

DIGITAL WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION: INNOVATIVE APPROACH AFTER COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 had undoubtedly speeded up adoption of digital technologies. Most of the theoreticians agree that changes that happened in the pandemic period would not happen in the next several years or even decades. There is almost no business operation that has not been affected by the pandemic, from customer relation and sales to supply chain. It influenced different business sectors leaving permanent change and making a significant proportion of organizations working in at least hybrid mode: combining digital and traditional pre-pandemic ways of working. COVID-19 had significantly changed the workplace and way of working. Workplace has shifted to digital or at least hybrid and employees and companies have adopted new ways of working, including usage of digital technologies but also accepting more agile and flexible procedures and rules. The research community has followed this phenomenon and tried to provide best possible recommendation to it accordance to recognized research methods. The paper provides a systematic literature review of the most significant scientific and industry publication in the years after the pandemic start. It is based on Kitchenham methodology of the systematic review with selected publication from recognized bibliographic databases. First part provides general effects of the pandemic to digital transformation of businesses all over the globe, mostly connected to analysis of the employees' workplace preference. The second part is focused on digital workplace transformation and presents key theoretical and professional findings in the post-pandemic workplace. This part is consisted of the preview of benefits of the digital workplace transformation, identification of critical success factors and the most significant challenges of the process.

Keywords: digital transformation, digital workplace, COVID-19, change management, human resources.

1. INTRODUCTION

Due to technological development, as well as under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital workplace transformation has become the subject of number researches with different focuses and from different scientific fields. It is unquestionable that the way of working is changing, so the workplace of today is significantly different from the way of working a decade ago.

We can define digital workplace transformation as “a multi-step process of transition from traditional workplace, usually considered as a physically limited space and set of correlated tasks, to digital workplace, which is more flexible regarding place and time of work, and supported through adequate strategic and technological background”. Therefore, we can define a digital workplace as “a digital technology-supported working system consisting of, not only the physical space, employees and tasks, but also a set of strategically accepted procedures and rules in order to maximize productivity and improve collaboration, communication and knowledge management”

(Micic et al., 2022).

The paper will firstly provide an overview of the key results of a systematic literature review of the *digital workplace* with special focus on innovation as part of the transformation process. Various projections suggest that in the post-pandemic era, remote working will continue to be present, at least to some extent, having in mind technology has proven to be a significant factor and value that allows many organizations to continue to grow their business in ways unimaginable twenty years ago, including the application of various technologies, from the cloud to modern video conferencing tools (Harvard Business Review, 2021).

2. METHODOLOGY AND DATA

The systematic literature review is done following the methodology defined by Kitchenham and others (Kitchenham et al., 2009, 2010; Turner, Kitchenham, Budgen, & Brereton, 2008). It includes a review of the literature related to the digital workplace as a modern concept, without focusing on a specific industry or activity, in order to provide a preview of the latest publication regarding the effects of the pandemic and technology progress to preferences about the workplace with specific focus on innovation. The review included a search of the literature database through a search of journals and papers as well as collections of papers from scientific conferences, reports and similar related scientific and professional literature: Web of Science (WoS), Clarivate Analytics; Scopus, Elsevier and Xplore, The Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE).

In addition, a concise overview of books, guides and other literature (for example, collections of papers or monographs based on conference papers) was done, which is related to keywords from the following databases: Springer Link (EISZ) (Economics and Finance, Behavioral Science and Psychology, Political Science and International Studies packages 2017) and (Springer E-book packages, 2017).

The mentioned databases were searched by the keywords “digital workplace”, “COVID-19” and “innovation”. Additional criteria for searching the database were: English as the primary language and publication after 2010, as well as the review of the publication by several reviewers. The purpose of the literature review was to identify empirical and theoretical analysis related to the digital workplace as part of the general digital transformation, but also to identify the shortcomings of previous research and research directions in the future. The aim of the review was to identify fundamental research issues on the topic of the digital workplace.

The literature review process consisted of several steps: primary scanning of results from databases, filtering of results based on titles, filtering based on abstracts and subtitles and final selection based on paper content, book or other type of publication. In the last step, using forward and backward research, some of the sources were added to the research bearing in mind that they are used as primary sources in the previously selected publication.

