemic has brought awareness to professionals who have been mandated to shift to a virtual work environment (Pantell and Shields-Zeeman, 2020). Managing telework employees is a key skill that goes beyond just being able to work from home. The literature describes teleworking, sometimes referred to as telecommuting, as employees who use computer technology to work for an employer from home or remote

locations on a regular or occasional basis (Baruch, 2000; Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Tavares, 2017). Managing telework employees requires paying attention to several key areas, from which the most important are described below.

The principles should set up clear rules of cooperation. The manager should inform employees about their conditions of employment, standards of use of communication technologies, and continuous performance feedback (International Labour Organization, 2020). Standards for availability and acknowledgement, plus the establishment of guidelines for meetings and discussions, information about responsiveness and data security should be announced (Morley, Cormican, and Folan, 2014).

Leaders need to schedule virtual meetings with clearly defined goals and short/medium objectives (Mukhopadhyay, 2020). Although employees are dispersed, they should know what, how and why they should perform particular tasks, what are the expectations toward them, and what kind of results they are about to achieve (Chang, Wang, and Yu, 2020). After identifying objectives, tasks, and milestones, teleworkers should be informed how to report the results of their work and be acquainted with ways of monitoring tasks and projects accomplishments.

Supervisors should review the communication options at their organizations (Mathos, 2015). Determining how we communicate is just as important as what's being said (Chang, Wang, and Yu, 2020). Before managers decide that employees should telework, they must make sure that all employees are prepared to use the best options for communication (Mathos, 2015). Managers should help workers and organizations use learning technologies to navigate the continuously changing workplace landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hughes, 2021). If a teleworking program is to be successful, support must be offered from all levels within the organization (Kowalski and Swanson, 2005).

Keeping teleworkers connected is one of the challenges for management. The managers must motivate and inspire out of sight workers and provide authentic information sharing from managers to workers and between work teams (Arlene, 2014). Supervisors should provide timely access to information (Mukhopadhyay, 2020) related to decisions and arrangements.

Supervisors should ensure good flow of information in the team and enhance employees to share information about projects they are currently working on. Different IT systems, network drives which enable to work on uniform documents and files can be used (Kobierska, 2020).

Supervisors should provide employees with adequate feedback, because if it is missing or improperly communicated, it reduces the effectiveness of teleworkers (Trziszka, 2019; Rotkiewicz, 2010). Another essential factor in teleworking is introducing integrating activities. Employers are encouraged to keep social contact and break the feeling of isolation and loneliness (Wojcak, Lubica, Sajgalikova, and Polakova, 2016). This can be achieved through regular communication and ventures like integrative videoconferences, virtual coffee breaks or online lunches (Łojewska, 2020).

However, managers need to strike a balance to ensure that communications and check-ins are not excessive or perceived as micro-management (GitLab, The Remote Work Report: The Future of Work is Remote, 2020).

In order to motivate teleworkers and increase their efficiency, supervisors try to use methods of mental support for employees, i.e., sending them for training courses on how to deal with stress or mindfulness workshops (Łojewska, 2020) as the pandemic has centered the physiological and mental health of people in the organization as priorities (Spence, 2020; Prochazka *et al.*, 2020).

Another important factor which principals need to pay attention to is control of the employees. Teleworking reduces the feasibility of monitoring employee behaviour as a control mechanism (Groen, Sander, Coers, and Neeke, 2018). Keeping tabs on employees and micromanaging should be avoided (Mukhopadhyay, 2020).

Finally, supervisors should continuously identify barriers in the telework (e.g., dealing with distractors, a sense of isolation, etc.), be ready to recognize what is not working and modify it promptly, and develop solutions for each problem. Leadership teams that continuously learn, actively identify best practices, and rapidly set up mechanisms to share ideas across the organization tend to be most successful in the long run (Chang, Wang, and Yu, 2020).

Since the future will bring more flexible, remote-friendly, digital working norms, the changes in policies, processes, workspaces, collaboration systems, and employee wellness are of increasingly urgent importance (Gigauri, 2020).

