ANALYSING THE LANDSCAPE OF TELEWORK IN THE ROMANIAN PUBLIC SECTOR

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Abstract. *The pandemic has changed the entire world, but it has also changed the world of work forever. Millions of people and activities worldwide had to change and adapt overnight to the new reality.*
The overall objective of the paper is to capture a comprehensive and genuine image of telework in the public sector in Romania and to evaluate the impact of telework activity at the level of central and local government.
Specific objectives relate to studying telework in the public sector in Romania and presenting the results of a questionnaire on telework in central and local government, thus identifying practical solutions for the effective development of telework activity in the public institutions and authorities, designing the strategies of implementation of telework for a public organization, identifying the main advantages and disadvantages of this phenomenon.
The research questions are: How does telework impact central and local government in Romania? Will telework become the new normal in the public sector?
The paper explores telework's state of the art at the international, European, and national levels, by presenting the realities and main trends.
The key findings of this paper highlight that telework in the public sector fosters sustainability, and a green and digital transition. It has main implications for public policy by considering work-life balance, enhancement of digital competencies, and work flexibility. Implementing and adopting telework within a public institution represents a profound change in the organizational framework, in view to preparing the structures and people involved in implementation, so that the process represents a success.
The research methodology comprises the qualitative method by using the research of scientific literature on flexible ways of working in the public sector and their impact, as well as the quantitative analysis based on a questionnaire applied to civil servants from central and local government.
The contribution brought by this research consists in presenting the realities and trends for telework in the public sector as well as the perception of public employees concerning the accomplishment of telework activities and the evaluation of the impact of telework activity in central and local government.

Keywords: *digitalization, public administration, teleworking, the world of work*

Introduction

The pandemic has changed the entire world, but it has also changed the world of work forever. Millions of people and activities around the world had to change and adapt overnight to the new reality, having to switch from office work to working from home, and the interactions that normally took place in person were replaced with interactions, mainly online. This change probably could have taken decades if it had been planned.

Such situations always require quick adaptation to change and finding the best solutions. As one of the main measures imposed around the world, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has been social distancing, all organizations had to find solutions and adapt to these requirements, taking into consideration the safety and health of employees. Therefore, a solution has been to make the working methods and time more flexible by introducing telework.

In the 1970s, telework represented a new topic for researchers and practitioners considering the wide spread of digital networks and computers. (Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016).

In the 1980s, telework was considered "the work arrangement of the future" (Illegems et al., 2001).

However, telework was used "mostly as an occasional work pattern" until the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2020).

Telework had to be accepted in Romania as well, even if shy, many specialists considering that a step forward is being taken on the path of modernization and digitalization. Due to the consequences caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, telework, where possible, has become a necessity.

The public sector in Romania was no exception to these requirements and had to quickly adapt to the new changes and trends regarding how to carry out activities, having no previous experience in the flexibility of work. However, the staff's health and the activities' continuity had to be ensured. The classic organization of work processes was quickly replaced with new methods, which "forced" the flexibility of the employees' activity, creating new dynamics and mobility in labor relations. Although already implemented in the public system in other European countries, telework represents a new concept for public administration in Romania, known to be a very rigid field, full of outdated concepts and reluctant to change.

The paper attempts to capture a comprehensive and genuine image of telework in the Romanian public sector and to evaluate the impact of the telework activity at the level of central and local government.

The research questions are: What is the impact of telework on central and local government in Romania? Will telework become the new normal in the public sector?

In this context, the paper explores the state of the art of telework at the international and European levels by presenting the realities and main trends.

The paper achieves the analysis of telework in the Romanian public sector, presenting the main realities and the results of a questionnaire on telework in central and local government, thus identifying practical solutions for the effective development of telework activity in the public institutions and authorities, designing the strategies of implementation of telework for a public organization, identifying the main advantages and disadvantages of this phenomenon.

State of the art of telework

Society, and implicitly the labor market are in a continuous and dynamic process of transformation and consolidation. This process implies a change at the level of each institution, a change in the working methods of employees while capitalizing on their potential. The labor market has experienced strong development in the last decade and continues to globalize. Teleworking, tele-activities, tele-socialization represent modern activities, characteristic of a knowledge-based society.

