

# Knowledge Exchange as a Factor Shaping Employee Relations in Remote Work

Elżbieta Robak

Częstochowa University of Technology, Częstochowa, Poland

[elzbieta.robak@pcz.pl](mailto:elzbieta.robak@pcz.pl)

**Abstract:** It is difficult to overestimate the benefits of positive employee relations, as they relate to individual, team and organisational aspects. Good relations between employees are reflected in effective communication, higher work efficiency, employee commitment, but also in a higher job satisfaction. Such relationships in the organisation also show respect, trust, and the willingness to cooperate among employees, which foster knowledge sharing. Employers whose employees work remotely are often faced with the problem of how to shape an organisational culture of openness, built on positive employee relations, encouraging the sharing of knowledge with colleagues. The empirical part of the study was prepared on the basis of the results of a survey conducted at the turn of 2021/2022 among young people, representatives of generation Z, living in the Silesian voivodeship in Poland. The results of the conducted research show that young people from generation Z negatively evaluate the impact of remote work on relations with both colleagues and superiors. Moreover, according to the respondents, the remote work interferes with building emotional ties and also limits mutual support in difficult situations and may lead to a feeling of social isolation. Although the respondents believed that remote work allows a quick exchange of information and promotes the exchange of knowledge between employees, they were reluctant to work remotely in the future (they preferred hybrid or stationary work).

**Keywords:** employee relations, knowledge exchange, remote work, Generation Z

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## 1. Introduction

Relationships at work serve the achievement of specific goals, and the participants of these relationships interact with each other, realizing individual needs and expectations as well as common tasks and plans. During personal relationships, as opposed to business relationships, employees establish closer contacts, deepen the mutual bond, are more committed and willing to help each other. This type of relationship allows them to experience support from others, and also builds a friendly working atmosphere (Blyton and Turnbull 2004). A positive working atmosphere and especially good relations with colleagues are one of the most important values for today's employees. This applies especially to people from the Z generation, who often resign from employment with a given employer due to unsatisfactory employment relationships. In this context, the importance of the analysed issue is visible, as it concerns a key problem for many contemporary organizations. How to shape employee relationships in remote work, that will be conducive to sharing knowledge, among the youngest employees?

The aim of the article is to present the opinion of the representatives of Generation Z on employee relations in remote work in the context of knowledge exchange. The empirical part of the study presents the results of a survey conducted among young people representing the Z generation. As part of the study, the following research problem was raised: How do young people perceive the exchange of knowledge as a factor shaping employee relationships in remote work? The study also posed a number of detailed problem questions relating to employee relations and the exchange of knowledge and information in remote work. To assess the significance of differences in the analysed variables, the non-parametric ANOVA Kruskal-Wallis test was used, and the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength of the correlation between the variables. For the purposes of analysing the results of the study, a number of statistical hypotheses were adopted. The study presents the relationships verified with statistical tests, which authorise the conclusion about the regularities in the studied group.

## 2. Employee relations in remote work and the exchange of knowledge - an introduction to the problem

The occurrence of social relations refers to a situation where people are aware of their existence and take into account each other, and between them there are specific interactions as well as mutual connections and expectations, conducted by an agreed method of communication (Adler, Rosenfeld and Proctor 2011). Building relationships is one of the basic social skills thanks to which a person is able to function well in society. Having this skill allows achieving the intended goals, meeting the needs of, inter alia, belonging to a group and self-fulfillment in the private and professional area.

The benefits of shaping positive relationships at work can be seen in an individual, as well as team and organisational context. When analysing the individual benefits of maintaining good interpersonal relations at work, it is necessary to emphasize their importance not only in increasing job satisfaction, but also in shaping the self-esteem in employees (Robertson, O'Reilly and Hannah 2020, pp 596-619; Carmeli and Gittel 2009, pp 709-729). With regard to the organisational profits resulting from positive employee relations, their influence on the innovation, higher work efficiency - related to the effective communication, and stimulating employee involvement are emphasized (Glińska-Neweś et al., 2017, pp 25-37; Brhane and Zewdie 2018). On the other hand, negative relationships create a work environment in which conflicts occur more often, and the cooperation is limited only to fulfilling formal duties. Negative relationships are also associated with a reluctance to help each other and, what is very important, to share information and knowledge.

