



TELEWORK AND OCCUPATIONAL RISKS, TAKING INTO ACCOUNT THE EXPERIENCE OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN LITHUANIAN MUNICIPAL ENTERPRISES

Project implementation period: 2022

Background. In the past, telework was mostly done by workers with a high degree of autonomy, but during the global pandemic, working from home was recommended for anyone who could work in this way. Since March 2020, telework has become almost the only safe form of work in Lithuania, implementing such requirements as ban of mobility, maintaining physical distance between people, self-isolation, etc. This has led to significant changes in work performance. This study aims to discuss the experience of telework using information and communication technologies (ICT) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Tasks: 1) To reveal the experience of employees working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic about changes in working conditions, measures to manage them, and to anticipate the possible perspective of telework after the end of the pandemic; 2) To describe the peculiarities of occupational risks for teleworkers, their significance for their safety and health.

Methodology. Qualitative method used in the study. 2 focus discussions groups were organized. Group 1–11 occupational safety and health (OSH) specialists, occupational health specialists, employers or persons authorized by employers; Group 2–18 employees. Research participants worked in Lithuanian municipal enterprises and had telework experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidelines for the discussions are based on a study commissioned by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) in 2021 „Telework and health risks in the context of the conducted COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from the field and policy implications". The authors of the study revised the discussion guidelines taking into account the Lithuanian context and suitability for the selected target group. The discussion guidelines consist of 5 parts: 1. Introduction, characteristics of the participant; 2. The order of telework; 3. Organization of telework; 4. Occupational health and safety; 5. Concluding remarks. The analysis of the qualitative research data was based on the principles of thematic analysis.

Result and conclusions.

1. The experiences of Lithuanian municipal enterprises managers, occupational health and safety specialists and employees have revealed that during the pandemic, remote work has positively changed

the attitudes of employers and employees in terms of remote work, and created sustainable experiences of corporate work organization that will be applied in the future. The development of remote work has accelerated the trends of digitization of work, improved the skills of employees to manage IT, increased the flexibility of working conditions, encouraged those who did not use this form of work to work remotely. Managers, occupational health and safety specialists and employees would prefer a mixed work in the future.

2. Remote work is difficult to apply where it is difficult to replicate the performed functions with virtual means without losing the quality of work. These are jobs that require direct interaction, have social communication, emotional requirements, in those cultural environments where there are deep traditions of contact communication, in small municipalities that do not have enough resources to organize remote work. The autonomy of the employee and the support of the organization are the main prerequisites for achieving the best work result and harmonious team work.

3. Due to the exceptional intensity and duration, forced remote work led to significant changes in working conditions and increased psychosocial risks. Working remotely for employees were not provided with any guidelines or instructions on how to avoid occupational risks. The main challenges were related to work organization and coordination, working time management, work control, information and virtual communication management, work-life balance, difficulties in ensuring equal working conditions for all employees in proportion to their contribution and result. Research participants said they felt increased anxiety, depressed mood, isolation, uncertainty about the future, which they associated with the pandemic and the need to learn new forms of work. Employees also considered impaired communication, insufficient emotional contact with other employees, and insufficient support from managers as causes of tension. Some companies have managed to create a certain professional culture based on mutual trust and support.

4. According to the participants of the study, occupational risk assessment was not carried out at remote workplaces. In the absence of prepared solutions and recommendations, employees were usually officially requested to declare compliance with safety and health requirements at home. In fact, for some employees, the working conditions during remote work were not ergonomic enough. Because of this and because of the long time spent with the computer, employees complained of general fatigue at work, exacerbation of various diseases, back pain, and eye fatigue. Increasing competencies in matters of occupational risk management would be very useful for both employees and employers.

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