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**The Work–Life Interface in a Situation of Forced
Employee Flexibility**

The COVID–19 experience has clearly shown that flexibility in the context of work is not uniform. Modifying one work parameter affects another. Companies considering staying remote should analyze the broader context of this change. In the article, the focus is on the cross–contamination of spheres of life in a situation of forced flexibility, in which employees had had to reorganize their ways of working almost overnight. By adopting a phenomenological approach, on the basis of qualitative research conducted using the Individual In–depth Interview (IDI) method during the lockdown period (March–April 2020), an attempt was made to develop a semantic and operational description of the coexistence of professional and private life subject to these specific conditions, assuming that they act as an accelerator for phenomena and processes related to the flexibility of organizational behavior. Based on the criterion of separateness of spheres of life and an individual’s activity in their management, four types of Work–Life Interfaces were distinguished as a consequence of the analysis of empirical material.

Key words: behavior flexibility, work–life interface, organizational behavior, work–life balance..

JEL code: M12, M54, O15

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Introduction

Certain types of labels are used in the literature on the subject to describe organizational solutions that increase flexibility. These include: “new work environment,” “agile, flexible work,” “smart flexibility” (Lake, 2015, p. 1), “smart work” (Hall & Heras, 2010), and “innovative solutions that increase employee involvement and

efficiency” (Lonti & Verma, 2003, p. 284). They all suggest a departure from the old, traditional, innocent, inflexible way of working that is most often associated with industrial production in favor of other solutions. Such a one-dimensional description of an inherently heterogeneous phenomenon seems to be an unjustified simplification. A flexible work environment is a kind of compilation of elements that can be evaluated in different ways. It is an amorphous term that tends to be used to describe many qualitatively different forms of work. The most common of these are temporal, spatial, task-related, and functional flexibility (Januszkiewicz, 2018), which contain both positive and negative elements (Conley, 2006). Evaluation as such remains dependent on the evaluator.

The results of research on the perception of flexibility of the work environment that described the pre-pandemic reality indicate that employees often declared discouragement towards available solutions. They assessed the manner of their implementation as inconsistent. Moreover, in certain situations, they did not feel free to choose from among available solutions—perceiving some as limiting, others as imposed (cf. Hayman, 2009). Research conducted by Galinsky et al., a part of the National Study on the Changing Workforce, shows that some employees in the United States, who have access to flexible solutions, believed that using them would involve costs, and may even threaten their work (Galinsky, Sakai & Wigton, 2011).

The analysis of the research results, conducted at a very specific moment that has forced flexibility, allows a look at the situation under almost laboratory conditions, where the compilation of professional tasks was accompanied by sharing space with other household members. In a situation where work entered the home space overnight, the interface of these two dimensions changed drastically. Interestingly, previously, the consequences of remote work were seen mainly in the context of organizational functioning. Experiencing the SARS-CoV-2 virus pandemic causing the Covid-19 disease showed that the real challenge is not so much the cross-contamination of life spheres as managing the relationship between these two areas of life.

Forced Flexibility: Covid-19

Due to the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) coronavirus pandemic, the need to introduce remote work almost overnight meant that both employers and employees had to quickly adapt to altered operating conditions. They found themselves in a situation of forced flexibility, which was not limited to changing the place of work and moving it home (spatial flexibility), but also forcing a change in working hours or the way that tasks are conducted. Large companies operating on international markets

coped with this challenge best. In such organizations it was possible to take actions aimed at not only enabling employees to perform work (computer and telephone), but also at ensuring their comfort (a comfortable desk and armchair for work). An additional challenge faced by more than 6.2 million employees in Poland—i.e. half of those employed under an employment contract—was to reconcile remote work with caring for children and close adults. According to a survey by the Responsible Business Forum, 26 percent of enterprises offered their employees assistance in caring for children during the lockdown (Kaczyńska, 2020). COVID–19 and its associated restrictions meant that many working parents had to do both work and family care at home. Working at home has blurred the boundaries between time that should be devoted to work and time that can be devoted to oneself and one's family, between the place of performance of duties and the space of family life, and between professional and private roles (manager/ parent / friend). The lockdown situation focused on applied distance work solutions. It showed their positive and negative consequences very clearly.

