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“EFFECTIVENESS OF REMOTE WORK DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC: EMPLOYEES AND MANAGERS’ VIEW”

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Abstract

In March 2020, World Health Organization (WHO) declared a new coronavirus infection (also called COVID-19) a pandemic. Immediately, several organizations around the world adopted remote work to their employees to avoid people’s contact and, consequently, virus spread. Remote work was adopted in many places with low or no previous planning, putting in doubt its effectiveness. This study aims to explore the effectiveness of the remote work implemented in a public federal hospital in Brazil, taken by the Administrative Area, both in teleworker employees and presential worker managers’ view. The investigation consisted of a case study regarding a public university hospital in Santa Catarina, Brazil. The study consists of qualitative research by having employees and managers answer an open questionnaire. Laurence Bardin’s content analysis and a word cloud tool were applied to analyze the collected data. The research result in the conclusion that among employees, remote work was considered effective. Higher performance, better productivity, less distraction during work, and higher quality of life were the main aspects cited and the importance of access to technology. Regarding managers' views, there was no consensus on whether remote work is effective or not. Effectiveness seems to be related to employees’ commitment and personality, together with the manager’s follow-up.

Keywords: remote work, COVID-19 pandemic, effectiveness

Introduction

In early 2020, the world was aware of a new coronavirus strain that has quickly taken several Chinese into a serious infection that seemed to spread easily and injure especially lungs and respiratory system. In March, World Health Organization (WHO) declared this new coronavirus infection (also called COVID-19) a pandemic. According to Bonacini, Gallo, Scicchitano (2021), COVID-19's daily increasing cases and deaths have led to worldwide lockdown, quarantine and some restrictions. In almost 90% of the world, social isolation is applied in some way. People do not go out on the streets, workplaces are closed, flights are banned, people are dismissed. One-way organizations all over the world found to avoid spreading the virus among workplaces and keep duties going was to shut offices down and determine telework to all employees whose activities allowed to do so. According to Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés (2020), so far, there have not been significant cases of the implementation of telework because of a health crisis, and, therefore, this is an unprecedented situation where most organizations (both companies and public organizations) have asked their employees to work remotely from home as teleworkers.

Bonacini, Gallo, Scicchitano (2021) says that although there is no universally accepted definition of telework, it can be described as a type of work and/or provision of services done remotely, at a distance, and online using computer and telematics technologies. Telework just involves working outside of the employer's premises with the support of ICTs, and, therefore, it can occur from multiple locations (home, office, and other places) using different technologies (e.g., mobile teleworking) and with different frequencies. In this case, telework is necessarily taken from the employee's home, once cowork places and other alternatives were also closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so it could also be called work from home, or WFH. According to Dockery and Bawa (2020), working from home (WFH) is more commonly referred to as 'telecommuting' in the United States and 'teleworking' in Europe.

Although the pandemic had led several workers to telework never seen before, the concept of telework is not new. Baruch (2000) stated that homeworking is not a new phenomenon. In the pre-industrial era, large numbers of people worked mainly at or close to home, for example in craft workshops and on local land. The industrial revolution took people away from home to centralized workplaces—factories and offices. Before the pandemic, Martin and MacDonnel (2012) studies show that data from academic research, census reports, and think-tank reports alike show the average frequency of telework by organizational employees to be somewhere between 2.2 and 12 percent.

The impacts of telework both regarding companies' interests, like effectiveness and productivity, as well as employee's quality of life, were also widely studied. Baruch (2000) stated there are four factors that influence telework: individual factors, job factors, organizational factors, and family/home factors, and overall, teleworking can provide benefits for individuals, organizations, and nations. Bailey and Kurland (2002) found out that positive outcomes such as improved productivity, organizational loyalty and belonging, job satisfaction, and employee retention and attraction often top lists of telework's advantages. Two outcomes receive the most attention among the empirical studies examined by the authors: productivity and job satisfaction. Rupiatta and Beckmann's (2016) empirical analysis shows that working from home has a statistically significant positive effect on work effort, and employees, who work from home more frequently, provide higher work effort than employees, who only stay very infrequently at home or always stay in the office.

Baruch (2000) states that further technological innovations permit more people in more professions and occupations to join in telework. This way, COVID-19 pandemic shows that technology used nowadays helped companies to implement telework as a way of contributing

to social distancing once most of employees have access to the internet and a computer or similar device at home.

