

THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND WELL-BEING OF ROMANIAN TELEWORKERS DURING PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT. This period of mandated remote work has been challenging the Romanian employees to adept to the new paradigm of telework for most of them. While prior to COVID-19 pandemic employees were accustom with the work environment and its variables, they were suddenly replaced. The psychological place for restoration, called home, got invaded and occupied by working life. In this time remote workers were learning to adapt to the new way of working from home and balancing it with everyday life. While employers are searching for new and performing approach to accomplish their goals, employees are addressing new conditions affecting their working performance and personal or family life. The study presents and analyses data of two surveys conducted by the “European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions”. The impact and consequences of telework on work-life balance and well-being of workers are discussed, seeing that the working time and work intensity dimensions have a direct influence. The search for sustainable telework requires customized working conditions, adapted skills, tackling emerging risks and involving all stakeholders in Romanian working environment.

Keywords: telework, work-life balance, well-being, work intensity, working time, flextime, autonomy, right to disconnect, COVID-19

JEL Classification: M100, M540, M150

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Introduction and literature review

Unexpectedly, the rising of COVID-19 pandemic changed the work environment of many Romanian employees in an unpredicted way, having to start working remote. Prior to the pandemic, in Romania, the percent of employees practicing telework were around 10% in 2015 and mainly happening in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector (Eurofound, 2021). For most of the teleworkers the new way of approaching work came with several challenges, first having to carry out their work through the use of ICTs, as telework is define (European Commission, 1998).

Due to the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, the companies in several industrial sectors strived to adept, digitalizing and developing their ICTs, reorganizing activities and rethinking human capital management (Grigorescu & Mocanu, 2020). A study of Romanian teleworkers reveled some advantages of remote work: improved work-life balance, achievement of new specific skills for telework, work flexibility and autonomy both sustaining further self-development, so important for remote work. Another essential effect of commuting work is the opportunity offered to careers to combine their home responsibility with work ones, and to those living in rural areas (Dima, Tuclea, Vranceanu, & Tigu, 2019). Among teleworkers, there is a positive correlation between work-life balance, well-being, job satisfaction, competences, and environment (Miron, Petcu, David-Sobolevschi, & Cojocariu, 2021).

While in the western world, the telework or remote work was heard of in 1970 (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016), in Romania telework is at the point of spreading among different economic sectors. The telework is regulated by law in Romania just since April 2018 (Dima, Tuclea, Vranceanu, & Tigu, 2019). Therefore, the research of teleworking activity is in its time of developing and uprising with important results and information for all parties.

There are several benefits and challenges of telework revealed by researchers. The ICTs empowers workers to perform their duties from almost anywhere, either is home, hotel, office, train or a cafe (Wojcak, Bajzikova, Sajgalikova, & Polakova, 2016), just using the necessary technology to perform their tasks (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020). Remote work facilitates more flexibility that boosts work-life balance and results in increased job satisfaction, it decrease stress (Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013), supports single parents and persons with special issues (Burrell, Barnard-Zaffino, & Ulomi, 2014), reduces commuting time and enriches personal development (Tremblay & Thomsin, 2012), offers time autonomy that enhances work-life balance and productivity (Sostero, Milasi, Hurley, Fernandez-Macias, & Bisello, 2020). Likewise, the challenges of remote work could lead to some negative consequences, like work-life blurring, social isolation and increased worry due to lack of colleagues support (Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013), it can intensify work-family conflicts (Song & Gao, 2019), lowering trust, self-discipline issue, decreasing job performance due to lack of technological skills, procrastination (Antonacopoulou & Georgiadou, 2020), (Contreras, Baykal, & Abid, 2020), (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2019), (Waizenegger, McKenna, Cai, & Bendz, 2020), (Wang, Liu, Qian, & Parker, 2021), over-working influencing negatively the well-being (Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013), if work and life in the same place is not well managed it could lead to social dilemmas, longer working hours, incapacity to switch work off (Amichai-Hamburger, 2009), psychological costs and health problems (Giménez-Nadal, Molina, & Velilla, 2020) caused by always-on status.