The analysis of organizational behavior and solutions applied during this period may constitute the basis for inferences and forecasting in the use of distance work in the future. It can be assumed that the functions performed by individual organizational units (departments, plants, divisions, etc.) will largely remain unchanged in the near future. However, the way they are implemented will undergo profound changes. Solutions that seemed temporary at the beginning of the pandemic (lockdown) have been extended in time and have begun to enter the organization permanently (Deloitte, 2020). Managers face the challenge of managing a more complex, hybrid workforce. As Eurostat indicates, before the pandemic only about five percent of employees aged 15–64 worked from home in the European Union. Most often they were residents of Scandinavia (14%) and Finland (13.3%). Poland (4.6%) and the countries of Central and Eastern Europe used distance work to a small extent, mainly in the IT industry (Eurostat, 2020). The Sars Covid–2 virus pandemic will significantly change the organizational solutions applied. Hays Poland research shows that 36 percent of employers plan to introduce a more flexible approach to policy related to the form of work. Employees also declare their interest in such forms of work organization. After the end of the pandemic, nine percent of respondents would like to work only remotely, while another 39 percent prefer a model dominated by working from home. Only two percent of respondents would completely give up remote work in favor of performing all their duties in the office (<https://www.hays.pl/rynek-2020>). The experience of forced flexibility provided employees with an intense experience of cross–contamination of professional and private life. Having no other way of performing tasks, they were forced to resolve

individual ways of functioning in the imposed reality. As a result, many of them better understood the need to manage their own work and maintain a work–life balance, even if it was more difficult to achieve (ibidem).

Evolution of Approach to Contamination of Life Spheres: From Work–Life Balance to Work–Life Interface

The problem of cross–contamination of the spheres of life (professional and non–professional) and maintaining a work–life balance has been a subject of interest of management researchers and practitioners since the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. Activities of this nature were initiated in Great Britain, subsequently in the United States and other countries (Glass & Fujimoto, 1995). Initially, the leaders in this area were large enterprises that could provide a wide range of benefits. Over time, the interest and importance of maintaining a balance between these two basic areas of life also found a place among smaller companies, their owners, employees, and researchers. The work–life concept has evolved from a phase of (1) separating private life from work, with an emphasis on limiting the impact of work on the private lives of employees via (2) a harmonious combination of the professional and family spheres of employees (work–life and / or work–family), to a phase of (3) tech–life—i.e. a blurring of the boundaries between professional and private life as a result of technological development (the Internet and intelligent technologies). Employees increasingly perform tasks outside the company (including at home). Work and other activities are beginning to mutually permeate each other more and more (Gajdzik, 2018). The work–private life issue perceived in terms of a clear separation between professional and private life is moving in favor of mingling or combining these two spheres of activity. New concepts for combining work and professional life appear in the literature on the subject—work–life blend, work–life–integration (Williams et al., 2016), or work–life interface (McMillan, Morris & Atchley, 2011). They are characterized by a holistic approach to the activity of the individual and assume the penetration and consolidation of various areas of life. These approaches create greater synergy between all areas that define life: work, home / family, community, well–being, and health (Berkeley.edu). In this study, particular attention is paid to the last of these approaches, which is applicable to the analysis of employee behavior in a situation of forced flexibility. Grawitch, Barber, and Justice (2010) took an interesting research perspective and focused their attention on the personal aspirations and personal resource management of employees. They proposed a Personal Resource Allocation (PRA) framework that views all life requirements as compelling individuals to make choices about where, when, and how they use their

personal resources in the domain of life. They indicate that the efficient allocation of personal resources can actually contribute to positive outcomes.

