

THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUNG PEOPLE ON THE EFFECTS OF TELEWORK ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE AT WORK

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Abstract

Due to consequences related to Covid19 pandemic, the extension of telework - where this is possible - has become a necessity. Currently, the share of employees who perform telework is significant: in Romania it represents approximately 20%, and in Europe, 37%. Under these circumstances it is increasingly necessary to analyze the effects of telework on the quality of life at work, considering both the profession and the social background of the employees involved in this particular type of activity. This paper aims to identify the perception of young employees regarding the effects of telework on the quality of life at work, indicating their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of telework. The paper comprises a theoretical outline meant to clarify the basic concepts: telework and the quality of life at work, respectively. The second part of the paper includes clarifications regarding the concept of telework, as well as the regulatory legislative framework in force, and presents the analysis of statistical data obtained from a questionnaire-based survey. In order to add more depth to the quantitative and qualitative data which resulted from the survey, the focus group method was also employed in this research.

Key words: telework, perception, young people, the quality of life at work

1. THE QUALITY OF LIFE AT WORK

The concept of "Quality of Life at Work" dates back to an international congress held at Arden House in 1972.¹ It was Louis Davis who originally formulated this concept. The papers which were presented at this congress were published in two volumes by Davis and Cherns, in 1975. It is a complex concept which is associated with both factors - what

¹ Ana Alice VILAS BOAS , Estelle M. MORIN, Le sens du travail et la qualité de vie au travail dans les établissements publics d'enseignement supérieur: une comparaison entre le Brésil et le Canada
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/256446873_Le_sens_du_travail_et_la_qualite_de_vie_au_travail_dans_les_etablissements_publics_d_enseignement_superieur_une_comparaison_entre_le_Bresil_et_le_Canada

determines QWL - and indicators - which defines the QVT. For example, Boisvert published in 1977 an analysis of QWL presenting 15 dimensions of QWL: control or autonomy at work, the possibility of exercising judgment, the importance of decisions, the opportunities for learning, use of skills, control over performance criteria, challenges offered by the work, variety of tasks, interaction with colleagues, recognition, pride in the work accomplished, contribution of work to the objectives of the organization, the perception of a desirable future and participation in decision-making.

In 1983, using the Delphi method, Levine reached the conclusion that, when measuring QVM, one needs to consider six criteria: the respect and confidence of the executives towards the employees, the variety of tasks, the challenge in the work, the fairness of the promotions, the work-life balance and the self esteem. (Ana Alice VILAS BOAS , Estelle M. MORIN, 2018). Here again, we can distinguish factors such as the variety of tasks and indicators such as work-life balance. More recently, Royuela and his collaborators (2008) published an article on the measurement of the quality of life at work and in particular, on the comparison of the definitions of this concept among academics with that of institutions like the European Commission. They selected 10 dimensions: the intrinsic value of work, skills and career development, gender equality, health and safety, inclusion and access to the labor market, organization of work and work-life balance, social dialogue and employee engagement, diversity and non-discrimination, overall performance. Again, there are factors like gender equality and indicators like the intrinsic value of work.

In their book, Ketchum and Trist (1992) presented the dimensions of QWL: meaningful work, the feeling of belonging and commitment, the feeling of dignity and accomplishment in one's work and achieving work-life balance. (Ana Alice VILAS BOAS , Estelle M. MORIN, 2018). According to Wrzesniewski, Dutton and Debebe (2003), **meaningful work** can be defined as the understanding that employees have of what they do at work and the importance they place on it. Pratt and Ashforth (2003) even suggest a difference between the meaning of work and the meaning at work, the first referring to the tasks and roles of the person in his job and the second, to the conditions and relations that he must have to do its job.

The sense of dignity and accomplishment discussed by Ketchum and Trist (1992) may be related to the concepts of well-being and psychological distress. Psychological well-being is indeed a psychological state which reflects the extent to which a person has the feeling of having value and of fulfilling himself in his Daily life, the indicators being mainly: the feeling of accomplishment, the self-esteem and a sense of balance. In addition, Massé et al. (1998) demonstrated that psychological well-being and psychological distress are different states of mental health, but complementary. Previously, Veit and Ware (1983) had made the same observation. A sign of times of insecurity and social pressure, presenteeism has become a criterion of QWL (Johns, 2010). It means to report to work when one should be staying at home for health reasons. Presenteeism is perhaps more costly than absenteeism, due to its impacts on the quality of relationships and on performance.

Commitment reflects the strength of the bond and the investment of the person in their work (this is commitment at work) or in their organization (this is organizational commitment). Since 1987, it is mainly organizational commitment that has been the focus of research, following the work of Meyer and Allen. These researchers differentiated 3 forms of commitment: affective commitment - the person is attached to his organization, he keeps his job because he wants it, the continuity commitment - the person continues to work in the organization because that they have no alternative or because they have more to lose by quitting their job than keeping it, and the normative commitment - the person keeps their job because they feel they have a moral duty to others (clients, colleagues or others).