Final list of the publications is selected based on the connectivity to the main subject of the paper, effects of the COVID-19 pandemic to digital workplace transformation.

3. EMPLOYEES’ WORKPLACE PREFERENCES

When we analyze employees’ preferences about where they would like to do their work, most of them would like to have live office work at least once a week (Jill, 2021). Therefore, we come to the conclusion that not only are typical physical work spaces, such as offices or homes, preferred, but that more than one third of employees would like to do their work in other spaces at least one day a week. Other spaces include cafes, hotels, co-working spaces, etc.

Additionally, if we compare these results with the results from 2020, it can be seen that the percentage of those who express a desire to work at least one day from home fell from 72 percent to 67 percent, which indicates that interest in working exclusively from home is declining (in short,

less employees prefer to work from home for at least one day a week, which can be justified with increasing saturation of the same because the remaining 23 percent believe that one day should not work from home).

On the other hand, employees want to spend at least one day a week in the office, so the percentage of those who said that at least one day a week of office work is their preference increased from 71 percent to 79 percent, indicating that a higher percentage of employees compared to the previous year, they consider that meeting with colleagues and staying in the office once a week is minimal and necessary (Table 1).

Table 1. Two-year comparison: How employees would like to work at least one day a week?

Year		
Preferred location of work (minimum 1 day per week)	2020	2021
Work from home	72%	67%
Office work	72%	79%
Work from other locations	40%	36%
Hybrid operation:		63%
- Office + house	67%	- 29%
- Office + house + others.	not available for 2020 by individual elements of the hybrid workplace	- 20%
- House + other locations		- 9%
- Office + other locations		- 4%

Source: Author based on indicators from the JLL Workforce Preference Barometer (JLL, 2021).

Certainly, the most important thing is that this analysis does not confirm the preferences of employees for all days of the working week, but indicates that coming to the office one day a week is the preference of more employees in 2021 compared to 2020. It is certainly a signal that physical stay in the office and contact with other colleagues at least one day a week is still a need of most employees. In other words, employees do not prefer exclusive teleworking and distance working and it has not proven to be sufficient for successful work.

Among those who prefer at least one day of work on a hybrid model, there are more who would like to combine office work with homework or office with work from home and work in third locations (29 and 20 percent, respectively) than those who would like to work in other locations in combination with home or office (9 percent and 4 percent, respectively), which in itself may indicate that the hybrid work model, a combination of telecommuting with occasional visits to the office, is the expected future of work.

The absolute majority of employees, 63 percent of them, want to switch to a hybrid way of working by combining different ways of working, which is significantly higher than 8 and 26 percent of those who want to work exclusively from home and exclusively from the office, respectively (Puybaraud, Carroll, Beaudouin, & Taylor, 2021; JLL, 2021).

It is also related to new priorities of employees, such as the balance of work and private life, which with 59 percent of respondents took first place on the list of employee priorities, which before the pandemic was held by the amount of salary which is now the priority of only 55 percent of employees (Puybaraud, Carroll, Beaudouin, & Taylor, 2021; JLL, 2021). Accordingly, the authors

conclude the following:

- The office remains the center of the working ecosystem.
- Hybrid work will continue after the pandemic.
- Health and safety will continue to be important to employees.
- The net effect on the use of space will be relatively minor because, despite the fact that the employees will do some work from home, they will still have their place in the offices.

Additionally, it is important to note that 8 out of 10 employees want to work in the office at least one day a week, and ideally 3 days in the office and 2 days remotely (from home or other location - more precisely 1.5 days of work from home and 0.6 days of work from other locations) (JLL, 2021). These data confirm the paper that a quality digital workplace must enable employees to work smoothly and equally effectively, regardless of the location of work, which will apparently be a model of hybrid work, at least in selected industries.

3.1. BENEFITS OF CREATING A DIGITAL WORKPLACE

Digital transformation of the workplace brings significant benefits, such as:

- increase of employee motivation,
- improved collaboration,
- reduction of operating cost but also, as very important
- It encourages innovation and improves customer satisfaction (Attaran et al., 2019, Köffer, 2015, Meske and Junglas, 2020).

