

# REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivanka Georgieva Mihaylova

on dissertation entitled “**Management of People and Teams in Remote Work (in a Virtual Environment)**”

for awarding the educational and scientific degree “Doctor”  
in professional field 3.7. Administration and Management  
to full-time doctoral student Rayna Kostadinova Pehlivanska

**Grounds for the review:** Order RD № 38–284/03.06.2024, issued by the Rector of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”

## 1. Brief presentation of the candidate

Raina Kostadinova Pehlivanska holds a bachelor’s degree (2012) in International Economic Relations from the University of National and World Economy. In 2015 she obtained a master’s degree at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration of the Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski” (master’s program “Business Administration – Human Resources Development”).

Raina Pehlivanska has over 12 years of professional experience in the field of human resources, including in large international companies. Her professional career is related to recruitment, employer brand development, talent development programs, assessment centers, performance management process, organizational development, employee engagement, training organization and delivery. She is a certified career counselor by the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). She is fluent in English and uses French, Italian and Russian at a working level.

## 2. General description of the dissertation paper

The presented dissertation consists of an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a list of references and 5 appendices in a total volume of 179 pages. Without the references and appendices, the work is 149 pages long. The text includes 31 figures and 32 tables. The list of the references contains 180 information sources, of which 15 are in Bulgarian and 165 in English.

In the introduction, the doctoral candidate justifies the *relevance* of the issues related to the change in the way organizations work and operate, and in particular to the introduction of remote work as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The degree of elaboration of the selected issues is commented on. The *aim* of the *dissertation* is to investigate the impact of remote work on employee performance, their work–life balance, flexibility and the degree of autonomy. The aim is specified in *five research tasks*. The *research logic* is presented schematically. The *objects of the study* are employees from different sectors in Bulgaria, most of whom have had the opportunity to work remotely, as well as Human Resource managers and an operations director from organizations where employees have the opportunity to work from home. The *subject of the study* is remote work and its effects, advantages and disadvantages for employees and for organizations. *Eight research questions* are formulated, divided into *two groups*. *Quantitative and qualitative methods* were used to collect the empirical data: focus groups, survey and interviews. *Five limitations* of the study were defined.

### 3. Content evaluation of the dissertation paper

The *first chapter* of the dissertation reviews concepts of remote work. The chapter begins by clarifying the nature of remote work and examining various definitions of it. The author concludes that there is no single, universally accepted concept of remote work and that there are overlaps between the concepts of “remote work”, “telework”, “working from home” and “hybrid working”. The advantages and disadvantages of remote work are presented sequentially, and their examination is structured in two aspects: for organisations (employers) and for employees. It is pointed out that due to the contradictory nature of existing data and evaluations, it is difficult to give a clear interpretation of the results of remote work. The effects of remote work on society are also briefly commented. The chapter continues with a sequential presentation of notions, concepts, and research related to employee performance (productivity), work–life balance, flexibility of work commitments, and autonomy. The significance of these four dimensions of work activity for the organizational outcomes and in particular for the employees is discussed. The doctoral candidate examines in detail the inconsistency in research on the impact of remote work on performance, work–life balance, flexibility and autonomy. The existence of the controversy mentioned is the basis for the formulation of the research questions by the author. The chapter ends with a brief summary of its findings.

In the *second chapter*, the methodology and the design of the empirical study are presented. The doctoral candidate provides a brief theoretical justification and briefly presents the methods used to verify the research questions. The data of the study were collected in several stages. During the first and preliminary stage, a focus group was used with 9 participants from academic and business backgrounds in order to narrow the focus of the study. The second stage involved conducting *a quantitative study* by means of a survey: a pilot one among 7 participants and *a substantive one* among 560 employees from organisations in Bulgaria. The questionnaire for the substantive survey includes four sections. *The first section* consists of three questions, which aim to gather information on the preferred work model and whether it coincides with the actual one, as well as to find out what the respondents’ experience with remote working is. *The second section* contains 4 groups of questions related to employee performance, work–life balance, flexibility and autonomy (24 in total). *The third section* includes 22 statements on remote work (10 positive and 12 negative). *The fourth section* consists of eight questions designed to gather information about the demographic characteristics of the respondents and the characteristics of the organizations. During the final stage, qualitative research was conducted through interviews with seven Human Resource managers and a focus group with three Human Resource managers and one Operations director. The statements examining the five factors were subjected to factor analysis in order to reduce the number of initial variables and identify factor groups. The factor analysis confirms the existence of five factors: performance when working remotely, performance when working from an office, work–life balance, flexibility and autonomy. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

In the *third chapter* the data from the empirical study are presented and analysed. The first paragraph introduces the demographic profile of the respondents of the survey. The obtained results related to performance, work–life balance, flexibility and autonomy of employees are analysed sequentially.

A correlation analysis and dispersion analysis were used to test the first research question “Does remote work affect employee performance and in what way?”. Based on the empirical data and the analyses made, the doctoral candidate concluded that employees who work more frequently from distance rate their performance higher when working from home. The answer to the first research question is provided by the statistically significant positive moderate relationship found between remote work and employee performance/ productivity. The result is in line with findings from other previous studies and among the possible reasons are the opportunity for better focus and fewer distractions and the availability of suitable

conditions for working at home such as separate workspace, comfortable chair, good internet connection.

