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PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF ORGANIZING REMOTE WORK IN THE UKRAINIAN CIVIL SERVICE: A STUDY

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the practice of organizing remote work in the Ukrainian civil service during the quarantine brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers describe the modes and peculiarities of organizing remote work, and the differences in modes of organizing remote work in government agencies at different levels of jurisdiction are shown. Civil servants' self-assessments of efficiency, work quality, and administrative discipline levels after the transition to remote work are examined. A comparison of attitudes towards the peculiarities of remote work among individuals of different ages, experience levels, and genders and among those performing different tasks is carried out. This article identifies problems that need to be addressed within the framework of implementing remote work. Five main trends in organizing remote work are outlined: the promotion of learning and self-development; the promotion of IT tools in the civil service; an awareness of the importance of communication and interaction; the development of non-financial incentives for teams; and the adaptability of employees to new working conditions in the face of moderate resistance to change.*

Keywords: *remote work, civil service, COVID-19, personnel management.*

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *nuotolinis darbas, valstybės tarnyba, COVID-19, personalo vadyma.*

Introduction

In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant number of government officials switched to a remote or mixed method of work. The practice of remote work in the civil service, although not widespread, was present in other countries – for example, in Great Britain, Poland, and Ireland – before the introduction of quarantine measures. Under quarantine conditions, in order to preserve the stability and quality of the activities of state bodies, the need for the large-scale and unexpected transfer of civil servants to remote work emerged. During the pandemic, most countries revised or developed legal regulations regarding remote work in the civil service, as well as other methodological and instructional materials.

In Ukraine, the possibility of remote work in the civil service was an innovation. To introduce the practice of working remotely, amendments were made to the Model Regulations of Internal Service (Decree of the National Agency of Ukraine for Civil Service dated March 13, 2020). As a result, it became possible for civil servants to perform their official duties outside the workplace, which is located in the state body's administrative building.

Switching to remote work furthered many transformations in work organization, prompting changes to the usual means of communication, leadership strategies, and performance management. Consequently, the culture of communication and interaction within the civil service underwent a makeover. Many employees had to quickly acquire new professional knowledge and maintain or create a favorable socio-psychological climate in their teams. As such, the mass-scale process of adapting to new working conditions has begun.

The peculiarities of organizing remote work, interaction, and professional development, in particular during a pandemic, are reflected in the work of the following researchers: Ahuja, Kaur, and Panda (2019); Bondarenko, Rishko, and Tatarskina (2018); Kryvosheieva and Vasiurenko (2020); Hassan, Mirza, and Hussain (2020b); Mutalib and Shafiee (2020); Nevmerzhytska (2020); Shchetinina, Pavlova, and Rudakova (2015); Rudenok, Petyak and Khanetska (2020); and others.

The purpose of this study is to examine the practices of organizing remote work in government agencies in Ukraine, and to analyze the readiness of the public administration system to implement new working conditions to ensure the sustainable, uninterrupted operation of government agencies during quarantine.

The main objectives of this study are to collect information on the implementation of remote work in government agencies and to provide primary insights for stakeholders (heads of government agencies, departments, their employees, personnel management service, government agencies, and other parties).

Theoretical background

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, issues of remote work (or teleworking) were often analyzed in the context of distance learning or study. However, the increased demand for remote work and the need for new methods of organizing it required a much broader analysis at the scientific and practical levels. As a result, the main focuses of current studies (Ahuja, Kaur, and Panda 2019; Mutalib and Shafiee 2020; Hassan Mirza, and Hussain 2020a) involve different aspects of remote work, such as: motivation, the active involvement of participants, technical issues, and other topics that are crucial for remote work. Of course, remote work, in the public and private sectors, was not a new phenomenon that had never been applied in practice before. Studies reveal that before the outbreak of COVID-19, approximately 70% of the global workforce was permitted to perform their office tasks from home or remotely at least once a week (Browne 2018, quoted in Agba, Agba, and Chukwuhar 2020, 190). However, an unpredictable future and the growing number of COVID-19 cases provided a window of opportunity to break through procedural restrictions and to increase the scale of remote work. Organizations (irrespective of their field of activity) had to react quickly and loosen their policies on home office work, even when they had strictly opposed it before (Brandsen and Steen 2020, 853). On the one hand, this caused challenges for personnel management and work organization, but on the other hand the “new normal” presented new opportunities.