The blurring of the boundaries of the organization seems to intensify the need to face the challenge of flexibility in its various forms among employees. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable among the representatives of Generation Z (people born between 1995 and 2010). In general, it can be stated that younger employees appreciate the possibility of flexible work and maintaining their work–private life balance (Wiktorowicz et al., 2016). They are less likely to engage in additional work activities that would restrict their work–life balance. They are also more likely to take advantage of the various work–life balance programs offered by their employer. This behavior, as shown by C. Parker (2007), may indicate a more determined attitude on the part of the young generation to take control over their own work–life balance. Although the need and awareness for shaping the work–life relationship increases as the age of employees decreases, the changes in work organization caused by the Covid–19 pandemic, especially moving work to employee homes, have forced representatives of all generations to develop their own action strategies for the new organizational reality (BBC, 2020). They have found themselves in a situation of forced flexibility. Company readiness to increase the share of remote work, as compared with the period before the pandemic, allows the assumption that employee flexibility will rank high on the list of expected competences. This change means that the organizational behavior of the individual will take on a new character. In this context, a question arises as to the extent to which, in the case of the dominance of remote work, the organizational behavior of employees can still be considered organizational behavior—something implemented in the organization and shaped by the organization—and to what extent it is the result of extra–organizational conditions such as the psychological flexibility of an employee, working conditions at home, family status (marital status, and number and age of children), and access to modern technologies and work tools. Home workers indicate various benefits of this form of work (Beño, 2018). A total of 64.0 percent of respondents believe that it saves time, 49.4 percent that it facilitates work–life balance, and 26.6 percent indicate a better quality workplace. It should be noted, however, that home workers work longer than employees working on company premises (more overtime). The line between work and leisure is also blurring. In their spare time, employees respond to urgent situations and reply to e–mails (Beño, 2018). Working from home places additional demands on employees and cannot be considered a universal solution. It requires self–discipline, the ability to define the time frame of tasks as well as control daily rhythms, habits, and needs. Working from home leads to the cross–contamination of the employee’s professional and

private life. The employee plays several professional and life roles in a single place and time. This phenomenon intensifies when remote work is used as a permanent solution for performing work.

Research Methodology

The results of personal research presented in this article are the product of the first stage of a research project entitled, “Organizational Behavior Flexibility: Stability and Variability (2020–2021),” conducted on the basis of a mixed sequential survey scheme (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In the first stage of the qualitative research (in-depth individual interviews), emphasis was placed on recognizing the phenomenon and building a theoretical model (typology) that will then form the basis for quantitative research (survey research), whose purpose will be to describe the scope and frequency of the phenomenon under study.

Due to the period of the study, the interviews were conducted by telephone. The interview scenario centered on the concept of the flexible organizational behavior of employees (EZOP). It examined the behavior of an individual in the context of four dimensions of flexibility: task-related, temporal, functional, and spatial (Januszkiewicz, 2018).

The selection of the sample was deliberate as well as suitable. In-depth individual interviews conducted on a sample of thirty people, as needed to guaranty the theoretical saturation state, was assumed (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2009; Creswell; Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Mason, 2010; Pasikowski, 2014). During the research process, the sample was sufficiently saturated with 25 records (the decision was made taking into account the number of new categories that appeared, the modification of already generated categories, and consistency between the code generation cycles).

The analysis of the collected empirical material was conducted in two ways. Firstly, a semantic description of the coexistence of the private and professional spheres in the case of forced flexibility was made on the basis of content analysis. Subsequently, answers were coded and analyzed. It was on this basis that the Work–Life Interface model was developed in a situation of forced flexibility of employee behavior.

Research Results

The analysis of empirical material was focused on seeking answers to the following research questions: Is there and in what areas is there cross-contamination of the spheres of employee life in the case of forced flexibility? What attitudes and behaviors do employees represent in the face of forced flexibility at work?

Transferring professional tasks to the home space weakens the division into the spheres of work and private life (cf. Strykowska, 2002) and their boundaries blur—work–home blurring (Galinsky, Sakai & Wigton, 2011). In a situation of forced flexibility, which is the one in which the study was conducted, staying in the physical space of work attributes (the home office) increased the likelihood of staying there mentally as well.

One of the important factors describing the flexibility of employees defining the boundaries of performing remote work (home office) is the time during which the work is performed. The respondents indicated different solutions applied by both companies and by themselves. In some cases, the nature of the work meant that as a consequence the respondents worked during their normal hours without any influence on this aspect of the work. In companies that did not impose such restrictions, some of the respondents tried to transfer the workday routine to the home and prevent any interpenetration of professional and non–professional life. They stated, for example, “I decide about my working hours. I know that the work takes at least eight hours, but the working hours depend on me.” The respondents spoke with great responsibility about the need to work within eight hours and emphasized the need for self–discipline: “I do not check my business e–mail after 5:00 PM; I set a limit.” They also pointed to the benefits of such a solution: “I don’t have to rush.” “I can get the work done later.” “Being calm and relaxed is better.” It should be noted that not all respondents took steps to limit the interpenetration of work and private life. Having no working hours imposed by the company, some of the participants passively adapted to the situation and pointed to its consequences: “Work, e–mails, and tasks set the rhythm.” “There is no plan, everything happens reactively.” “From morning to evening, there are no clear boundaries.” “The organization goes outside working time—phone calls at 10:00 PM.”

