

APPROACHING TELEWORK SYSTEM BY ROMANIAN EMPLOYEES IN THE PANDEMIC CRISIS

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Abstract

Suddenly and unexpectedly, many workers had to change their work location to home during the COVID-19 pandemic that emerged at the end of 2019. Swiftly, the line between work and personal life got blurred and the home became a working and an educational place. These changes had a thumping impact on the employees' way of living and working. The new way of working from home challenged Romanian employees' capacity to sustain their job satisfaction, the efficiency of work, and work-life balance. The study presents and analyses official results of two surveys by the "European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions" regarding Romanian employees' attitudes and perceptions about working conditions, performance and job satisfaction, subsequently experiencing telework activities during the pandemic crisis. The research findings reveal that even if the working hours increased a lot in the remote system, the respondents displayed their overall satisfaction and willingness to continue working from home.

Key words: *employees' perception, job satisfaction, telework, work efficiency, work-life balance.*

JEL Classification: *M100, M540, M150*

I. INTRODUCTION

The current pandemic crisis generated a tremendous impact on the way people live and work. The development of information and communications technology (ICT) ensures new ways of organizing work activities during this period and facilitates many economic and social sectors to continue their activities in a new pattern. Many persons were witnesses of a paradigm-shifting in working conditions, from a factory-based working context to a more flexible model, in a remote manner. According to the definition, Telework and ICT based mobile work (TICTM) represents any type of work arrangement where employees work remotely away from an employer's location, using digital technologies (Eurofound, 2020a). The telework pattern emerged in time, especially in the IT sector, and the percentage of employees undertaking their work activity in this system in Romania was just around 10% in 2015 (EWCS6, 2015). Prior to the pandemic, remote working was a rarely used practice. Most employees had little experience in telework, nor their employers were prepared for remote activity (Wang, Liu et al, 2021). The new environmental context changed the situation dramatically. Even if this model was not totally new in the organizations' life, TICTM became prevalent in many new sectors giving employers and employees the capacity to adapt the location of work to current needs (Eurofound, 2021). In other words, it can be concluded that a disruptive type of organizational innovation occurred in many companies and institutions. This arrangement came in many cases with advantages for the employees, like greater autonomy, higher productivity or reducing commuting time, but on the other hand, led to longer working hours, overlapping of work and home life and intensifying work activities. Many employees and employers were forced to deal with these new working patterns, without appropriate training and a set of competencies. Thus, facing unprecedented working structures, the employees and managers developed their strategies to cope with new conditions and engaged an additional effort to adjust to them. In this context, this study analyses the perceptions of Romanian employees regarding remote activities during the pandemic crisis. The focus of the research is on the following aspects: how employees perceived the working effort and performance results in a remote system, the impact upon their quality of work and life, and overall preferences for maintaining this pattern in the future.

II. LITERATURE INSIGHTS

Especially due to ICT development, telework has attracted the attention of researchers. The intensity and implications of TICTM across several countries were investigated before the pandemic of 2020. The work from home, also known as telework and based on ICT, was predicted already in 1970 and 1980 and was promoted by some companies in California, like Yahoo. Over the years, technological development transformed telework from a home-based location to location-independency (Messenger and Gschwind, 2016). In time, this led to an increased number of teleworkers; as practicing teleworking, they experienced several advantages. They reduced the commuting time, could organise working hours, were able to gain flexibility, better manage work-life balance and personal development (Tremblay and Thomsin, 2012). Some studies reveal a substantial number of teleworkers expressed their enjoyment of working time autonomy which positively affected work-life balance and productivity. The flexibility of work in TICTM influenced the number of hours worked. Even the results showed a slightly increase in the number of weekly working hours for teleworkers compared to non-teleworkers, and the main part of supplemental working hours appears to be unpaid; altogether, the teleworkers majority indicate a preference for working from home (Eorufound and ILO, 2017; Sostero, Milasi et al, 2020).