The employee relations and the associated working atmosphere are a very important factor, especially for the representatives of the youngest generations in the labor market. It turns out that they want not only attractive earnings and benefits, development opportunities and a stable employment, but also a good atmosphere. Especially the representatives of the youngest generation Z want to be aware that their work makes sense, to know what is happening in the organisation in which they work and to have an influence on it. However, most of all, they want to work in a place where there are good relations both among the employees of the same level and between the superiors and subordinates (Singh and Dangmei 2016). The representatives of generation Z believe that the professional environment is extremely important in their development, and therefore they expect their superiors to act as mentors and support, but also to be autonomous. In addition, they are characterised by the need for sustainable development, work-life balance and a strong need for security, reflecting their desire to have a decent job and a decent wage (Robak 2017). What is worth emphasizing, the social environment for this generation is an important factor shaping the organisational culture associated with a good working atmosphere and the positive employee relations.

Shaping positive employee relations, which are so important for young people entering the labor market, is a particularly difficult challenge for the management in the situation of remote work. This form of work, often forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, means work using means of direct remote communication, performed wholly or partially in a place indicated by the employee and agreed with the employer. The main organisational advantages of the remote work include, above all, an increase in organisational flexibility, a reduction in operating costs and a decrease in employee absenteeism. Remote work is also conducive to the employment of the disabled workers living in places far from industrial centers, as well as workers caring for children or other dependent persons. Another benefit for the employee is the flexible working time agreed with the employer (Sanchez et al., 2021; Pyöriä 2011). Apart from these unquestionable advantages, this form of work also has some drawbacks. People working remotely may feel that they are missing out on various meetings and discussions and therefore have less influence on making important decisions. In addition, remote workers, having limited contact with colleagues and superiors, have less chances of integration, support, sharing experiences and current observations, but also the exchange of knowledge. Remote work, impressing its specificity on employee relations, is not conducive to shaping the working atmosphere based on close ties and trust in colleagues, which makes it difficult to share knowledge (Hamilton 2002).

The exchange of knowledge between employees causes that it multiplies and each time gives rise to the possibility of new knowledge being created (Davenport and Prusak 2000; Mårtensson 2000, pp 204-216; Nielsen 2006, pp 59-71). When analysing the individual stages of the knowledge conversion process, particular attention is paid to the importance of the social competences of people involved in the process of sharing knowledge and creating informal organisational bonds (Lang 2001, pp 43-57; Heffernan 2019, pp 10-15). The exchange of knowledge is fostered by informal communication channels, free flow of thoughts and experiences between employees, organisational units, employees and superiors. It should be emphasized that knowledge cannot be treated as an individual resource of the employee, but as an organisational resource (Kukowska and Skolik 2021; Cichobłaziński 2021). It will become such a resource when it is available to all the employees, and therefore all the employees are ready to ask for it and share it at the same time. This poses great challenges for the management staff, which should solve such problems in a systemic manner, creating a work environment conducive to such attitudes and associated with the positive employee relations (Albrychiewicz-Słocińska 2020, p. 29).

### **3. Methodology**

The study results presented in the study are part of a survey conducted at the turn of 2021/2022 among young people living in the Silesia voivodeship in Poland. The research problem of the project concerned the impact of the young people's experiences in the field of distance learning on their preferences in the field of remote work. The survey was conducted using quantitative research methods using the survey technique. In the surveys, the questionnaire was made available to respondents in a paper version (PAPI). A deliberate selection of the research sample was made - related to the availability of interviewees. The basic criteria for selecting the respondents were their age and education at university. The study covered young people studying various fields, because in relation to these people, due to their predispositions resulting from the generation's characteristics and professional competences, it is highly probable that they will use remote or hybrid work in the future.

The research tool used was a standardised questionnaire consisting of closed questions and statements. A Likert scale was used for the responses, which enables the relative intensity of the various responses to be determined. The research tool (the questionnaire) is original and was formulated by the members of the research team - the employees of the Department of Applied Sociology and Human Resource Management, the Faculty of Management, the Czestochowa University of Technology. The issues related to remote work were divided into several areas relating to: employee relations, knowledge, development and learning, motivation, communication, teamwork, creativity, work organisation and work-life balance.

This study presents an excerpt from the research results concerning employee relations. The aim of the survey is to analyse the opinions of young people about employee relations in remote work in the context of the knowledge exchange. As part of the research, the following main research problem was raised: How do young people perceive knowledge exchange as a factor shaping employee relations in remote work? The study also posed a number of detailed problem questions relating to employee relations and the exchange of knowledge and information in remote work.

STATISTICA software was used in the process of compiling the research results. The non-parametric ANOVA Kruskal-Wallis test was used to evaluate the significance of the differences in the analysed variables. Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was used to assess the strength of correlations occurring between variables.