3. Methodology

The research methodology consists of three phases which are described below:

Phase I: Surveys based on a drafted questionnaire

The research on management of home-based administrative workers was carried out in July 2020. 30 employees altogether – 21 women and 9 men from 7 secondary schools in the province of Wielkopolska – took part in it. The number of administrative staff members in each of the investigated schools varies from 4 to 7, therefore it can be assumed that most employees in the chosen units were questioned. All of those questioned have been employed for more than 6 years while as many as 19 of them have been working for more than 21 years in the same institution.

The questionnaire of the survey consisted of 21 closed-ended questions with a possibility to add one's own answers. The respondents answered the questions concerning motivating, telework organization and communication tools in use during the pandemic. Each of them was able to assess and compare various tools of remote communication. Next, the respondents assessed their own telework-related skills. The administrative staff members also listed the advantages and disadvantages of telework. Each of them indicated which work form, office-based or home-based, is more convenient to them. The questionnaire of the survey was sent to 50 persons, 30 of whom responded.

All the questionnaires were completed correctly. Analysing the obtained results, the authors realize that the sample group is small. Therefore, they treat the research as a case study, which should facilitate improvements in management of home-based administrative workers.

Phase II: Extended interviews with the principals of the investigated educational units

The extended interviews were carried out directly with particular principals on the basis of a scenario encompassing the following content: rules of telework, organization of telework of administrative staff, tools necessary for telework, motivating employees during the pandemic, communication of employees in the team as well as relationships between employees and principals, control over administrative staff, advantages and disadvantages of telework from the perspective of the principal of an educational unit. The interview helped in the development of a value network and a concept of improvements in the management of administrative personnel during a pandemic.

Phase III: Value exchange

The idea of the value exchange according to V. Alee (2003) is based on the assumptions that network participants and stakeholders get involved in the value network by converting the value of their impact on other parties into the growth of their tangible and intangible assets (Kubiak, 2011). According to the concept of value networks by V. Alee there are two types of flows between the parties, income (received values) and expenditure (supplied values) (Alee, 2000). At the same time, within the framework of income and expenditure, there is a traditional exchange in the form of material values and in the form of intangible assets. Material exchange includes goods, services, and income. It also contains all transactions involved in the exchange. Knowledge products and services that generate income, or those which are anticipated, and which are purchased as part of a service (e.g., reports), are all defined as the tangible ones (Alee, 2003).

In turn, the intangible values include strategic information, process knowledge, and technical know-how, designing collaboration, joint planning of activities and policy development. Intangible benefits are the advantages or favours, which can be extended from one person or group to another person or group (Alee, 2003).

The value network refers to each establishment of relationships that generates both tangible and intangible value through dynamic, complex exchange between two or more individuals, groups, or organizations. People exchange not only goods, services and income, but also knowledge and other intangible assets, such as favours and benefits. Exchange of knowledge and other intangible assets do not only encompass the activities that support the business model, but they also constitute a part of that model. The perception of an enterprise as a value network brings about a better understanding of the business model than its perception as a value chain (Alee, 2003).

4. Analysis of Research Results

The questionnaire of the survey was divided into 3 parts concerning planning and organization of telework, motivating and control over administrative staff. The first stage

of the analysis was getting to know the conditions and regulations concerning the telework of those questioned. We compared the amount of time the administrative staff had spent on telework before and during the pandemic. 16 of those questioned worked remotely from 3 to 8 hours a day before the pandemic, while all those questioned worked remotely from 4 to over 10 hours a day. 6 respondents claimed that they had worked more than 8 hours a day (overtime). 13 respondents did not work from home before the pandemic, it was not until the pandemic that they had to adapt to that new form of work.

The respondents were asked whether the principals and managers had introduced any regulations concerning telework. All those questioned were able to mark a few answers. As many as 22 persons marked the answer concerning reporting on the task fulfilment, 18 respondents – delegation of tasks and ways of communication with the employer. The remaining regulations mentioned by the administrative staff were as follows: the schedule of meetings with the employer (13 persons) or providing with tools necessary for work (12 persons). What kind of tools were the employees provided with? 19 of those questioned were equipped with a computer, 10 persons with a printer and 9 with a scanner. 5 persons claimed that the employer had not equipped them with any tools necessary for home-based work.