When analyzing remote work in the civil service, it is necessary to consider that it is essential to guarantee the continuity of the provision of public services and the effectiveness of the response to the citizen. Therefore, this area of activity is more sensitive to changes and, depending on its specific functions, may require higher capacity. In this context, remote work can be a solution that allows the general operation and quality of public services to be maintained, and its adoption is mandatory whenever the functions in question permit (Martins 2020, 19).

In summarizing the ideas of different authors (Agba, Agba, and Chukwurah 2020; Brandsen and Steen 2020; Gigauri 2020; Masilionytė 2021; Bortkevičiūtė et al. 2021; and others), it can be stated that effective remote work requires the following principles to be adhered to:

- managerial support at all levels, identifying objectives and tasks to be performed clearly and monitoring progress without burdensome reporting requirements;
- the provision of the equipment and work conditions necessary for remote work;
- all parties involved need to be clear about expected results, ways of monitoring, working hours, and work conditions;
- flexibility in time usage;
- maintenance of a healthy personal work-life balance;
- trust between all parties involved in remote work;
- the ability of the organization to accept changes and find new solutions to day-to-day issues.

At the practical level, different issues relating to the organization, productivity, and efficiency of remote work are analyzed. Despite possible prejudices about remote work,

surveys show that the scale of its implementation suggests acceptance. One survey of EU residents revealed that almost half of respondents (44.3%) worked from home during the pandemic, of whom: 57% said they were satisfied with the experience of working from home; 65.1% were satisfied with the quality of their work; and only 6.5% found it difficult to concentrate on work because of family responsibilities (Eurofound 2020). Of course, institutions and employees may see the same situation quite differently due to different expectations regarding remote work and different assessments of the situation itself, but, if properly organized, this practice can bring benefits to both sides. As stated above, in Ukraine, the possibility of remote work in the civil service was an innovation, and as such there was no previous experience of organizing it. This is why this article focuses on an empirical analysis of this phenomenon, identifying both the current situation and the readiness of the public administration system to implement new working conditions.

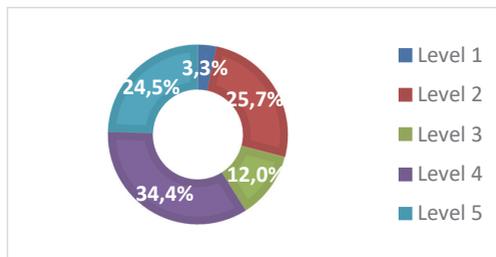
Research methodology

The study of organizing remote work in government agencies was carried out by an anonymous online survey of civil servants in April 2020 using the Google Forms online survey service. The results then underwent quantitative and qualitative analysis using SPSS 21 software. The data was compared using the Mann–Whitney U test (U) and the Kruskal–Wallis test (H), and a correlation analysis was performed using the Pearson correlation coefficient (r).

Sample

In total, 665 respondents took part in the survey, with 43.2% belonging to Category B and 56.8% to Category C.

The sample was composed of civil servants from bodies at different levels, specifically: 34.4% from state bodies with jurisdiction over the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, one or more regions (*oblasts*), or the cities of Kyiv and Sevastopol (level 4); 25.7% from ministries, central executive bodies with special status established by law, staff (secretariats) of higher specialized courts, the High Council of Justice, and the High Qualification Commission of Judges of Ukraine (level 2); 24.5% from state bodies with jurisdiction over the territory of one or more districts, city districts, or cities of regional significance (level 5); 12.0% from other state bodies whose jurisdiction extends to the entire territory of Ukraine (level 3); and 3.3% from the staff of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, the Secretariat of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, the permanent subsidiary body established by the President of Ukraine, the staff (secretariats) of the National Security and Defense Council of Ukraine, the Accounting Chamber, the Constitutional Court of Ukraine, the Supreme Court, or the Prosecutor General's Office (level 1) (Figure 1).