Admittedly, the literature also draws attention to the challenges of this phenomenon, such as infrastructure challenges or the challenges of embracing new technologies and talent management, but their effects are outweighed by the positive aspects of digital workplace transformation (Dery et al., 2017; Attaran et al., 2019).

The last decades are recognizable, among other things, by the significant development of information technology and the changes they have brought in the field of organization and performance of work, but also changes in the nature of work, which has significantly accelerated digital transformation and work on developing various digital workplace designs (Williams & Schubert, 2018).

Changes in the application of technologies and changes in the workforce require a workplace that encourages productivity, collaboration and agility, but which also lowers the costs of information technology and business operations (Attaran et al., 2019). In addition, digital innovations as well as artifacts enable communication and collaboration and can lead to a change in the nature of work. Bearing in mind that work is also a social activity and that it may require intensive communication and collaboration between employees, the importance of the above-mentioned changes and their effects on job changes are unquestionable (Meske and Junglas, 2020).

There are three main trends that have influenced the establishment of the digital workplace (Attaran et al., 2019):

- *Information overload* - The amount of information is growing exponentially and finding, filtering and forwarding information is significantly more difficult.
- *The need for higher speed* - The modern workplace is changing significantly faster than before, and employees are expected to work faster, collaborate and be more effective and efficient in

their work.

- *Workforce Demographics* - Businesses face the challenge of meeting the changing demands of a multigenerational workforce and different generational groups: baby boomers are retiring and millennials are IT fanatics who expect flexible working hours and simple digital tools.

Additionally, in the same primary literature review, it is stated that the digital workplace infrastructure should be based on secure access to information through various devices and channels and should include video and messaging systems to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and information effectively (Attaran et al., 2019).

Intel defines several segments and phases of creating a digital workplace. Below are the parts and phases listed by Constant (2016):

- *Physical transformation of the workplace - agile workplace* - Constant (2016) points out that traditional offices and workplaces are often expensive, inefficient and inflexible and challenging to scale and modify, and therefore need to focus on an integrated platform with front and back-office tools.
- The same author states that the digital workplace should meet the following criteria: *characteristics of the digital workplace* (which can be different, from the so-called home office, shared workspaces to third places) which implies easy access, portability, possibility of continuous operation of the organization in one region or globally and the ability to work outside of corporate constraints; and *the characteristics of the distributed workplace*, which implies the fact that the workplace is no longer just a physical office space but a combination of physical, virtual, social and mental space that intertwine with the aim of creating a collaborative workplace.
- *Digital Technology Solutions* - Emphasizes the importance of appropriate technologies and IT infrastructure designed and delivered by cross-functional teams to repair systems and improve organizational network infrastructure to every switch, router and firewall as well as appropriate software solutions from system to applicative. This part of the digital workplace includes the selection of cloud technology, big data analytics and similar segments of the application of digital technologies in the work and improvement of work.
- *Collaboration in the workplace* - There is a need for platforms for sharing knowledge, especially in the segment of problem solving in dislocated locations, but also the choice of communication channels for company employees, which includes: collaboration platform, social networking tools, corporate intranet and public internet.

Also, there is the unquestionable importance of virtualization and virtualization of work, as well as enabling work on various devices and user technologies.

One of the basic positive effects of establishing a comprehensive digital workplace is minimizing the so-called “time wasters” (Schubmehl, 2014):

- *Ineffective meetings* because meetings cost money and any waste of time through ineffective meetings leads to economic costs.
- *Email management* because employees spend a lot of time reading, replying to and sorting emails, so spending time on those jobs is also spending money on the organization.
- *Searching for information and people* as a cost to the organization and a significant waste of

time.

- *Duplicating work* as a redundant activity that involves performing the same task multiple times or repeating a process previously repeated in another task or activity.

Enhanced business results, which include increased labor productivity and revenue growth, are typically achieved in organizations that use digital tools (Greeven and Williams, 2017; Koch et al., 2019; Walker and Lloyd-Walker, 2019). Research shows (Attaran et al., 2020; Vukelic and Cizmic, 2019; Yu et al., 2019) that flexible working hours and digital workplace have a positive effect on employees' absence, including less absence due to health problems, less depression in employees, less sleep problems as well as lower stress levels.

