

STUDY ABOUT THE MANAGEMENT OF WORKING FROM HOME DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: The paper presents the results of the study on home work management. The COVID-19 pandemic has produced, in addition to a health crisis and an economic crisis like no other, with unexpected effects and an impact that we have not thought about and that has profoundly changed the way we work, it has made us pass from office work to telework, in other words to working from home. Therefore, the only "points of support" for us to pass this test are the lessons learned on the go for telework management.

Keywords: work at home management, project management, time management, crisis management, risk management, conflict management.

1. Premises

The COVID-19 pandemic has produced, in addition to a health crisis and an economic crisis like no other, with unexpected effects and an impact that we have not thought about and that has profoundly changed the way we work, it has made us pass from office work to telework. Therefore, the only "points of support" for us to pass this test are the lessons learned on the go for telework management.

To minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection, as Z. Chen puts it [1], more and more people are choosing to work from home (WFH). Compared to traditional office work, working from home has certain limits and opportunities with a significant impact on both employees and organizations (companies, institutions, etc.).

2. The Proposed Issues

As this study shows, working from home has both advantages and disadvantages. In other words, working from home can be a "double-edged sword" that leads to both positive and negative results. Studies conducted in Romania show that, between May 15, 2020 and September 15, 2021, over 38% of the labour force worked from home. Before COVID-19, only 2% of Romanian employees worked from home. At the same time, Romanian businesspeople had to change their priorities. A first priority was to adapt their business to the new constraints of social distancing and security regulations to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second priority was to ensure business continuity through customer retention services and job retention processes for as many employees as possible.

The third priority was to develop and implement a resilience plan for the rapid return to normal state from the state of shock brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the management lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic, learned on the fly by Romanian managers, we may list:

1. When times are so changeable and people have unexpected behaviours, the manager-leader is the binding person who can unite the employees around a common set of premises;
2. If you take care of people, they will take care of business, this can be a leading path;
3. Planning must lead to a well-structured and clear plan, in several scenarios, for easy adaptation when a crisis strikes;
4. In the organization of the work process, we moved to working from home, the flexibility of the program and the communication with positive energy;
5. Decisions may be taken only on the basis of information received in real time and through continuous communication;
6. In adopting a leadership style, a good leader cannot but be sensitive to people's fears, but he or she cannot ignore business imperatives, in a business environment with a unprecedented rate of change;
7. Controlling people's work has increasingly been based on transparency, individual responsibility and a high degree of trust because people need to understand what is happening and why.

If the "seeds" have planted, those of a flexible management style, based on trust, discipline and responsibility, and the selection of people in work teams

who have the ability to adapt to change and a good emotional balance, the manager should not encounter any problems when the situation imposes the change: "tomorrow everyone has to work from home!"

3. Core of the Issue

As shown in the study, in order to ensure business continuity in the given and regulated conditions for the prevention of the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant number of Romanian companies have moved to working from home.

It is necessary to specify that not in all fields of activity it was possible to start working from home. In the fields of IT, communications, accounting and finance, it was relatively easy to switch from office work to telework. On the other hand, in manufacturing, agriculture and retail industries, areas where direct interaction with the end customer and physical work were needed, employees remained in the classic work variant.

A particularly difficult situation has been in the hospitality industry (HoReCa) where the activity has either closed for shorter or longer periods or has been carried out in a restricted way, with the distribution of food at home, and so on.

This survey presents the main effects of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Work from home refers to working remotely from a location other than the office, usually from the employee's home.

The literature has been significantly enriched with new works on telework. Thus, Lister [4] showed that although the demand for work flexibility and the need for work-life balance have been around for a long time, the COVID-19 pandemic and the restrictions imposed by the authorities in each country have accelerated the tendency to work from home. In their study Gursoy and Chi [2] underline that the restrictions imposed forced companies to offer employees the opportunity to work from home.

