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Companies' views of teleworking difficulties

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ABSTRACT

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, several countries have recommended or imposed teleworking. This study examines the arrangements made by companies in French-speaking Switzerland to prevent or reduce the negative aspects of teleworking in order to improve the experience for their employees. To do so, semi-structured interviews were conducted with human resources or team managers in companies from various industries. The literature review enabled these risks to be classified into six categories and was used to guide the interviews. The results offer interesting insights for academic researchers and practitioners. For the first, they can use these findings to investigate this issue in other geographical regions or expand by doing a quantitative study. For the second, they can use the insights to tailor their management practices when crises materialize.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; teleworking;
working from home

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in 2020 with the World Health Organization declaring a global health emergency (Velavan & Meyer, 2020). The virus caused tremendous harm, affecting many people and their lives, but also impacting businesses around the world. To fight against the spread of the virus, many countries restrained their populations' movements, thus greatly increasing the number of people teleworking (Mori, 2021). Dubey and Tripathi (2020) noted that this decision was accompanied with many people showing resentment and having negative feelings toward the notion of working from home.

Research has been conducted on teleworking's negative effects from an employee's point of view, but little literature can be found that interrogates companies' views. This skews the perspective, as it is unclear how companies are viewing the situation and what actions they are taking to resolve or prevent these issues. To better understand the company side of the matter, a review of the literature was conducted and the negative effects were categorized.

Before diving into the aforementioned aspects, it is important to define the terminology. Indeed, various terms are used, sometimes interchangeably, to describe similar but different situations. Academia has not defined a single

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definition for telework and various characteristics are taken into account depending on the situation (Sullivan, 2003). Lindstrom et al. (1997) stated that telework is an overlying concept that can further be defined through various concepts: telecommuting, mobile work, work at home, satellite office, detached unit, meetings/cooperation at distance, as well as virtual/imaginary organizations. Olson (1983) also discussed remote work as another concept where employees conduct their tasks outside the space and time confines of their company. Google Trends gives a picture of web searches performed on various terms for a given period (Google, 2021). COVID-19 is believed to have started at the end of 2019, thus November 2019 to June 2021 was selected as the time period and the geographic location was set to worldwide (World Health Organization, 2020).

The [Appendix](#) gives definitions for the most popular terms, according to Google Trends. Work at home was not included, as there is no differentiation with work from home (Shamir & Salomon, 1985). Based on the definitions in the [Appendix](#), work from home and telework are umbrella terms that can be used to define a person working outside a company's physical premises (Allen et al., 2015; Savić, 2020). This can then be subdivided between remote work (too far to commute, thus fully remote) and telecommuting (close enough to commute, thus commuting on a schedule).

When considering organizational responses to the pandemic, Liguori and Pittz (2020) explained that it is crucial to be transparent and inform employees about the situation and foreseen perspectives. Some workers noted several positive aspects since they started teleworking, notably concerning their work-life balance. They state that working from home resulted in improved autonomy and flexibility as well as reductions in commuting time, stress, risk of burnout, and increase in morale. Altogether, they agree that their productivity has improved along with higher job satisfaction (Buomprisco et al., 2021; Fílarđi et al., 2020; Morilla-Luchena et al., 2021; Purwanto et al., 2020; Tavares, 2017; Teo et al., 1998).

Although several workers reported positive outcomes from teleworking policies, a nonnegligible number of them reported an overall negative sentiment (Dubey & Tripathi, 2020). Even the workers that appreciated teleworking still faced negative aspects (see the [Appendix](#)). Several examples can be noted, such as Tavares's (2017) findings that work-life balance can induce family conflicts as well as overwork and stress, as the boundaries between the office and home are blurred. Some employees also believe they will be passed over for promotions and their career will be negatively affected (Moens et al., 2022; Teo et al., 1998). An important consideration is that women are more likely to work from home due to their household chores (Nguyen, 2021) and, if given the choice, they are more likely to work from home (Bloom, 2021). This creates higher inequalities, as it will decrease the proportion of promotions proposed to women, thus resulting in wage disparities. Physical health issues due to a lack of equipment,

noted by Buomprisco et al. (2021) and Tavares (2017), as well as mental health conditions created by loneliness and isolation take their toll on a worker's body and mind (Dubey & Tripathi, 2020; Peterman et al., 2020; Savić, 2020; Tavares, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). Infrastructure also poses problems as employees may lack equipment, technical support, and access to data when working from home (Fílarđi et al., 2020). Last, working from home has consequential implications on workers' productivity due to communication difficulties, among other factors (Moens et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2021). Durst and Henschel (2021) mentioned that flexibility, agility, and experience working in uncertain conditions shape how companies deal with crises, such as COVID-19.