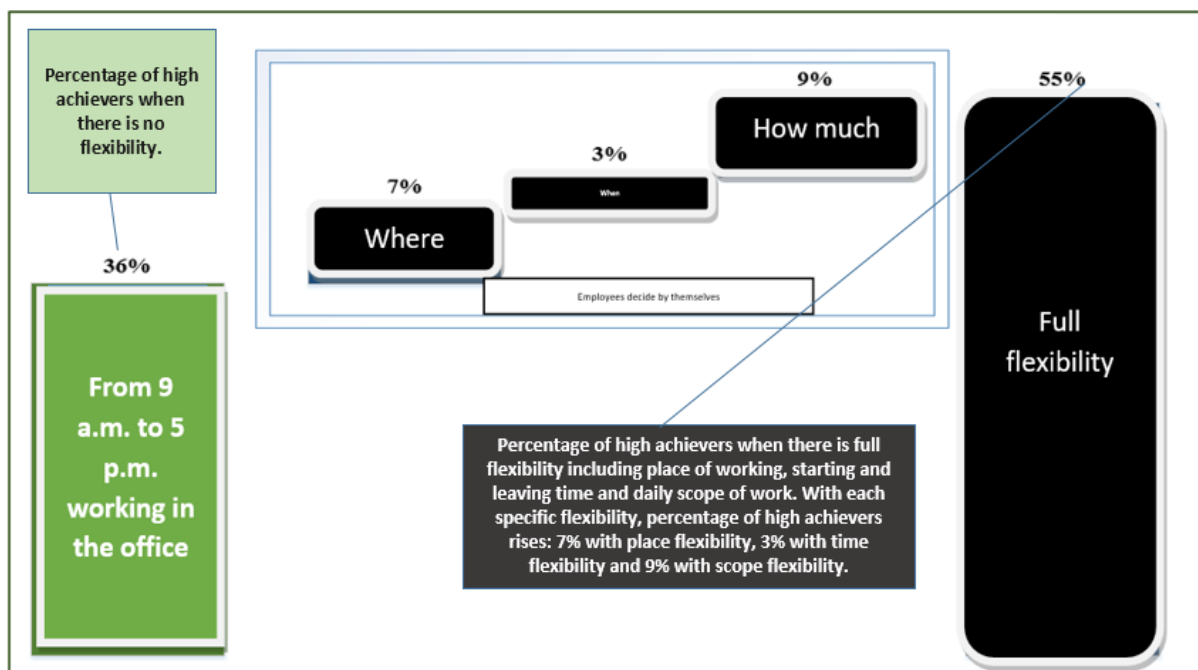
The most significant advantage of creating a digital workplace is the improvement of employee productivity, which is accompanied by improved employee satisfaction and experience, increased collaboration among employees, reduced operating costs, greater innovation, improved customer experience and ultimately increased revenue (Attaran et al., 2019).

Modern research indicates that the digital workplace will be an integral part of the so-called. hybrid workplace as a way of working in the future (Neeley, 2021). The very benefits of a digital workplace are especially evident when they are part of a hybrid mode. One of the most important positive aspects of a hybrid digital workplace is flexibility, which significantly increases productivity.

Thus, Gartner (2021) states in its report that there is only 36 percent of the so-called high performers (those who achieve exceptional results) if there is no flexibility and work is done from the office from 9 am to 5 pm every day. On the other hand, if the employees are offered some of the flexibility (when they will work, where they will work and the scope of work they will work), more than half of them are high performers, (Figure 1).

In short, productivity increases with the increase in work flexibility that the digital workplace certainly provides, with an increase of 7 percent when there is a place flexibility, additional 3 percent when there is a time flexibility and additional 9 percent when there is scope flexibility (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Flexibility increases employee performance (percentage of high performers/achievers).



Source: Gartner, 2021.