Accordingly, the theoretical papers identify the importance of boundary-management for teleworkers (Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013). The strategy applied by each employee while managing time and space, and the decision-making proceeding in regards with the work and family roles are vital to balance work and life (Amichai-Hamburger, 2009). Most recent, the literature review highlights the significance of work-life balance and the wellbeing of teleworkers. The major issues of employees emphasize the need for improved technical and communication skills, flexible working arrangements, customized leadership (Wojcak, Bajzikova, Sajgalikova, & Polakova, 2016), health supporting environment,

better time management, expectation of a sustainable organizational culture enhancing individual development and diminishing inequities and discriminations (Galvez, Tirado, & Martinez, 2020).

From the employers' perspective, remote work determines some cut in costs (Galvez, Tirado, & Martinez, 2020) improved productivity and decrease absenteeism (Grant, Wallace, & Spurgeon, 2013). As workplace and worktime flexibility maintains well-being, this upholding the work-life balance, for organizations the result is lower health costs, greater productivity, and commitment (Casey & Grzywacz, 2008). Nevertheless, it is very important that organizations' activities are projects or assignments based for results evaluation. A formal clear policy guidance provided to employees is mandatory in preparation for accomplishing expectations. The employers must supply employees with adequate communication technology and tools. Studies show that teleworkers are less likely to be dissatisfied and to withdraw their job (Burrell, Barnard-Zaffino, & Ulomi, 2014). A side effect of telework is the reduction of organization structural hierarchy (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020) that increases workers' empowerment and commitment.

Once the widespread of COVID-19 begun, there were several studies lunched to analyse the pandemic impact. These recognised that work-life balance, health and wellbeing were highly affected (Nangoy, Mursitama, Setiadi, & Pradipto, 2020), the work from home were recommended or imposed, the loss of job increased on the labor market (Cetrulo, Guarasio, & Virgillito, 2020). Work-family conflict is a result of inter-role conflict triggered by pressure between work and family roles. Work-related stress occurs when work demands exceed individual capacity to accomplish them. This influence personal performance affecting organization performance, causing absenteeism, complaints, or conflicts (Stankevičiūtė & Savanevičienė, 2019). The world seems to be at risk of a mental health pandemic due to the life and work experience in 2020 when stress, anger, sadness, and worry reached record levels among workers (Gallup, 2021).

The work-life balance is a widely used and abstract term. Different definitions and measurements have been attributed to it in the academic literature. While people struggle with balancing work and private life, the EU and national governments put together work-life balance policies to stimulate employment, productivity, healthy workplaces and to reduce

inequalities. The concept work-life balance originates in the theory of roles that differentiates the roles of individual at work and the roles in the private sectors of life. In this regard, one perspective on balance is no conflict. Even so, the allocated value or preference to each role could offer a different perspective for the individual, achievement being considered when roles involvement is in accordance with values. Individuals are searching for fulfillment of their commitments and to experience success and satisfaction in their work and life (Eurofound, 2018).

Human well-being gained attention over the years being a core global issue today. Some international agencies publish annually reports at country level measuring the well-being and related indicators (McGillivray, 2007). Casey and Grzywacz (2008) researched underline the positive influence of flexibility on well-being. The employees who can decide when and where to work expressed a higher life satisfaction with improvement on work-life balance. The employees associate greater flexibility with better mental well-being, as flexibility enables them to better coordination of work life and personal life, this also is reducing stress. Addressing this issue could result in win-win satisfaction for workers and organizations (Casey & Grzywacz, 2008).

The employees' higher control over the where, how and timing of work has valuable effect for their well-being (Amichai-Hamburger, 2009). Wheatly (2012) identified the increase of available time of home-based teleworkers for household activities, especially for women. Thus, in recent years, the number of women employed in Europe has increased and the percent of those who have started working from home is higher than among men. The results show that due to time flexibility women have managed better their work-life balance while working from home. However, during non-working hours, the results show a percent of almost 30% of teleworkers working in their free time daily or several times weekly, while the office workers doing it is less than 5%. (Eurofound, 2021).

Furthermore, some studies focused on negative effects of telework are presented by Song and Gao (2019). Their research identifies the increase in stress for those bringing work at home after working hours and when working from home on weekends. Also, they present the effects of homework activities on parents' workers and the problem of blurring work and family life. The effects of remote work vary by the type of telework, by parental status, by gender, and by the day of the week (Song & Gao, 2019).