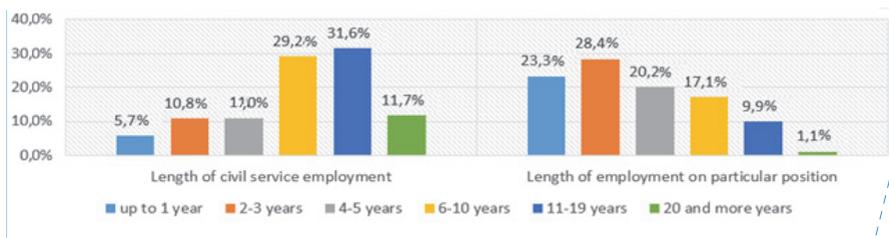


Legend: on the right, level of state body in descending order – Level 1 to Level 5.

Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by level of state body

Source: compiled by the authors

The distribution of respondents by length of service is shown in Figure 2.



Legend: underneath graphs: Length of civil service employment, length of employment in a particular position. Below, left to right: up to 1 year, 2–3 years, 4–5 years, 6–10 years, 11–19 years, 20 or more years.

Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by length of employment in the civil service and in their specific role

Source: compiled by the authors

The following distribution of respondents by age was observed: 40.3% – 36–45 years; 35.8% – 26–35 years; 15.2% – 46–55 years; 4.5% – younger than 25 years; and 4.2% – older than 56 years.

Distribution by gender was as follows: 82.6% of respondents were women, 17.3% of respondents were men.

Research results

The study indicated that most civil servants started working remotely under quarantine (60.3%, of which 31.3% switched to wholly remote work and 29.0% worked from home and also attended in person, based on a shift schedule).

The growth dynamics of the percentage of civil servants who switched to working remotely correlated with the level of the state body. Thus, the higher the level of the state body, the more civil servants switched to remote work.

Under quarantine, while 81.8% of civil servants in first level state bodies worked remotely, only 41.8% – almost half – of civil servants in fifth level state bodies did so. This is most likely related to technical capacities and greater flexibility in decision-making in higher-level government bodies.

Table 1. Comparison of work organization methods in state bodies of different levels

Method	Level 1 (3.3%)	Level 2 (25.7%)	Level 3 (12.0%)	Level 4 (34.4%)	Level 5 (24.5%)
Conducting online meetings with heads of structural units/employees of the state body	36.4%	33.3%	35.0%	31.4%	23.3%
Holding working group meetings online	18.2%	27.5%	25.0%	14.8%	8.6%
Exchange of electronic documents between employees	81.8%	88.3%	65.0%	69.9%	52.1%
Collaborating on documents online	50.0%	56.7%	36.3%	35.8%	25.2%
Planning and monitoring the implementation of structural units' tasks online	54.5%	50.9%	27.5%	36.7%	25.2%
The setting of daily tasks online by the head of the unit	54.5%	46.8%	31.3%	36.7%	19.0%
Individual telephone communication	68.2%	79.5%	62.5%	62.9%	47.2%
Exchanging messages through telecommunication means	86.4%	77.8%	62.5%	62.4%	43.6%
Correspondence (sending business correspondence) with the help of telecommunication means	68.2%	74.3%	57.5%	61.1%	44.8%
No method was used	4.5%	3.5%	11.3%	14.4%	27.6%

Source: compiled by the authors

In the course of this research, it was established that the most common ways of organizing remote work in government agencies were: exchanging electronic documents (70.1%); individual telephone communication (63.5%); exchanging messages through telecommunication means (62.6%); and correspondence (60.3%). Less widespread were: collaborating on documents online (39.1%); planning and monitoring tasks online (37.0%); setting daily tasks online (34.9%); conducting online meetings (30.5%); and conducting online meetings of working groups (17.0%).

This research shows how various methods of work organization are applied in state bodies of different levels, and that the higher the level of an organization, the more different methods of work organization they use (Table 1).

Explanatory analysis concerning the organization of remote work in government agencies revealed that the following guidance was issued: 58.3% – oral explanations were provided; 38.9% – official written explanations were provided; 23.8% – no activities of any kind were conducted; 13.7% – online training was conducted; 5.9% – offline training was conducted.