The correlation analysis and dispersion analysis used for the work–life balance data allow a conclusion to be drawn for the second research question, namely that remote work has a positive effect on employees' work–life balance, with a weak to moderate relationship found. The author suggests that a likely leading cause of this result is reduced travel time, which is consistent with the view of 93% (n=508) of the respondents. According to 78% (n=423) of the respondents the time saved is invested in personal commitments (for family and loved ones or in favourite activities, even in more time for rest or exercise). The survey data also reveal that remote work could also lead to a blurring of the boundaries between work and personal life, resulting in a disruption of the balance between the two. The perception that employees are constantly at work and need to respond immediately to work emails or messages is valid for 39% (n=213) of the respondents. A key prerequisite for successfully separating the two spheres is having a separate workspace. For 25% (n=136) of the respondents there is a lack of work facilities (comfortable chair, etc.) and 32% (n=177) do not have their own separate workspace. Other problems identified with remote work are related to motivation (22%, n=122) and self-discipline (24%, n=128).

Based on the correlation and dispersion analyses for the third research question, the doctoral candidate concludes that remote work has a positive effect on employee flexibility, with a statistically significant weak to moderate positive relationship for this dimension of work as well. The likely reasons for these results are: the ability to plan independently one's day; the ease of carrying out activities that require physical presence at home at certain times (receiving deliveries, doing household chores, and engaging in physical exercise); the ability to set a work schedule different from the standard one (e.g. starting and finishing later in the day) or to make up for lost time if one has a personal commitment during the workday; the ability to work from home instead of taking sick leave if one is feeling sick or needs to care for a young child.

The results of the correlation and dispersion analyses for the fourth research question indicate that remote work has a positive effect on employee autonomy, with a very weak relationship found. The author finds a possible explanation for the weak relationship in that autonomy depends to a greater extent on other factors such as the position held in the organisation or the level of experience in a specific position. In support of this assumption weak statistically significant differences were found in the responses of managers (Cramer's  $V = 0.194$ , Spearman's  $\rho = 0.193$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), who were more likely to indicate that they make important decisions about their work independently. The data also allow the author to assume that employees are also sufficiently empowered to make these decisions independently, as most of the respondents were more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statements comprising the autonomy factor. Another assumption made is that organizational culture and organizational size can be examined as factors regarding employee autonomy.

The chapter continues with an analysis of the data on employees' preferred work model. The results reveal that 57% (n=312) of respondents prefer to work mainly or entirely remotely, 33% (n=178) prefer a balance (both from the office and remotely), and 10% (n=54) prefer to work mainly or entirely in an office. There is a high correspondence between the preferences of the respondents and the actual work model: this is true for 49% (n=42) of office workers, 64% (n=103) of hybrid workers and 85% (n=254) of teleworkers. There is a moderate statistically significant relationship between the preferred work model and the actual work model (Cramer's  $V = 0.56$ , Spearman's  $\rho = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). However, 51% (n=43) of office workers would like to have more flexibility regarding remote work, as would 32% (n=52) of those who work hybrid.

The assessment of remote work of people who prefer to work mainly or entirely in an office (10%, n=54) is mainly associated with its disadvantages, namely: inability to maintain

and develop social contacts (80%); occurrence of obstacles in the interaction between team members (78%); occurrence of feelings of isolation and loneliness (76%); presence of problems with self-discipline and focused task completion (74%); lack of a separate working space (70%); reduction in the ability to motivate themselves for work (70%); occurrence of technical problems (lack of laptop, printer, internet, etc.) (65%); appearance of feeling of being constantly at work (63%); lack of some work facilities (comfortable office chair, etc.) (63%). However, this proportion of respondents also mentioned some advantages of working from home, such as saving time (74%) and being able to devote more time to loved ones (56%). People who prefer to work mainly or entirely remotely (57%, n=312) report no such difficulties. According to them, when working remotely, they save time (98%); they are able to concentrate better (because of the quieter environment and lack of interruptions) (95%); their expenses are lower (for transport, parking, food) (93%); they are able to devote more time to their loved ones (87%); their stress level is lower (77%); they adapt more easily their working tasks to their own needs (71%); they become more creative (66%); their job satisfaction increases (66%). A majority have no difficulty planning their time and tasks independently (87%) and find a sense of meaning in their work (87%). In addition, they have work facilities such as a comfortable chair (84%), the ability to motivate themselves for work is not dropping down (85%), and they have no problem with self-discipline and focused task completion (82%). The answers of the respondents who prefer the hybrid work model are more balanced: they feel to a more moderate degree the advantages and disadvantages of this work model, while at the same time maintaining a connection with the office environment. Based on the results obtained about the advantages and disadvantages of remote work by the three groups of respondents, the doctoral candidate concludes that psychological and social needs are of enormous importance for choosing a work model (office, hybrid, remote).