The concept of telework has been defined, as an activity that "includes all work-related substitutions of telecommunications and related information technologies" (Collins, 2005).

According to the International Labour Organization (2020), telework involves "workers who work in their own residence. Similar to remote work from home, the physical location where the work is carried out is the worker's own home, that is, an alternative location to the default place of work, but in addition, the worker uses personal electronic devices as part of carrying out the work".

Teleworking and other terms, such as "homeworking, telecommuting, remote working, virtual work, e-homeworking have been used inter-changeably" (Golden et al., 2017).

Also, the International Labour Organization (2020) states "the lack of statistical standards defining different concepts" and the fact that "countries are using slightly different and sometimes overlapping definitions, while different terms are being used inter-changeably".

According to Eurofound (2020), "almost 40% of those currently working in the EU started to telework in a full-time mode due to the pandemic".

The report of the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission and Eurofound (Sostero et al., 2020) has presented "the large differences in the prevalence of telework across EU Member States, sectors and occupations". "The preparedness for telework at a large scale is higher in ICT and knowledge-intensive sectors, and generally for high-skilled workers, although with big differences across the EU countries".

The same study estimated "25% of employment in teleworkable sectors in the EU. Considering that before the outbreak, just 15% of the employed in the EU had ever teleworked, large numbers of workers and employers alike are, in all probability, facing challenges in dealing with the sudden shift to telework. However, the extent of these difficulties is likely to vary considerably, depending among other factors on the level of prior experience with telework" (Sostero et al., 2020).

"The share of regular or frequent teleworkers was above 30% in a range of knowledge-intensive business services and in education and publishing activities. It was also high of 20% in telecommunications, finance, and insurance.

On the other hand, the share of teleworkers was low in the public sector" (Sostero et al. 2020).

The adoption of telework can be influenced by the presence of similar organizations that have done the same before within the same regional or national context. This means that imitation, competition, and learning from others can influence the adoption of telework (Nasi et al., 2015).

Teleworking is fostered by several factors such as dynamics of ICTs development, inter institutional-dynamics, legislative factors, political, social, economic, environmental factors, and demographic factors.

According to Taskin and Bridoux (2010), other factors related to "work-life balance, the trend of outsourcing activities, changes in employment types, less commuting time, pressures in the business environment, unpredictable changes resulting from global competition".

In the communication on the 2020 country-specific recommendations, the European Commission emphasizes the important role of telework.

"Digitalisation, e-commerce, E-government, e-health, developing new business models, home-work arrangements, and teleworking at a larger scale may increase productivity. However, the benefits may not be available to the unskilled or the untrained. Investment in digitalization of business and the public sector, the development of data digital services in the public and private sector can enable teleworking, virtual learning, and homeschooling" (European Commission, 2020).

In this context, there are essential challenges that "countries, institutions, companies, employers, and employees have to face in view to adapt to telework" (European Commission, 2020).

EUPAN survey (2022) states that in "several administrations, the use of remote working has led to changes in the regulatory framework. Before the pandemic, most EUPAN members already had regulations for remote working/teleworking: 20 out of 27 Member States had such regulations. Nevertheless, the massive use of this type of organization has often required a modification of the regulatory framework. In March 2021, 17 of the 27 EU Member States had already revised their legislation or were in the process of doing so".

In addition to regulations, many tools have been developed, especially in view to train employees in remote work and to support managers in order to adjust to this new "hybrid" organization of work.
At the same time, the measures have also aimed to contribute to the the well-being of employees, by preventing the risks of digital overload telework.
While these developments have significantly impacted the organization of work, they have not fundamentally changed the professions and careers of civil servants.

Within the competition between Europe, the United States, and East Asian countries, the telework program of the European Union constitutes an important component of public policies, the European Parliament considers telework as a major direction of research and action.

For the time being, telework is, on multiple levels, linked to economic, social, and political development. The progress of telework is supported by the development of the market and economic policies, and at the same time, it contributes to solving some economic and social problems. If until the pandemic, in the public sector, no kind of flexibility in the way and time off work was considered, the public sector had to quickly adapt to the new changes and come up with solutions for the introduction of new concepts such as telework in view to able to comply with the recommendations aimed to combat the COVID-19 pandemic.

In countries where telework has been in force, the COVID-19 pandemic has determined an intense debate on this topic, both at the level of theory and social dialogue, revealing the fact that telework will become an increasingly popular option.