Most of those questioned do not use and are not familiar with communication tools, such as Webex, Microsoft Teams, Zoom or eMeeting. The respondents communicate using mainly emails (the effectiveness of this communication tool was rated 4.8 on a scale from 0 to 6) and phone (average effectiveness rating 4.23).

The following issue raised in the research was motivating the administrative staff in the course of the pandemic. Each of those questioned was allowed to choose a few answers. The employees claim that the main motivating factor introduced by the employer concerned clearly outlined goals (17 persons), feedback on the results of their work and schedule of home-based work (13 respondents), informing about the situation of the unit during the pandemic (12 persons). There were no financial incentives in that difficult period and just one person claims that they were not motivated during the pandemic.

In that difficult period the employer controlled the task fulfilment by the staff in the following manners, phone conversations regarding the task fulfilment (22 respondents), sending emails listing the fulfilled tasks (21 respondents), a summary table concerning the fulfilled tasks (12 persons) or online meetings with the employer (10 of those questioned). The phone conversation regarding the task fulfilment was described as the most effective way of control (12 of those questioned – in this part of the survey they were allowed to mark just one answer) and sending emails listing the fulfilled tasks (9 of those questioned). 5 persons described online meetings with the employer as the most effective, while 4 persons appreciated sending a summary table concerning the fulfilled tasks.

In order to manage the staff effectively, we need to know the level of their competencies. Since the pandemic, the competency requirements concerning home-based work have increased sharply. What are the competencies in question? Those questioned decided that the most vital competency necessary for telework is the knowledge of tools for remote

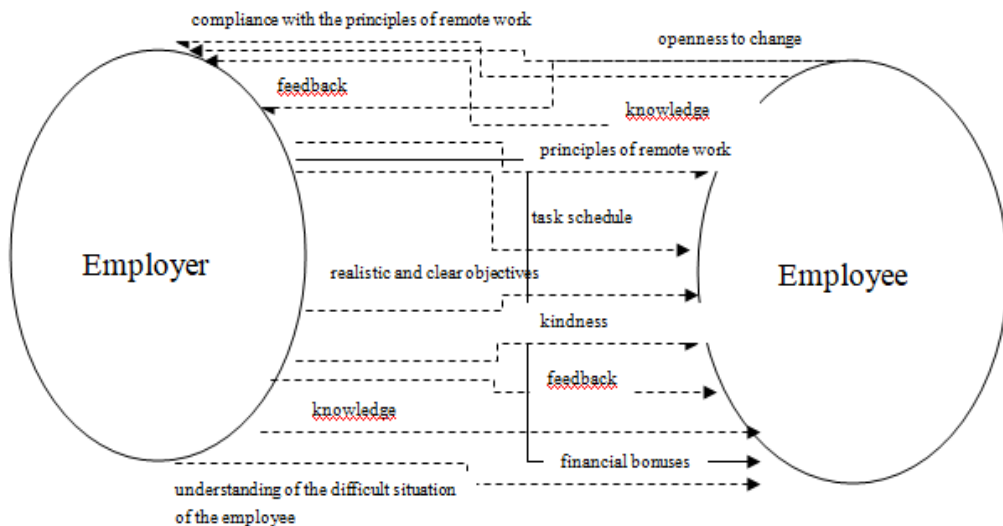
communication (14 respondents), communication skills (13 respondents), computer literacy (12 of those questioned), time management (11 of those questioned) and flexibility (10 persons). Organization skills, timeliness and goal definition were described as important by 9 respondents. Only 3 persons listed continuous development as a competency vital for effective remote work. We also compared the self-assessment of the level of telework-related skills of the administrative staff members from before the pandemic and currently. 12 respondents described it as at least one step higher than before while the others considered their level of telework-related competencies to have remained unchanged.

The presented research carried out on a small sample of 30 administrative staff members, extended interviews with principal as well as a quality analysis of the results allowed us to prepare guidelines for managers of educational units.