For the purposes of analysing the results of the study, a number of statistical hypotheses were adopted regarding the occurrence of significant differences in the responses of the respondents due to their socio-demographic characteristics and experience in the field of work, as well as remote learning and remote work. It was assumed that H0 is a hypothesis that there are no differences due to the grouping variable, while H1 is an alternative hypothesis that there are such differences. These hypotheses were verified with the use of a statistical test, which allowed for the rejection of the null hypothesis about the lack of significant differences and the adoption of an alternative hypothesis about the existence of significant differences. The study presents the relationships verified with statistical tests, which authorise the conclusion about the regularities in the studied group.

### **4. Results of the research**

226 people studying at 13 different faculties took part in the study. Among them, 50.44% were women, 48.23% were men, and 1.33% did not enter their gender in the questionnaire. Generation Z was dominant in the studied group (people born in 1995 and later constituted 83.19% of all respondents). Due to the fact that the statistical tests did not reveal statistically significant differences in the opinions of the Z representatives and other respondents regarding the analysed issues, the description and analysis of the research results will present the overall results without distinguishing between generation Z and older generation Y respondents.

The majority of respondents (86.73%) had experience in remote education (only 12.83% did not learn remotely, and 0.44% did not provide information on this issue). People with professional experience also dominated among the respondents (86.28%). Only 13.28% of the respondents did not have any professional experience, and 0.44% did not provide any information on this subject. On the other hand, work experience in remote work was declared by 48.67% of respondents (50.89% of respondents did not work remotely and 0.44% did not provide information on this subject). Moreover, the respondents declared that in the future they would like to work: stationary (35.4% of indications), hybrid (50% of indications), remotely (12.39% of indications), and 2.21% of respondents did not indicate any of the above employment options.

The information obtained from the respondents representing the Z generation allowed for the emergence of many interesting insights relating to the analysed issues. The question of employee relations in remote work directly related to the main research problem. As it results from the data obtained, the majority of respondents stated (53.54% of responses) that remote work hinders relations with colleagues. In this, 29.2% of the respondents rather agreed with such a statement, and almost every fourth respondent (24.34%) - fully agreed with it. Only 21.24% of the respondents had a different opinion, and the same number did not give an unambiguous answer on this matter. Opinions of the respondents from the generation Z regarding the relationship with the superior were similar. Half of the survey participants believed that remote work hampers relations with the superiors, 24.34% had the opposite opinion, and 22.12% did not express an unambiguous opinion on this statement. Importantly, the respondents, when asked whether remote work hinders relationships with the clients, also had a critical opinion on the impact of remote work in this area of employee functioning. However, their responses were not so clear, because although 37.16% of respondents said that remote work worsens the relations with clients, 30.98% of the respondents had a different opinion, and 24.34% marked the answer "neither agree nor disagree".

The statistical analysis conducted revealed that the opinions of the respondents regarding the impact of remote work on relations with colleagues were differentiated due to the preferred form of work (Kruskal-Wallis test results ( $p = 0.0002$ ), with the adopted significance level ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ) indicates the rejection of the verified null hypothesis). Survey participants who would like to work stationary in the future relatively more often (68.75%) than respondents preferring hybrid work (44.25%) and respondents opting for remote employment (17.85%) - critically assessed the impact of remote work on relationships with co-workers. On the other hand, respondents who believed that remote work was the best form of work - were much more often (53.57%) against the statement that the remote employment hinders relationships with colleagues than people opting for stationary work (7.5%) and people preferring hybrid work (29.2%). The respondents' assessments of the impact of remote work on the relationship with the supervisor were also differentiated due to the form of preferred work, and their distribution was very similar (AKW test  $p = 0.0000$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

Additional light on this critical assessment of the impact of the remote work on employee relations is shed by the respondents' responses regarding other aspects of the impact of remote work on employee interaction. According to the results of the survey, almost half of the young people participating in the survey (49.56%) indicated that remote work hinders contacts between the employees (26.99% of respondents had a different opinion, and 20.8% did not give a clear answer on this matter). Even more, as many as 58.85% of the respondents stated that remote work also hinders non-professional contacts between the employees (16.82% of the respondents had a different opinion on this matter, and 19.91% did not give a clear answer). What's more, as many as 60.62% of the respondents emphasised that remote work makes it difficult to build emotional ties with colleagues. Moreover, according to half (49.56%) of the respondents, remote work limits the mutual support in difficult situations. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the people participating in the study were the most unanimous in the statement that remote work leads to a feeling of social isolation (62.39% of responses).

