PERCEPTIONS OF MILLENNIALS ON THE PRACTICE OF FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS IN SERBIAN IT SECTOR

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Abstract: The need for research arose due to the rapid development of information technologies, robotization, digitization of business, economic, health (Covid-19), energy and other crises, as well as changes in the demographic structure of the workforce. These changes have led to the increasing application of various forms of flexible work arrangements, and special emphasis is placed on employees in the IT sector who, due to the nature of their work, have a greater possibility of application. The work aims to examine the level of application of different types of flexible work arrangements according to Cranet research methodology and perceptions according to Startit research on a sample of 146 highly educated millennials who belong to the private IT sector in the Republic of Serbia. The results indicate that flexi-time records the highest level of application, that teleworking during the Covid-19 pandemic records the highest level of application by comparing before, during and after the pandemic, as well as that employees are comfortable with this way of working, but there are also certain problems when applying such that loneliness occurs while working from home, more precisely that they miss their colleagues, that employees have to take care of children and work more than before. To solve the mentioned problems, IT companies must adapt various forms of flexible work arrangements to establish a balance between work and private life and positively influence on attitudes and behaviors of young employees.

Key words: flexible work arrangements, IT sector, millennials, private sector, highly educated employee, Republic of Serbia

JEL classification: M10, M50

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the development of IT, globalization, digitization of business, increasing competition on the market, as well as the increasing impact of the economic crisis, political crisis (war between Russia and Ukraine), health crisis (Covid-19 pandemic), etc. companies around the world had to change their way of doing business to survive on the market but also to become leaders in their field of business (Gašić & Berber, 2023). Spreitzer et al. (2017) emphasize that the implementation of various forms of flexible working arrangements has increased rapidly over the last decade and that a remarkable jump was observed due to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Sinclair et al., 2020).

One of the growing trends in facing organizations with the aforementioned challenges is the

application of various forms of flexible work arrangements, which according to the authors Kossek & Michel (2011), and Rau & Hyland (2002) refer to where (flexi place), and when (flexi-time) work activities are carried out. That is, flexible working hours refer to the employee's control over working hours, more precisely including adjusting the start and end time of work (compressed work schedule, reduced working hours and ease of taking days off). While on the other hand, Flexi-place refers to a policy that allows employees to carry out work activities in locations that do not require constant physical presence at the company's workplace (such as remote work, or home-based work). These two stated policies are thus designed to meet the specific needs of employees who are focused on the time and place of work to maximize the positive effects of flexible work arrangements for both employees and the organization itself (Wheatley, 2017).

The subject of the research is determining the perception of highly educated millennials who are employed in the private IT sector in the Republic of Serbia on the application of various forms of flexible work arrangements to provide such employees with those work arrangements that will have a positive effect on work attitudes, employee behaviors such as work engagement, job satisfaction, commitment, innovative work behavior, employee performance, motivation, productivity and efficiency, and employee loyalty to the company and its values. Also, the aim is to determine to what extent different forms of flexible work arrangements are implemented and what impact the implementation has on employee productivity. In addition to the main advantages, the goal is also to determine the negative sides of working from home. Based on the presented perceptions, the goal is to give recommendations to employers and employees who use this form of work.

The research consists of theoretical and empirical research. The theoretical part of the research is aimed at explaining the concept, importance, and types of different forms of flexible work arrangements, which, under the influence of various factors, have seen a significant increase in application. The authors in the empirical research analyzed eight questions taken by Startit (2020) regarding the implementation of various forms of flexible work arrangements on a sample of 146 millennials in the private IT sector of the Republic of Serbia. After that part, as part of the concluding discussion, the authors summarized the entire research and highlighted significant segments that

should be paid attention to by both employers and employees.

2. FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENT

Flexible working arrangements are a necessary phenomenon of today's digital society, where organizations are forced to adapt their way of doing business to overcome the various challenges they face, such as the increasing development of information technologies, strong competition, globalization, digitalization of business and various crises such as health (Covid-19 pandemic) which had a significant effect on increasing the level of application of various forms of flexible work arrangements such as flexible working hours, remote work, etc. as well as economic, political, environmental and other crises. Berber & Slavić (2019) conducted a factor analysis of 12 types of flexible work arrangements, and the analysis showed that 12 types of flexible work arrangements according to the Cranet research methodology can be grouped as follows: the first group consists of weekend work, shift work and over time, the second group: flexi-time, remote work, and home-based work, the third group: compressed work schedule, job share, part-time, and the fourth group: fixed term contract, annual hours contract, and temporary job.

Allen & Shockley (2009, p. 267) emphasize that flexible working hours is a concept that allows employees to adjust their working hours according to their needs, within certain frameworks determined by the employer. More specifically, some of the forms of flexible working arrangements such as working from home, flexible working hours, etc. can be applied to balance business commitments with private life. This approach usually implies more autonomy for employees when organizing their working time, which can contribute to increased productivity and job satisfaction. The application of flexible work arrangements must be coordinated with the company's activities and the positions of the employees in the company. The nature of the work requires some employees to be physically present at work (factory workers) or at customer sites (eg, site-independent service engineers) and thus creates a gendered workforce in terms of choices regarding work locations (Felstead, 2022). Wheatley et al. (2023) point out that the pandemic resulted in the blockade and social distancing of employees and that this forced many organizations to apply remote and hybrid work.

Flexible work arrangements have their positive and negative sides, the results of the authors Shifrin & Michel (2022) indicated that flexible work arrangements are associated with better

physical health, reduced absenteeism and fewer somatic symptoms. This suggests to us that flexible work arrangements can facilitate employees in maintaining their health. The positive effect of the application of flexible working arrangements on the establishment of a balance between the work and private life of employees was determined in the works of authors Hayman (2009), and Dizaho, Salleh & Abdullah (2017). Also, by applying different forms of flexible work arrangements, there is a reduction in the level of stress by establishing a balance between work and private life, which was shown in the work of the authors Subramaniam et al. (2020). Positive effect on work attitudes and behaviors of employees such as work engagement, commitment, intention to leave, innovative work behavior, and employee performance, etc. it was established in the works of. Gahlawat & Kundu, 2019; Gašić & Berber, 2021; Berber et al., 2022; Tsen et al., 2022; Gašić & Berber, 2023; Stavrova et al., 2023; Qi et al., 2023.

Some of the basic negative sides of the application of flexible work arrangements is the loneliness of employees, during remote work, employees have moved away from each other (Miyake et al., 2021; Becker, 2022), especially during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The application of various forms of flexible work arrangements under the influence of modern challenges has forced some employees to be available outside of their working hours, which can have a negative impact on maintaining a balance between private and work life (Russell, O'Connell & McGinnity, 2009), which additionally leads to increased stress among employees (Titopoulou et al., 2019). Vasic (2020) emphasizes that an adequate strategy aimed at the implementation of various forms of flexible work arrangements (in the specific case of remote work) would lead to greater employee loyalty to the organization and satisfaction. He also emphasizes that employees need appropriate leadership and support for remote work because remote work cannot be successful enough if support is not provided, including regular training, and even psychological support in case of burnout and stress.

3. METHODOLOGY

To determine the perceptions of highly educated millennials about the practices of flexible work arrangements in the private sector of the Republic of Serbia, a Google Forms electronic questionnaire was created to collect a sample. As part of the research methodology, the questionnaire that was used as well as the research sample will be explained.

3.1. SURVEY

As mentioned, an electronic questionnaire was created to collect the necessary sample for analysis. The advantage of the electronic questionnaire is that the respondents had the opportunity to answer the questions at any time, wherever they were, using their electronic devices. The questionnaire consisted of two parts, the first part included control questions (gender, level of education, position in the company, headquarters of the organization, and the organization you work in a national organization, a branch of a national organization, an international organization, a branch of an international organization). The second part of the questions included one question about the application level of different forms of flexible work arrangements according to the Cranet research methodology, as well as seven questions taken from the Startit (2020).