5. Value Network Analysis in Remote Work

The results of the survey and in-depth interview were used to identify value flows. Also, two groups of stakeholders were distinguished in the implementation of remote work by administrative employees. These were directors of educational units (employers) and administrative personnel. After the identification of the stakeholders, value networks in the implementation of remote work were developed.

Figure 1. Value exchange in remote work



Source: Own study.

Twelve flows were identified in the network, of which only one is material. The employer-employee relationship is based on values, such as principles of remote work, realistic and clear goals, task schedule, understanding of the difficult situation of the employee, kindness, feedback, knowledge and financial bonuses. While preparing and organizing remote work, the employer should first of all pay attention to the use of

appropriate forms of communication, provide constructive feedback on the fulfillment of tasks, establish rules for remote work, develop a task schedule, remember about kindness and understanding of the difficult situation of the employee (home environment, family members, decline in the employee's motivation) and, if possible, provide financial rewards linked to the performance of assigned tasks.

The employee, on the other hand, transmits to the employer such values as new knowledge, feedback, adherence to the principles of remote work and openness to change. Value flows between stakeholders are highly interdependent. Adequate preparation and organization of remote work by the employer affects the employee's willingness to acquire new knowledge, increases openness to change and minimizes anxiety associated with the performance of tasks in a new reality. The results obtained from the carried-out research enabled the development of a concept for improving the management of administrative personnel during a pandemic.

6. Management of Home-Based Administrative Workers

On the basis of the carried-out research, the main steps concerning management of home-based administrative workers have been elaborated (Figure 2).

The outlined concept of improvements in the management of administrative staff during the pandemic consists of three areas concerning work organization, motivating of employees and control. Each of these areas includes actions that can improve the staff management. The development of remote work policies is an important step in the improvement of the organization of remote work. It was also confirmed by the respondents who believe that determining the time frame of telework is necessary (20 employees).

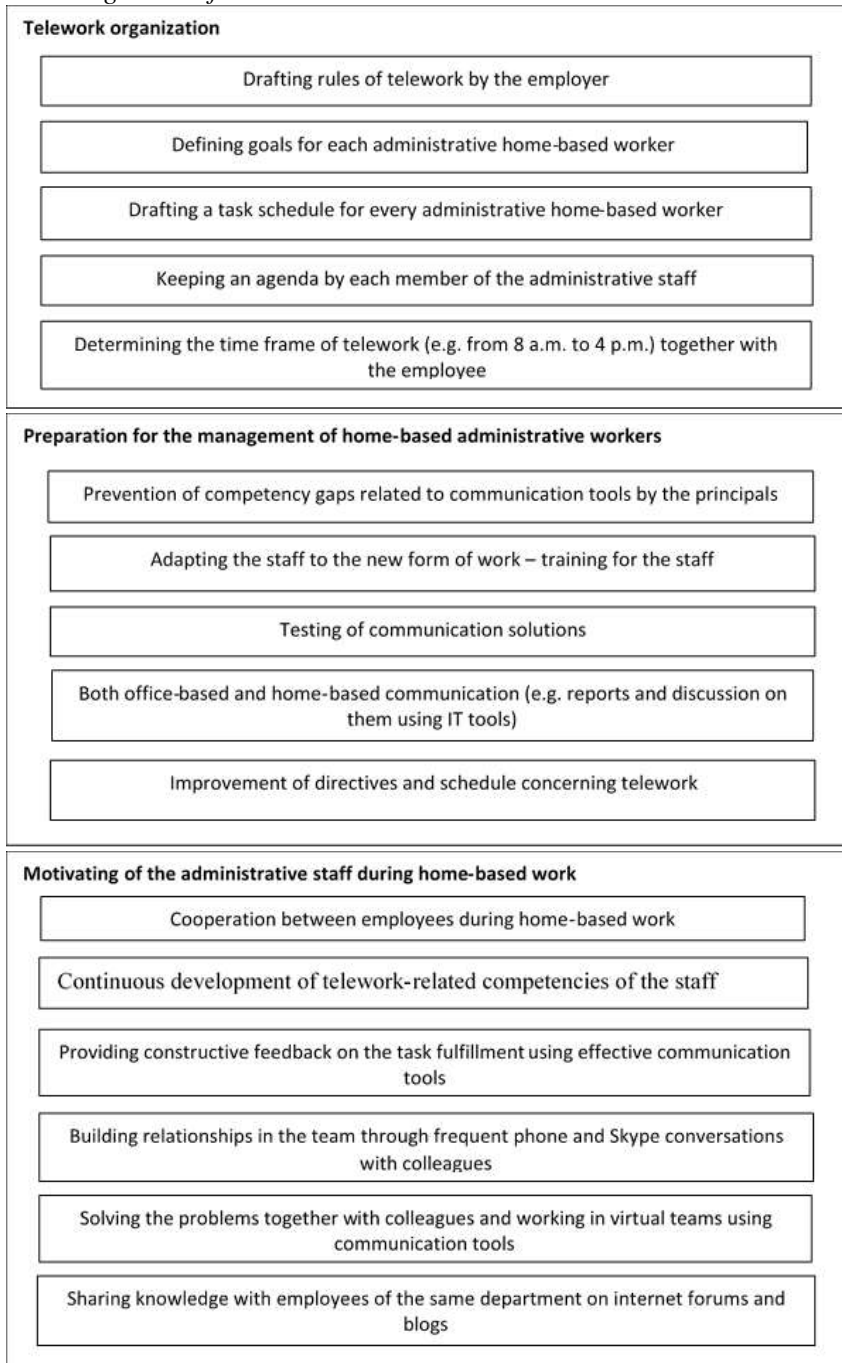
Elimination of competency gaps constitutes the most vital action for motivating employees while those questioned described participation in training courses enhancing their skills essential for telework (17 persons) and solving problems together with their colleagues (17 persons) as the most important motivating factors during telework. When it comes to controlling, those questioned pointed out the highest effectiveness of everyday phone or Skype conversations with the superior in order to discuss tasks to be done and present the results.