Once the COVID-19 pandemic plunged in, investigations of the pandemic impact on employees and employers started early in 2020 and are continuing. The studies cover the economy on a global scale and on specific items like jobs lost, work conditions, the possibility to work from home, work-life balance, or health risks. The spreading of the pandemic increases labour market inequalities and vulnerabilities (Cetrulo, Guarasio et al, 2020). There are expectations of flexibility and security, quality and performance, autonomy and recognition, work and private life balance. One of the issues is the blurring between work and personal life. Some countries have proposed regulations addressing workers' rights to disconnect from work (EU-ILO, 2020). Working from home seems to lead to intensification of labor due to co-workers' lack of immediate availability to use their know-how (van der Lippe and Lippenyi, 2019).

The work-life balance was crumbled due to having to take care of daily responsibilities or health issues that sometimes had to be dealt with at the same time with work tasks. Persons having children were much challenged by this new situation as they had to supervise their children during home-schooling or for lack of childcare services (Eurofound, 2020b). In recent years, the number of women employed in Europe has increased and the number of those who have started working from home is higher than among men. The results show that women have managed better their work-life balance while working from home due to flexibility (Eurofound, 2021). Working time flexibility helps to reconcile work and private life, as the possibility to take an hour or two off reduces the conflict between work and life. The number of working hours per week influences the way employees perceived work-life balance. The benefits of a successful balance between work and private life have positive effects on workers, employers, and society (Eurofound, 2018). TICTM had a positive effect due to the reduction in commuting time and increased work autonomy (Eorufound and ILO, 2017).

Following the recovery of the labor market in Romania after the global financial crisis from 2007-2008 with effects until 2013, unemployment was in a continuous decrease until the appearance of the COVID-19 pandemic when it increased from 3.9% at the end of 2019 to 5.2% at the end of 2020 (INSSE, 2021). The consequences of the pandemic on labor market in Romania are very little analyzed. The study of Rădulescu, Ladaru et al. (2021) reveals the influence of the pandemic on: the visible changes in the labor market, the preference of working combining office with home, the better results, but also the influence on mentality level. Grigorescu and Mocanu (2020) study exposes the influence of the COVID-19 crisis in speeding up the technologization and digitalization in many industrial sectors, forcing changes of working methods and also in workers' behavior and expectations.

Teleworking advantages include an increase in job performance, job satisfaction, a positive effect on work-life balance, access to information, open communication, highly interacting with information and communication technologies (ICTs), creating self-work rhythm, and reducing stress. Whereas teleworking risks considered are social isolation, work-family conflict, insufficient technological skills, low trust, privacy intrusion. Nevertheless, remote working could remain a norm even after the pandemic, as ICTs allow work from almost everywhere (Antonacopoulou and Georgiadou, 2020; Contreras, Baykal et al, 2020; Waizenegger, McKenna et al, 2020). Effective remote work is challenged by work-life balance, communication, procrastination, loneliness, social support, job autonomy, monitoring, workload, self-discipline. The mitigation of all these issues requires a substantial reorganizational efforts and specific policies to provide equal opportunities (Cetrulo, Guarasio et al, 2020, Wang, Liu et al, 2021).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For performing this analysis were used mixed methods and a comparative design. The study focused on the attitudes and perceptions about working conditions, performance and job satisfaction of Romanian employees subsequently experiencing telework activities during the pandemic crisis. In this regard, a data analysis was conducted using the database of two surveys implemented at the European level. The most recent and relevant data related to the 2020 pandemic is “Living, Working and COVID-19 E-survey” (LW-COVID-19) launched by the “European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions” (Eurofound). This survey represents the main instrument in assembling database for this investigation. It provides research of the pandemic’s implications on the way people live and work. The survey had two rounds in April and July 2020. The data was collected online through snowballing and advertisements on social media. The two rounds of the survey were applied in almost all member states of the European Union (EU) and reached 87,477 respondents (Eurofound, 2020b). The sample size of Romanian respondents was 5,021 in round one (out of 63,354 in total) and 1,318 in round two (out of 24,123 in total), the total panel for both rounds being 817 in Romania (out of 11,575 in total) (Sandor, Ahrendt et al, 2020).

