

MANAGING A REMOTE WORKFORCE: PERSPECTIVES OF HUMAN RESOURCE SPECIALISTS. A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT. In the context of the substantial share of employees currently working remotely, human resource (HR) specialists are increasingly concerned with the implications of this work arrangement for HR management practices. Accordingly, the primary aim of this paper is to investigate the specific characteristics of human resource management within remote work systems, from the perspective of HR specialists in Romania. The research objectives are: (1) to determine the specific features of managing employees in a remote work environment, with particular emphasis on maintaining work motivation, ensuring effective team functioning, and monitoring and assessing work performance; and (2) to identify the principal benefits and challenges that the implementation of a remote work system entails for organizations. To achieve these objectives, an empirical qualitative study was conducted. Primary data were collected between March and April 2024 through four semi-structured interviews with HR specialists employed in organizations in which a significant proportion of staff work remotely. The main findings of this qualitative empirical study indicate that, within the organizations represented by the interviewed specialists, specific techniques and practices have been implemented to sustain the motivation of employees working remotely, to support the effective functioning of their teams, and to improve processes related to monitoring and assessing employee performance.

Keywords: remote work, teleworking, human resources management, Romania

JEL classification: J24, J81

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Introduction and literature review

Hybrid and remote work models have become the defining characteristics of the contemporary business environment, becoming "the norm" much more rapidly than expected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020, with the introduction of lockdown measures in most countries worldwide, teleworking (or remote work) was widely adopted, rapidly, and in a largely unplanned manner (PwC, 2020). Currently, companies employ a variety of business practices to enhance their attractiveness in the labor market (World Economic Forum, 2025). One of these practices is the provision of remote and hybrid work opportunities within countries, acknowledging that the possibility of working from home for part of the time has become an important criterion for job choice among labor market candidates (Tatel *et al.*, 2025). This criterion is particularly salient for members of Generation Z when selecting an employer (Deloitte, 2025). Generation Z (born between January 1995 and December 2006), together with Generation Y (born between January 1983 and December 1994), is expected to account for 74% of the global workforce by 2030 (Forrester, 2021).

The body of literature that addresses human resource management in the context of remote work is already well developed. A systematic review conducted by Almeida *et al.* (2024), covering the period 2016–2023 and including 136 articles, synthesizes the findings along three main analytical dimensions of telework: (1) antecedents (at the individual, organizational, technological and cultural levels, among others); (2) decisions (with respect to the adoption and implementation of telework); and (3) results (at the level of work processes, organizations, employees, etc.).

With specific regard to the Romanian organizational context, existing studies primarily focus on: the situation of remote work in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic (Turkeş *et al.*, 2021; Ionescu *et al.*, 2022; Suciuc *et al.*, 2022); the experiences of employees and middle managers related to the transition from office-based to home-based work during the pandemic (Săvescu *et al.*, 2022); the impact of remote work on organizational performance (Andrei & Militaru, 2022); managers' perceptions of the effects of remote work on company productivity (Khan *et al.*, 2021); employees' perceptions in the business services sector about remote work, with an emphasis on factors that positively or negatively influence the achievement of career objectives, the dimensions of

organizational performance, and key elements of organizational culture (Caraiani *et al.*, 2022); the advantages of remote work for employees in managerial and executive positions (Gavril (Moldovan) *et al.*, 2022); and the perceptions of employees and employers about the advantages and disadvantages of remote work (Stanciu *et al.*, 2023).

In this context, the main aim of this paper is to find the specific characteristics of human resource management in remote work systems, from the perspective of human resource specialists. The decision to focus on the viewpoint of HR professionals is grounded in their central role in defining, operationalizing, and overseeing the implementation of remote work arrangements within organizations (Couto *et al.*, 2024).

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge through empirical qualitative research along two main dimensions. First, it analyzes the perceptions of human resource specialists about the distinctive features of managing employees who work remotely—an angle largely underexplored in prior research. Second, it offers an up-to-date empirical account based on data collected in 2024, while the studies cited above rely on data gathered in earlier periods.