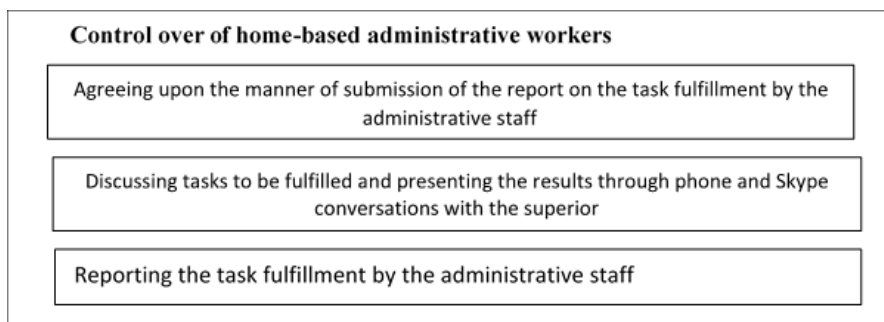
7. Conclusions

3 research methods have been used in the article: a survey, an extended interview and value exchange. On the basis of the carried-out research, it has been determined that the level of knowledge and skills concerning teleworking is insufficient, therefore it is necessary to organize relevant training courses.

The use of the value network analysis by Verna Allee helped to identify key value factors. Each of the stakeholders, that is the employer and the employee, while transferring non-material and material values, also receives them in return. This exchange increases the value of each stakeholder.

Figure 2. Management of home-based administrative workers





Source: Own study.

By preparing and organizing remote work, focusing on the use of appropriate forms of communication, giving constructive feedback on the implementation of tasks, setting the principles of remote work, creating a task schedule, not forgetting to be kind and understand the difficult situation of the employee and, if possible, providing financial rewards, the employer affects the willingness of the employee to acquire new knowledge, increases their openness to change and thus minimizes the anxiety associated with the implementation of tasks in a new reality.

The proposed concept of improvements in the management of administrative personnel during a pandemic includes three areas, which are organizing work, motivating and controlling employees. In each of the above areas there are measures that will improve the management of remote workers.

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