Regarding the pandemic stated telework, also a variable number of papers were already published concerning telework impacts, most of them studying how telework changes productivity's companies' parameters or the impact of telework in employee's life. Dockery and Bawa (2020) studies suggest that workers are in fact more productive when they WFH, but that of course requires their jobs are amenable to being carried out from home in the first place. There is also a direct saving in commuting times, potentially allowing more time to be devoted to productive activities. WFH may also allow workers to devote more time to work by more efficiently combining work time with family and other non-work responsibilities, as most workers tend to work longer hours when they work from home. Ferreira *et al* (2021) explored, synthesized, and elicited the following remote work concept key aspects: advantages, driving forces; challenges; and disadvantages, through both a systematic literature review (SLR) to elicit the initial artifact and individual semi-structured interviews to evaluate and tune the artifact. According to Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés (2020), several experiences in the implementation of teleworking show the use of telework as a new way of organizing work that improves conciliation and flexibility, and consequently, refer to individual and family/home factors. Baert *et al.* (2020), in their study, concluded that workers interviewed believe that telework has a strong positive effect in general, and their overall satisfaction with their job increases with telework, also, telework improves their work-life balance and helps to minimize both work-related stress and chances of burnout. The effects of telework on performance are also positively evaluated, with respondents asserting that telework improve their efficiency in performing tasks (56.3%) and increases their work concentration. Even though teleworking is mostly thought of in a positive manner, there are some downsides regarding career development, future prospects and the social aspects of not working in a regular office. Most notably, about a quarter of the panel members believe that telework decreases their chance of promotion (27.0%) and hampers their professional development (29.4%). Additionally, more than half of the respondents think that telework has a negative effective on their relationships with their colleagues (57.5%), while the sense of connectedness with their employer is lowered in the perception of about half (47.4%) of the panel members.

A considerable number of important published studies shows that, in general, workers' opinions about telework are positive, increasing both the quality of life and the productivity. But most of the studies are taken by interviewing the employees that are effectively working from home and their perceptions, while, in several organizations, their managers keep working presential and might have a different perception about the telework impacts. This study takes as an example worker from the administrative area of a public hospital in Brazil, where most of the employees were allowed to telework as soon as the pandemic was declared by WHO, and the managers kept working at the hospital.

The studies presented show that the two main factors that are used to evaluate telework are related to quality of employee's life and work productivity. So, the effectiveness of telework is a concept that can aggregate both factors. Cameron (2015) states that organizational effectiveness has been defined in a variety of ways, but no single definition has been accepted universally. Mandl, Dierx, Ilzkovitz (2008) stated that effectiveness is more difficult to assess than efficiency, since the outcome is influenced by political choice. The effectiveness shows the success of the resources used in achieving the objectives set. According to Connolly, Conlon, and Deutsch, (1980), the central differentiation among current effectiveness statements is in how they specify the evaluative criteria used to define "how well" the entity is performing or could perform. So, effectiveness can be taken as a concept that assembles ideas as productivity and performance together with organizations' political and cultural aspects. As this study aims to measure telework by one single concept, effectiveness is used as so.

This investigation is taken in a Public Federal Hospital in Brazil, which is also an University Hospital, among all employees working from home in the Administrative Area of the hospital, as well as their managers, that are working presential. It aims to explore both employees and managers' views on how telework is taken during the pandemic, according to the research question:

Is telework effective during COVID-19 pandemic in employees and managers' view?

In order to answer the research question the authors have defined three objectives:

- 1 - Is there effectiveness in telework during the pandemic according to employees?
- 2 - Is there effectiveness in telework during the pandemic according to managers?
- 3 - In which aspects employees and managers' views differ and in which aspects do they converge?

Methodology

The study consists of qualitative research, since it seeks to understand the reality constituted by socially constructed phenomena, whose socio-historical transformations assume aspects that cannot be captured only by the numbers of the quantitative strategy. Applied research was also developed, through descriptive statistics, whose means of investigation consisted of a case study regarding the hospital.