It is critical to investigate how people feel when working from home, the relationship between remote work and affective well-being. Telework could boost well-being but it is conditioned to maintaining social connections outside of the workplace. The affective well-being is also subject to personality types as for example some are more open to new experiences, others have a higher level of rumination (that combined with low openness could decrease well-being), others seek new sensations more or social connections (Anderson, Kaplan, & Vega, 2015). Baruch and Nicholson (1997) developed a framework of homeworking identifying the organizational and individual factors that affect both sides in positive or negative ways. They classified these influences in four major factors: *individual* including personality and situation, *organization* comprising its strategy and culture, *job* involving nature and technology, and *home & family* (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997). To these four factors of teleworking was added later the *environmental* factor encompassing safety and legal elements (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garces, 2020).

The perspective for 2030 of the European Union (EU), based on the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, is aiming at smart, sustainable and inclusive development. The target addressing labor force is to protect labor rights, advance safety, secure working environments and support health and well-being for every worker (United Nations, 2015). Thus, the *European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions* (Eurofound) is observing the advancement of working conditions and the quality of life since 1991 applying regular surveys. The impact of telework on social, environmental, and economic levels were included in their monitoring, as the behavioral responses to remote work are exceptionally complex (Moos, Andrey, & Johnson, 2006).

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of telework over the work-life balance and well-being of teleworkers as these two are overlap and inter-related to some degree and can be positively and negatively impacted.

Research methodology

The research focuses on the attitudes and perceptions regarding work-life balance and well-being of Romanian employees subsequently experiencing telework activities during the pandemic context 2020-2021.

Thus, a descriptive study was the appropriate method to be employed for this objective. Also, a descriptive analysis could provide the opportunity to study how the employees responded to the new working settings and pandemic context influences on work-life balance. To understand what are the employees' perceptions and behaviors, a quantitative analysis was carried out for a set of variables and items.

Since Eurofound provides through their reports knowledge to assist in the development of better social, employment and work-related policies since 1975, database was gathered from Eurofound's investigations. This European Union Agency collects comparable and reliable data on working conditions across European countries starting from 2005. Their most recent investigation related to the pandemic is the "Living, Working and COVID-19 E-survey" (LW-COVID-19). The survey was applied in several rounds in almost all EU members and for the research purpose have been selected the databases associated with June-July 2020 and Feb-March 2021. The sample size of Romanian respondents was 1,318 (out of 24,123 in total) in June-July 2020 (Sandor, Ahrendt, & Eurofound, 2020). The second database used in this research is The European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS) from 2016. In this survey participated 1,004 Romanian respondents out of 36,908 in total from 33 countries (Eurofound, 2016).

The framework for investigating the work-life balance in the case of Romanian employees during pandemic context and analysing the influences of working conditions in new settings upon the living ones, is shaped around two dimensions of job quality: working time and work intensity (Eurofound, 2021). To respond better to the research objectives have been selected the following variables: working hours per week, remote working hours per week and well-being index. Regarding the work intensity 4 items were considered that illustrate the employees' perceptions about the influence (positive or negative) of job tasks and responsibilities on free time. Due to the fact that descriptive analysis permit to conduct comparisons at different periods of times to see whether the patterns are similar or dissimilar at different points of time, have been selected three periods: before outbreak, results obtained for 2020 and for 2021.

Results and discussions

According to the LW-COVID-19 survey results of 2020 teleworking pattern in Romania was not a common practice before the outbreak. Thus, an important feature during the pandemic crisis is that remote work became the regular way of working for many Romanian employees with no experience or very little in this system. Based on the results of the LW-COVID-19 survey applied in July 2020 in the period of lockdown, the percentage of Romanian employees working only from home was around 31% and 52% in the hybrid system. Among the industry sectors, the highest incidence of teleworking was registered in the service sectors: education, financial services and public administration; and lower level was characteristic for the frontline sectors such as health, transport and agriculture, as well as in sectors that were subject to specific lockdown restrictions, like commerce and hospitality.