Given that the field of human resources is very broad, it is necessary, at an early stage of the research process, to delineate the relevant aspects that must be considered, thereby setting up a proper context for an exploratory approach (Schmalz *et al.*, 2021). Keeping in mind that “qualitative research is a means of exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009), the methodology employed in this research comprises both a theoretical component and empirical, qualitative, exploratory research, using the interview as the primary method of data collection.

Primary data were collected through four semi-structured interviews with specialists working in human resource departments in four Romanian companies. The specific objectives of this research are: (1) to identify the specific characteristics of employee management in a remote work environment, with a focus on maintaining work motivation, ensuring team functioning, and monitoring and evaluating work performance; and (2) to identify the main benefits and challenges associated with implementing a remote work system at the company level.

The methodology thus combines theoretical analysis with empirical investigation. The empirical part is based on primary qualitative research, using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted with four HR specialists from four companies in Romania by one of the authors of this study, and the resulting data was subsequently analyzed and interpreted.

This article is structured as follows: the first section presents a review of the literature on human resource management in the context of remote work. The second section outlines the research methodology. The third section presents and discusses the empirical findings derived from the semi-structured interviews with HR specialists. The final section sets out a series of conclusions regarding the ways in which human resource specialists manage remote employees.

The human resources department, regardless of its specific designation, fulfills a strategic function, namely integrating human resource strategies with organizational strategies to ensure that human resources support the achievement of organizational objectives (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). These authors emphasize that a strategic approach to human resources provides a broad and long-term vision of the direction in which organizations must develop their HR policies and practices.

In a dynamic and constantly evolving environment, HR specialists face a multitude of factors that significantly influence their activities. These factors include the effects of globalization, legislative changes, technological advances and digitalization, changes in the economic environment, and the COVID-19 crisis (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). In the face of these challenges, it is essential for HR specialists to prove flexibility and maintain up-to-date skills and knowledge, to respond effectively to the needs of both organizations and employees.

Remote work represented an essential solution to ensure business continuity during the pandemic period. However, organizational management encountered difficulties in supervising and training employees, leading to the need for innovative solutions, such as the development and deployment of more advanced virtual communication and collaboration tools (Popa, 2022).

Teleworking or remote work can be defined as a work arrangement in which the employee, on a full-time or part-time basis, performs job tasks from home, while hybrid work refers to an arrangement in which the employee works part of the week from home and the remaining part on the employer's premises (Armstrong & Taylor, 2023). During the lockdown period associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, working from home was the primary solution to ensure the continuation of work activities. Subsequently, following the gradual lifting of restrictions, remote work was increasingly replaced by hybrid models that require physical presence of employees in the workplace only on a limited number of days a week (Radu *et al.*, 2023).

The implementation of remote work at the organizational level involves a series of challenges and changes, particularly in relation to communication, employee well-being, and work-life balance (Couto *et al.*, 2024). At the level of HR practices, major changes have occurred in recruitment and selection, internal communication, as well as training and development, largely as a direct consequence of the increased use of digital technologies (Gonçalves *et al.*, 2021).

The trend towards hybrid work is continually expanding, as it offers employees increased flexibility. Work schedules that require physical presence at the company's headquarters on certain days, while allowing employees to work remotely with others, constitute a form of flexibility that employees are increasingly seeking.

To effectively manage human resources and maximize employee performance, managers and HR specialists need to understand and influence work-related behaviors. The achievement of optimal employee results depends on how teams are managed, with HR specialists playing a supporting role by creating an enabling work environment and implementing appropriate motivational policies. As remote work becomes more widespread, shifting employee expectations have emerged as one of the main drivers shaping the future of work. In this context and in a volatile labor market, human resource management has increasingly adopted a sustainability-oriented strategy that integrates organizational performance with social, human, environmental, and financial development, promoting regeneration and sustainable use of resources (Davidescu et al., 2020).

HR sustainability is linked to employee flexibility by fostering a work environment that supports work-life balance, thus facilitating adaptability and job satisfaction (Davidescu et al., 2020). According to the aforementioned authors, the forms of work flexibility perceived as most important by Romanian employees are team autonomy and flexibility in managing work time. These findings underscore the importance of work flexibility for employee satisfaction in Romania.