The Great Reshuffle phenomenon has led many employees to resign and look for work elsewhere, while others have pressured employers to allow a hybrid work schedule.

Teleworking has a positive impact and boosts productivity and creativity, reducing costs. According to the studies accomplished in the US and Europe, "if telework is applied correctly, it could bring benefits such as: it provides safety and protection, an increased level of employee motivation, it reduces the institution's expenses, it develops autonomy and digital skills of employees, an increased level of concentration and increased productivity" (National Institute of Administration, 2020).

The remote work statistics (Wise, 2022) provide relevant facts and information concerning telework and working from home, as follows:

"5% of brands around the world offer opportunities for remote work.
18% of the workforce telecommuted full-time during COVID-19.
77% of people telecommuting consider that they are more productive.
16% of companies globally are fully remote.
30% of telecommuters save almost $5000 per year.
80% of remote workers say that remote work is less stressful.
74% of of companies plan to permanently transfer some of their workers to remote work.
23% of remote workers say that their employer covers the cost of a co-working space.
54% of IT professionals believe remote workers pose a bigger security risk than conventional workers. Remote workers depend on technology and the Internet to do their job, which means they are always at risk of being cyber-attacked. Therefore they should be provided training in cyber security.
70% of remote workers get training regularly from their company.
19% of people consider that they feel lonely as a result of working from home.
74% of remote workers believe that being able to work remotely made them less likely to leave a company.

64% of recruiters believe that offering remote work enabled them to find high-quality talent.

85% of managers think that having remote workers will be the new normal".

Statistics indicate that "remote work isn't just good for employers and employees, it is also really good for the planet. As people work from home, they don't have to drive their car every day, which means there are fewer cars on the road, and pollution levels can go down".

"69% of millennials consider sacrificing specific work benefits to have a more flexible workspace as professionals value flexibility and freedom. Over half of the millennials consider that they would be willing to give up other benefits, if this meant that they could work from home, and have a much more flexible work-life balance.

Remote work is more prevalent in cities with higher-income levels.

Currently, 15% of the health care industry works from home, 10% of the technology industry works from home and 9% of the financial services industry works from home". Thus, it reveals that no matter the activity, it is always worth searching for telework opportunities.

Analysis of telework in the public sector in Romania

Teleworking can benefit both employees and employers due to the integration of work and responsibilities, increased productivity, and increased employee commitment to work. But many employers remained skeptical of facilitating access to this type of employment, especially because of the uncertain benefits. Opinions differ on how much the institution's performance and productivity will increase. Some question whether the gains outweigh the losses due to difficulties in supervision and communication and the isolation of employees.

Teleworking is "the form of work organization in which the employee, on a regular and voluntary basis, performs the duties specific to the position, occupation he/she holds, in a place other than the workplace organized by the employer, at least one day a month, using information and communication technology" (Parliament of Romania, Law no. 81/2018).

Even though in Romania telework has been regulated since 2018, the public sector has been reluctant and resisted this type of activity. The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed and accelerated the development of telework for the public sector. In this context, telework has proven to be a very useful tool in ensuring the continuity of activities, the existence of a telework policy being an essential part of any operational continuity plan.

In 2020, the percentage of those who could work remotely in Romania was around 20% while in Europe the percentage reached 37% (European Commission, Joint Research Center, 2020).
A study carried out in 27 countries at the level of the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN) and published by the Federal Ministry for Public Service and Sport ("New ways of working in public administration") in 2018, shows that "work flexibility in Europe varies between 2% and 40%, depending on the country, sector, and occupation".

In Romania, according to the report of Eurofound and the European Commission (2020), the evolution of telework has been insignificant in recent years, with a percentage of 0.6% of employees who worked from home from time to time in 2019, a situation valid also for the private sector. But in 2020, due to the need to quickly adapt to the changes determined by the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage increased to 24% of employees who worked only remotely.

Employees can work more and more often outside the institutional framework, the work schedule becoming thus much more flexible, and the dynamics of labor relations are changing. At the same time, the element of novelty is also provided by the Governing Program 2021-2024 where, as part of the measures provided for employees in Romania, the digitalization of labor relations is approached, focusing on the use of electronic signatures in documents and the simplification of the mechanisms for the development of telework (including health and safety at work).