The results of the statistical analysis show that the opinions of the respondents regarding the impact of remote work on building emotional ties with colleagues were differentiated due to their experience in remote work (AKW test  $p = 0.0043$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). The shaping of these ties was assessed much more critically by the young respondents who had no experience of working remotely (70.43%) compared to those with such professional experience (50.91%). The study of the significance of differences also shows that the respondents who wanted to work stationary in the future relatively more often (67.5%) than people who want to work hybrid (61.95%) and people preferring to work remotely (25.71%) indicated difficulties in building relationships between employees (AKW  $p = 0.0243$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). The representatives of generation Z who wanted to work stationary also more often (68.75%) than the respondents who preferred hybrid work (64.6%) and people opting for remote work (42.86%) emphasised the fear of being in danger of being isolated when working remotely (AKW test  $p = 0.034$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ).

In the survey, the respondents were also asked whether remote work is conducive to shaping a good working atmosphere and building trust in relationships with the employees. These two aspects of the employees' functioning in the work environment have a significant impact on the creation of the positive employee relationships. The analysis of the data obtained in the survey shows that only a small percentage of respondents (16.36%), the same in both questions, confirmed the positive impact of remote work on the working atmosphere and trust between employees. Young people participating in the survey also indicated that remote work does

not help in building trust in relationships with employees (42.03% of responses). As shown by the results of the statistical analysis, the opinions of the respondents regarding the impact of remote work on building trust in relationships with employees were varied due to their experience in remote work (AKW test  $p = 0.006$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ), but also due to their experience of remote learning (AKW test  $p = 0.0385$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). People declaring a lack of practice in remote work more often (46.09%) than young people with such experience (38.18%) stated that remote work does not help in building trust in relations with employees. Opinions of the respondents on this subject developed in a similar way, depending on the experience of remote learning they had. People who have never learned remotely much more often (68.96%) than people with experience of education in this form (38.27%) were critical about building trust in remote work. Therefore, it should be emphasised that both people without practice in remote work and people without the remote learning experience were more often of the opinion that when undertaking work in this form, it is difficult to build trust between employees. The statistical analysis also revealed that the declarations of young people participating in the survey - regarding their preferred job in the future - differentiated their statements regarding the impact of remote work on building trust in the employee relations (AKW test  $p = 0.0106$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ) and statements related to shaping the work atmosphere (AKW test  $p = 0.0002$ ,  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). People who want to work stationary relatively more often (55%) than the respondents opting for hybrid work (36.28%) and remote work (28.57%) declared a critical assessment of creating trust between the employees working remotely. Very similarly, the small possibilities of shaping a positive atmosphere in remote work were seen most often by people who preferred stationary work (61.25%) in relation to the respondents choosing hybrid (43.36%) and remote work (28.57%).

In connection with the adopted aim of the research and the research problems related to it, in the survey, the respondents were also asked to comment on the statements concerning the impact of remote work on the exchange of information and knowledge exchange between the employees. The majority of young people participating in the study (57.07% of responses) indicated that remote work allows a quick information exchange (only 19.46% of respondents had a different opinion on this matter, and 19.91% did not give an unambiguous answer). The respondents had a similar opinion on the impact of remote work on the exchange of knowledge, although their opinions were not so unanimous on this issue. 41.14% of respondents believed that remote work was conducive to the exchange of knowledge between employees, however, 27.43% were of the opposite opinion, and 27.87% did not give a clear answer. The results obtained are puzzling in the context of the critical opinions expressed by the respondents regarding the influence of remote work on employee relations. This unequivocally negative assessment of the lack of direct contacts between the employees, typical for remote work, is in contradiction with the positive perception by the respondents of the impact of remote work with the knowledge exchange.

Studying this issue, as part of the statistical analysis, an attempt was made to determine the relationship between the variables using the Spearman's rank correlation index. The analysis of the level of dependence between the indicators regarding the impact of remote work on the exchange of knowledge and information between employees was made:

1. exchange of knowledge between the employees
2. exchange of information between the employees

and selected indicators describing the impact of remote work on the employee relations, which include:

1. contacts between the employees,
2. non-professional contacts between the employees,
3. shaping a good working atmosphere,
4. building trust in relations with the employees,
5. building emotional bonds with colleagues,
6. a sense of social isolation,
7. relations with colleagues.

Table 1 presents the values of the Spearman's rank correlation index, for the adopted significance level, which allow to find statistically significant correlations between the variables.