The European Quality of Life Surveys (EQLS) were carried out in 2003, 2007, 2011 and 2016. The latest survey covers some topics relevant to work-life balance and well-being. The results classified Romania below the European Union average in terms of well-being and work-life balance. The Romanian employees are less satisfied with their life, less happy, they work more hours than average, they come from work too tired, found it more difficult in fulfilling family responsibilities and due to these responsibilities, it's more difficult to concentrate on work (Eurofound, 2016). A tool widely used in the psychological field is the 5-item World Health Organisation Well-Being Index (WHO-5). It consists of five questions screening the mental well-being of the respondents (Topp, Østergaard, Søndergaard, & Bech, 2015). The scale is considered from 0 to 100 and a score equal to or less than 50 shows a risk of depression. The WHO-5 was included in EQLS 2016 and LW-COVID-19 surveys in 2020 and 2021. The results show a higher depreciation of employees' well-being in Romania than at EU level at the beginning of the pandemic compared with the EQLS results in 2016 but followed by an increase above the EU level in the first semester of 2021. The results indicate a better mental well-being recovery of the Romanian employees after the lockdowns and the pandemic implied risks.

Table 1. The 5-item Worlds Health Organisation Well-Being Index

	EQLS 2016	LW-COVID-19 Survey Jun-July 2020	LW-COVID-19 Survey Feb-March 2021
RO	66	47.2	49.3
EU	66	52.2	45.3

Source: Data selected from Eurofound EQLS 2016 and LW-COVID-19 surveys

Work-life balance and well-being of teleworkers are highly correlated to working time. Therefore, since remote work primarily allows both employees and employers to adapt work time and place to their needs the first dimension analysed was the perception regarding change of working hours in the remote system. The results indicate that the working time used in the remote system has been growing in comparison with the average hours/week resulting before the outbreak. Regarding the working time have been selected two representative items: changing of the working duration per week and the working time spent in a remote system. To establish the point of comparison for changes in the working time have been selected the average before the outbreak, based on EWCS6 from 2015 (EWCS6, 2015), which resulted in 40.8 hours/week for the Romanian employees. Based on Jun-July 2020 survey responses to the question “*Last month, how many hours per week did you work on average?*” for the Romanian employees resulted in a value of 50.9 hours/week. So, the outbreak and the Covid-19 context which imposed the implementation of the teleworking or hybrid system in many fields of activity, determined a significant growth of 24.7% in the working time, with a negative impact upon the work-life balance. Even if the average decreased to 48.5 hours/week in the survey applied during February-March 2021, still the gap remains important in the case of Romanian employees, as well when it is compared with the European average of 40.1 hours/week (Eurofound, 2020).

However, it seems the Romanian employees did not perceive this growth. Figure 1 displays these perceptions on a five levels scale. Based on these data a weighted score was computed, using a rating system from -2 (decreased a lot) to 2 (increased a lot) to evaluate the overall perception. Correspondingly an overall index of (- 0.24) indicates that even if the amount of working time increased, the general employees’ perception is

contrary. This result leads to the idea that remote working benefits like flexibility, greater autonomy and higher productivity were appreciated by Romanian employees strongly influence their perception. The issue emerging here is the perception of “extra” work hours gain by teleworkers not having to spend time on getting ready and commuting to the office, therefore some additional working hours was not such a burden. However, for long term this could get them unhappy as their working hours are more compared with the office workers (Amichai-Hamburger, 2009).

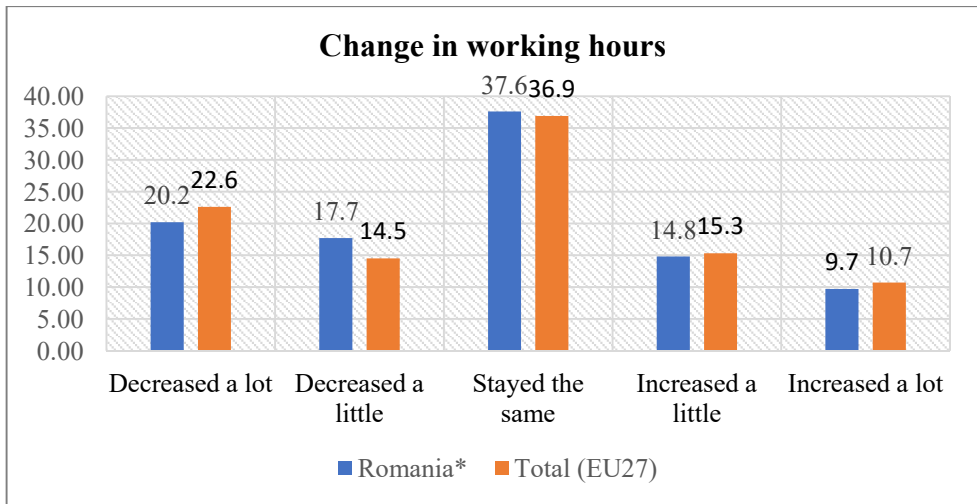


Figure 1. Perceptions about working hours in the remote system
Source: Author’s processing based on data provided by the Eurofound