Summarizing the above points, it can be said that the main goal of creating a digital workplace

is strategically coordinated and properly managed development of a digital work environment tailored to the organization, teams and individuals within the organization, all to ensure the following benefits:

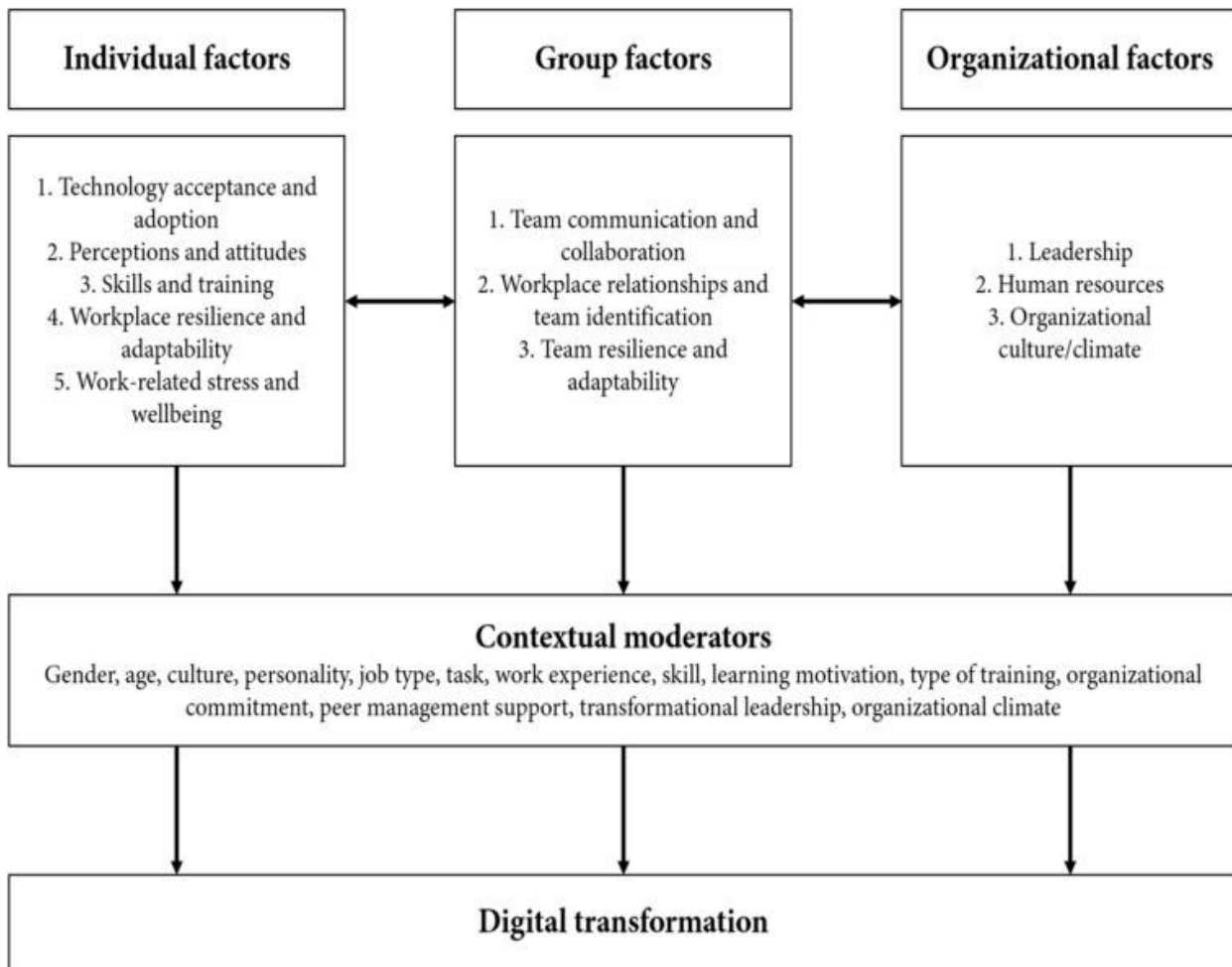
- Increasing work productivity through greater flexibility in work and the use of modern digital tools.
- Greater employee satisfaction, primarily through increased flexibility, i.e. possibilities of choosing where, when and how much they work.
- Saving resources, from overhead to reducing the number of employees needed for the same amount of work.
- Minimize errors by using advanced digital tools as part of a virtual / hybrid workstation.