In the current Romanian context, where professionals have access to a wide array of employment opportunities, employers must adapt and offer benefits that go beyond financial compensation, with a particular emphasis on organizational flexibility. Consequently, remote work and flexible arrangements are essential elements for employee motivation and productivity, influencing both the length and quality of employee engagement with the organization (Davidescu et al., 2020).

Research methodology

The primary aim of this paper is to identify the specific characteristics of human resource management in remote work systems from the perspective of human resource specialists. The research objectives are: (1) to determine the particular features of employee management in a remote work environment, with a special emphasis on maintaining work motivation, team functioning, and monitoring and evaluation of work performance; and (2) to identify the main benefits and challenges that the implementation of a remote work system entails for organizations.

To achieve these objectives, we conducted a primary qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews as a data collection method (Ghauri *et al.*, 2020). Primary data were obtained through four semi-structured interviews - conducted by one of the authors of the present study. The research design followed several stages. Based on the formulated research question, we developed a structured interview guide. This instrument includes ten questions aimed at eliciting in - detailed information on human resource management in remote work environments within the organizations to which interview participants belong.

We defined a profile for the interviewees as follows: (a) they had to be human resource specialists; (b) they had to work in companies operating in Romania; and (c) they had to have occupied a human resources position prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (before March 2020), in order to be able to describe the challenges and changes that occurred during this period in relation to the management of human resources in remote work systems. Based on this profile, we contacted HR specialists to obtain their consent to participate in the interviews. Ultimately, we received positive responses from four human resource specialists who met the defined criteria (see Table 1).

We then scheduled and conducted semi-structured interviews online between April and May 2024. The interviewees work in organizations located in Cluj-Napoca and Bucharest, in companies that have implemented remote work systems; consequently, their professional experience is relevant to address research questions. The final stage of the study consisted of analyzing the information collected from the four semi-structured interviews - and formulating a set of conclusions to respond to the research questions previously stated.

Table 1. Profile of the companies from which the interviewees come

Name initial of the interviewee	Company code	The company's field of work	Number of employees of the company	% of work time performed in a remote work environment
L.P.	A	Marketing for the construction industry	30	80%
C.N.	B	Training & development services	65	30%
L.I	C	Marketing and market research	43	100%
V.M.	D	Design consulting & construction consulting	300	50%

Source: Authors' compilation

Results and discussions

In the following section, data obtained from four semi-structured interviews conducted with human resources specialists are analyzed. The organizations in which these four HR professionals are employed were forced to implement remote work arrangements during the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, and, at the time of data collection (2024), these arrangements were still in effect (see Table 1).

When asked to describe their experience in managing remote workers by three concepts or expressions, the four human resources specialists most frequently referred to the following themes: communication; building and maintaining trust; and people, their development, and their performance. Furthermore, these aspects converge with several current research themes related to remote work, as outlined by Gifford (2022), specifically communication, employee performance, and trust as a key component of the organizational social climate.

In relation to sustaining the motivation of employees engaged in remote work, L.I. highlights the provision of continuous training programs and courses, alongside the delivery of frequent, predominantly positive feedback. V.M. underscores the role of transparent and honest communication, operationalized through a high degree of autonomy granted to employees and a strong level of mutual trust, while explicitly avoiding excessive monitoring practices. C.N. points to the need for more frequent one-to-one meetings compared to on-site work, as well as heightened attention to the onboarding and integration of new employees who begin their activity directly in a remote work arrangement, where insufficient integration is associated with diminished motivation.

C.N. further argues that motivational strategies should be tailored to the individual needs of employees, particularly with respect to status, recognition, autonomy, and interpersonal relationships. The same specialist also stresses the relevance of mentor–mentee pairings as a motivation mechanism, especially for employees who need support for professional development. Additionally, C.N. describes an organizational practice implemented in their company, namely a Friday morning connection meeting, referred to as “morning coffee,” during which discussions are informal and work-related topics are deliberately excluded.

Concerning the functioning of teams whose members work remotely, C.N. identifies a major risk of decreased team-level cohesion, which in turn needs additional efforts to preserve team spirit. L.P., C.N., and L.I. collectively note a tendency among remote employees to experience a diminished sense of belonging to the team. The level of team cohesion in remote work contexts has a direct impact on team performance, which underlines its critical importance (Maurer *et al.*, 2022).