In recent years, new technologies have become widespread in all fields, whether economic, social, or legal. This series of transformations that occur in society, made the relationship and the form of service provision different from those we were used to, which means an adaptation to the new context or form of organization with an impact on various aspects of social life. Because it cannot be otherwise, the public administration is part of this transformation process and should implement a series of measures and actions in view to be able to adapt to the new reality.

Telework has represented one of the main lessons of pandemics, a difficult experiment, but which has also generated a series of benefits for employees and, above all, for the institutions which had to make efforts to comply with the new context.

Before COVID-19, some organizations were reluctant to work remotely, fearing a decrease in their productivity, and the impossibility of controlling the quality of the employees' activity. "Very fast switching from one working mode to another, made almost overnight, highlighted the differences between the organizations/institutions that had already digitized part of their activity and those that had not yet taken this step. Productivity, employee motivation, and administrative cost reduction represent three reasons teleworking is a viable and future model. It is a flexible way of organizing the activity, the employee fulfilling his/her job duties through IT technologies" (National Agency of Civil Servants, 2020).

In 2018, when the law on telework was adopted in Romania, only 3 employees had telework contracts and all worked in the private sector. At the end of 2019, there was an increase in the number of those who worked remotely, reaching 13,744 people in the private sector and 91 employees in the public sector. In February 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 15,000 employees were on telework in the private sector, and in March their number increased to over 53,000. The increase was even higher in the public sector, from only 171 employees to 5,679 employees. At the end of 2020, the number of employees working remotely increased to over 300,000 in the private sector and over 31,000 in the public sector (Economedia, 2019).

The research methodology focused on the mixed research method, more precisely, the qualitative method, involving the analysis of specialized publications, reports, and

statistical yearbooks, and the quantitative method by designing and applying a questionnaire.

The questionnaire aims to explore the perception of managing and executive civil servants regarding the accomplishment of telework activity, and to identify measures to improve the telework activity in central and local government.

We consider the quantitative approach through the questionnaire to be appropriate in this research as through the statistical data obtained we could establish numerical results that allow us to compare the answers statistically.

The questionnaire was applied to management and executive civil servants at the central level (General Secretariat of Government and 7 ministries) and at the local level (8 city halls). The questionnaire ensured the anonymity of the respondents. The condition imposed on the respondents to complete the questionnaire was to work for two years minimum in the institution to ensure that they know the working mechanisms and tools of the organization during the pandemic.

As limitations in research from a methodological perspective, we mention the impossibility of applying face-to-face questionnaires due to restrictions in public institutions, which has led to incomplete responses to questionnaires and implicitly to the invalidation of some questionnaires. Also, applying online without an operator could sometimes lead to a different understanding of the questions. Another limitation was the lack of response to the questionnaire from the authorities. The questionnaire was sent to several public institutions, and many did not respond.

Data collection was achieved online during March - April 2022, by email.

The questionnaire comprised 35 closed and open questions. Also, some questions had multiple answers. There were 146 valid questionnaires.

Regarding the public institution and its size, most respondents (74.6%) work within the central government, and only a percentage of 25.4% work in local governments.

The largest percentage is represented by employees in large institutions with over 250 employees (50.8%), followed by those working in institutions with between 150 and 250 employees (17.5%). Regarding the structure in which they carry out their activity, the highest representativeness is in specialized structures (54%), those who operate in support structures such as procurement, legal, economic, and administrative departments, representing a percentage of 46%.

The executive positions were represented by 58.7% and the management positions were represented by 41.3%. Regarding the age group, most respondents belong to the 36-45 age group (47.6%), followed by those from the 45-55 age group (38.1%). A high proportion was of female respondents (54%), the male respondents having a representativeness of 46%. Regarding experience within the institution, there was an experienced workforce, with most respondents having experience between 5 and 10 years (38.1%), followed by those with more than 10 years of experience (36.5%). Most respondents (39.7%) have incomes between 5001 and 6500 lei, 36.5% have incomes between 6500 and 8500 lei, 22.2% earn below 5000 lei, and those with earnings over

10,000 lei correspond to 1.6%. We should not be surprised that public employees did not carry out their activities remotely at all, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, representing an overwhelming percentage of 98.4%. The respondents worked for the first time in this way during pandemics, but the majority only occasionally (28.6%) or in a hybrid mode (23.8%).