4. IDENTIFYING CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS FOR DIGITAL WORKPLACE TRANSFORMATION

Critical Success Factors (CFS) can be defined as key areas of performance that are important to an organization in achieving a given mission or goal (Caralli, 2004). The success of digital workplace transformation is an example of an organizational goal with its specifics in terms of internal processes, technology, mindset and reactions of teams and the organization as a whole. Coaches et al. (2021) state that three groups of factors that influence the success of digital workplace transformation: individual, group and organizational.

At the level of individual factors, the authors (Trenerry et al. 2021) state: acceptance of technology, perception and attitude towards technological change, skills and training for employees, adaptability in the workplace and stress related to work along with wellbeing at the work place. Groups, i.e. teams also have an impact on the success of the project and the authors state three factors: communication and collaboration within the team, interpersonal relationships and identification with the team and finally group i.e. team adaptability. Finally, at the organizational level, the authors identify the following factors: leadership, human resources, and organizational culture (Figure 2).

Additionally, it is important to note that all: individual, group and organizational factors are contextually moderated by gender, age, job type and other moderators (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Theoretical framework for understanding the digital transformation of the workplace.

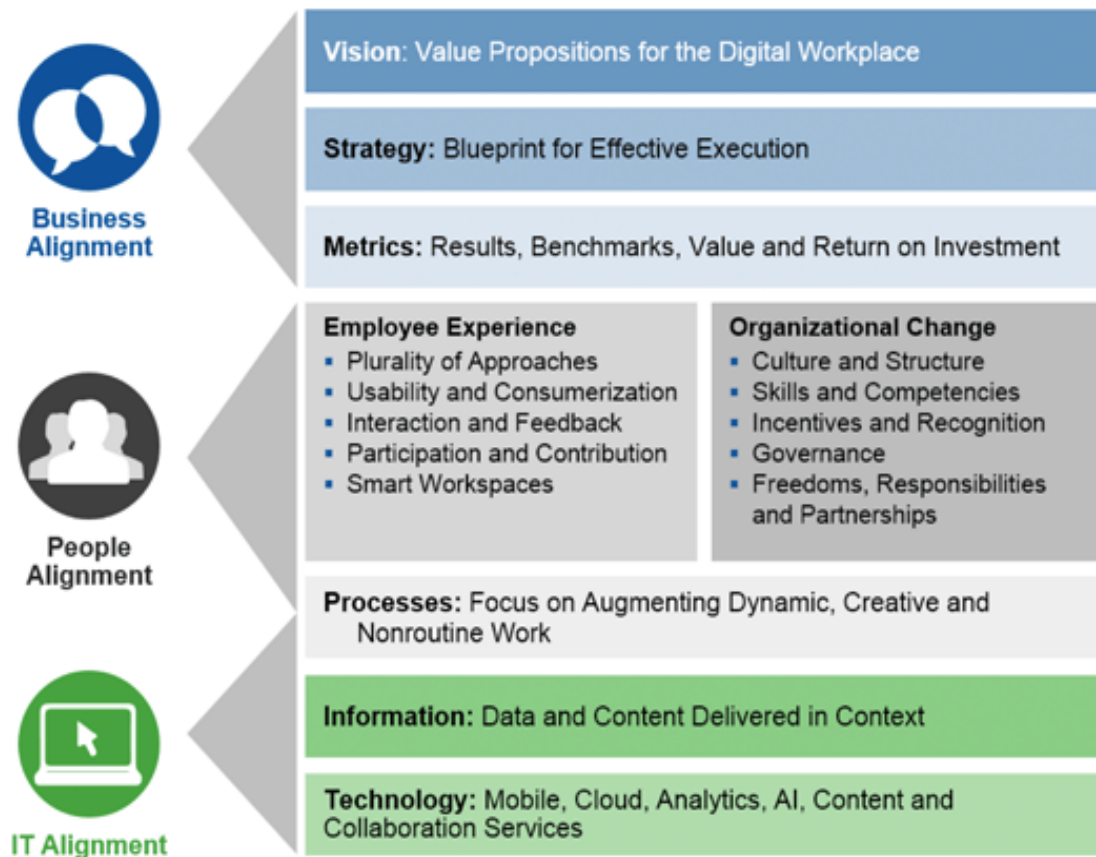
Source: Trenerry et al. 2021.