Since the 1980s, research on ***work-life balance*** has been marked, according to Schneewind and Kupsch (2006), by determining the sources of imbalances mainly associated with the organization of work or personnel management. However, Grzywacz and Carlson (2007) point out that the direction of research in this area is changing, especially since the early 1990s. More and more, work-life balance is considered to be the result of the exchange and negotiation of expectations between the person and his employer. According to Chrétien and Letourneau (2010), the impact of work-family conflict on the mental health of employees is considerable.

2. YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERCEPTION OF THE EFFECTS OF TELEWORK ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE AT WORK

2.1. Telework: a different kind of work. Conceptual outline and legal framework.

Telework or telecommuting is the activity for which people use information and communication technology (ICT) to carry out a lucrative activity away from the place where the result of the work is needed or the place where the work would normally have taken place. The term telework is more commonly used in Europe, while telecommuting is a term used in the United States. The term telecommuting was first used in 1973 by Jack Nilles, who played a major role in promoting the concept in the United States, and was later popularized by the futurist Francis Kinsman in his book *Telecommutators* (1987).

The term telework was popularized in Europe by the European Commission, which sponsored important research in the field. The European Union's strategic goal, set at the Lisbon European Council in 2000, was to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy, taking into account trends in the global knowledge-based economy. In this context, the aim was to modernize labour relations, including the establishment of flexible ways of working, in order to increase the productivity and competitiveness of companies, but also to improve the quality of jobs (Ion Traian Ștefănescu, 2014). Accordingly, the European Commission invited the social partners at EU level to start negotiations on telework, which began on 20 September 2001 and ended on 16 July 2002, with the signing of the Framework Agreement on Telework, concluded between the Union of Industrialists of the European Community, the European Union of Craftsmen and Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, the European Center of Public Enterprises and Enterprises of General Economic Interest and the European Trade Union Confederation. The stated purpose of the agreement was / is “to modernize the organization of work, including flexible commitments to work and to achieve the necessary balance between flexibility and security” (Brîndșa Vartolomei, 2008).

In Romania, Law no. 81/2018 regarding the regulation of the telework activity was published in the Official Gazette no. 296 of April 2, 2018. The law entered into force on April 5 and can be enforced in those fields of activity in which it is possible to carry out telework. According to art. 2 of Law no. 81/2018, *telework represents the form of work*

organization through which the employee, regularly and voluntarily, fulfils the tasks specific to the position, occupation or profession he holds, in another place than the workplace provided by the employer, at least one day per month, using information and communication technology. Thus, there are two important conditions that define telework activities: (a) at least one day a month, the employee works from home or other possible workplaces that offer him the best conditions to carry out his work; (b) the activities of the job allow the use of and even rely on ICT. Consequently, any employee who meets these conditions can be called a tele-employee (teleworker).

According to art. 6 of Law no. 81/2018, the **tele-employee** benefits from all the rights recognized by law, from the internal regulations and the collective labour contracts applicable to the employees who perform their job-related tasks at the employer's headquarters or domicile. The employee has the following **obligations**:

- to carry out his activity, in accordance with his education and training;
- to inform the employer about the work equipment used;
- to inform the employer about the places where the activity takes place;
- to use only safe work equipment that does not pose a danger to his safety and health;
- not to change the safety and health conditions characterising the original workplace from the places where the telework activity is carried out.
- At the same time, the **employer** has the following obligations:
- to provide the employee with the safe work equipment necessary to perform the work;
- to install, check and maintain the necessary work equipment;
- to ensure conditions for the teleworker to receive sufficient and adequate training in the field of occupational safety and health, especially in the form of information and work instructions;
- to ensure the transport to and from the place where the telework activity takes place.

II.2. The perception of young Romanians regarding the advantages and disadvantages of telework

This study is the result of a survey conducted on the basis of an opinion questionnaire. 261 students (both undergraduate and graduate, all of them employed) from *Nicolae Titulescu* University in Bucharest participated in this investigation. The questionnaire was filled in online by the participating subjects. The aim was to identify their views on the advantages, disadvantages and effects of telework on the quality of life. To complete, clarify / add depth to certain options / answers, a focus group was also used, in which a number of 52 employed students participated.

After statistically processing the answers of our respondents, the main advantages of teleworking are:

- a. the reduction of the stress related to home-work transport (78% of the interviewed subjects);
- b. the increased freedom in choosing the domicile for the workplace (65%);
- d. the decreased personal costs related to professional activity (61%);
- e. the increased autonomy 73 %

Also, a little more than half of the interviewees (56%) consider that teleworking brings about decrease in the level of fatigue of the employees.

50% of the respondents state that this type of work creates the conditions for increasing the time devoted to personal life (hobbies, sports, etc.). Most subjects point to the fact that the company / organization they work for could have the following benefits:

- a. optimization of office space 75%
- b. decrease in the company/ organisation expenses (66%);
- c. decrease of absenteeism (65%);
- d. improving one's image (65%).

