

TEAM EFFECTIVENESS AND TMS IN RELATIONSHIP WITH ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES

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Abstract. *The paper reports the results of a qualitative study investigating the adoption of remote work in Romanian companies. It focuses on remote workers' perceptions regarding their efficiency, creativity, ability to cooperate, coordinate with others and integrate their expertise with the working group to fulfill their daily tasks or deliver the projects. The study analyses the role of organizational values and internal communication in supporting individuals to face difficulties and keeping the work teams united. It shows that shared organizational values and good internal communication help organizations harness the expertise of remote workers, supporting them to collaborate and perform well.*

Keywords: *internal communication; organizational culture; organizational values; Romania; TMS; team performance.*

Introduction

The work-from-home practice remained present in KIBS' workers' routine as a legacy of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the ILO report (ILO, 2021b), the share of employees working from home grew significantly from 3% (before the COVID-19 pandemic) to 20-30% (during the pandemic), varying by country and industry. At the EU level, Eurofound (2020a) reports that 48% of the employees worked at home, at least some of the time during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 34% worked exclusively from home. As for the knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS), the ILO reports (ILO 2021a, 2021b) and the European Commission (2020) estimated an increase from 8-14% (before the pandemic) to 90% (during the pandemic) in the share of remote workers, with variations by country.

In this context, this paper focuses on KIBS' workers and presents the result of a qualitative study exploring their work-from-home (WFH) experiences during the COVID-19 crisis.

Literature Review

Traditionally, working from home (WFH) has been positively associated with flexible working arrangements for employees (Felstead & Henseke, 2017) and with the benefits for employers through higher productivity of their employees. (Senz, 2019; Bloom et al., 2015) and cost cuts for working space (Ipsen et al., 2021; Senz, 2019; Felstead & Henseke, 2017).

The studies conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic show that the perceptions of employers and employees of remote work have remained positive: more than half of

workers still prefer working from home or the hybrid model (PwC, 2021; Eurofound, 2020b; Eurofound, 2021), and 83% of employers say the shift to remote work has been beneficial for their company (PwC, 2021).

Studies mention several advantages perceived by remote workers, such as saving commuting time, greater time flexibility, increased productivity, less stress, and a better work–life balance (Ipsen et al., 2021; Felstead & Henseke, 2017), as well as diminishing the risk of getting COVID-19 virus (Ipsen et al., 2021; Radulescu et al., 2021).

Still, working from home during the COVID-19 outbreak has been a different experience compared to what it meant before the pandemic: the office was moved to a home environment quite suddenly by governmental measures and not due to an arrangement made with the employer; the house was turned overnight both into the office of several companies (depending on the number of family members forced to work from home), and into a classroom for children connected to online schooling (Eurofound, 2020a; Grose, 2020); the Internet connection was overloaded, imposing negotiations, additional extensions and costs (Eurofound, 2020b); lockdowns and the extended state of alert depriving the parents working from home from the help of baby sitters, relatives and aides for childcare and housework (Feng & Savani, 2020); ending with more house tasks as family members had to work, play and eat under the same roof (Arntz, Ben Yahmed, & Berlingieri, 2020; Boca et al., 2020; Grose, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic brought a higher level of stress induced by threats to health and life, long isolation, the severity of restrictions and health protection rules, and worries related to economic and social security (Eurofound, 2021; Pieh et al., 2021).

Their own efficiency, creativity, and ability to communicate well, cooperate, and coordinate with others to integrate their expertise with the working group and fulfill their daily tasks or deliver projects are the challenges that remote workers cope with using the support of their companies. In their ongoing analysis of employee-written reviews on Glassdoor, Sull & Sull (2020) discovered that the top quality of team communication, leaders' honesty, and transparency are the themes that stand out in the pandemic months, being mentioned twice more often than in the previous year, and containing more positive employee-written reviews. When employees think, speak, and act through screens, effective communication that integrates transparency is essential for maintaining trust, engagement, and social connectedness (Nadkarni et al., 2021).