The second instrument used for this research is a survey applied in Europe with data before the pandemic caused by COVID-19. This is the “6th European Working Conditions Survey” (EWCS6) from 2015 when 1.063 Romanian respondents participated, the total respondents being 43,850 from 35 countries (EWCS6, 2015). Database collected through it was used to reconcile the results of this new pandemic situation with evidence from the previous normal way of being.

The results are presented and analyzed based on the following dimensions:

- working conditions respectively changes in the working effort perceived throughout the number of working hours and implications upon the work-life balance,
- job satisfaction indicated in relation to the perception of the nature of work, responding to the question if teleworking system improved the inner motivation,
- preferences associated with telework activities.

The comparative design of the research implies the analysis of the employees’ perception after their experience in teleworking in 2020, LW-COVID-19 survey, related to relevant data before the pandemic, identified in EWCS6 survey.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Confirming the previous study EWCS6, the LW-COVID-19 survey’s results revealed that teleworking pattern in Romania was not a common practice before the outbreak, as only 15% of the respondents used it on weekly basis (Fig. 1) (Eurofound, 2020b). More than 70% of them never worked remotely, highlighting that the shift in working behavior that occurred was strong and with high intensity.

Since the TICTM primarily allows both employees and employers to adapt work time and place to their needs, inferring productivity improvements, the first dimension analyzed was the perception regarding change of working hours in the remote system. Figure 2 shows these perceptions on five levels: decreased a lot, a little, stayed the same, increased a little, a lot. Starting from these data was applied a weighting average score to evaluate the overall perception. In this regard was used the Likert scale: from -2 for label “*decreased a lot*” to 2 for label “*increased a lot*”. The case of Romanian employees resulted in a weighted average of (- 0.24) which corresponds to the perception that the working hours decreased in the remote context. Compared to the same average computed for the EU employees which is (-0.23), Romanian employees tend to perceive this reduction to a greater extent. This can be explained because using ICT technologies in teleworking produced a labor productivity improvement in some industrial sectors.

In the analysis was added an additional question to a broader perspective regarding the changes perceived in working time: ‘*Last month, how many hours per week did you work on average?*’ Based on responses resulted in an average of 51.2 hours weekly for the Romanian employees, 20% more in comparison with the European average of 41.6 hours weekly. The gap remains the same also in the case of female employees, even if the female average working hours are slightly lower in comparison with the male ones – 50 hours for Romanian men and 39.8 for EU men.

Corroborating with previous results, this aspect also highlights that in the remote system it is difficult for employees to organize their work efficiently, or it is likely that the new environmental context generates a higher volume of activities and tasks.

For a better understanding of the situation, were compared the results with the findings of EWCS6 in 2015. The EWCS6 results indicate that the average usual weekly working hours for Romanian employees was

40.8 hours per week, positioning Romania on second place in Europe (only Croatian employees worked more, namely 41.5 hours per week). In terms of gender, Romanian male employees worked 42.3 hours weekly (being overtaken only by Croatian males with 43 hours weekly) and female employees worked 39.2 hours weekly (while Bulgarian females worked 40.1 hours weekly and Croatian females worked 39.9 hours weekly) (Eurofound, 2017). In general, there is this gap in EU countries, women spend more hours in unpaid work while men spend more hours in paid work (Eurofound, 2018).