3.2. SAMPLE

After the electronic questionnaire was created, it was distributed to employees who work in the private IT sector and belong to the Y generation age group in the Republic of Serbia. This layer of employees was selected because they often show a greater preference for flexible work arrangements for several reasons, namely: the workplace culture that is characteristic of the IT sector in the sense that it has a more liberal workplace culture that supports flexible work arrangements. Younger employees in such an environment often have greater opportunities to use such arrangements. Technological literacy (they often have a high level of technical literacy, which allows them to work outside the headquarters of the company office using various remote work tools such as video conferencing, online collaboration tools, etc., then adaptability to life in the sense that they often value the ability to adjust working hours to their life needs such as different hobbies, education, travel, and this way of working allows them to achieve that. time management.

The collection lasted from September 2021 to September 2022. The focus was on millennials who work in the IT sector in the Republic of Serbia. Questionnaires were personally sent to the collected address base of IT companies that were found by electronic search, as well as by posting on the LinkedIn business network. As a result of the survey, 162 employees filled out the questionnaire, but with the application of selection to narrow the sample to employees who are highly educated and work in the private IT sector in the Republic of Serbia, the final number of respondents is 146.

| Gender	N	%
Male	80	54.8
Female	66	45.2
Level of education	N	%
Bachelor's degree	44	30.1
Master study	98	67.1
Ph.D.	4	2.7
Position in organization	N	%
Manager	35	24
Professional worker	111	76
Headquartered of the organization	N	%
Republic of Serbia	77	52.7
EU	39	26.7
Non-EU country	10	6.8
USA	20	13.7
The organization you work for is:	N	%
National organization	52	35.6
Branch of a national organization	2	1.4
International organization	29	19.9
Branch of international organization	63	43.2
Total:	146	100

Source: Authors of research

Table 1 indicates that out of a total of 146 employees in the private IT sector working in the Republic of Serbia, the largest number of them are men (N=89, %=54.8) while the rest are women (N=66, %=45.2), that is about highly educated employees, where the largest number of them have completed master's studies (N=98, %=67.1), then bachelor's degree (N=44, %=30.1), and Ph.D. studies (N=4, %=2.7). The largest number of them work in the position of professional workers (N=111, %=76), while the rest of them are managers (N=35, %=24). Analyzing the headquarters of the organization where they are employed, the largest number of them marked the Republic of Serbia (N=77, %=52.7), EU (N=39, %=26.7), USA (N=20, %=13.7), while the smallest number of them marked Non-EU country (N=10, %=6.8). By reviewing the answers to the question "The organization you work for is", the largest number of respondents marked Branch of international organization (N=63, %=43.2), National organization (N=52, %=35.6), International organization (N=29, %=19.9) And the smallest number of them indicated the branch of a national organization (N=2, %=1.4).

4. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the presented questionnaire and sample, in the third chapter, a graphic presentation was made on the level of application of various forms of flexible work arrangements according to the Cranet research methodology, whether they would like to work outside the office, even after the Covid-19 pandemic and for how many days, the assessment of the productivity of working from home compared to working in the company office, whether you work more or less compared to work before the Covid-19 pandemic, what are some of the main problems employees face while working from home, as well as whether the employer has provided them with adequate equipment for working from home, motivation and support due to the new situation (Covid-19). The following graphic display refers to the percentage display of different forms of flexible work arrangements according to the Cranet methodology, as well as a comparison of the level of application of remote work before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