The authors state that employees are a key part of the success of the digital workplace transformation process and that their understanding of technology and attitude towards technological change, together with strategies that support it, has a significant impact on process success (Trenerry et al. 2021).

Leading global consulting firm Gartner identifies several digital workplace success factors (Rozwell, 2017), grouping them into three basic groups (Figure 3):

- Coordinating the organization (vision, strategy and metrics).
- Adaptation of employees (Experience of employees and organizational changes).
- IT compliance (Processes, information and technologies).

Figure 3. Digital workplace success factors.



Source: Gartner (2021) and Rozwell (2017).

Boulton (2019) expands and clarifies the aforementioned previously defined Gartner list, and clarifies the individual success factors of digital workplace implementation:

Vision - The vision of the digital workplace must be in line with the general business goals but also the goals of the overall digital transformation of the organization. It is stated that special attention should be paid to the fact that the digital workplace should primarily increase the engagement of employees and their productivity, as well as that the implementation of the digital workplace itself implies changes in business processes.

- 1. Strategy** - It is recommended to create a roadmap for the coordination of initiatives from different organizational units with the aim of more successful implementation of the digital workplace. Among other things, a good strategy means that employees are enabled to participate more in making decisions related to the technologies that will be used in the work in order to increase their use in the future.
- 2. Persons - roles in the process** - The author defines several user roles (persona), among others: those who share (English sharers), those who seek knowledge (English knowledge seekers), internal experts and the like. and for each of them, attributes should be defined, such as: level of acceptance of technologies, use of mobile solutions, content creation, use of content, organizational knowledge, etc. Also, for each of the persons, the so-called "Technological consumption", i.e. the manner and scope of use of technological solutions by a certain role.
- 3. Metrics** - The use of analytics for measurements in IT, human resources and general business as well as the creation of so-called digital dashboards are recommended in the implementation of the digital workplace. It is recommended to quantify the positive effects of digital workplace

implementation on employee effectiveness, agility and employee satisfaction.

4. **Employee experience** - Although increasing customer satisfaction is one of the long-term effects of digital workplace implementation, one should start with employee satisfaction. IT resources as well as spatial and technical solutions should enable uninterrupted work and satisfaction of employees, starting with a quality online portal where management can monitor employee contributions and their success and incorporate it into the previously mentioned work metrics.
5. **Organizational change** - The digital workplace usually requires significant changes in internal processes, organizational structure, motivational factors and skills of employees, organizational culture and ultimately the behavior of employees themselves. For these reasons, it is necessary to start by assessing the skills and competencies needed to establish a digital workplace. Identification of individuals, the so-called change managers, who are able to plan changes and implement them is one of the key success factors of digital early-stage transformation.
6. **Training** - Bearing in mind that changes, especially of a technological nature, are stressful for employees, it is necessary to plan an appropriate set of training and exercises in order to establish new work dynamics and ways of working. Also, knowledge is often an important motivating factor in the adoption of new technologies, and accompanying training and coaching are important in the success of the implementation of the digital workplace.
7. **Processes** - In order to successfully implement a digital workplace, it is first necessary to identify how employees are currently doing their jobs and which activities they spend the most time on. Accordingly, the general goals of the digital transformation of jobs (such as reducing time, minimizing errors and savings) need to create an accompanying roadmap, i.e. transformations of one mode of operation into another.
8. **Information** - Providing information to the extent and exactly when employees need it is crucial to support employees in implementing a digital workplace. For these reasons, the information sharing system should be simple, adapted to different platforms and technologies, and time-synchronized.
9. **Technologies** - It is interesting that the author positions technologies at the very end of the list of success factors. However, this does not dispute the fact that they are also a key and mandatory factor for a successful digital transformation of the workplace. Having in mind the previous factors, such as e.g. business process reengineering or change management, the appropriate technological solution should be selected so that in the end the implementation of the digital workplace itself would be successful and achieve the previously specified benefits for the organization.