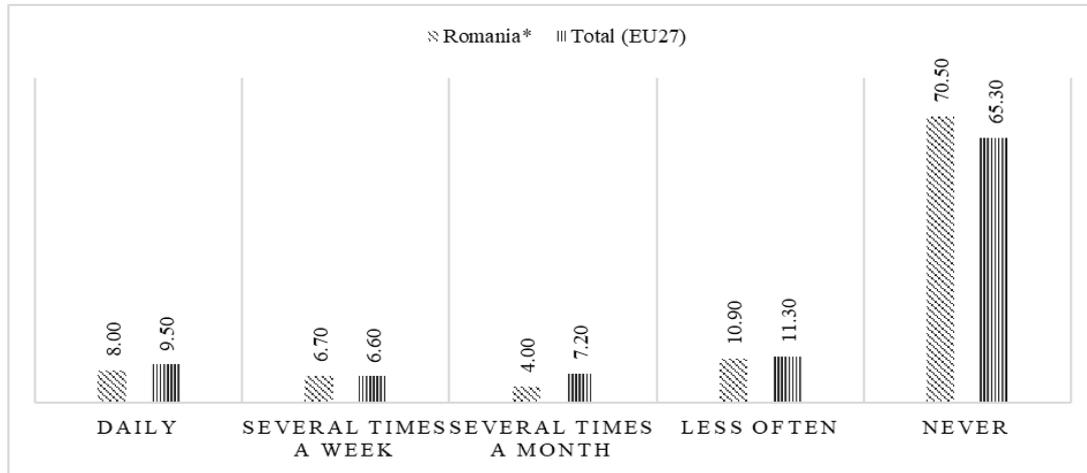


Figure 1 - Frequency of teleworking before the outbreak (%)

Source: Authors' calculations based on LW-COVID-19

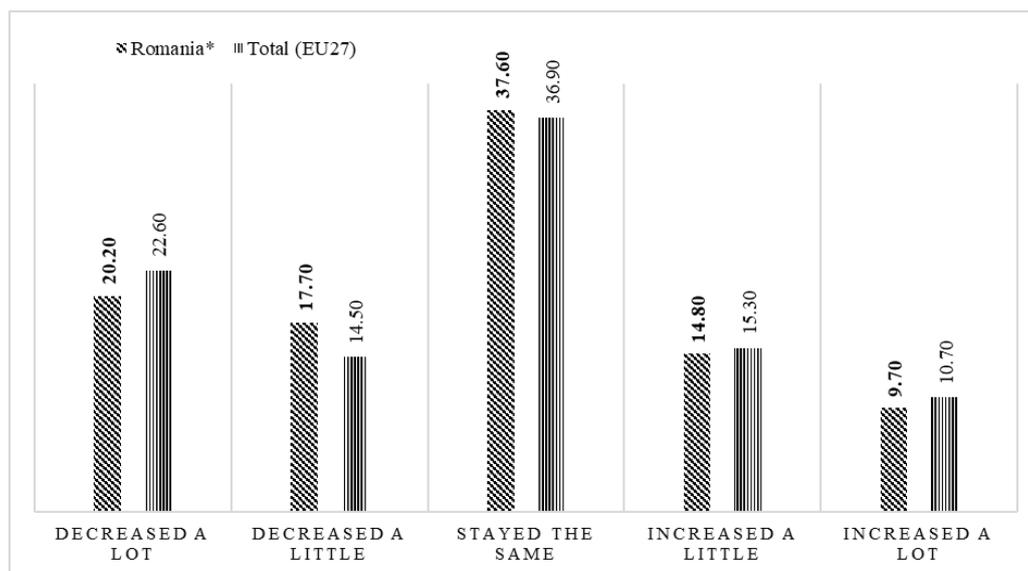


Figure 2 - Perceptions about working hours in the remote system (%)

Source: Authors' calculations based on LW-COVID-19

Regarding the work-life balance, the data evidences the employees' inability to disconnect from work and their tendency to worry too much about work. Of all Romanian employees, just 18.7% manage to separate totally work from personal life, while the average percent in this regard in the EU is at 22.7%. The data shows an eroded work-life balance with a higher effect on Romanian workers, but also raising this issue at the European level (Table 1). The work-life balance is influenced by some other factors, such as social status, household responsibilities, gender, etc., but these factors call for a broader approach. As a result, just the question referring to personal attitude of employees towards work was considered, and this relates to the intensity of worrying about work when not working.

Ultimately, during the remote system, the number of working hours increased a lot and Romanian employees remained at the top of EU countries at this index. The work-life balance is most likely influenced by the number of working hours and this can further negatively affect home life. An equilibrated work-life balance increases mental well-being, sustain a better engagement in the job, results in satisfaction with work and life, and

leads to living a happy and healthy life (Eurofound, 2018). However, when asked how often they worked in their free time, Romanian respondents specify in a high proportion never or very seldom (Table 2). Their result is higher in comparison with the averages of EU counter partners, indicating that Romanian employees, when involved in teleworking, are not trained to create a clear demarcation between work and lifetime.