A desk, computer, and documents are the elements left in the office at the end of a working day. In a situation of forced flexibility, employees themselves decided about the organization of their workplace, although in reality these decisions were largely determined by the family and housing situation of the respondents. There were different ways of dealing with spatial cross–contamination. Some of the respondents had a clearly separate work zone: “We need to organize two offices in a small apartment.” “I have my workplace at home. It is spread out all the time.” Some used an intermediate solution: “The equipment is still there, but it is turned off after hours.” “I organized a desk–table in the dining room.” Still others highlighted the limits of the place and time for professional activity: “I do not have an office at home. I take out my laptop and start working in the living room and hide it at the end of work.” It was often emphasized in the interviews that it is the

switching on or off of a computer that introduces the state of professional activity, where the ability to work in space that is separated and isolated from other household members affects the quality and speed of tasks performed as well as the comfort of work.

The availability of work tools was a pressure factor during the lockdown. It also influenced employees in their spare time. The importance of boundaries and their actual permeability was reflected in the narratives of the respondents: "It is difficult to reconcile work when I do it at home, once, but, at this point it is more difficult to distance myself from professional things." This situation means that work is still thought about even after it has been completed for the day. It was perceived by survey participants as a tendency: "Now, after work, I often wonder if I have done everything." It was also seen as increasing availability for work: "I'm on standby all the time."

Some of the participants described their situation as penetrating: "Everything permeates and mixes during the day." This becomes both the cause and the effect of combining activities ("everything connects"), where multitasking takes on a new meaning: "I eat breakfast and read e-mails at the same time." "When I am focused on tasks, I cook dinner at the same time..." On the other hand, although in the minority, some employees declared the separation of these two spheres: "I want to rest at home." "When I sit down to work, I sit and do other things." "I don't think about work after work." They at least declared a need for such separation: "I want to do what I have to do and forget about work." "I want to rest at home."