To counteract and potentially eliminate this tendency, L.P. reports on the organization of in-person meetings, team-building activities, and the use of gamification applications—such as Mission Teams—for micro-trainings, challenges, and quizzes, while L.I. also emphasizes team-building events and online games. According to C.N., the maintenance of team spirit in remote settings is further supported by assigning employees to joint projects.

According to the human resources specialists interviewed, key performance indicators (KPIs) and SMART objectives continue to be used in evaluating the performance of remote employees. As specific aspects, C.N. notes that effective monitoring of employee performance requires multiple follow-up meetings to assess the degree of objective attainment, while L.I. highlights the importance of continuous communication regarding work activities, as well as the provision of ongoing feedback rather than limiting feedback to the end of the month.

Furthermore, C.N. emphasizes that performance levels tend to be higher when employees prove self-discipline; in their absence, more intensive monitoring and feedback from the organization become necessary. L.I. also claims that the level of concentration among remote employees may increase due to the elimination of office-related distractions, such as noisy colleagues and frequent breaks.

The use of digital platforms in the performance monitoring and evaluation process is an element mentioned by two of the four HR specialists interviewed. L.P. points out that the use of such platforms contributes to transparency with respect to employee activities, while V.M. specifies the parameters that can be measured with these tools, such as the duration of the login and the nature and volume of the activities carried out.

Regarding the digital platforms and tools used to manage employees in remote work arrangements, the responses obtained from the four HR specialists are presented below. In the context of remote work, the specialists interviewed indicated that their organizations have integrated a range of digital platforms and instruments to ensure efficient management and communication with employees.

Project management platforms such as Basecamp and Zoho, together with video conferencing solutions such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet, are used at the team level for task coordination and the facilitation of online meetings. Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems, such as Hubspot and Zoho CRM, are used to centralize and structure customer data, while enterprise systems such as SAP are used for human resource management processes.

Written communication through text-based channels—particularly applications such as WhatsApp and e-mail—has become predominant. This development reflects a broader cultural transformation that is observable at both the individual and the organizational levels. The specialist identified as L.I. reported that, while telephone calls were previously regarded as the standard

communication medium, contemporary practice now favors the transmission of information through text messages. As a result, the dominant interaction modality has shifted from synchronous voice calls to asynchronous written exchanges, underscoring a salient trend in the evolution of social and professional communication practices.

According to the four human resources specialists interviewed, the implementation of remote work arrangements and the digitalization of work processes have generated multiple opportunities for organizations. The L.P. Specialist highlighted the geographical expansion of the recruitment pool, the possibility of hiring personnel irrespective of their place of residence, and the realization of substantial cost savings through comparatively lower salary levels for employees located outside major urban centers. Specialist L.I. emphasized that “recruitment and collaboration are much more flexible, allowing access to international talent without geographical barriers.” In addition, L.P. noted that job interviews and the training of new employees can be conducted efficiently through online platforms and digital resources, thereby facilitating their access to and integration within organizational teams.

In examining the challenges faced by organizations in implementing remote work systems, several critical dimensions emerge, notably the centrality of communication, the need for mutual trust among employees, and the imperative to keep a proper balance between work and home. These are complemented by the need for sustained investments in technology and the continuous adaptation of digital tools to evolving organizational and operational requirements.

V.M. highlights the requirement for ongoing, transparent communication and a high level of trust between employers and employees as foundational conditions for the effective functioning of remote work arrangements. L.I. underscores that the disappearance of both formal and informal face-to-face interactions has contributed to a weakening of interpersonal ties among employees, a factor considered essential for the optimal functioning and cohesion of work teams. A similar perspective is expressed by C.N., who notes that direct and spontaneous interactions are significantly reduced in remote work contexts, a circumstance that can negatively affect the performance of certain employees.