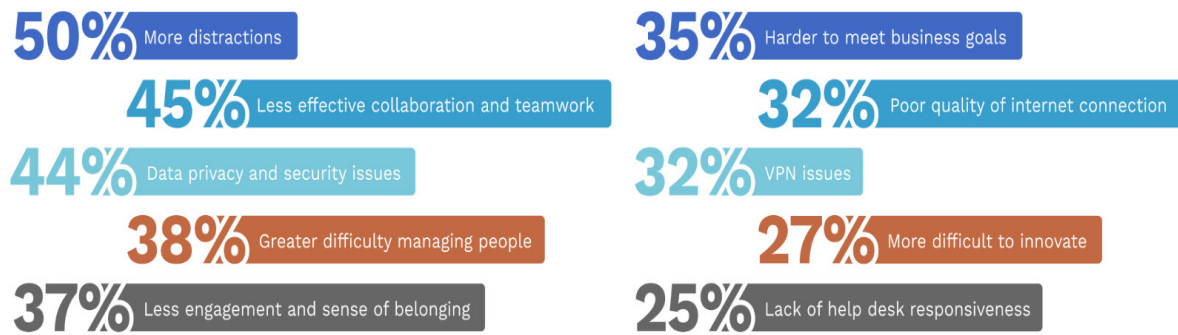
Grampp and a group of authors (2018) state the characteristics of certain elements of the so-called workplace ecosystem: talents, technologies, place and location (note: location refers to the company's headquarters or outside, and by place, a specific workspace).

When defining a digital workplace, it is necessary to pay special attention to the challenges of the digital workplace itself, on which the assessment of success directly depends, especially if the work is exclusively remote. Thus, the report "The Future of Digital Workplace" identifies challenges such as increased distractions, less effectiveness in teamwork, data security and privacy challenges, greater challenge in managing people, less sense of belonging, internet connection challenges, VPN difficulties and lack of response from support services (**Lakeside, 2021**). However, some difficulties are more present and they need more attention when designing a digital workplace. In accordance

with previously defined success factors, there is a need for adaptation to the specific organization context, such as characteristics of employees, their level of skills and knowledge, their work experience, etc.

There are also several challenges identified in the process of the digital workplace transformation. Among them, the most significant are: digital work has more distraction, there is less effectiveness in digital collaboration and there are several data safety and security issues (Figure 4).

Figure 4. The most significant challenges of a digital workplace based on remote work.



Source: Lakeside, 2021.

The **Deloitte report (2021)** also lists the key factors of job success of digital workplace:

- Virtual collaboration tools and telework platforms.
- Implement telework policies and procedures that optimize productivity and collaboration while minimizing the risk of data loss.
- Adopting long-term norms and culture of live work as part of a hybrid campus.

Based on the above views, the key success factors of digital workplace transformation are grouped into three basic categories:

- Organizational factors - starting from the existence of an appropriate vision and strategy through organizational culture and leadership that support the transformation process to quality human resource management and the existence of appropriate technological solutions as success factors.
- Team or group factors - i.e. readiness of teams / groups to accept the “new normal” and joint sharing of knowledge, joint facing of challenges and team motivation in the transition from traditional to digital workplace.
- Individual factors - as specific success factors depending on the employees themselves, i.e. their knowledge, skill levels but interest in change as well as the degree of support for the process of transition from traditional to digital workplace (level of resistance to change as an individual factor).

5. CONCLUSION

Technological change and COVID-19 have, undoubtedly, influenced the way work is being done. A digital workplace has become a new normal and virtual and telework is a decision of the many for future work.

However, employees have stated that physical presence in the office is still something that should remain on some level, depending on the organization, type of work and other limitation factors, of course. Majority of the employees stated that they should come to the office at least once per week and that the ideal workplace should combine office work together with other workplaces, such as online or telework and other spaces such as hotels, bars etc.

Therefore, we can conclude that fully online/remote work will not be a future of work and that some sort of hybrid working will be a choice for the majority of the organizations whose nature of work does not require physical contact with the consumer. Additionally, it can be concluded that COVID-19 has embraced and sped up the process of workplace innovation and that it created new opportunities to further workplace developments in accordance to employee preferences.

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