A significant proportion of respondents believed that they had all the materials (56.2%) and technical equipment (61.9%) necessary to work remotely, and also believed that their unit implemented systematic work planning and control (64.1%).

The majority of civil servants (>70%) believed that the levels of efficiency, quality, and administrative discipline in their structural unit and state body had not changed since the transition to remote work (Tables 2 and 3).

This research determined that women rated the quality of work ($U = 28737; p \leq 0.05$) and administrative discipline ($U = 28334; p \leq 0.05$) of their structural unit higher than men did.

Table 2. The assessment of the structural unit’s performance since its transition to remote work

Criterion	Improvement	No change	Deterioration
Efficiency of work	14.6%	75.5%	9.9%
Quality of work	11.7%	80.5%	7.8%
Administrative discipline	12.3%	78.8%	8.9%

Source: compiled by the authors

Table 3. The assessment of the state body’s performance since its transition to remote work

Criterion	Improvement	No change	Deterioration
Efficiency of work	11%	77.6%	11.4%
Quality of work	9.8%	80.9%	9.3%
Administrative discipline	9%	78.3%	12.6%

Source: compiled by the authors

Category C employees, in comparison with Category B employees, assessed the efficiency of their structural unit ($U = 48540; p \leq 0.05$) and state body ($U = 51081; p \leq 0.05$), and the administrative discipline of the structural unit ($U = 49807; p \leq 0.05$) and state body ($U = 50768; p \leq 0.05$), more positively after the transition to remote work, and showed a stronger tendency to believe that the aforementioned indicators had improved.

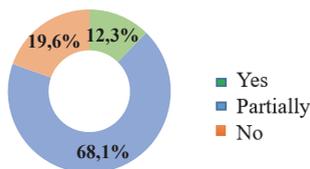
Senior workers were more likely to consider that their structural unit’s efficiency had deteriorated since the transition to remote work ($H = 11.491; p \leq 0.05$).

It should be noted that the way Ukrainian civil servants assessed their own effectiveness during remote work bears similarities to the way Irish civil servants estimated their

own level of effectiveness. In a civil service employee engagement survey (Department of Public Expenditure and Reform 2020), 88% of Irish civil servants said that they felt they were just as effective during the period of remote work as during their regular offline work.

When estimating their productivity, 35% of civil servants in New Zealand noted that productivity levels were similar between remote work and regular office work, with 38% saying that they were more productive at home (O’Kane, Walton, and Ruwhiu 2020).

In Ukraine, the majority of respondents (68.1%) would prefer to combine remote work with offline office work, 19.6% would not like to work remotely, and 12.3% would like to switch to permanent remote work (Fig. 3).



Legend: top to bottom – Yes, Partially, No.

Fig. 3. Distribution of respondents by willingness to work remotely in the future Source: compiled by the authors

The results of a survey carried out among civil servants in New Zealand also indicate that the majority of respondents (67%) would prefer to have a mixed method of work (working remotely several times per week or month), 22% would like to work from home every day, and 10% would not want to work remotely (O’Kane, Walton, and Ruwhiu 2020).

A comparison of survey results from several countries shows that – despite differences in economic development, dissimilar socio-cultural conditions, and new challenges – there are positive trends in the assessment of the efficiency and productivity of remote work.

Discussion

Analysis of the results revealed five main trends in organizing remote work:

1. The promotion of learning and self-development.

Almost half of the respondents (46.5%) said that working remotely stimulated them to grow and learn. Most of these individuals were under 25 or over 55 years old. Category C employees, compared to Category B employees, were more likely to think that this mode of work stimulates them to develop and learn ($U = 47803$; $p \leq 0.05$).

One of the major issues which needs to be addressed, as emphasized by the respondents, is that managers need to be aware of the need to develop the managerial competencies essential for organizing remote work.

In particular, the majority of respondents noted that senior and middle-level managers either completely or partially lack the knowledge, skills, and abilities to organize remote work. Managers, on their part, also underlined their inability to control the efficiency and quality of employee performance.