Concerning the legal regulations related to telework activities, 52.4% of the respondents know these provisions, but the segment that does not know these regulations is equally representative (47.6%). Regarding the differences between the two types of flexible work in Romania (work from home and telework), a fairly large percentage of study participants (55.6%) declared that they did not know those differences, with 44.4% of them knowing them. Therefore, 87.3% of respondents believe it is necessary to be informed about the legislative aspects. At the same time, the need for a procedure to regulate teleworking activity at the level of each institution was identified, with 82.5% of respondents considering it necessary, even if there are legislative regulations. Regarding the degree of availability of public employees in order to carry out their professional activities in a telework regime, 52.5% of the respondents are very willing to carry out their activity in this form.. Consequently, the public sector should consider the activities that allow telework applications to be carried out in this form.

Regarding the period considered being the most beneficial for carrying out telework activities, this was indicated by a percentage of 36.5% of respondents as being between one week and 4 weeks, 31.7% considering the period as beneficial between a week and 2 weeks, and 23.8% choosing the interval of more than a month. Regarding the alternation of teleworking activities with periods of physical presence at the institution's headquarters, 84.1% of respondents consider this alternation beneficial and necessary. 49.2% of the participants in the study did not work overtime, and 11.1% declared that it was necessary to work overtime, but to a very small extent. To a large extent, those who worked extra hours in carrying out their telework activity represent a percentage of 7.9%. Although the percentage of employees with digital skills necessary to carry out telework activities is very high (84.1%), the study shows that 68.3% of respondents believe that the institutions where they work cannot provide the minimum equipment for carrying out activities in this form.

Regarding the most suitable communication channels in the case of telework activities, 76.2% of respondents consider platforms dedicated to online meetings (zoom, Webex, Google meet, etc.) to be the most suitable channel of communication, 66.7% e-mail, 42.9% phone calls, 41.3% the institution's internal network and 39.7% instant messaging applications (WhatsApp, messenger, etc.). Regarding the monitoring of the activities of those who work remotely, 60.3% of the study participants do not consider monitoring necessary, the emphasis is on the delivery of results and not on additional reports that would only make the activity more difficult.

However, with a percentage of 15.9%, the most effective monitoring method was weekly or monthly reporting. Performance indicators for this type of activity are considered necessary to be established by 39.7% of respondents, 30.2% considering that they are not necessary. At the same time, planning the activities was identified as necessary by a percentage of 82.5% of respondents, a very small percentage (6.3%) considering that planning is not necessary. Concerning the efficiency of carrying out professional activities remotely, 38.1% of the respondents consider that they are more efficient than

when physically present at the workplace, and 27% consider that it depends a lot on the situation. A percentage of 22.2% believe that they are equally effective in both cases. Regarding the costs of the equipment necessary to carry out this type of work, the majority of respondents (98.4%) declared that they did not receive from the institution amounts intended for the purchase of goods, only a percentage of 1.6% receiving amounts for the purchase of a computer/laptop. 87.3% of respondents consider that they have a favorable environment at home so that they can perform their tasks in optimal conditions. Even if the lack of communication with colleagues is considered to be one of the major disadvantages of telework, when asked about the duration of telework activities and the impact it can have on communication with colleagues, a percentage of 34.9% believe that it has been affected to a small extent, 30.2% moderately, 22.2% to a large extent, 12.7% not at all.

With regard to the income obtained as a result of carrying out professional activities in a telework regime, 36.5% of the respondents believe that their income was affected to a small extent, 15.9% to a large extent, 9.5% not at all, and 38.1% of them do not know how their income was affected, a rather large percentage due to ignorance of the legal provisions in force and their application differently from institution to institution. Regarding the effects of telework activities on the institution, 66.7% of the respondents declared that they did not know how the institution was affected due to the introduction of telework, thus indicating the lack of studies on this aspect and the lessons that could be learned. Only 25.4% believe that the institution in which they work has been positively affected by the implementation of telework. Do you think telework can be effectively applied in public administration? The answers to this question were mostly positive, with the study participants considering that telework can be applied successfully in the public sector, of course respecting certain rules and under certain conditions. The respondents believe that there is a need for more accurate identification of the activities in the public sector triggering telework and for designing and implementing pilot programs in public institutions that measure the efficiency of this type of work. The need to change outdated mentalities regarding the classical accomplishment of professional activities and embrace new working methods is also important.