Rawlins (2008, p. 6) defines the three important characteristics of transparency: "information that is truthful, substantial and useful; participation of stakeholders in identifying the information they need; and objective, balanced reporting of an organization's activities and policies that hold the organization accountable". Even without agreeing on how transparency in communication is defined and measured (Hopp & Fisher, 2021), the studies carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic bring evidence that informational transparency, participative transparency, and accountable transparency are internal communication dimensions that influence how employees cope with organizational change (Lee et al., 2020), play the role of means strengthening workplace culture (Nadkarni et al., 2021), are the key elements in managing employee morale, as well as fear and uncertainty (Spalluto et al., 2020), function as levers enhancing employee motivation, job engagement and knowledge-sharing behavior (Mani & Mishra, 2020; Lee et al., 2020), increase employee potential and performance

in various industries (Kim et al., 2021; Sizemore et al., 2021), and are also related to the perceived quality of employee-employer relationship (Lee & Li, 2020). Communication and organizational culture are symbiotic (Schein, 2000; White et al., 2010; Stein, 2006), depending on and influencing one another. According to Schein (2017), organizational culture consists of three interrelated layers: (1) basic underlying assumptions and beliefs (defining what to pay attention to, how to determine behavior, perception, thought, and feeling), (2) exposed beliefs and values (about appropriate attitudes and behaviors with subtle differentiations between beliefs and values which are congruent with the underlying assumptions, those that are part of the ideology or philosophy of the organization, and those that are rationalizations or only aspirations for the future), and (3) the artifacts (visible and feelable phenomena - e.g., architecture; language; technology and products; artistic creations; style, as embodied in clothing, manners of address, and emotional displays; myths and stories; published lists of values; observable rituals and ceremonies).

At the beginning of March of 2020, the COVID-19 outbreak imposed a sudden and non-negotiated relocation of the working space from the organizational architecture into a home space of a kitchen, a living room, a balcony, or a bedroom. Once this sudden change of location occurred, social rituals and ceremonies changed, such as coffee breaks or water-cooler conversations (Howard-Grenville, 2020), which were replaced by the domestic routines related to children or pets.

Also, the language changed (i.e. the body language became highly limited through screen mediation), as well as the office attire (i.e. the images of employees wearing pajamas and upper body suits during office hours), while the artistic creations had been left behind in the empty spaces of former offices etc. In fact, the artifacts layer of organizational culture vanished or changed dramatically over a short period. The leaders' communication faced the challenge of finding new artifacts, new vehicles for interactions or adjusted cultural tool kit (Howard-Grenville, 2020 ; Schein, 2017) that would perpetuate the shared beliefs and values as something people experience, in congruence with the basic underlying assumptions and beliefs, so that the culture could become an organizational antidote for COVID-19 crisis (Saran, 2021).

Empirical Investigation

The empirical investigation used a qualitative study based on semi-structured in-depth interviews to reveal participants' job-related experiences generated by the mandatory work-from-home (WFH) imposed by the COVID-19 crisis.

The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2021 from middle of March to the end of May via on-screen meetings held on Google Meet or Zoom platforms that lasted 25 to 30 minutes.

The participant's sample comprised 18 participants (aged between 28 and 51 years old, 11 males and 7 females, Romanian nationality) with more than 3 years of work experience at the actual job and holding full-time positions in knowledge-intensive business services (KIBS) operating in Romania. Participants were recruited from either professional services or information technology (IT) companies.

The interviews discussed the impact of the first year of massive adoption of remote work imposed by the COVID-19 crisis, focusing on remote workers' perceptions regarding their efficiency, creativity, and ability to cooperate with others and integrate their expertise within the working group to fulfill the daily tasks and deliver the projects. It also discussed the role of organizational values and transparent communication in supporting individuals and keeping the work teams united.