For the second item related to working time have been selected the responses to the question *Out of the number of working hours/week, how many did you work from home?* and outcomes are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Average weekly working time

	Romania		Europe	
	Average working hours/week	Working hours/week from home	Average working hours/week	Working hours/week from home
Survey Jun-July 2020	50.9	10.6	41.5	14.2
Survey Feb-March 2021	48.5	11	40.1	14.5

Source: Data selected from Eurofound LW-COVID-19 surveys

In the case of Romanian employees resulted that after 2020 when the working hours from home represented 20% of the total average per week, in 2021 not only that the trend remains the same but even more, increased to 22%. In comparison to the mean at the European level, of 34-36% the working system in remote mode seems to be less utilized in the case of the Romanian economy. According to the 2021 survey, in countries like Belgium, Ireland, Finland, Netherlands the working hours from home represented more than 50% of the weakly working time (Eurofound, 2021). It is important to emphasize that the positive experience of employees and employers related to the implementation of the teleworking system during the COVID 19 context determined them to maintain it and even to embrace it more in 2021. Because of that, it is important to investigate also how the work intensity was perceived in this pandemic situation.

The second dimension investigated, work intensity has a higher potential influence upon the work-life and well-being of Romanian employees. For the analysis have been selected the following items:

- *Over the last 2 weeks, how often you have worked in your free time to meet work demands?*
- *Found that your job prevented you from giving the time you wanted to your family.*
- *Found that your family responsibilities prevented you from giving the time you should to your job.*
- *Felt too tired after work to do some of the household jobs which need to be done.*

Quantitative demands can be measured by the extent to which people have enough time to get their job done. Not always having enough time to get the job done denotes high quantitative demands and it is part of the work intensity with the potential to affect the work-life balance. Consequently, analyzing the responses obtained in both surveys, Jun-July 2020 and Feb-March 2021, resulted that the frequency to work during free time for accomplishing the job tasks increased in correlation with the intensification of working time in remote mode (Table 3). Because the incidence of these situations is not intense – higher percentages just for *Less often, Once or twice a week* response – this leads to the conclusion that the Romanian employees during Covid 19 context preferred to move

toward teleworking system because this doesn't diminish in an important ponder the work-life balance, but even contrary have been perceived having an insignificant effect upon the free time.

Table 3. Working during the free time

<i>Over the last 2 weeks, how often you have worked in your free time to meet work demands?</i>	Every day	Every other day	Once or twice a week	Less often	Never	Weighted averages
Survey Jun-July 2020	8.9	6.1	12.1	19.4	53.4	1.97
Survey Feb-March 2021	8.2 (-)	4 (-)	16.9 (+)	24.3 (+)	46.7 (-)	2.02

Source: Author's processing based on data provided by the Eurofound LW-COVID-19 surveys

Even working time increased with the experience of remote work, the most Romanian employees (75%) expressed their wish to continue working from home at least occasionally after the pandemic (Eurofound, 2020). Consequently, work-life balance is currently a tough challenge for employees and employers because telework will continue to intensify after the pandemic.

Regarding the work-life balance, the following two items are eloquent: job disallowed you from giving the time you wanted to your family and second family responsibilities prevented you from giving the time you should to your job. For 2021 in comparison with 2020 resulted, based on the Romanian employees' responses, a reduction of the situations when job tasks banned from giving enough time to spend with families. This comes in a strong connection with the minor reduction of working hours in 2021 compared to 2020 and a slight growth of the remote working time. The weighted average computed using a rating system from -2 (always) to 2 (never) increased from the overall 0.22 for the survey 2020 responses to 0.28 for 2021 survey responses. This result designates a small improvement of the work-life balance perceived by Romanian employees during the pandemic context and new working settings. On the other hand, in the case of Romanian employees, it turned out that the intensity of work is very rarely altered by family responsibilities, even if they are novices in experimenting with the remote work system.