According to the respondents, the main advantages of telework activities in the public sector have been identified as follows:
- Saving commuting time to and from the workplace;
- Reduction of costs in terms of fuel expenses;
- Reduction of pollution and crowding of public transport during peak hours;
- Traffic reduction;
- Savings and significant improvement in nutrition and health, due to the consumption of home-cooked food;
- More flexibility regarding the schedule;
- Reducing stress;
- Lack of stress caused by certain hierarchical superiors;
- Elimination of acoustic and visual stress from the workplace;
- Optimal balance between professional and personal life;
- Greater productivity in carrying out activities due to the limitation of interruptions caused by colleagues/phones without purpose, which can translate into an increased performance of the institution;

- Improving family ties due to physical presence at home and in other social spaces;
- Efficiency of the activity by carrying it out in personal comfort;
- Health protection;
- A more comfortable working environment;
- The opportunity to acquire new skills;
- Better organization of work tasks;
- Faster solving the work tasks;
- The opportunity to digitalize the institution;
- Flexibility, independence, increased responsibility;
- Reduction of the employer's costs in terms of space;
- Control and permanent follow-up of the progress of the scheduled activities by means of technological tools;
- Improving the recruitment process due to the fact that highly qualified personnel can be hired;
- Using the employees' own equipment, thus reducing the institution's costs;
- Total control over the "virtual office" and the flow of information;
- Inclusion in the active labor market of the vulnerable population (persons with disabilities, geographical isolation, etc.)
- Improving the quality of life.

The main disadvantages of telework activities in the public sector have been identified by respondents as follows:
- Lack of socialization;
- Lack of teamwork;
- Lack of suitable digital infrastructure;
- Increasing the level of sedentarism, which can cause serious physical problems;
- Increasing the level of "disconnection" and working more than normal;
- Defocusing, in the domestic environment, from the problems of the institution;
- Installation of a psychological comfort unfavorable to the professional act;
- Lack of data protection;
- Difficult flow of documents, lack of programs dedicated to this type of work;
- Lack of direct interaction with peers, lack of interaction with collaborators, less access to the information channels;
- Difficult flow of documents;
- The need to purchase the electronic signature from own funds;
- Gaps and bottlenecks in communication;
- Increasing the feeling of isolation from the institution and colleagues;
- Employee productivity control is much more complex;
- Reduction of interpersonal relationships;
- Increasing social differences due to the existence of a gap in access to ICT.

Even if there is a regulatory framework on telework, as mentioned by respondents, there is a need to develop work procedures that establish the workflow at the level of each public institution. Work procedures for institutions with certain specificity can be considered, as well as standardized procedures that can be applied uniformly at the level of the entire public administration. Work procedures should facilitate the digitalization process of labor relations. The legislation in the field must be revised and adapted to the new context, emphasizing the distinction between the two forms of remote work existing in Romania (telework and work from home) which are often confused and not

applied correctly. Data security represents another crucial aspect. Working with state documents is sensitive, and their transmission through insecure channels represents a real danger. In order to be able to benefit from total security in the drafting and transmission of documents, a secure, encrypted network must be created through which data can be transmitted safely even from home. Considering the fact that the development process of digital tools is very fast, special attention should be paid to training civil servants in terms of the use of new communication technologies, through courses dedicated to employees with management and executive positions.

Studying the good practices of other countries and taking into account the results of the questionnaire, we have identified five stages of the implementation and adoption of the telework process at the level of a public institution:

1. The commitment of the public institution regarding the implementation of the process, a commitment that clarifies the objectives and the will of the management team regarding the implementation of the telework process and the communication of this decision to all stakeholders: the implementation of the telework process at the level of an institution represents a strong transformation of the organizational culture, starting from the work modality to the evaluation modality. Without the management team's commitment and involvement in the change process, telework will not achieve the objectives and generate the expected benefits.
2. Planning the implementation of the telework process, through defining and establishing objectives, the stages and ways to achieve the objectives, the resources necessary, the action plan, establishing key performance indicators, and identifying the risks regarding implementation.
3. Analysis of the institution: To identify the opportunity to implement the telework process at the level of a public institution as well as the best methodology, the institution will have to make an analysis of the current situation. The purpose of the analysis is to identify whether the institution has the capacity to adapt to new organizational changes. This can be done by considering the legal, technological, and organizational aspects.
4. Conducting a pilot program in light to measure the degree of adaptability and acceptance by the public institution and employees in view to introducing telework. Such a pilot program should be conducted between 4 and 6 months in order to be able to provide conclusive information on the results, on the identification of possible ways of improvement, on costs, risks, and the application of the program in general.
5. Adopting the telework process, work policies, and procedures, as a continuous way of carrying out activities.

Perhaps, in Romania, it would help to develop and implement a National Strategy for the regulation of remote work, a strategy that would focus on four fundamental aspects:

1. Creating the necessary prerequisites for a favorable environment for the implementation of remote work - as remote work represents a new way of life, new and diverse measures are needed to support its development. Changes to how people work and where they work will impact several different aspects such as the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees, legislation

on health and safety at work etc. All activities carried out are likely to support both the employer and the employee;

2. The development and capitalization of telework by creating the necessary infrastructure for carrying out professional activities;
3. Maximizing the benefits of remote work and disseminating good practices to achieve the strategy's objectives;
4. Evaluation of the impact of the introduction of telework activity at the central and local government level.

Summarising, in view to being able to adapt to a constantly changing environment and to be able to adopt the new "normal", the public sector should consider aspects such as:

- Elaboration of a public policy regarding telework activity at the public sector level, a public policy that takes into account the lessons learned in this field during the pandemics and what can be improved;
- Development and implementation of pilot programs;
- Investment in the purchase of new digital technologies and equipment in order to facilitate the implementation of the process of carrying out telework activities;
- Evaluation of the specificities of the activities carried out by public institutions in order to be able to determine exactly which of them can be carried out in a telework regime or in a hybrid regime;
- Permanent training of employees regarding the use of new digital technologies;
- Training of staff with executive functions on change management.

Conclusions

Work flexibility represents a genuine reality in the public sector.
Although in Romania, there was no previous experience in the flexibility of work, the public sector had to face the changes with speed and to adapt quickly, understanding that in such moments the continuation of the activity is the main goal.

In order to make the way and time of work more flexible in the public sector (telework, individualized work schedule, unequal schedule, etc.) the following are necessary: amendments to the Administrative Code, the Labour Code, and other regulations, an adequate IT infrastructure, the promotion of results-oriented management, information/training regarding digitalization and management change in public institutions, as well as the development of digital skills for public employees.

In the future, telework is important for work productivity, efficiency by capitalizing on digital technology, and a flexible option to balance professional life with personal life.
The big challenges are information security and communication. The first depends on technological solutions to reduce the risk of cyber-attacks on less protected home networks. The second relates to the need for employee networking and the fact that no social platform can replace direct relationships between people, no matter how sophisticated. The key to solving lies with the management team, which, even in the case of remote work, must preserve the organization's values and find a solution to keep all team members together.

The Romanians place more and more emphasis on the balance between personal life and work and on the possibility of working flexibly. Among the benefits they seek in a

job, we have found a more pleasant working environment, the possibility to work remotely, more free time, and commitment to the organization's values.

The transition to telework activities has fostered technological and logistical challenges, with many institutions using the technology they already had, and others having to supplement capacity and acquire new equipment and services. It has changed the entire organizational culture, it has raised multiple questions in areas such as human resources and increased cyber security threats. But it has also led to increased productivity and efficiency and it has accelerated the process of digitalization and modernization. Public employees can function just as well, if not better, working remotely. This meant governments' new ideas in terms of labor recruitment. While face-to-face interactions are important, expanding recruitment efforts could help governments attract and retain talent. The COVID-19 pandemic has questioned the traditional notion that public employees must always be in an office.

Implementing and adopting telework within a public institution represents a profound change in the organizational framework, in view to preparing the structures and people involved in implementation, so that the process represents a success.

Summarising, telework in the public sector fosters sustainability, and a green and digital transition, and it has main implications for public policy by considering work-life balance, enhancement of digital competencies, and work flexibility.

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