**Table 1:** Spearman's rank order correlation for selected variables at  $p < 0.001$

R Spearmana	(A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	(E)	(F)	(G)
(1)	-0,308212*	-0,189899**	0,339807*	0,275235 *	-0,177496**	-0,197944**	-0,211262**
(2)	-0,244638*	-	0,282761*	0,186709**	-	-	-

\*\* $p=0,001$ , \* $p=0,01$

Source: own elaboration based on the research result

The analysis of the collected research material leads to the formulation of a number of interesting observations and conclusions. The first observation indicates that among the respondents who indicated that remote work creates a good working atmosphere, the majority also indicated that remote work is conducive to knowledge exchange and information exchange.

Spearman's rank correlation indices also prove that among the respondents who indicated that remote work builds trust in relations with employees, the majority also indicated that remote work is conducive to knowledge exchange and information exchange. From these two correlations, it can be concluded that people who have a good opinion about the impact of remote work on the employee relations are also convinced that remote work promotes the exchange of knowledge and information. Interesting is also the observed relationship that the respondents who believed that remote work favors the exchange of knowledge most often did not agree with the statement that remote work hinders contacts between the employees. This observation means that they have a positive opinion on remote work in terms of networking between the employees. This regularity also applies to other aspects related to generally understood employee relations, in particular: establishing non-professional contacts by employees, building emotional ties, feeling of social isolation and relations with colleagues.

## 5. Discussion

The research results of other authors, described in the literature on the subject, correspond with the presented survey results (Gill 2008; Bajaj, Sinha and Tiwari 2013). A very interesting study by Boyer O'Leary, Wilson and Matiu (2014) on remote work and the changes in the perception of the meaning of the concept of cooperation, closeness and interpersonal distance deserves special emphasis. The cited authors indicate that people can build strong ties and relationships despite being physically distant and working remotely. The quality of the relations with people at work does not depend on the physical distance between them, but on the subjective perception of this closeness. This symbolic closeness between remote colleagues develops as they share their personal experiences and exchange informal, personal information.

According to M. BoyerO'Leary, J. M. Wilson and A. Matiu, the perceived feeling of closeness has a huge impact on building relationships and the cooperation with other people, and the objective physical distance between people does not affect the quality of relationships built between them. At the same time, it should be emphasized that frequent communication between people working remotely not only brings a new dimension to their joint relationship, for example, sharing their own experiences, but also allows to predict the level of satisfaction of these people with the relationship they have built and their willingness to continue the contact. Thus, the research shows that remote work does not negatively affect cooperation or building relationships and the feeling of closeness in a team, if certain conditions are met.

## 6. Conclusions

The presented research results reveal interesting dependencies on employee relations and knowledge exchange between employees working remotely. According to the analysis of the data obtained from the survey, the majority of young people from generation Z believed that remote work hindered relations with both colleagues and superiors. They were especially critical of the impact of remote work on relations with colleagues and superiors - respondents who would like to work stationary or hybrid in the future. Therefore, it can be presumed that the reluctance of the respondents to work remotely in the future may result from the fear of the hindered employee relations. This conclusion is also confirmed by the statements of the respondents regarding other aspects of the employee relations. The young people participating in the survey also indicated that remote work hinders not only professional contacts, but also non-professional relations between the employees. Moreover, according to the respondents, remote work hinders the building of emotional ties with colleagues, limits the mutual support in difficult situations and leads to a sense of social isolation.

Negative assessments of the employee relations in remote work were also reflected in the opinions of the representatives of generation Z, regarding factors that are very important for them, which create the working environment, such as: the work atmosphere and trust between the employees. According to the respondents, remote work is not conducive to creating a good working atmosphere and does not help build trust in relationships with the employees. Importantly, both people without practice in remote work and people without experience of remote learning, more often than the respondents with such experience - indicated difficulties in building trust in remote work. Moreover, people who want to work stationary in the future - relatively more often than the respondents opting for hybrid and remote work - declared a critical assessment of creating trust between the employees and the possibility of shaping a positive atmosphere in remote work. These results lead to another conclusion that the lack of experience in education and remote work intensifies the concerns of the respondents about the difficulties in creating a positive atmosphere at work and trust among the employees working remotely.

In the light of such negatively assessed by the respondents - employment relationships in remote work - it is surprising that when asked about the exchange of information and knowledge in remote work, the majority of young people participating in the survey stated that this form of work not only enables a quick information exchange, but also it is conducive to the exchange of knowledge between the employees. When analyzing the presented results, a general conclusion arises that the management of the knowledge exchange processes, focusing on the identification of knowledge and people possessing it, is a factor which initiates establishing good employee relations, which are so important for the generation Z. This means that organisations that attach great importance to the management of the knowledge processes, as a result, not only stimulate the growth of knowledge and its dissemination, but also create an attractive work environment for the employees representing the generation Z.

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