Job satisfaction, which represents a significant response to various sides of job circumstances, can influence the employees' behaviors and implicitly their productivity. The EWCS6 report indicated an increase in job satisfaction for Romanian employees from below the European average level in 2010 to a little above it in 2015. The same report mentioned that in terms of remuneration, Romanian employees were satisfied with their wage situated just above the average (EWCS6, 2015). Even if the Romanian employees felt satisfied with their job and wage, the work they perform has a low level of meaningfulness for them. The Romanian workers satisfied with their job and who do not feel they are performing meaningful work are in second place in Europe after Estonian workers. The Romanians did not feel they were doing useful work. The Romanian employees who perceived they perform meaningful work situated at the 5th level above the lowest one in Europe. Furthermore, in Romania employees feel under high time pressure, occupying second place in Europe, above being Cyprus workers (Hammerman and Stettes, 2017).

Table 1. Worrying about work

'How often in the last 2 weeks, have you kept worrying about work when you were not working?'	Always	Most of the time	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Romania (%)	7.6	16.3	38	19.4	18.7
Total (EU27) (%)	7	20	30.5	19.7	22.7

Source: LW-COVID-19

Table 2. Frequency of working in free time

'Over the last 2 weeks, how often have you worked in your free time to meet work demands?'	Every day	Every other day	Every other day	Less often	Never
Romania (%)	8.50	5.80	11.50	19.00	55.20
Total (EU27) (%)	8.30	7.10	17.50	20.70	46.30

Source: LW-COVID-19

Knowing these premises, an important dimension regarding the employees' perception after experiencing teleworking during the pandemic crisis, was to evaluate their level of satisfaction. There are many theories and approaches which attempt to explain job satisfaction. Some of them are oriented on the content, others on the process. For measuring it, were selected three items connected with the work itself, which include stimulating tasks, opportunities for personal growth and a chance to perform outstanding results. The statements used in this respect were: "I am satisfied with the amount of work I managed to do", "I am satisfied with the quality of my work" and "You have the feeling you are doing useful work" (Sandor and Ahrendt, 2020).

The selection of these three items was based on study of literature in the field. It is well known the higher impact of intrinsic motivation in job satisfaction compared with extrinsic incentives. Kenneth W. Thomas explains in his book the four senses of intrinsic motivation at work that massively highlights employees' engagement. The sense of meaningfulness is the perception of pursuing purposeful work, the time and energy being worthy effort. The sense of choice is the own capacity to make decisions and acting in acquaintance with the work requirements. The sense of competence is the sense of work well performed and of high quality. The sense of progress is the recognition of achieving work expectations (Thomas, 2009).

Correspondingly, Sharma and Bhaskar (1991), Robbins, Odendaal et al (2003) and Griffin and Moorhead (2009) stated that the most significant influence over job satisfaction has the nature of the work. Employees achieve higher job satisfaction if the job required a variety of tasks, challenged them to achieve them and provide a scope for engaging individual skills and competencies. In conclusion, employees feel their job satisfaction directly correlated with achievement, quality, and meaningfulness of work.

Using the five Likert scale (1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree) was measured the employees level of satisfaction based on the selected items. Figure 3 shows the differences for each dimension, between mean obtain for Romanian employees in comparison with the one at the European level. Founded on teleworking experience, the attitude of Romanian respondents is quite similar to that resulted at the European level. The highest mean corresponds to a better perception of the relevance of the work followed by the quality of their tasks accomplished. Regarding the amount of work that was able to manage in these conditions seems that is a general perception. Both Romanian and EU employees are not satisfied with the volume of tasks they could accomplish in the telework system. One aspect that interferes in this regard is that coping with ICT technologies reduced their efficiency. Overall, job satisfaction is positive during a remote system.