Furthermore, C.N. stresses the importance of “maintaining trust to avoid micromanagement, which can demotivate employees and affect their autonomy.” L.I. draws attention to the specific need for “monitoring and mentoring new employees, as ‘hot’ feedback and support are difficult to achieve through virtual means, thus pointing to the limitations of technology-mediated communication in onboarding and professional development in the early-stage. The same specialist emphasizes the promotion of work–life balance for employees engaged in remote work as a prerequisite to keep their well-being and productivity.

V.M. additionally refers to the necessity for organizations to invest in proper equipment and broader digital transformation. L.P. finds the need to “prepare and register all work procedures and tools to facilitate the access and integration of new employees, regardless of their location,” highlighting the importance of accessible standardized documentation for distributed teams. C.N. notes that the adoption of remote work systems by companies entails not only technological adjustments but also a profound transformation in the cognitive and attitudinal frameworks of employees. In this regard, C.N. recommends keeping a positive mindset towards the transition to remote work, viewing “challenges as opportunities for personal and professional growth,” and emphasizes the importance of remaining open and receptive to ongoing organizational and technological change.

Conclusions

Human resource specialists are increasingly concerned with the management of remote workers, both due to the relative novelty of this form of organization of work and the specific challenges it entails. The added value of this paper lies in the empirical and qualitative primary research conducted on the current state of remote work and on the perspectives of human resource specialists about the management of employees working within remote work systems.

To achieve the main aim of this study—namely, to identify the specific characteristics of human resource management in remote work systems—primary data were collected through four semi-structured interviews with human resource specialists from Romanian companies that have implemented remote work arrangements. With respect to the first research objective, which focuses on determining the specific characteristics of employee management in a remote work environment, with particular emphasis on the maintenance of work motivation and the functioning of teams, as perceived by human resource specialists, the conclusions of our research are as follows.

1. With respect to organizational efforts to keep the motivation of employees engaged in remote work, a wide range of practices is used. These include transparent and candid communication, the provision of a high degree of autonomy, and the cultivation of trust-based relationships without resorting to excessive monitoring. In addition, organizations report increasing the frequency of one-to-one meetings compared to on-site work arrangements and devoting increased attention to the onboarding and integration of new employees.

2. Concerning the functioning of teams whose members work remotely, organizations undertake more initiatives to preserve team cohesion and a sense of belonging. The measures implemented in this regard include the organization of in-person meetings, the conduct of team-building activities, and the deployment of gamification applications.
3. Regarding the performance evaluation of employees working remotely, organizations continue to rely on key performance indicators (KPIs) and SMART objectives, while also incorporating additional specific practices. These include more frequent follow-up meetings to monitor progress toward objectives and continuous communication about ongoing activities, accompanied by regular, formative feedback rather than feedback provided solely at the end of the month. The use of digital platforms in the monitoring and evaluation of performance provides a major advantage to the organization by ensuring a high degree of transparency with respect to the activities of the employees.

Regarding the second research objective - namely, identifying the principal benefits and challenges associated with the implementation of a remote work system for the company, as perceived by human resources specialists - the findings of this study can be summarized as follows.

On the benefit side, remote work eases a recruitment process characterized by several specific advantages. These include the expansion of the candidate pool beyond geographical constraints, as well as access to qualified human resources whose benefit expectations may be lower than those that prevail in the labor market of the company's headquarters, particularly when candidates live in smaller cities. Furthermore, the use of online platforms and digital resources enables the efficient organization of interviews and the training of new employees, thereby enhancing their accessibility and integration into the organizational team.

However, the management of work within a remote system also generates a series of challenges for companies. Among these are the need to set up clear and transparent communication channels, maintain trust between employees and employers, and support employees in preserving a healthy balance between work and personal life. In addition, remote work frequently requires substantial investments in technological infrastructure, as well as the continuous adaptation and updating of digital tools to align with evolving organizational and operational needs.

The limitations of this research derive primarily from the constraints inherent in qualitative primary research based on semi-structured interviews as the principal data collection method. These constraints include the dependence on

the methodological competence and interpersonal skills of the interviewer, as well as the relatively long duration of data collection, which generally exceeds the time needed to administer standardized structured questionnaires (Ghuri *et al.*, 2020). Consequently, a relevant direction for future research would be the implementation of quantitative primary studies on a nationally representative sample to extend, corroborate, and generalize the findings of the present investigation.

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