Figure 1. Presentation of the average level of application of different types of flexible work arrangements according to the Cranet research methodology
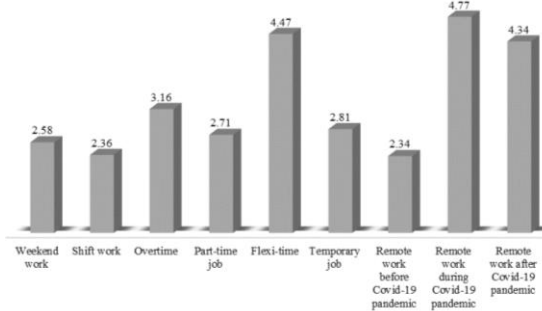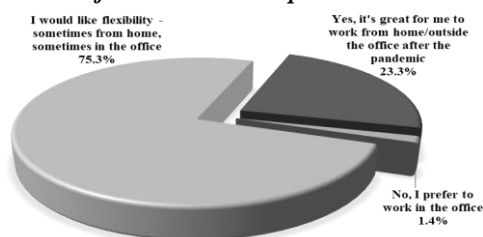

Source: Authors of research

Figure 1. shows the average level of application of various forms of flexible work arrangements according to the Cranet research methodology, if we compare all levels except remote work, it can be concluded that flexi-time (4.47) records the highest level of application, followed by over time (3.16), temporary job (2.81), part-time job (2.71), weekend work (2.58), while shift work (2.36) records the lowest level of application. By comparing remote work before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, it can be concluded that the highest average level of application was recorded during the Covid-19 pandemic (4.77), followed by a slightly lower level of use after the Covid-19 pandemic (4.34), while the lowest level of use was recorded before the Covid-19 pandemic (2.34), which indicates that companies saw the effects and importance of this way of doing business due to the great impact of the health crisis and that they decided to keep this way of working to a greater extent than before after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Wickramasinghe & Jayabandu (2007) investigated the perceptions of professional employees in the IT sector, about flexible work arrangements and the creation of an appropriate professional environment for them. The results indicated that the level of satisfaction with flexible working hours is high and also indicate that employees have managed to develop work patterns that allow them to combine business and personal life commitments, while employers reap the benefits of gaining employee commitment, and loyalty and maximizing employee potential. The results of the research by Błaszczyk et al. (2022) indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly changed the pattern of work in the IT sector in Poland. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 82% of employees worked in stationary or hybrid conditions, with stationary mode of work prevailing. The pandemic has influenced as many as 74% of employees to change their way of working and to switch to remote work or a hybrid way of working, whereby remote work still prevails. The findings of the authors Błaszczyk et al. (2023) point to a significant change in business models, within which most companies have completely adopted remote work as a dominant way of working. However, managers generally perceive remote work as a worse outcome compared to stationary work. Major concerns about telecommuting relate to the difficulty of monitoring, and maintaining effective team communication, and the potential negative effects on employee motivation and well-being due to limited interaction. However, they say that the main advantages of remote work are flexibility, talent attraction, and compliance with the requirements of employees and the labor market.

Figure 2. Percentage of answers to the question "Would you like to work outside the office even after the Covid-19 pandemic?"
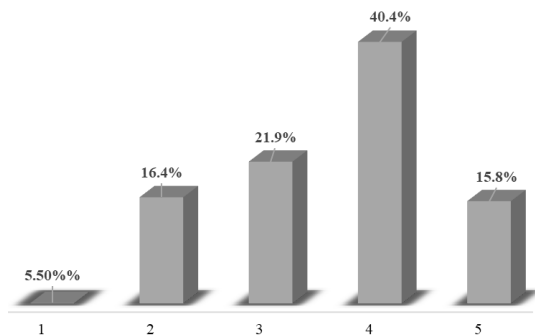

Source: Authors of research

Based on the presented Figure 2. the results indicated that the largest percentage of respondents would like to have flexibility, sometimes to work from home and sometimes in the company's office (75.3%), then, yes, they would like to work from home, outside the office after Covid-19 pandemic (23.3%) while 1.4% of

them answered that they would like to work in the company's office and not from home after the pandemic.

Figure 3. Percentage of answers to the question "How many days a week would you like to work outside the office after the Covid-19 pandemic?"