In the research were considered employees assigned to the Administrative Area of HU-UFSC / EBSEH, which have functions related to purchasing processes, bids, inventory, supplies control, hospitality, maintenance, and asset management. It was also decided to include employees related to human resources area, because, as it is the area of the hospital where all remote work processes are managed, their opinion is considered important to the study. Operational function employees such as drivers and waitresses were disregarded, as its work is impossible to perform remotely, and only those who have administrative functions were considered. Thus, of the 68 employees who meet the requirements of the object of the study, 33 are in some form of remote work, which represents 48% of the entire Administrative Area of the University Hospital, a significant percentage for the study. Questionnaires were sent to servers who were working totally or partially remotely at the time of the survey. From a total of 33 mapped servers, 29 responses were obtained. Regarding the managers, a questionnaire was sent to those occupying positions of leadership of Units, Sectors and Divisions of the Administrative Area that has servers acting in a remote module under their management, as well as to the Administrative Manager of HU-UFSC / EBSEH, totaling 18 managers. 17 responses were obtained.

Regarding specific objectives number 1 and 2, interviews conducted through the application of a questionnaire to two groups of subjects - employees in remote work and their managers. One single question was presented to both categories of responders: In your opinion, is there effectiveness in the activities developed in telework in the HU-UFSC/EBSEH? Justify your answer.

As for the data analysis, the interpretation was performed based on Content Analysis, by Laurence Bardin (2011), with the establishment of categories of analysis and evaluation of frequent synopses, since these mathematical resources they already demonstrate to be enough to obtain a result relative to the perception, both managers and the workers, about the remote work.

Furthermore, a wordcloud was put up, considering the most cited words by employees and managers. Words such as prepositions and articles were disconsidered. An analysis of the most cited words in both categories of answer was made by the authors.

Data Analysis

Regarding problem question number 1, Is there effectiveness in telework during the pandemic according to employees?, most employees understand that there is effectiveness, improved performance and quality of life when working remotely. They also pointed out that its implementation, development, and effectiveness are directly related to the availability of technology and digital transformation. In addition, aspects such as the lowest rate of distraction in the performance of daily work tasks are fundamental to productivity and effectiveness in all areas of the Administrative Area. Finally, a part of the employees was concerned with the need for improvements in the implementation and monitoring of remote work, pointing out this aspect as necessary for the development of the effectiveness of this work module.

Regarding problem question number 2, Is there effectiveness in telework during the pandemic according to managers, when subjectively answering about the effectiveness of remote work developed in the research period, managers come to concurrence that there is a relative effectiveness. Thus, good planning and monitoring of the work plan of remote work is essential, also, that effectiveness is tied to employees' profile. In addition, they point out the need for constant investments in technologies and digital transformation that enable the continuous development of the effectiveness of this modality in the Administrative Area of the University Hospital of Federal University of Santa Catarina.