More than half of the respondents add to the above mentioned advantages the following two: better responsibility or autonomy in work (58%), and the increase of the commitment / motivation of the employees (55%).

The main perceived inconveniences related to performing the professional activity online refer to:

a. the loss of the social labour relations, the team spirit and the risk of isolation from the group - 86% of the respondents;

b. increased difficulties in separating the time related to the private life, from the one related to the professional life - 73% of the subjects express their total or partial agreement;

c. an increase in the number of daily working hours - 66% total or partial agreement;

d. 67% of the subjects complained about encountering greater technical difficulties in the conditions of telework (remote computer tools, network quality, unavailable assistance);

e. 65% of the survey participants believe that teleworking generates a delay in their opportunities for professional development in the workplace.

f. a significant percentage of the subjects (57%) state that they encountered some difficulties in managing and organizing their work at home.

Most of the respondents notice that telework does not generate a positive evolution of the following factors:

- relations with collaborators - 70%;
- relationship with their manager - 70%;
- physical and mental health - 65%;
- job satisfaction - 65%;
- total working time - 60%;
- efficiency of work in the organization - 55%;
- the employee's work quality - 55%);
- work-related fatigue - 55%;
- time dedicated to social life (friends, neighbors, etc.) - 55%.

III. Conclusions regarding the effects of telework on the quality of personal life / and at work

For most of the young people interviewed, enthusiasm for telework is related to improving the quality of personal and work life due to the following factors: reducing stress related to home-work transport (78% of respondents), increasing employee

autonomy (73%), the decrease of the personal costs related to the professional activity (61%), the increase of the employees' commitment / motivation (55%), the increased freedom in choosing the domicile for the workplace (65%). In the conditions of traditional work, long commuting time, traffic jams, bad weather delays, etc. can make travelling from home to work and vice versa a real source of stress. This is especially the case in Bucharest and in big cities.

The debates within the focus group highlighted the fact that, in Bucharest, a considerable part of the employees commuting spend in traffic between ½ h - 1h to get to work. This fact has a negative impact on their mental and physical well-being, increasing the level of fatigue and stress, as well as on keeping a balance between professional and private personal life. On the other hand, teleworking, reducing the employees' time spent on commuting, results in saving both time and money. Young people also notice a reduction in the level of fatigue. They believe that teleworking also entails a significant reduction in the negative impact on the environment, an increase in air quality. Teleworking creates the premises for a better reconciliation between personal and professional time.

Most subjects consider that teleworking increases the autonomy of employees (73%). This gives employees a stronger sense that their value, their dignity is well acknowledged by the employer. This feeling, combined with the other positive effects of teleworking, creates the conditions for increasing the commitment of employees (each person's investment in his work), thus contributing to improving the quality of life at work, in the opinion of 55% of the subjects participating in the focus group interview.

Moreover, teleworking entails an increase in the freedom employees have in choosing their domicile for the workplace (for 65% of respondents). Discussions in the focus group highlighted the fact that for some young people it is important that they can work from anywhere, that they can go, for example with their children / family to the mountains, or that they can live with their grandparents, in the countryside, even if they are not on vacation. In their opinion, this degree of freedom contributes to increasing the quality of their personal life.

On the other hand, the dissatisfaction caused by telework is related - for most respondents (86%) - to the loss of social relations, team spirit and the risk of isolation from

the group. The focus group participants claim that they have a vital need for 'live', 'face to face' social relations, for an authentic communication with their colleagues, employers, educators. They argue that such relationships are not possible in the exclusive conditions of teleworking, which has negative repercussions on their mental well-being: more often than not they feel alienated, alone, sad, even depressed.

In the young interviewees' opinion, the dissatisfactions caused by performing their professional activity online include: the difficulty of separating professional time from personal time (73%); the increase in the number of daily working hours (66%); the repercussions on physical and mental health (65%); decreased job satisfaction (65%); increased work-related fatigue (55%) and others. We note that the percentage of young people who consider that teleworking generates an increase in the total working time is higher than the percentage of young people who claim that teleworking entails an increase in work-related fatigue. For some, although working time increases, perceived fatigue does not increase as much. They claim that 'although they work longer hours, they work effortlessly to some extent, as the intensity of work is lower than in the case of office work. Telework allows them to take more breaks, to drink their coffee in peace, etc.'

We notice that the enthusiasm for telework is counterbalanced by a significant number of dissatisfactions that impede the quality of personal life and work. We can conclude that certain aspects of digital work may lead to an increase in the employees' quality of life (personal and professional) of, while other aspects, on the contrary, are detrimental. The students participating in the focus group interview claim that, 'if in pandemic conditions telework is life-saving, as it allows us to continue working, learning, surviving financially, under normal circumstances, it is only partially acceptable. The mental costs (loneliness, dissatisfaction, depression) of a daily digital workload would be much too high.'

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