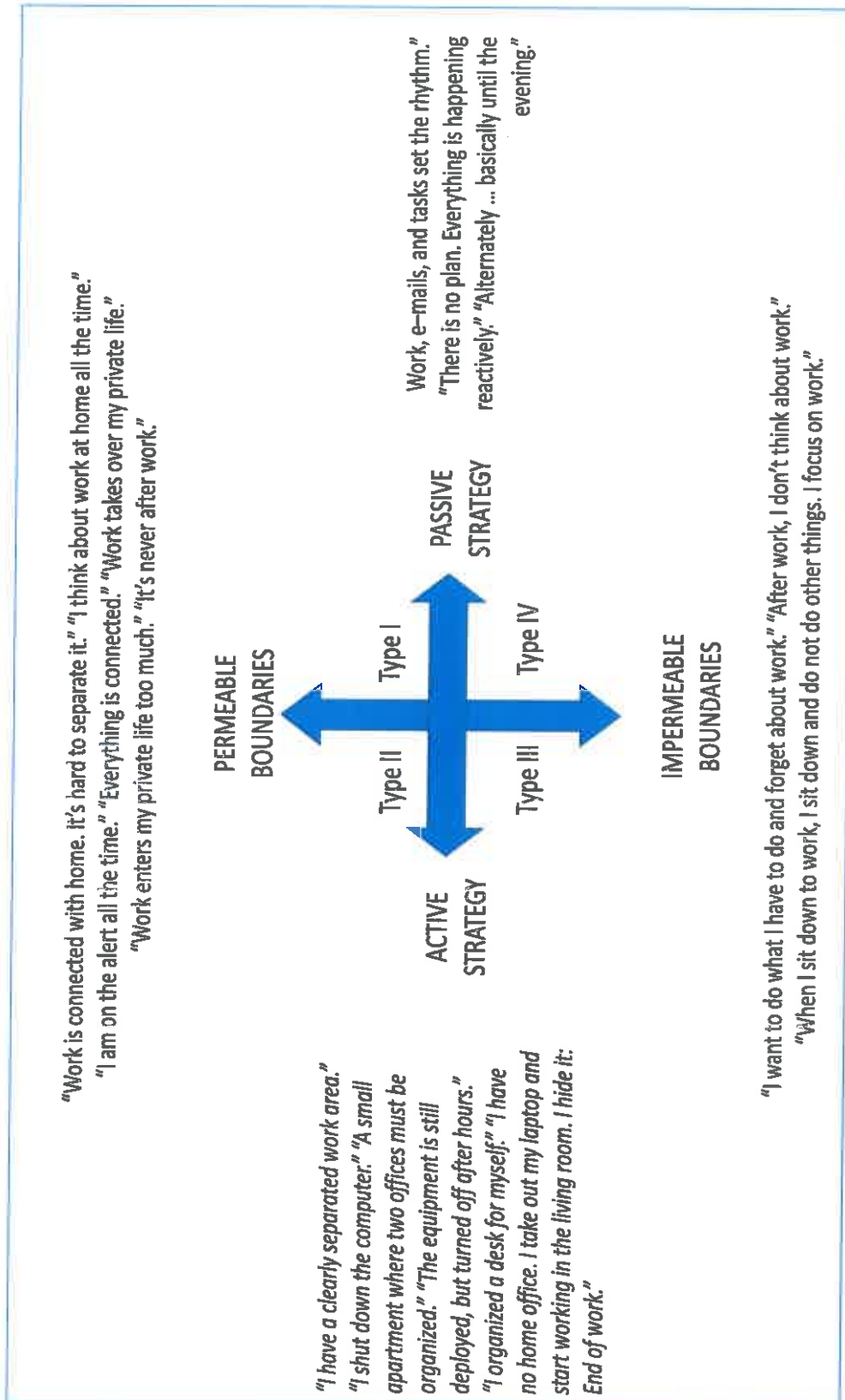
The argument concerning the combining of professional and private duties is often raised as a benefit resulting from the transfer of work to the home. It is lauded for creating the possibility of employment for groups previously excluded, such as mothers of young children or people who care for dependents. However, research results show that the perception of this situation, especially in this group, is not so clear-cut. The need to combine care with the performance of professional tasks was described as an uncomfortable situation in which "work enters (...) private life too much, while at the same time my home and my private life suffers" (a woman aged 40 with children aged seven and nine). Moreover, there is this feeling that "she is away after work" (a woman aged 41, children ten and twelve), while during the day priority is given to professional duties and "the children must wait when I have a phone call." It can be assumed that in these cases the costs related to lowering the quality of life, while indirect, may be particularly high. The intersection of daily roles may lead to conflicts manifested in both spheres (Schultz & Schultz, 2002), where their intensity and direction depends on the specificity of the situation.

Additionally, it is worth noting that in the literature on the subject, the issue of cross-contamination of spheres of life is considered from two qualitatively different perspectives: the impact of work on family life—work interference with family (WIF)—and the impact of family life on professional work—family interference with work (FIW) (Allen et al., 2013). At the same time, the results of research on the use of flexible organizational solutions (preceding the pandemic) indicate the existence of just such a work–home impact, where such a relationship has not been confirmed for the relationship between family life and work. This may be related to the reasons why employees decide to use flexible solutions, where they most often want to increase their involvement in the implementation of tasks related to family life (Allen et al., 2013). A similar direction of impact is also maintained in the case of forced flexibility—it is work that crosses private boundaries. A semantic analysis of the concepts used to describe the relationship shows their clearly negative evaluation, where work “encroaches too much into private life” and even “takes it over.” In individual cases, the opposite direction of impact appears and respondents declared that sometimes during work they take breaks for their private life, “lunch together when my son returns from school” or shopping “during working hours,” for example. However, even then the respondents have the impression that they work more—“even at 10:00 PM, I sit down at the computer.”

Making reference to the general theory of systems, it should be noted that just as a completely closed system and a completely open system remain purely theoretical constructs, so too is the case of separating professional and non–professional activities. It seems justified to describe this dimension as a continuum, where at one end we deal with a hypothetical, complete demarcation (border impermeability) and on the other with blurring of all differences (border permeability).

The analysis of the collected research material allowed the observation of cross-contamination of spheres of life in terms of employee time, space, tasks, and functions. These spheres are not separable. The boundaries appearing in them are of a different nature (permeable vs. impermeable). This being the case, respondents were characterized by an approach that could place them on a continuum, where the active approach and the passive approach are the extremes. It is possible to build a work–life interface model in a situation of forced work flexibility on the basis of the image obtained (see Figure No. 1).

Figure No. 1. Work–Life–Interface model



Source: Own development.