Then Wang et al. [6] in their 2020 study argue that a new home business strategy is needed, a strategy that should not be temporary but long-lasting. And the study by Zou et al. [7] stressed the fact that many companies have approached new, more flexible work patterns, such as online commerce and working from home. At the same time, Dingel and Neiman [3] argued that in certain jobs, such as health, agriculture and hospitality, not all activities can be carried out just by working from home.

There were also many concerns about the effects on employees' work behaviour, as Chi, Saldami, and D. Gursoy debated in their 2021 study [2] along three dimensions: vigour, dedication and absorption.

The discussion in the relevant study conducted by Zhisheng Chen in the period 2020-2021 [1] claims that HR practitioners need to address new issues of working

from home, such as improving digital skills, the stress experienced by the employees working from home, and work-family imbalance. Focusing on these new work-from-home issues benefits both employees and companies.

Finally, the 2020 exploratory study [5] conducted about telework in Hong Kong by Lina Vyas and N. Butakhieo showed that interest in WFH remains after the COVID-19 pandemic, but not in its current form. For instance Wang et al. [6] showed that there are fluid boundaries between work from home and family life which results in high work-family interference and overwork for the employee.

The results of the study were obtained through an online investigation based on an electronic form whose link was distributed to 380 Romanian employees and employers between May 15, 2020 and September 15, 2021.

The respondents were between 20 and 60 years old, sampled along the two generations of age given by the year of birth:

1961-1980 – the sensitive generation or generation X;
1981-2000 – the super-sensitive generation or generation Y.

The hyper-sensitive or Z-generation respondents (born after 2000) were not selected because they participated in another study on online learning, in their capacity of pupils or students.

The methodology of the study and the stages covered are the subject of another paper, so the article presents the main effects, positive and negative, of working from home both on employees and employers.

The main common challenges in the work from home management were:

1. **Management of the work schedule**, moving from a fixed 8-hour working time, usually from 9 a.m. at 5 p.m., to a flexible schedule in which the employee could set his or her desired work schedule, either 8 hours in the morning or 4 hours in the morning and 4 hours in the evening;
2. **Ensuring the home comfort** for work. For most respondents, working from home meant the freedom to choose the time, space and order in which they performed their work tasks. However, only those who had more than one room in the dwelling (28%) and / or did not have children in the house (34%) felt complete peace at home. For those who had children at home (56%) there were many disturbances during work. Many employees need a lot of convenience through the freedom in different options when working: not to be interrupted during work (22%), to keep the windows open (15%), to be able to adjust air conditioning or heat as they please (43%), to talk and / or use the mobile phone (82%) etc.