The applied interviews sought to provoke free expression and allow the examination of the participants' answers. Thematic analysis was used to identify and develop the main concepts into common themes.

The analysis of the interviews indicated that the ad-hoc transition from office to WFH was made without technical difficulties by the investigated companies because the online communication and remote working tools were already used since pre-pandemic period, so the changes were merely associated to the space of working and the adjustments of working processes ("the change I felt was related only to the environment" – FI, 51 years old, 3 children).

In this context, the interviewees mentioned that the mandatory WFH enabled them to manage both professional duties and family life during the pandemic, and this was very important because it allowed them to feel secure, to "stay safe, away from the danger of getting ill" (GA, 37 years old, 1 children) to take care of their jobs, children and homes in the same time, while saving time and money. "Home-to-office (and back) travels were no longer necessary, saving certain amounts of time and money. Also, the lunch break became a healthy meal, cooked at home during WFH, which is a far better option than the not so healthy and more expensive catering meals at the office" (EG, 35 years old, 2 children)".

However, the interviewees have reported that the advantages of WFH "have come with various challenges at the personal and professional level" (RF, 28 years old, no children), so they have described mandatory WFH as "full of predicted and unpredictably difficulties" (EP, 38 years old, 1 children).

The first mentioned difficulty discussed was that they "have to balance the work and personal life in the same space" (FI, 51 years old, 3 children); all study participants indicated the disadvantages related to the blurred boundaries between professional and personal life. In this regard, almost all participants have indicated increased stress and exhaustion associated with "the conversion of personal space into working space" (ZA, 38 years old, 1 child) because childcare, online schooling, and house kipping are all melted with job tasks.

Moreover, 66.33% of participants also discussed exhaustion and extra working hours due to the increase in organizations' expectations about employee's availability for daily job tasks "there is no delimitation between personal and professional life, there is no longer a limit of working time, the work schedule is continuous" - PP, 44 years, no children).

While one interviewee has reported a subtle rise in work efficiency, explaining that WFH "reduced a part of the work interruptions [...] occurring more frequently in the office" (LA, 29 years old, no children), most study participants have indicated that results were

kept during mandatory WFH at a very similar level to that reached before the pandemic. However, these results obtained during WFH consumed higher amounts of time spent on working. As PC (44 years old, 2 children) reported, remote workers “managed to overcome the limitations of WFH [...] but activity lasted longer than normal”, or “the projects are delivered as usual, rather the deadlines are no longer met (DD, 35, years old, 1 child). Moreover, if you need to grow your team, you face a situation that is very hard to handle. The integration of the new-comers and the assignment of new tasks is highly complicated because they cannot benefit from the presence of a mentor to guide them (PC, 44 years old, 2 children).

Although only 33.3% of participants reported a consistent drop in performance after one year of intensive WFH practice, all participants have indicated more or less severe issues related to communication and synchronization of teammates within their work teams and companies.

As CC (44 years old, 2 children) indicated “If you need someone's help with an unplanned 5 minutes task, you usually ask for help at coffee break or lunch. Now you need to set up a MS TEAMS appointment - and it's very hard to find availability on the calendar. And this is only one of the many types of timing problems when teams work only in the remote mode.”

Among the usual communication problems that were reported we noticed the mentions about the fact that the absence of on-site collaboration, the lack of face-to-face contact, and informal debates with teammates have induced “the monotony and the sensation of working alone” (GB, 45 years old, 2 children), blurring the creativity and the generation of fresh ideas within working teams. A kind of “never-ending solitary work feeling” (LC, 31 years old, no children) replaced the team spirit used to inspire WFH workers in normal times. As EG (35 years old, 2 children) declared “It was a short period at the beginning of the pandemic, when everyone was somehow ‘waiting’ and did not know what to expect. In the meantime, we got used to the situation and adapted well. Collaboration between colleagues remained good. Innovation has declined during this period, as face-to-face communication and coffee-break-inspired discussions are missing.”