Therefore, the percentages of responses with *Never* or *Rarely* to the question: *Found that your family responsibilities prevented you from giving the time you should to your job*, prevailed reaching a total of 80% (Figure 2). Making a comparison of the percentages obtained for both questions results that there is a lower incidence of the situations when the family responsibilities altered the working time in contrast with the situations when job tasks accomplishment waisted the free time spent with family. In the same idea, the computed Pearson coefficient between the responses of these two questions is -0.55, revealing an indirect correlation between the predominance of working time upon family time and the prevalence of family time upon working time. In conclusion, this evidence characterized an unbalanced work-life equilibrium for Romanian employees, especially for those working from home, there is often no physical separation between work and living spaces. This raises issues of unclear boundaries between work and non-work life, while the process of going out to work helps to delimit work and family.

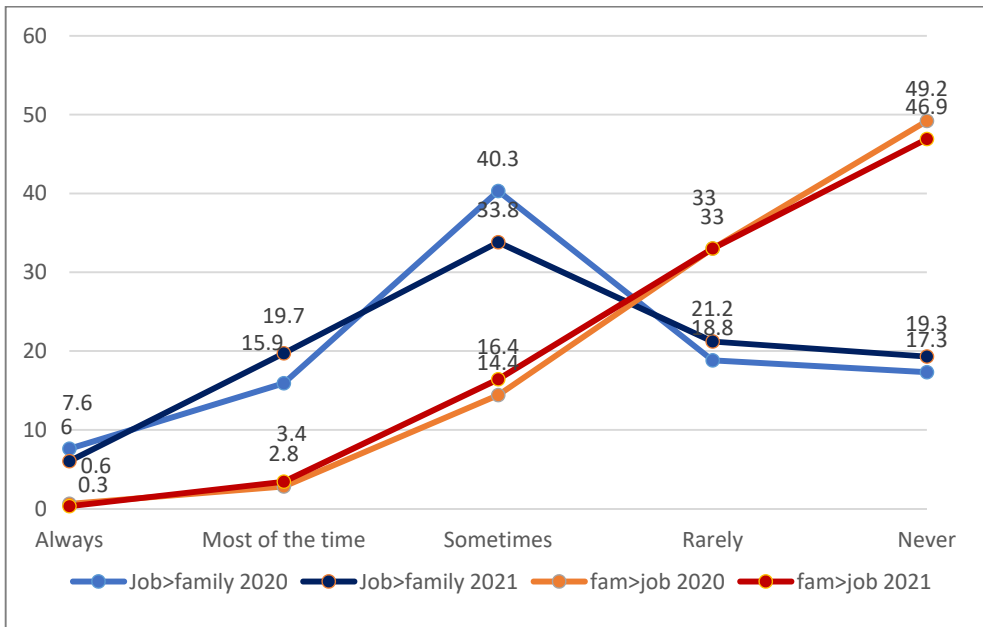


Figure 2. Job and family responsibilities comparison
 Source: Author’s processing based on data provided by the Eurofound LW-COVID-19 surveys