EFFECTIVENESS IN REMOTE WORK - EMPLOYEES AND MANAGERS VIEW

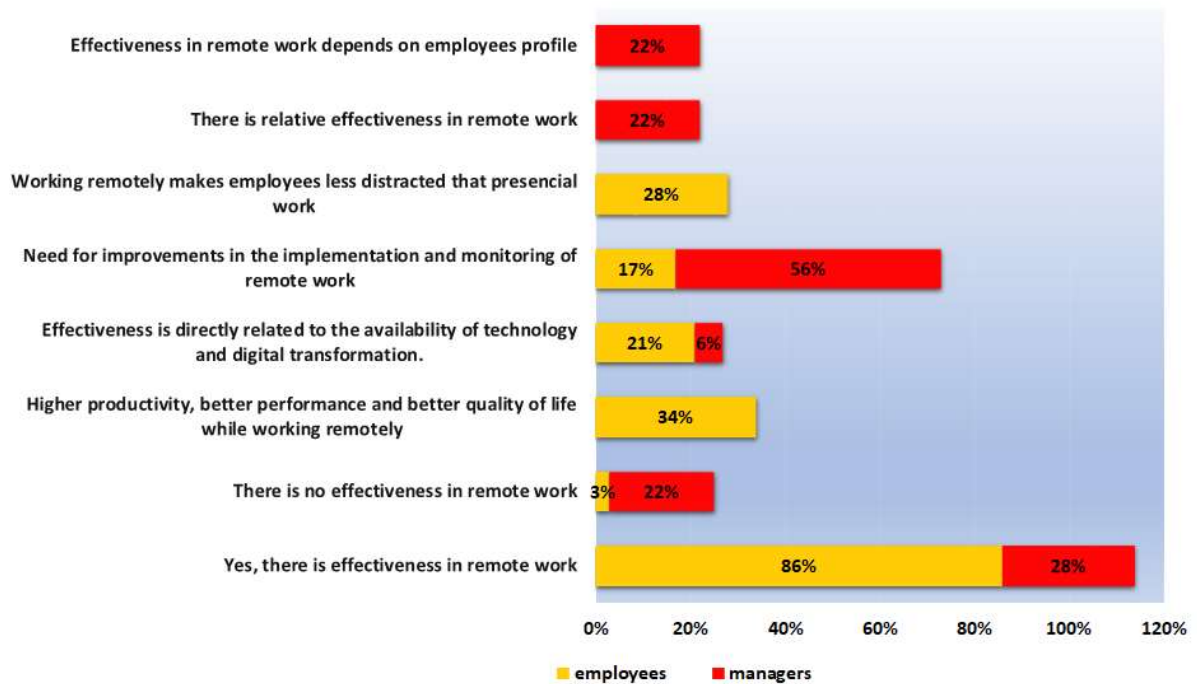


Table 1: Effectiveness in remote work in employees and managers view
Source: authors

Table number one is used to respond to problem question number three: In which aspects employees' and managers' views differ and in which aspects do they converge? The table shows the main differences and similarities in employees and managers' view about remote work. While most employees agree that there is full effectiveness in remote work (86%) and suggest that this may be because of the lack of distractions (28%) and improvement in quality of life (34%), among managers there is not a fully agreement, whereas 28% consider that there is fully effectiveness, 22% answer that effectiveness is relative and 22% state that there is no effectiveness at all. This answer can be related to the fact that most managers understand that there is a need for improvement in implementation and monitoring of remote

work, and a considerable part of the managers think that employees' profile is determinant on its effectiveness.

To assert the differences in employees and managers' view concerning remote work, word cloud graphic was used using each category responses to the main question. To build the figures, it was used words most frequent cited by the responders, excluding words that are not meaningful by itself, like prepositions, conjunctions, and others. Expressions like no distractions and quality of life were considered as one single word not to lose its meaning in the answer. It was considered words cited more than once by each group.

Figure number one shows employees answers word cloud:

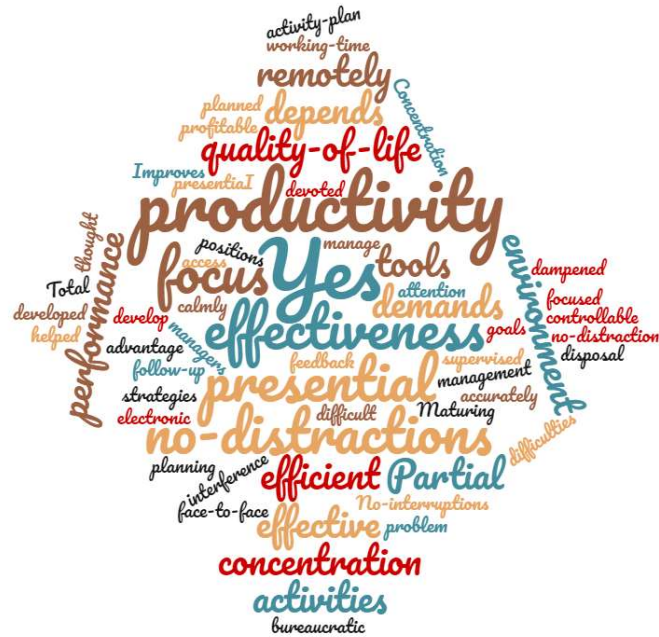


Figure 1: employees answers word cloud

Source: authors

It is clear by the figure that the words yes and productivity were most cited, followed by effectiveness, presential, no distractions. Quality of life, performance, efficient, effective, focus, concentration and activities were also frequently highlighted. This shows that employees' answers were related to quality of the work developed, as well as the benefits that remote work brought to their daily activities.

For further studies, authors recommend expanding the research to other organizations, once the work done remotely in a hospital is very characteristic and may need more presential interaction.

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