3. **Social isolation** is another challenge that has intensified especially after 6 months of working from home. The feeling of loneliness was one of the most frequent complaints of the respondents (73%). Then the lack of real interaction with colleagues was mentioned by 67% of respondents, of which: lack of direct socialization (47%): "going out for a cigarette" (31%), and "having a cup of coffee" (16 %); lack of lunch break "going to a pizza place" (20%) or "exercising" (50%);
4. **Insufficient and difficult communication** between employees and managers, among employees and colleagues in the project team. The limitations were due to both the lack of a work laptop for the employee (18%) and the restricted Internet access (54%); a significant number of respondents (77%) mentioned the additional effort required to obtain information from teammates;
5. **Routine and overload** represent in their turn a set of challenges for the Romanian employees. Although working from home creates a sense of freedom, almost all respondents (95%) said that over time they entered a routine in which they did not leave the computer (desktop or laptop) except to go to the bathroom or to eat. at an unhealthy pace. Moreover, half of the respondents said that although they changed their classic work schedule, they worked more overtime hours, and this extended schedule led to overwork. Although they were able to take advantage of working from home to exercise more, over 42% of respondents said they were sedentary because of this overwork.;
6. **Interference between working from home and family requirements** which affected two-thirds of respondents engaged in working from home. The employees with children have often been in the position of holding a child in their arms and typing on a laptop, lying on a couch while working or even on the living room floor; Moreover, over 35% of respondents felt a great imbalance between work and family life which led to conflicts with family members.;
7. **Decreased loyalty** of the Romanian employees to the company's culture. Over 80% of respondents said they were always afraid of job security. Half of them said they intended to leave the company;
8. **Continuous motivation of employees** is a challenge that has created great difficulties for Romanian employers. If you work from home, as a manager, you can't tell when an employee has a bad day because of personal issues. If a manager reports stress and inability to help employees, the "leak-down" effect on employees occurs. Only managers who have had a double approach of the situation by addressing formulas to the employees, such as "we have this or that to do, it's hard, but I know we can do it together." But this requires as many online and even offline discussions as possible;
9. **Effectiveness, efficiency and productivity** in telework. Effectiveness has been understood by employees through their confidence and focus on completing tasks at home. Efficiency was felt in Romanian companies by reducing rental costs, office maintenance and employee transportation. At the same time, employees did not waste time in traffic in order to get to the office, which in the big cities of Romania can be almost 2 hours! The productivity of work from home had a parabolic evolution among Romanian employees. If in the first 6 months a trend of increasing productivity was identified, for a year a decrease in the productivity of work from home followed. Everything can be explained by the influence of psychological stressors on job satisfaction, life satisfaction and family satisfaction.;
10. **Trend towards the hybrid form** of work through the mix in a golden ratio (38/62) between office work and home work. Employees in Romania, especially young people, have realized that working from home can not only be a short-term way of working, but a new long-term trend in the post-COVID-19 period. From the study, the respondents answered the question as follows "What would you choose?":
 - 7% are in favour of returning to the office;
 - 38% prefer to work from home;
 - 55% opt for the hybrid form, telework and office work.

The 10 effects (Fig. 1) showed that telework management requires the modern application of MTIs (methods, techniques and instruments) in:

- Crisis management;
- Risk management;
- Stress management;
- Conflict management;
- Time management.

Crisis management means that when times are so changeable and people have unexpected behaviours, the manager-leader is the binding person who can unite the employees around a common set of premises.

Risk management makes telework to be thought of in multiple scenarios for easy employee adaptation by acquiring new digital online work skills.

Stress management shows that working from home also poses many challenges for employees and employers that lead to increased psychological stress through social isolation.

Conflict management will resolve the interference of working from home and the work-family conflict.

Time management will show the flow of time for telework and the golden ratio of results to the effort invested through the flexibility of the work schedule.



Fig. 1. The effects of working from home (WFH)

4. Conclusions:

The following conclusions can be drawn from the research meant to investigate telework management:

1. In order to minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection, more and more people are choosing to work from home (WFH). Compared to traditional office work, working from home has certain limits and opportunities with a significant impact on both employees and organizations (companies, institutions, etc.).
2. This study presents the main effects of working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. Telework or working from home refers to working remotely from a location other than the office, usually from an employee's home.
3. The 10 challenges showed that telework management requires the modern application of MTIs (methods, techniques and instruments) in:
 - Crisis management, which means that when times are so changeable and people have unexpected behaviours, the manager-leader is the binding person who can unite the employees around a common set of premises.
 - Risk management leads to considering work from home in several scenarios for an easy adaptation of employees by acquiring new digital work skills online.
 - Stress management shows that working from home also presents many challenges for employees and employers that lead to increased psychological stress through social isolation.
 - Conflict management will resolve the interference of telework and the work-family conflict.
 - Time management will show the flow of time for working from home and the golden ratio between the results and the effort made through the flexibility of the work schedule.

5. References

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Personal Notes

Gheorghe Popovici (born in 1958) graduated from the Faculty of Mechanics of the "Politehnica" University of Timișoara, he was awarded a PhD degree in engineering in 1995 by UP Timișoara and a PhD degree in marketing granted in 2007 by the West University of Timișoara. Technical-scientific publications: 25 books, 3 patents and 130 scientific papers published in the fields of Engineering and management of technological systems, Marketing, Tourism Marketing and Online Marketing. For the works he received the "Ion Ionescu de la Brad" award of the Romanian Academy (2019).