To strengthen the idea that the link between TICTM and tasks accomplishment is supported just with additional working hours it is essential to mention the following results. For the statement: “During the COVID-19 pandemic, the amount of work you managed...”, more Romanian employees in comparison with European considered that the workload remained the same - percentages in Table 3. Also, an important percentage of Romanian employees indicated that it decreased a lot. Starting from these circumstances the average weighted values have been computed, using again the scale from -2 established for “decreased a lot” to value 2 for “increased a lot”. The results suggest that overall, both categories of employees perceived in a similar way that TICTM led to a deterioration of work efficiency. Even if previous studies (Lasfargue and Fauconnier, 2015) indicated the positive effect of telework on individual performance, the causal link is still not clear. This is because the work performance depends significantly on how the work is organized and on the efficiency of communication and coordination processes. However, many of the employees found themselves tangled in this system without any preparation.

Overall, remote work comes across as a positive experience for EU employees since three-quarters of them expressed in July 2020 the willingness to continue working from home at least occasionally (Table 4) (Eurofound, 2020a). The number of Romanian workers never willing to work from home exceed the EU average, this could be influenced by the novelty of the situation considering the low level of telework before the pandemic.

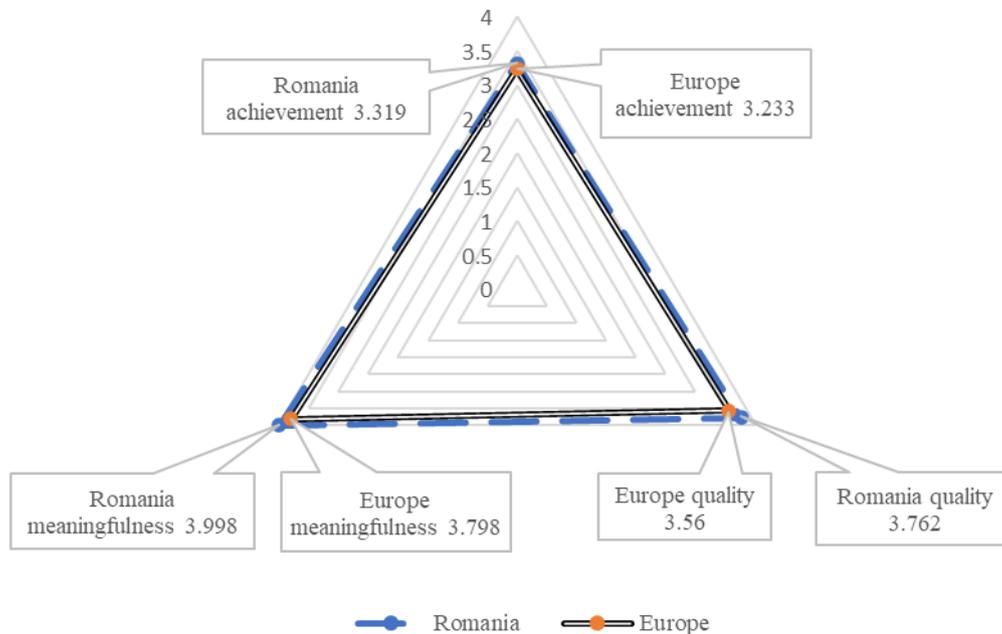


Figure 3 - Level of satisfaction on the work's dimensions

Source: Authors' analysis based on LW-COVID-19

Table 3. Perceptions regarding teleworking efficiency

Work Efficiency	Decreased a lot	Decreased a little	Stayed the same	Increased a little	Increased a lot	Weighted value
Romania (%)	19.8	10.5	40	11.4	7.3	-0.241
Total (EU27) (%)	16.6	11.4	32.7	12.5	8.5	-0.151

Source: LW-COVID-19

Table 4. Preferences for teleworking

Work from home preference	Daily	Several times a week	Several times a month	Less often	Never
Romania (%)	14.9	18.1	12.8	16	38.3
Total (EU27) (%)	13.3	31	21	11.8	22.9

Source: LW-COVID-19

Coming to a conclusion, in the EU member states, the blurred boundaries between work and personal life were confirmed to be a disadvantage, as almost 48% of those working from home used part of their free time to respond to work demands. Those working from home are mainly employed in IT and communication, education, financial services, public administration, real estate, and energy supply service sectors. In terms of job satisfaction, teleworkers had a positive experience (70%), being satisfied with the quality of work (77%) and a little less with the amount of work performed (69%), although just 47% confirmed their employer provided the necessary equipment for remote work. The teleworkers of 2020 indicated their preference to work from home post-COVID-19 pandemic at least occasionally, preferably two or three days per week. The “digital divide” shows a stronger effect these days, such as teleworkability is expanding to more types of jobs than what was considered before 2020. That being the case, telework could involve a larger number of employees (Sostero, Milasi et al, 2020).