Source: Authors of research

Based on the results shown, it is evident that the largest number of employees would like to work 4 days outside the office after the Covid-19 pandemic, as much as 40.4%, a slightly smaller percentage indicated 3 days (21.8%), 2 (16.4%), 5 (15.8%), while the smallest number of them marked 1 day (5.5%). De Klerk, Joubert & Mosca (2021) emphasize that the ideal ratio of remote work and office work is about 2-3 days a week and that adequate support for employees should be established.

Figure 4. Percentage of answers to the question "Did your employer provide you with the necessary motivation and support in adapting to the new situation related to the COVID-19 pandemic?"
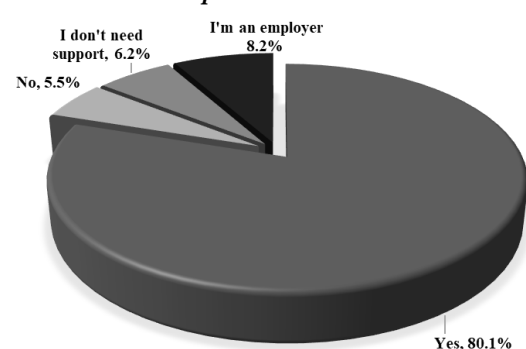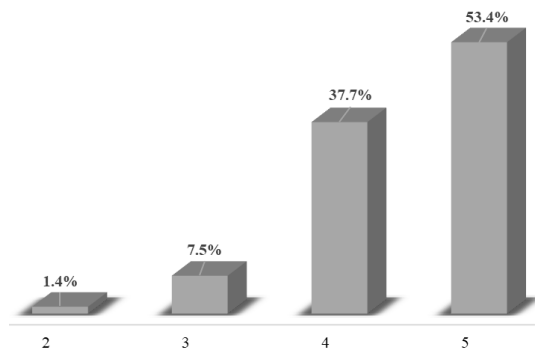

Source: Authors of research

According to the above, as the authors De Klerk, Joubert & Mosca (2021) pointed out it is necessary to provide employees who use different forms of flexible work arrangements with the necessary motivation for work, the results of our research shown in Figure 4 indicate that the 80.1 % of employees responded that the sender

provided them with the necessary motivation and support in adapting to the new situation related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Hill, Ferris & Martinson (2003) emphasize that the implementation of flexible work arrangements such as working from home and flexible working hours, positively affects the trust of the organization among employees, which positively reflects on morale and motivation (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Chen & Fulmer (2017) support the above and emphasize that employees who work remotely may not always be satisfied with their work, but the trust given to them has a positive effect on the motivation of employees to work harder as a sign of gratitude for the trust instilled in them. Employee motivation is a set of factors that influence the desire, ability, and intention of employees to achieve the defined goals of the organization and includes internal and external factors that encourage the individual to engage a certain level of energy, time, and resources to achieve results in their work (Liaquat et al., 2024).

Figure 5. Percentage of answers to the question "How do you rate the productivity of working from home compared to the productivity of working from the office on a scale of 1 to 5?"
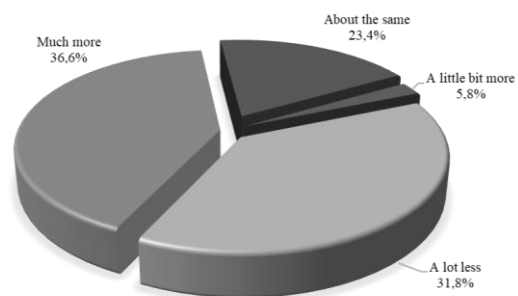

Source: Authors of research

Based on the results shown in Figure 5, the largest percentage of respondents marked that productivity from home is at a high level (grade 5, 53.4%), followed by 4 (37.7%), 3 (7.5%), while the smallest number of them marked 2 (1.4%). Gibbs, Mengel & Siemroth (2021) used staffing and analytics data from over 10,000 qualified professionals in a large Asian IT company, where they compared the productivity of working from home before and during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results indicated that total hours worked increased by approximately 30%, including an 18% increase in after-hours work while average production did not change significantly. Productivity fell by about 20%, while time spent on coordination activities and meetings increased, but continuous working time was significantly reduced. Employees spent less

time networking and had less coaching and 1:1 meetings with supervisors. Employees with children worked more than those without children and suffered a significant drop in productivity compared to those without children. Haridas, Rahul & Subha (2021) on a sample of 115 employees in the IT sector in India who work from home, found that communication and collaboration have the greatest impact on employee productivity when they work from home. They suggest that employers and managers must find adequate ways to improve communication with and between employees.