Taking into account the indicated dimensions (permeable boundaries – non-shell boundaries and active strategy – passive strategy) allows the distinguishing of four types of Work–Life Interfaces in a situation of forced flexibility:

- Type I – Passive strategy and permeable borders,
- Type II – Active strategy and permeable borders,
- Type III – Active strategy and impermeable borders, and
- Type IV – Passive strategy and impermeable borders.

In Type I, the behavior of employees is reactive and a manifestation of adaptation to existing conditions. In such a situation, the boundaries between private and professional spheres may become secondary and weaken. The opposite of such behavior is Type III, in which employees actively manage relationships and thus guard the separation of the private and professional spheres. Type II shows intentionality of behavior as a consequence of which areas of an individual's life merge. Against a background of distinguished areas, Type IV is characterized by a certain specificity: In this case, the impermeability of borders is a consequence of the situation and context of task implementation, not the employee's activity.

Summary

When summarizing the thoughts presented in this article, it should be noted that the research was conducted in an exceptional situation (the pandemic), which forced the use of remote work on an unprecedented scale. Fear, uncertainty, and need to find oneself in this situation, a situation that accompanied most people during this period, as a consequence, brought both positive and negative experiences. It is interesting that the respondents entered the situation of lockdown and the performing of remote work in great depth. During the interviews they described the types of work–life interfaces that they had implemented, ignoring the predicted temporary nature of the situation and applied solutions. Conducting the research at this particular moment made it possible to use a natural experiment to collect research material and show that we are dealing with not one type of elasticity, but a bundle of them. Changing one parameter in terms of the performance of work involves another. The basic types of flexibility distinguished in the literature—temporal, spatial, task-related, and functional—interact with one another, although the force of the impact varies (Januszkiewicz, 2018). It was noticeable that the place of work has a significant influence on the direction of cross-contamination of the spheres of life. Moving work from the office to the home has consequences in the form of a penetration of work into the sphere of private life. The opposite phenomenon occurs in the situation of working in the office, during which non-working life may

penetrate into work. However, the intensity of this phenomenon seems to be much lesser.

In the conducted interviews, it was indicated that the degree of cross-contamination varied depending on factors such as the family or housing situation of the employee. Preliminary observations point to the heterogeneity of employee attitudes and behaviors in a situation of working remotely. It prompts the undertaking of in-depth research on their determinants and a search for answers to questions about whether and to what extent the type of work-life interface characteristic of an employee is the result of individual employee characteristics or the degree of permeability of the work-life boundaries that are the result of forced flexibility or is it a result of the digitization of work and a weakening of ties between work time and space (tech-life).

The work-life interface typology proposed in this study was created on the basis of research materials collected in a situation of forced flexibility of the individual. It requires operationalization and further research in a situation of unforced flexibility—i.e. a situation where the performance of remote work is established by a contract between the employee and the employer. The quantitative research on a representative sample planned in the next stage will allow the examining of regularities and recommending actions.

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Work-life interface w sytuacji wymuszonej elastyczności zachowań pracowników

Streszczenie

Doświadczenie COVID-19 wyraźnie pokazało, że elastyczność w kontekście pracy zawodowej nie ma charakteru homogenicznego. Modyfikacja jednego parametru pracy pociąga za sobą kolejne, a firmy rozważające pozostanie przy pracy zdalnej powinny przeanalizować szerszy kontekst tej zmiany. W prezentowanym artykule osiã rozważań uczyniono kontaminację sfer życia w sytuacji wymuszonej elastyczności, kiedy pracownicy niemal z dnia na dzień musieli zreorganizować swój sposób pracy. Przyjmując podejście fenomenologiczne, na podstawie badań jakościowych przeprowadzonych metodã IDI (*Individual In-depth Interview*) w okresie lockdownu (marzec–kwiecień 2020) podjęto próbę semantycznego i operacyjnego opisu współistnienia życia zawodowego i prywatnego w tych szczególnych uwarunkowaniach, zakładając, iż pełnią one funkcję akceleratora zjawisk

i procesów związanych z elastycznością zachowań organizacyjnych. W konsekwencji analizy materiału empirycznego wyróżniono cztery typy *work-lifeinterface*, oparte na kryterium rozłączności sfer życia i aktywności jednostki w zarządzaniu nimi.

Słowa kluczowe: elastyczność zachowań, *work-life interface*, zachowania organizacyjne, *work-life balance*

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