A significant number of responses highlighted the lack of digital literacy among colleagues and employees and the need to master modern methods of communication or information exchange using IT solutions.

2. The promotion of IT tools in the civil service.

During remote work, the most frequently used tools are: phone (77.6%); Viber (70.2%); and both work (66.9%) and personal (51.3%) e-mail. Among electronic video communication platforms, Zoom was preferred; 20.9% of employees said that they used it.

An electronic document management system was used by 43.5% of employees. It was determined that the electronic document management system is mainly used in government agencies of the first, second, and third levels. This may be due to the absence of such a system in most level 4 and 5 government agencies.

It was also established ($p \leq 0.05$) that women were more likely to use Viber ($U = 27844$) and Facebook ($U = 29278.5$), while men preferred to use Telegram ($U = 27227$), CiscoWebex ($U = 30048.5$), WhatsApp ($U = 28507.5$), and GoogleDocs ($U = 27895.5$).

Category C employees were more likely than Category B employees to use a variety of modern means of telecommunications, including: Viber ($U = 48440$), WhatsApp ($U = 50694$), Zoom ($U = 48587$), and Cisco Webex ($U = 51929$).

Older workers preferred Viber ($H = 9.546$), while younger workers were more likely to use Telegram ($H = 9.726$), WhatsApp ($H = 10.562$), Slack ($H = 10.531$), Trello ($H = 16.909$), Zoom ($H = 9.403$), Meet ($H = 10.549$), and GoogleDocs ($H = 13.105$).

If we compare the use of telecommunication tools when working in normal and remote modes, it can be seen that, when working remotely, the percentage indicating the use of personal e-mail, instant messaging, and electronic document management systems slightly increased. At the same time, the percentage indicating the use of remote work organization tools (Trello, Slack) and online meeting organization tools (Skype, Zoom, Meet, CiscoWebex) remained critically low, indicating that the work of government agencies' structural units during quarantine is insufficiently well-organized.

A significant number of respondents also stated (with examples to support the claim) that in the process of working remotely they had experienced technical problems, a lack of necessary settings, a lack of access, and malfunctioning. These answers predominantly concerned problems in the operation of the electronic document management system, or indeed the complete absence of such a system.

3. An awareness of the importance of communication and interaction.

A significant percentage of civil servants stated that they were in constant contact with colleagues (77.6%) and received feedback regarding work completed (61.6%). At the same time, some respondents felt a sense of isolation from the team while working remotely (19.3%).

Men were found to receive less feedback on work done remotely than women ($U = 27857; p \leq 0.05$).

It was also determined that Category B employees and employees with more work experience received less feedback on work done remotely ($U = 47087; p \leq 0.05$).

The results of this survey show a correlation between the level of the state body the individual worked for and how highly they assessed their constant contact with colleagues ($r = 0.178; p \leq 0.01$) and the frequency of obtaining feedback ($r = 0.192; p \leq 0.01$). Specifically, the higher the level of the state body, the higher these indicators were.

Many respondents stated that they had difficulties in establishing rapid communication with government officials from other agencies and with stakeholders.

4. Developing non-financial incentives for teams

Approximately one third of civil servants (34.2%) said that their level of motivation increased when they started working remotely.

The shorter the length of civil service employment and employment in a particular position, the more likely employees were to report that their level of motivation increased when they started working remotely. Category C employees were more likely to indicate that their level of motivation increased after switching to remote work than Category B employees ($U = 47706; p \leq 0.05$).

This research has determined that it was easier for employees under the age of 25 or over the age of 55 to find a work–life balance when working remotely ($H = 9.992; p \leq 0.05$).

At the same time, in some cases employees' motivation was low – this was specifically due to the practice of reducing the wages of individuals working remotely. In addition, responses attested that the number of tasks which had to be completed increased when working remotely.

5. The adaptability of employees to new working conditions in the face of moderate resistance to change

More than half of civil servants (55.9%) were comfortable with performing their duties remotely. Based on this research, the longer the length of civil service employment and employment in a particular position, the less comfortable the employee was with performing their duties remotely ($p \leq 0.01$).