Methods

Sample

Five companies from Romandy were selected for interviews. For a phenomenology study, the number of participants typically varies between 5 and 25 (Polkinghorne, 1989, as cited in Creswell & Poth, 2018). These companies were chosen so as to have heterogeneity: a transportation company (participant A), a nonprofit organization managing a nature reserve (participant B), a university of applied sciences (participant C), an electricity provider and distributor (participant D), as well as a bank (participant E). The first two organizations have less than 50 employees, while the third has over 160 collaborators and the last two have over 2,000 staff members. The interviewed collaborators working in these companies occupied positions either in human resources or as team managers.

Research design

This research seeks to describe the experiences faced by companies in Romandy with regard to employees working from home. Indeed, employees were obligated to work from home as the Swiss government enforced strong anti-COVID-19 measures (Fédération Patronale et Economique, 2021). A phenomenology study is well adapted to this situation, as this type of research seeks to describe similarities faced by various actors concerning a common experience in a real-world setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2005).

Procedure

Semistructured interviews were conducted (and recorded) as a specific list of topics and questions were previously selected from the literature. Each interview would start with a very broad and general question relating to identified risks and measures the company had taken, and undisclosed aspects were then pursued (Edwards & Holland, 2013).

Data analysis

Hycner (1985) and Moustakas (1994) proposed a list of steps to follow when analyzing phenomenological interviews. Principle steps were used, notably reduction and elimination to determine the invariant constituents, clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents, and validating the emerged themes with the invariant constituents. The themes were then compared to the categories that emerged from the literature to assess if new categories were discovered through the interviews.

Findings

Only two participants noted that family conflicts were brought to their attention. However, Participant E noted that their company has a social service, so it is possible that managers are not aware of these issues. Societal issues (gender inequalities and promotions) were not deemed to be an issue, as no participant had received any complaints or remarks.

Two participants noted that some employees were struggling with back pain. These issues were present before COVID-19 but were made worse by the change of setting and lack of equipment. Participant A stated, “[A]s it is at home, it is the employee’s issue, not the employer’s duty” [my translation from French]. The bank also held a similar stance. While it let employees take their work equipment (like screens) or their work chairs home, it did not finance any ergonomic equipment the employee would require.

Employees from four out of five companies in the sample reported suffering from sentiments of isolation and loneliness due, in part, to a lack of social interactions and informal calls. Indeed, these two issues are the most prevalent as nearly all participants are unanimous on the negative sentiments their collaborators were facing. No other issue, even when considering all six categories, was highlighted as much.

Infrastructure also proved to be a mixed bag, as three out of five companies had a majority of their documents digitized, and four had virtual private networks as well as adequate servers that could take the additional load created by people accessing documents outside company premises. Three companies did not provide any financial help, while Participant B gave CHF 500.- so that specific items could be purchased to work from home, including additional electricity and internet costs. Some companies provided smartphones with 4G contracts, thus reducing the need for their employees to subscribe to a better internet contract.

Last, productivity was a mixed bag. Out of the five participants, four noted differences in productivity, with one stating it had improved and the other three that it had decreased. However, out of the three, two companies saw

a reduction due to the economy slowing down and their collaborators having less work. Therefore, only one company truly saw a decrease caused by teleworking.

Contribution, limitations and further research

This study contributes to the academic literature by enabling future papers to tackle teleworking issues from companies' perspectives as well as differences between Romandy and other geographical regions. Various companies can use the results presented in this article to give a greater voice to their employees on subjects that are not sufficiently (or at all) reported. These organizations can also inspire themselves from solutions implemented by the companies in the selected sample to take actions to prevent potential issues or remediate existing ones. This study presents several limitations, namely the fact that it is geographically constrained to the Romandy area. Additionally, the qualitative nature provides the readers and researchers with insights, but generalizations cannot be inferred from the results.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix

Remote work categories

Type of work	Definition	Source
Work from home	An employee or organization staff member who performs work outside the company’s physical sites and uses information technology to communicate with the employer.	Savić (2020)
Remote work	Employees work outside the vicinity of the company’s commuting area and are considered to be full-time remote.	Allen et al. (2015); Savić (2020)
Telecommuting	Work is done outside the office: from home or locations close to home like coffee shops, coworking spaces, or libraries. Information and communication tools are used to replace the commute. The frequency can vary between a hybrid form or a full-time remote form.	Allen et al. (2015); Savić (2020)
Telework	Work performed outside the company’s conventional workplace and use information technology tools to communicate with the employer.	Allen et al. (2015)