Enforced Remote Work and Resilience in Ukrainian Organizations During the War

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global event causing profound shifts in millions of lives, was swiftly succeeded by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the biggest threat to European peace since the Cold War's culmination (Mankoff, 2022). Ukrainian organizations, exhibiting resilience amidst the conflict, continued to thrive, effectively navigating war-time challenges (Gorodnichenko et al., 2022). In February 2022, while global recovery from the pandemic saw workplaces gradually reinstating physical presence, Ukrainian organizations were compelled to innovate work arrangements for safety.

RQ1: What challenges had Ukrainian organizations faced while reestablishing remote enforced remote work?

RQ2: What organizational and digital solutions they approached to create resilient remote work arrangements during the war?

Participants and methods

Our empirical setting is the Ukrainian organizations from the Kharkiv area, which are heavily impacted by external attacks. We conducted ten semi-structured interviews with leaders and managers at different levels from 10 business companies from September 2022 - February 2023. The interviews were conducted online using either Zoom or MS Teams and were audio recorded. The participating companies’ central offices were located in Ukraine at the moment of interviews, while their employees were dispersed in different parts of the country and abroad. Convenience sampling was used to reach out to knowledge workers and businesses. Next, snowball sampling was applied, as we asked the research participants to help identify potential participants from other companies and invite them to participate in the study. Our sample included the CEOs of four companies who agreed to participate in the study. The majority of companies represent the IT sector (7), apart from three (3) companies, which work with the delivery of household goods, clothes manufacturing, and printed material. All companies are middle and small, with more than five years of experience in the market. This study aims to broaden the understanding of organizational discontinuity in remote work (Watson-Manheim et al., 2012) and its overlap with organizational resilience (Duchek, 2020), drawing on Ukrainian businesses' responses.

Our interview questions concerned four areas: 1) Background (the company’s mission
and vision, the role of the respondent in the company, number of employees, and main activities); 2) Experiences during the times of war, coping and adaptation strategies; 3) Value of the pandemic experiences for building resilience during the war; 4) Additional comments (any other relevant information). Interviews were conducted between The interview length varies between 45-70 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Ukrainian or Russian. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Our next step was to run inductive coding following (Gioia et al., 2013). As we assumed that organizational challenges would be unprecedented, this approach allowed us to let data supply the structure of our analysis. The next step was to conduct selective coding. We focused on the discontinuities experienced and the adaptation strategies that the companies used to address them, relating them to different stages of Duchek’s model. We looked specifically at what challenges organizations faced during the war on the organizational level and what solutions they used to establish resilient work arrangements.

**Results**

The resilience of work arrangements in Ukrainian organizations during wartime is evident in the tactics to navigate the challenges of **structural relocation**. Firms have kept customers informed about the situation, even amidst crises, fostering an atmosphere of support from foreign clients. One executive (C3) highlighted this: "There was crazy support from foreign clients; they said, 'We will wait some time until you reestablish operations and business operations'”. "When the war started, leaders from another office we had in the relatively safe area picked up all things and maintained communication with customers so that they did not think that we as a company completely stopped working, this is such an important moment," said C8 representative. Organizations also demonstrated resourcefulness by developing evacuation plans and SOS teams. A respondent (C1) mentioned, "We created an SOS team responsible for relocations" Simultaneously, they initiated collaborations to manage relocations and share costs and strategically hired in safer regions. Despite the initial severe impact, with losses reaching 90%, as a leader (C7) noted, “The first month we were...we lost 90%. Every month we added 10%.” the recovery rate has been incremental and steady.

The **threat of office damage** requires steps to mitigate this risk. Organizations have relocated goods and machinery and rented offices and warehouses in safer locations. A representative from one organization (C10) noted, "It was dangerous to take [the goods] from Kharkiv: I want to say a big thank you to our partner; they supported us and sheltered us when we needed it.” Businesses have sought collaborative arrangements to share employee evacuation costs, demonstrating their resourcefulness and adaptability in adversity. The evacuation of critical resources has become vital, as illustrated by a representative (C6), who said, "There were such big battles nearby, and that's why our warehouse was constantly being hit. Fortunately, we managed to evacuate part of it.”

The war imposed significant operational challenges, such as the **inability to operate in offices** as it was dangerous for employees; they had to hide in basements and shelters. In
response, companies have demonstrated resilience by using modern work arrangements. They developed business continuity plans (BCP) locations to ensure operations can resume if necessary. One representative (C4) explained, "We preserved the office itself. It doesn't work; we don't allow it to work. But if needed, it works as a BCP location. Here is a minus second floor; electricity, if necessary, someone can come and charge the phones, but only for a short time. Of course, not work.". Organizations have adapted by creating new tasks for those remaining in the offices in frontline areas. This strategy maintains a presence in these locations and leverages local contacts and resources. An executive (C10) mentioned, “All are working remotely now, but some are from Kharkiv. We have a warehouse and equipment that we sell, not just software, but also the cash registers that cashiers use.”