The qualitative research data (interviews and a focus group with representatives of the organisations, mainly from the Human Resource departments) revealed different approaches to defining the work model after the COVID-19 pandemic. Most companies offer a hybrid model that includes mandatory office visits at least a few days a week or try to engage employees voluntarily with various initiatives. The change in the work model is also leading to a change in office space, with more spaces allocated for social activities and a doubling of the average square footage per person. Employees react differently to these changes and their preferences depend on personal characteristics and professional requirements.

The interviews and the focus group largely confirm the findings on employee performance, work–life balance, flexibility and autonomy drawn from the survey. Managers' views on productivity are contradictory, with a decline after an initial increase during the pandemic. The assumptions that employee performance may improve due to a better focus in the home environment are confirmed, but with the addition that productivity depends mostly on the individual's personal responsibility. The balance between work and personal life improves, especially for employees with children, but the impact of the family situation may vary. It is better in remote work, mainly because of the reduced travel time and the ability to combine with personal commitments. The flexibility in work time and location also differs, and the autonomy is subject to controversial views.

The qualitative research findings also reveal that when managing teams in a remote work environment, the emphasis should be placed on information security, maintaining team spirit and communication. Initiatives such as online meetings and social activities are applied, but international teams (mostly) face difficulties in managers accessibility. Another challenge for employers is the Bulgarian legislation that requires companies to ensure safe working conditions in remote work. Introducing new employees and maintaining social dynamics becomes more difficult, with organizing team-building events cited as a positive method for improving team atmosphere in a hybrid work model.

The chapter concludes with a summary that provides answers to the eight research questions, as well as a discussion of the challenges professionals face in managing human resources in the digital workplace.

The *conclusion* contains a summary of the main results of the study. Some recommendations for employers in choosing a model of work are formulated, as well as some research perspectives in the dissertation problems are indicated.

The *appendices* contain the questionnaire for the substantive quantitative research, the results of the factor analysis, the results of the advantages and disadvantages of remote work according to the respondents who prefer to work in a balanced way, the results of the advantages and disadvantages of remote work for all the respondents and the questionnaire for the interviews and the focus group with representatives of organisations.

#### **4. Evaluation of the research and applied scientific contributions**

The doctoral candidate has comprehensively pointed out the contributory nature of the dissertation paper in terms of systematization of the advantages and disadvantages of the remote work model; conducting her own research on the impact of remote work on employees performance, work–life balance, flexibility and autonomy; the effects of remote work on the studied dimensions of work activity and the enrichment of managerial approaches related to managing people in remote work. I accept the above contributions, although I believe that they could be more briefly and clearly stated.

#### **5. Evaluation of the publications on the dissertation paper**

The author has submitted 3 publications on the topic of her dissertation. Two of them are in Bulgarian and one in English. The publications present significant results of the dissertation and are in appropriate journals. They meet the requirements for successful completion of the procedure.

#### **6. Evaluation of the abstract**

The abstract consists of 62 pages. It correctly reflects the structure and content of the dissertation paper and as such meets the requirements.

#### **7. Critical remarks and recommendations**

My remarks are more in the nature of recommendations for the future work of the doctoral candidate and are as follows:

1) As a gap in the methodology, I consider the lack of description of the criteria for the research sample and the way of its formation. I strongly recommend Ms. Pehlivanska to pay due attention to this essential part of the research process in her future research work.

2) Some improvements can be made in the direction of strengthening the analytical-critical aspect of the text in the third chapter. The author could problematise more thoroughly the results in the context of managing people and teams in remote work, which would undoubtedly contribute to a better reflection of the dissertation topic in the data analysis.

3) As a whole, the dissertation is written in clear and understandable language. At the same time, there is room for improvement in terms of the language.

4) My recommendation to the doctoral candidate is to publish more papers that present other significant results that she has reached on the basis of the empirical data collected and that have not yet found publicity. Preferably, she should aim to publish in refereed and indexed

journals in world-renowned databases, which would help to increase the visibility of the scientific results.

## **8. Conclusion**

The presented dissertation is the result of an in-depth study of the impact of remote work on employee performance, work–life balance, flexibility and autonomy. The author has carried out a thorough review and analysis of relevant literature on the selected issues. Quantitative and qualitative research has been conducted, the data obtained have been processed, and the results have been summarized and analyzed. Considering the significant changes in the work model of organizations during and after the pandemic of COVID-19, the research problem is undeniably relevant. The doctoral candidate shows a good knowledge of the theoretical and practical issues and demonstrates correctness when referring to information sources. The results obtained contribute to the understanding of the impact of remote work on dimensions of employee work performance. With this dissertation, the author shows that she has achieved the main goal of doctoral studies: to broaden her scientific horizons, increase her professional training and acquire skills for independent research work.

On the basis of the above arguments and regardless of the remarks and recommendations made, I highly appreciate the work done by the doctoral candidate. I recommend the esteemed Scientific Jury to award educational and scientific degree “Doctor” in professional field 3.7. Administration and Management to Rayna Kostadinova Pehlivanska for the dissertation paper entitled “Management of People and Teams in Remote Work (in a Virtual Environment)”.

August 12, 2024

Reviewer:

(Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ivanka Mihaylova)