V.CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the context of the novelty of teleworking and the implications of the unexpected pandemic, it is still too early to produce a comprehensive presentation that would allow us to understand the Romanian employees' attitudes toward telework as well as the effects remote work has on them. Withal, the data that supported this research allowed us to draw some conclusions that are worth mentioning.

The research reveals new findings in the area of working conditions, respectively regarding the working effort and level of satisfaction in the telework system, that have not been researched in-depth at the national level before. The remote system challenged the employees to organise their work efficiently under the burden of ICT inclusion in their daily working time and the new home work environment. The difference, already existing before the pandemic period, between men and women in terms of the number of unpaid working hours remained visible but the gap reduced as due to working time flexibility, women can manage better care responsibilities. This flexibility and disruptions of teleworking time affected the degree of worrying about work, thereby eroding the work-life balance as work and home have the same house. The job satisfaction of Romanian employees was a positive one and they sustained their preference to work from home at least occasionally post-pandemic.

As the results indicate around three-quarters of respondents are willing to continue working from home. This result raises the need for governments and social partners to address the teleworking volunteering issue and the need for disconnection due to the high risk of physical and emotional exhaustion (Eurofound, 2020a). The involvement of employees in the decision-making process will enhance satisfaction and self-development, will revitalize well-being and will increase productivity and strengthen employees' initiatives (Eurofound, 2021).

There are several elements that could ensure future better results of employees. Special training programs for using collaborative technological tools will build efficiency, as interaction with colleagues is indispensable. ICT facilitation is essential improve cooperation at the organisational level in telework. A better understanding of work flexibility is vitally important from the perspective of employees and employers (van der Lippe and Lippenyi, 2019; Zakaria, 2016). The flexibility of working hours impacts work-life balance that could be fortified by colleagues' and managers' support (Eurofound, 2018). Thus, managers and employees need to suit the degree of flexible work with the personal claims. The work should be redesigned and employees should be involved in crafting their jobs. To overcome loneliness, informal communication with colleagues by use of technology could positively influence job satisfaction (Wang, Liu et al, 2021). “Social interactions in the remote working context cannot simply “happen”; instead, individuals need to proactively initiate or engage in online interactions... job autonomy is crucial for fuelling proactive behavior because autonomy enhances people's internalized motivation, builds their self-confidence” (Wang, Liu et al, 2021, p.49).

When employers pay attention to work time and are more flexible with employees' needs of time off for solving personal problems, the work-life balance is positively impacted. Written a few years ago, the statement “the essence of today's work is self-management” (Thomas, 2009, p.191) is more accurate now than ever. Customized working conditions designed by employers encourage workers to stay longer in a company. There is a need for improving the job opportunities for teleworkers through health promotion, training programs and flexible work time. Higher access to job resources and measurable job demands, not exceeding capabilities, could reduce employees' psychological risks. The right to disconnect should be implemented through collective agreements based on social dialogue. A useful resource for employers is the practice of ICT companies, their experience and methodology in virtual work. In this regard, analyses and adaptation of tools and models used in the ICT sector is an emerging request for research.

The possibility to work from anywhere comes with the risk of obstructing the limit between work and personal life, increases the flexibility and the work demands, and challenges employees' self-awareness. On the other hand, companies need to rethink their organisational strategy, to define the new way to lead and manage

human capital.

The impact of TICTM on each worker and the behavioral responses associated with it are very complex, affecting every worker's life. The limitation of this study is that is based on the results of the research "Living, Working and COVID-19 E-survey" (LW-COVID-19). The radical shifts in the society caused by the pandemic that forced people to start working remote and the short time experience in telework for most of the Romanian respondents, request more qualitative approach and to extend the analysis in other working behavior fields. Nevertheless, the research sets the groundwork for further inquiries into organising telework and employees' involvement.

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