The majority of respondents who answered this open-ended survey question focused on the following causes of concern: feelings of social and informational isolation; having difficulty concentrating on tasks and being distracted; stress and tension due to working

non-stop and an inability to efficiently organize their work day and break times; lack of face-to-face communication with colleagues; loss of some channels of obtaining and transmitting information; and the partial loss of empathy.

Among the difficulties respondents faced while working remotely, an imbalance between work time and leisure time, as well as the difficulty of self-organization while working, can be noted.

In addition, some civil servants mentioned that it is difficult to work remotely due to their colleagues' negative attitudes to remote work and their unwillingness to change their work styles.

Conclusions

1. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, public institutions have faced a number of different challenges, which include managing the situation itself, ensuring performance continuity, and the efficient organization of civil servants' work in responding to citizens' needs. Understanding that remote work can be an effective tool, and can be beneficial to both individual civil servants and the civil service in general, organizations need the flexibility to adapt to new working conditions to maximize the usefulness of remote work. It is therefore necessary to develop a centralized approach and to regulate it in legislation. These issues are important for all institutions, especially those where remote work was not common and permanent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (including Ukraine).
2. The survey of civil servants shows that the higher the level of the state body, the greater the number of civil servants working remotely. For example, 81.8% of civil servants in public authorities at the first level work remotely, while only 41.8% working in authorities at the fifth level do so – around half. This is due to the enhanced technical capacity and the flexibility of decision-making capabilities in top-tier government agencies. It was also found that the most common ways of organizing remote work were: the exchange of electronic documents between employees; individual telephone communication; the exchange of messages through the use of telecommunications; and correspondence (sending official correspondence) through the use of telecommunications. In total, 77.6% of civil servants were in constant contact with colleagues, and 61.6% received feedback on work completed. At the same time, some respondents experienced some isolation from their team during remote work.
3. The analysis of the organization of remote work in the Ukrainian civil service during the COVID-19 quarantine shows that 55.9% of civil servants were comfortable performing their tasks remotely, and 54.0% of respondents managed to find a balance between remote work and their personal lives. However, there is a need to find ways of properly involving those civil servants who encountered difficulties. Organizational preparations for implementing remote work require: appropriate resources; the training of managers on organizing remote work and remote management; automation and digitalization in all areas of personnel

management; the creation of conditions for the use and development of digital space and collaboration technologies; and the development of organizational social networks. In modern conditions, flexible forms of employment will increase the capacity of public authorities and the quality of civil servants' lives, while collaborative work technologies will help to successfully implement the aforementioned methods of work.

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Nuotolinio darbo valstybės tarnyboje organizavimo praktiniai aspektai: tyrimas

Anotacija

Straipsnyje analizuojami nuotolinio darbo organizavimo Ukrainos valstybės tarnyboje COVID-19 karantino metu tyrimo rezultatai ir pateikiami nuotolinio darbo organizavimo būdai ir ypatumai. Tyrimas atskleidė nuotolinio darbo organizavimo skirtumus skirtingų jurisdikcijų valdžios institucijose ir leido pateikti valstybės tarnautojų efektyvumo, darbo kokybės ir administracinės drausmės lygio *įsivertinimo*, pereinant prie nuotolinio darbo, rezultatus. Siekiant atskleisti Ukrainos viešojo administravimo sistemos pasirengimą *įgyvendinti* pokyčius, tyrimo metu palyginti skirtingų darbo vietų, *įvairaus* amžiaus, patirties lygio ir lyties asmenų *požiūrio į* nuotolinį darbą ypatumai ir identifiukuoti nuotolinio darbo organizavimo ir *įgyvendinimo* iššūkiai, reikalaujantys sprendimų. Remiantis tyrimo duomenimis, straipsnyje *išskiriamos* penkios pagrindinės nuotolinio darbo organizavimo tendencijos: mokymosi ir saviugdros skatinimas; IT priemonių valstybės tarnyboje plėtra; bendravimo ir sąveikos svarbos suvokimas; nefinansinių skatinimo priemonių komandoms kūrimas; darbuotojų gebėjimas prisitaikyti prie naujų darbo sąlygų ir atsparumas pokyčiams.

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