The most serious communication problems have been described by interviewees reporting important gaps between declared values and the cultural reality of the organization, and/or the lack of communication transparency since pre-pandemic times: “In terms of communication and transparency, there were difficulties even before the pandemic. During WFH they got worse. Probably because of the size of the company and outdated mentalities. Although communication and transparency are declared priorities at the company level, it matters more if people (colleagues and managers) understand and apply these values. But everyone works from home now, so values are harder to nurture” (GE, 34 years old, 2 children). Similarly, critical communication issues have been reported in cases where the work team was less cohesive: “there are many moments when it seems like working alone on the project because it happens to ask something on the discussion channel but no one responds” (LL, 30 years old, no children).

Therefore, an important issue associated with remote work and related communication deficiencies was linked to organizational culture. One of the interviewees expressed:

“The exclusive use of technology-mediated communication at work has had a negative impact. Confusion multiplied in the absence of face-to-face interaction, making collaboration more impersonal. The organizational culture received a shock in the pandemic. Although sustained efforts are being made to return to the nominal, finding the right approach is complicated” (CD, 37, years old, 1 child).

Not surprisingly, some of the interviewees reported that team leaders or/and company management have started to address the aforementioned issues, so the frequency of communication has increased: “a higher number of meetings are needed in the team, from 3 meeting sessions monthly we increased to 3 sessions weekly” (MM, 45, no children). Also, they have started to communicate more openly, and pay more attention to the needs and interests of their subordinates: “Weekly video meetings are organized to keep the team spirit alive. We have informal discussions on topics other than the work itself - for example: personal life, movie and book recommendations, hobbies, fun things to do, discussions about children, pets, garden, cooking sessions, etc.” (IO, 32 years old, no children).

All study participants who reported that the results were maintained during mandatory WFH at a level similar to that achieved before the pandemic also provided examples of efforts made during this period to fill communication gaps and increase transparency.

Conclusions

In line with the results of other studies (PwC, 2021; Eurofound, 2020b; Eurofound, 2021), WFH has been positively associated with multitasking, schedule flexibility, and savings. The participants in our study pointed out that WFH allowed them to manage both professional and family tasks during the pandemic, to feel secure, to take care of jobs, children, and homes at the same time, while they enjoyed healthier homemade food and saved the time and money that would otherwise have been wasted on commuting and catering meals.

Still, the results of our study indicate that KIBS' employees perceive various difficulties associated with WFH, if it is the only option available, which makes them prefer a hybrid solution.

The most prominent issues mentioned by our study participants were related to the blurred boundaries between professional and personal life, extra working hours, the increase of organizations' expectations regarding employee's availability for daily job tasks, difficult integration of new-comers, problems with meeting the deadlines, increased difficulty of synchronization and coordination between teammates, and communication problems.

The analysis of the interviewees' statements indicated most problems revolve around technology-mediated communication. The lack of on-site collaboration and face-to-face contact with teammates damaged team spirit and organizational culture.

Therefore, organizational culture has been a critical issue associated with remote work and communication deficiencies. Our study indicates that some team leaders and managers have started to address this problem, making efforts to increase transparency, communicate more openly, and pay more attention to the needs and interests of the

employees. In this regard, we remind that all study participants who reported they were able to maintain the results at a level similar to that achieved before the pandemic, have also provided examples of managerial efforts made during this period to fill communication gaps and increase transparency. In a similar manner, the study of Sull & Sull (2020) has indicated the importance of leaders' honesty and transparency during the pandemic months. When employees think, speak, and act through screens, effective communication that integrates transparency is essential for maintaining trust, engagement, and social connectedness (Nadkarni et al., 2021). Honest and transparent communication is related to the community-building process (Stein, 2006), as well as to the habitual practices of the community. Communication and organizational culture are symbiotic (White et al., 2010; Stein, 2006), depending on and influencing one another.

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