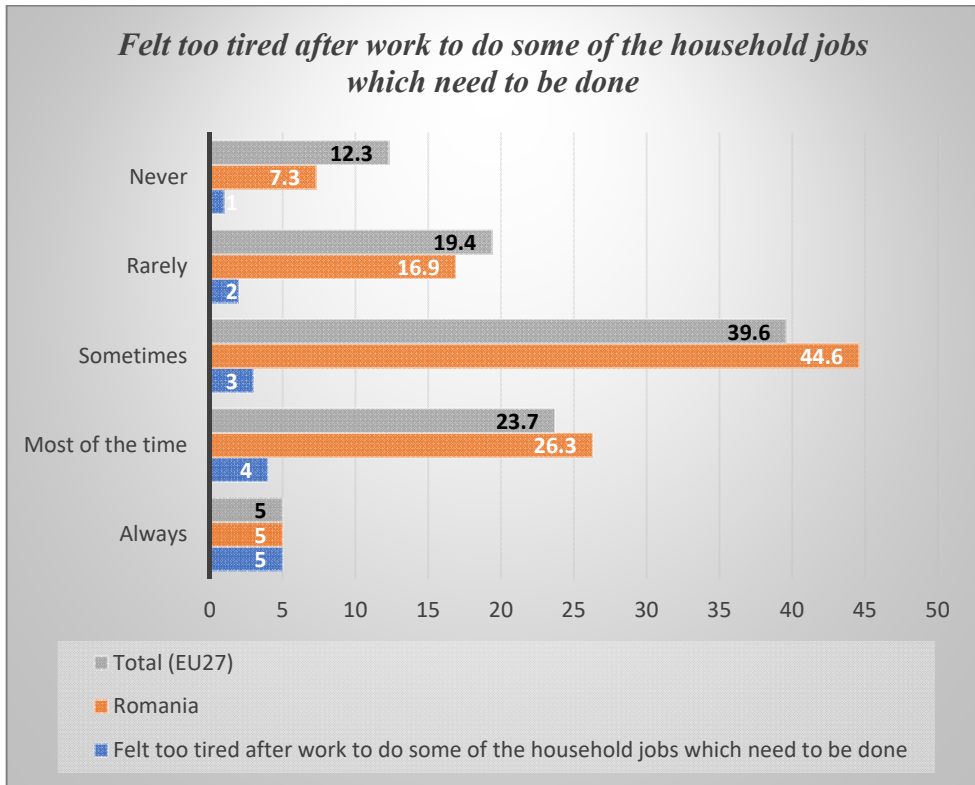


Figure 3. Work intensity and household responsibilities

Source: Author's processing based on data provided by the Eurofound LW-COVID-19 surveys

For a more comprehensive understanding of the work-life balance situation it was added the analysis of the responses to the question: *Felt too tired after work to do some of the household jobs which need to be done* (Figure 3). Respondents with children under 17 who worked only from home during the COVID-19 crisis reported a greater degree of work-life imbalance – both in comparison to those with children but working at the employer's premises or other locations and to those without children. It can be concluded that the work intensity, for Romanian employees during the pandemic context of 2020-2021, negatively influenced the non-work life, even if the spread of the remote system increased and carried the regular benefits like flexibility, job satisfaction and higher work productivity.

Conclusions

The increase of working time in remote system issue requires for different approach of Romanian teleworkers and organizational systems. There is a need for clearly defined work tasks and expectations, and family boundaries, teleworking training programs, like training to improve communication skills, self-time management or self-boundaries managing. It is very important that telework is design in a form of projects or assignments to facilitate effective results evaluation and a goal-oriented work achievement of employees. A formal clear policy guidance provided to teleworkers is mandatory in preparation for accomplishing expectations (Burrell, Barnard-Zaffino, & Ulomi, 2014). Furthermore, employers have the responsibility to facilitate a more sustainable working system offering adequate communication technology and tools with improving possibilities of digital skills and communication, establishing ways to connect and disconnect from work, also providing time management and self-boundary management trainings. These could enhance employees to reduce work-life blurring and the work intensity, being better prepared and having the necessary skills tailored to remote work.

In addition, the European Commission started earlier in 2017 to issue policies addressing employees' work-life balance. The latest rules concerning work-life balance asks for more adaptable working conditions with specific requests for parents and careers, and most important the flexible working arrangements. The rules were approved on 4 April 2019 and EU countries have three years to comply with the new rules (European Parliament, 2018). Also, the problematic subject of always-on status forced the police makers to consider and approve the law allowing employees to disconnect from work. This law was adopted by European Commission in January 2021 (European Parliament, 2021) and the right to disconnect follows to be integrated and embraced by teleworkers and their employers. The European social partners agreed, in order to overcome the challenges of telework, that it is necessary to train the employees and develop their digital skills, to provide ways to connect and disconnect form work, and to respect human dignity and surveillance (ETUC, BUSINESSEUROPE, CEEP, SMEunited, 2020). Such programs and policies will benefit employees, their families, and organizations.

This study highlights the work-life balance and well-being topics concerning Romanian teleworkers based and limited to the used data, still the respondents willing to continue working remote asks for further awareness and consideration. As home is psychologically the place for restoration the mixed of home activities and work activities impact the well-being, therefore further study on well-being of teleworkers from different remote locations needs more research. Work-life balance analysis in accordance with personality types should benefit of an in-depth relevant analysis. The work-life balance and well-being require specific attention to individuals, organizations, jobs, culture and environment in a comprehensive and sustainable way.

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