Figure 6. Percentage of answers to the question "Do you work more or less compared to work before the Covid-19 pandemic?"

Source: Authors of research

Based on Figure 6, it can be seen that the answers are divided, the largest number of them answered much more (36.6%), followed by a lot less (31.8%), about the same (23.4%), while the least number of them answered a little bit more (5.8%).

Figure 7. Percentage of answers to the question "What problems do you encounter while working from home?"
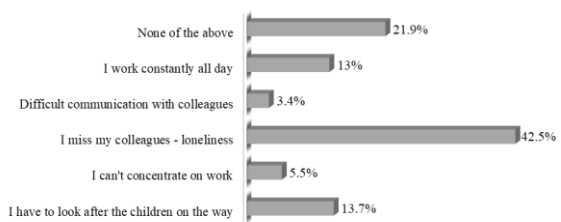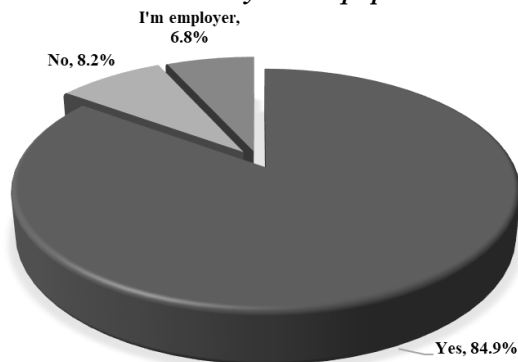

Source: Authors of research

The biggest problem that the respondents pointed out is that they lack colleagues, more precisely, that they feel lonely (42.5%), followed by none of the above (21.9%), which is a good indicator, the employees emphasize that they do not have any problems and that this way of working suits them"). Ipsen (2021) points out that the biggest disadvantages of working from home are the loneliness of employees due to social distance,

maintaining the balance between work and private life, etc. Yahoo!, Bank of America, and IBM have decided to bring remote workers back into the office to foster social relationships and foster creativity (Spector 2019). Khazanchi et al. (2018) emphasize that these organizations found that many employees preferred to work remotely rather than in the company office, which they saw as a threat to collaboration and morale. For certain employees, the office can indeed be a major source of stress. In their eyes, virtual offices can be a way to "escape" the office and alleviate the emotional exhaustion caused by social interaction (Stich, 2020).

Figure 8. Percentage of answers to the question "Do you think that your employer provided you with the necessary work equipment?"

Source: Authors of research

Based on the results shown in Figure 8, the largest number of respondents indicated that their employer provided them with the necessary work equipment (84.9%), then that they did not provide them with equipment (8.2%), while 6.8% indicated that they were employers. Work equipment is one of the necessary resources that enable employees to perform their work activities, especially in the IT sector. The development of IT technologies and digitization of business are increasing and the recommendation to companies is to provide adequate equipment so that the efficiency of business activities is as high as possible, and employees are satisfied.