The disruption of coordination was one of the managerial challenges. Companies maintained continuous contact via multiple communication channels. They've adopted a multi-pronged approach, disseminating the same message across different channels like email, social media, and SMS. This effort is reflected in a statement from an executive (C1), "Top management, human resources, and all other employees worked for 12-16 hours instead of 8 to be in touch with each colleague: so as not to miss anyone, not lose anyone, and to respond instantly to any problems". Alongside this, companies have ensured constant system communications to keep all employees aligned and informed, even when personal circumstances become challenging. An executive (C8) explained, "...constant system communications. When the war began, we directly turned on the rally for the whole company in the first weeks. Every day, we said what we were doing today, why we were doing it, and what we had to do tomorrow.”

Significant challenges are faced by both leaders and knowledge workers in enforced remote work and keeping the business “as usual.” Companies have attended to supply all employees with laptops, ensuring they have the necessary tools to perform their tasks remotely. They have also provided support through guidelines to help employees navigate the complexities of remote work. Regular meetings were escalated to monitor performance and address communication problems, fostering a sense of unity and coordination despite the physical distance and danger. However, the shift to remote work has been challenging. As one executive (C9) noted, "There was terrible internet, and it was difficult to serve our customers because telephony is 100% dependent on the quality of the Internet."

Abnormal stress levels within Ukrainian organizations are caused by hostilities affecting both productivity and the overall well-being of employees. Companies have attempted to care for their workforce by implementing various support mechanisms. They had established help-line support, offering access to professional psychologists for emotional support, as highlighted by an executive (C10): "Even before the war, we created help-line support: we have qualified psychologists to whom any colleague can turn, they will talk to him, help, etc. No one particularly used it before the war, but now they have begun to use it actively." In addition to psychological support, organizations have arranged online social activities to foster a sense of community and unity, countering
the challenging atmosphere that another executive (C2) describes: "During the war, keeping everyone together and maintaining the right atmosphere is much more challenging." Organizations use scenario planning to react to uncertainties, which helps reduce stress levels. An executive (C6) pointed out, "We have several work scenarios, for example, what will happen if the textbooks are not funded this year. It makes people calm."

The necessity of remote work during the war has introduced security and configuration challenges for people disseminated in different areas. Companies developed their IT policies and standards to accommodate remote work, including licensing conflicts between work software and personal computer software. Managing security has been a critical focus, particularly in the limitations of home computers, to meet company standards and ensure secure remote access. An executive (C2) mentioned, "Just computers owned by the company were allowed to be taken and used to work from home." This measure was taken to ensure the integrity and security of the organization's digital assets. Another representative (C6) further explained the complexity of the task: "We had to set up and standardize home computers, meaning personal computers, for work. For example, the publishing or any other software would conflict with the software installed on the personal computer. There are many, many security problems here as well. And there were, and still are,"

Power and internet shortages pushed to collaborate and share offices equipped with non-volatile power and reliable internet connections; as a representative (C3) noted: "We jointly use resources and infrastructure for employees to have places to work. In order not to depend on any electrical fluctuations, etc." In addition to infrastructure sharing, companies have provided employees with batteries, chargers, and satellite internet (mentioned Starlink) programs to ensure uninterrupted access to power and the internet. Work schedules have been adjusted to blackout periods, with most people at night when electricity and internet are available. As an executive (C6) explained, "We changed the work schedule because most people work at night when there is internet and electricity available. We also record meetings so those who couldn't connect can listen, or we send resumes via email or chat." However, these solutions come with their challenges, such as the physical strain of carrying heavy batteries, as a representative (C3) mentioned: "But many people in cities or girls do not want to carry these charging stations or generators - it's annoying."

The compulsory military draft has posed significant challenges for Ukrainian organizations. To mitigate the impact of losing key personnel to the draft, some companies have maintained a consulting relationship with draftees until suitable replacements can be found. Following the Ministry of Digital Transformation policy, they have attempted to classify certain employees as "critical specialists" to prevent their conscription. One executive (C1) highlighted their company's commitment, "They do not work, but they receive their compensation, they have a workplace, and I am sure it will continue to be so." The loss of critical specialists is acknowledged as a significant resource drain, as another executive (C3) said: "We have five people mobilized. These are
pretty strong and critical specialists. From the point of view of our processes for providing the service, this is such a heavy loss of our resources.” A representative C10 provides a further testament to the importance of these drafted professionals: “He was the IT director... I think he's not in the frontline, but somewhere near the General Staff because IT specialists are also needed there, and he probably works with some databases”. As of May 2023, the Ministry of Digital Affairs of Ukraine listed 2,292 conscripts from the IT industry from 79 enterprises as critically important. Lists were sent to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine for approval to reserve them for the functioning of the economy in a particular period. Ministry committed conscripts of 8 critical digital service enterprises.

References

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