CONCLUSION

Research on the topic of perceptions of millennials on the practice of flexible work arrangements in the Serbian IT sector indicates significant conclusions from a sample of 146 respondents, first of all, it was established that flexi-time is the most widely used in comparison to other forms of flexible work arrangements, unless we compare remote work before, during and after the Covid-19 pandemic where the level of application of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic records a significant level of application. By comparing remote work before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the highest level of application was recorded during the COVID-19 pandemic, which indicates that due to the significant health crisis, companies have found a way to reduce the negative effects. A good indicator can be observed in the sense that the level of application of remote work after the Covid-19 pandemic is significant, slightly lower compared to during but significantly higher than before, which indicates that companies have maintained this way of doing business because they saw that in their in crisis situations like the one mentioned, this way of working showed well and that the employees were satisfied. By analyzing the other questions, it was determined that employees would like flexibility in their work, in the sense that sometimes they work from home and sometimes in the company's office, and that they would like to work four or three days outside the office. Millennials in the private IT sector rated their productivity high when working from home, but opinion is divided as to whether they are working more or less from home than before the COVID-19 pandemic. When asked whether the employer provided them with the necessary equipment for work as well as support and motivation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the employees answered positively. On the questions related to the disadvantages of remote work, social distance was highlighted in the largest percentage, or more precisely, the loneliness that resulted from the success of remote work. Considering that the Y generation is at such an age where a good part of the employees have children, there are a lot of answers that when working from home, they have to take care of the children. There is also a problem where employees report that they work all day, have difficulty communicating with colleagues, and that they cannot concentrate on work, but in a smaller percentage. They would also emphasize that a good part of the respondents answered that nothing bothers them while working from home, even 21.9%, which is a positive indicator, in the sense that the employees are satisfied with this way of working and would continue to do business this way.

By searching scientific works on this topic, the results were confirmed, so De Klerk, Joubert & Mosca (2021) emphasize that the ideal ratio of remote work and office work is about 2-3 days a week and that adequate support for employees should be established. Hill, Ferris & Martinson (2003) emphasize that the implementation of flexible work arrangements such as working from home and flexible working hours, positively affects the trust of the organization among

employees, which positively reflects on morale and motivation (Weideman & Hofmeyr, 2020). Chen & Fulmer (2017) emphasize that trust given to them has a positive effect on the motivation of employees to work harder as a sign of gratitude for the trust instilled in them. Rahul & Subha (2021) found that communication and collaboration have the greatest impact on employee productivity when they work from home. Ipsen (2021) points out that the biggest disadvantages of working from home are the loneliness of employees due to social distance, maintaining the balance between work and private life, etc. Khazanchi et al. (2018) emphasize that these organizations found that many employees preferred to work remotely rather than in the company office, which they saw as a threat to collaboration and morale.

IT organizations should, by the various challenges they face, develop strategic programs as well as instructions for the implementation of various forms of flexible work arrangements, and they would especially emphasize remote work, work from home, and the use of flexible-teams, which records the highest level of application in this sector. The goal of an adequate strategy and implementation is to positively influence the working attitudes and behaviors of employees, as well as to eliminate the negative effects that may occur when applying this way of working, such as a disbalance between work and private life, loneliness, reduced concentration, reduced stress, etc. Some recommendations for managers in the private IT sector who use flexible work arrangements and want to effectively manage teams are primarily to set clear expectations (clear communication regarding expectations is necessary, all team members must know what is expected of them), the focus should be on efficiency through various forms of flexible work arrangements rather than on the number of hours worked, it is necessary to provide adequate resources such as access to technologies and resources necessary for remote work such as reliable internet connection and collaboration tools. Ensure regular communication with team members through various communication channels and foster a culture of open communication where all team members should feel comfortable sharing information and ideas. Implement appropriate systems for coordinating progress and evaluating performance based on long-term goals and provide feedback and support to help the team succeed. Promote a balance between work and personal life by encouraging team members to take breaks, set boundaries between work and personal life, and prioritize self-care. By implementing these recommendations, managers can effectively lead teams in a flexible work environment while promoting efficiency, productivity, and positive effects on work attitudes, and behaviors among team members.

Some of the main limitations of the research are focused on the number of employees, which should be higher to be more relevant, and conducting interviews with managers and other employees about more detailed information regarding the implementation of various forms of flexible work arrangements to uncover some new details.

Recommendations for future research refer to a larger number of respondents, conducting live interviews, as well as analyzing different effects such as the impact of flexible work arrangements on the establishment of work-life balance, job stress, work attitudes (employee engagement, job satisfaction, employee commitment, turnover intention, etc.), employee behavior (innovative work behavior, employee performance).

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