

TELEWORKERS' PERCEPTION OF WELL-BEING AND WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Article history: Received: November 2, 2022; Reviewed: November 25, 2022; Accepted: December 10, 2022; Available online: December 15, 2022; Available print: December 30, 2022.
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ABSTRACT. Few Romanian companies implemented remote work before the pandemic breakdown. The employees' experience with telecommuting started or for some increased suddenly in 2020 due to the lockdown restrictions. Therefore, the focus of this study was to examine the perception of employees from the perspective of well-being and work-life balance during telework. The quantitative approach was applied in the case of two companies and data was collected through a survey. The findings identified the influence of isolation from colleagues and friends on the state of loneliness which could lead to depression or tension, additionally affecting anxiety. These than are linked to the well-being and work-life balance of teleworkers. In reverse the state of calm and relaxation, and the condition of being active and energetic boost the employees' well-being. Also, the relaxed home working environment that could also include pets and time spent on personal activities enhance the work-life balance. Thus, the results emphasize the respondents' preference for telecommuting is the outcome of their awareness of work-life balance and well-being.

Keywords: work-life balance, well-being, remote work, anxiety, depression, WHO-5, Covid-19 pandemic.

JEL Classification: M100, M150, M540

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Recommended citation: Butoi, E., Fenesan, A.R., Balint, C.I., *Teleworkers' perception of well-being and work-life balance*, Studia UBB Negotia, vol. 67, issue 4 (December) 2022, pp. 65-78, doi: 10.24193/subbnegotia.2022.4.04

Introduction and literature review

One of the changes with a major impact on the lives of employees, caused by the Covid-19 pandemic which hit Europe in March 2020, was the enforced remote work. It influenced everyone, not only those who never experienced telecommuting before the pandemic wave (Kramer & Kramer, 2020). The measured implemented in Romania required employers to adapt to remote work where it was possible. Thus, with or without experiencing telework before, employees had to adjust and perform their tasks telecommuting and using information and communication technologies (ICTs).

As the technological explosion that has helped mankind in the past decades has brought about the greatest changes and advancements at all levels. Cutting-edge technologies have gradually been included in various sectors, such as health, communications, production at all industrial levels, economy, and finance, but also education and leisure, appearing then the remote work (Adhanom-Ghebreyesus, 2020).

In Europe the framework agreement on teleworking was given in 2002 and the first implementation report was presented in 2006. This agreement imposes the main conditions for employees to be able to work remotely, namely: the obligation of the employment contract, practicing telework regularly one day a week or 5 days a week, and the possibility of practicing it from several places, alternatives, compared to the space offered by the employer (ETUC, 2006). Romania regulated the term telework through Law 81/2018, as the way of organizing work, which gives the employee the opportunity to perform the work tasks using ICT, in a place different from the one provided by the employer (Legea, 2018). For telecommuting to be carried out, the company profile must allow it, as not all fields are suitable for telecommuting (Phillips, 2020).

According to Baruch (2002) through telecommuting, work autonomy increases, which ultimately leads to increased work performance (Gajendran, 2019). At the same time, Dima, Tuclea, Vranceanu, and Tigu (2019) state that this work at home benefits the employees, giving them the opportunity to spend more time with their families, thus finding a balance between family/personal life and work. Furthermore, work autonomy means that the employee obtains independence and flexibility in working from home (Gajendran & David, 2007). Also, the working time flexibility reduces the conflicts between work and personal life (Negruşa & Butoi, 2021).

Well-being is subjective as it can only be measured from people's self-ratings of their happiness and is typically assessed as the experience of positive affect, the absence of negative affect and life satisfaction (Dolan et al., 2011). Well-being research provides empirical evidence that happy people are more productive (Zelenski et al., 2008). One study observed that happy people feel less preoccupied with negative threats in everyday life, receive more support from superiors and especially from colleagues, therefore they feel they have more control on events in their lives (Wright & Cropanzano, 2007).

Research focused on work life and personal life emphasizes that finding and maintaining a balance between work schedule and other aspects of daily life is essential for people who tend to lead active lives. It also points out that a better work-life balance is also an indicator of good quality of life and general well-being, which would allow workers to lead a healthy lifestyle and live happier lives (Byron, 2005). Various researchers have suggested that only when work is designed to reflect certain characteristics it can generate employees' well-being, job satisfaction, performance, and other positive outcomes. The identified characteristics are motivational, social, knowledge (Humphrey et al., 2007) tasks interdependency, and work autonomy (Perry et al., 2018). Other dedicated studies have associated remote work with higher levels of well-being (Anderson et al., 2015) and with much lower levels of stress (Bentley, et al., 2016). The research in this area has focused mainly on comparing benefits for telecommuters and office workers (Fonner & Roloff, 2010).

One study considers that telecommuting is a disadvantage for employees because there is not so much interaction between the teleworker and colleagues and between the teleworker and supervisors. The longer telework is practiced the more it can lead to professional isolation and increased stress, being associated with poorer performance of teleworkers (Golden et al., 2008). Grant-Valone and Donaldson, in the study carried out in 2001, consider that telecommuting will ultimately affect well-being and health, because telecommuters do not manage to fulfill their family responsibilities, being overwhelmed by the workload. They also emphasize the fact that more and more employees are interested in how they can change professional and personal roles, in order to avoid conflict between the two (Grant-Valone & Donaldson, 2001).

The World Health Organization uses a short index, the WHO-5, to measure the mental health status of populations. This index is widely used to assess psychological well-being (Topp et al., 2015). Subjects have to rate how they felt during the last 2 weeks using 5 items: whether they felt cheerful and in a good mood, calm and relaxed, active and energetic, whether they wake up like new and rested, and if their daily life was full of things that interest them. The score result is between 0-100, and for interpretation it is considered that a score below 50 indicates poor health with a high risk of depression and of diseases that affect memory, behavior and thinking such as Alzheimer's. A score above 50 indicates good mental health, and one very close to 100 indicates that subjects have very good mental health (Pop, 2010). The results of a study carried out at European level, to determine the state of mental health of Europeans in time of pandemic, indicated that Romania's score is below 50. Thus, in April and May 2020 the score was only 44.6, June and July 2020 recorded a very small increase reaching 47.2 and in 2021 during February and March it did not exceed the threshold of 50, Romania having a score of only 49.3. This result places the population in the risk segment for mental illnesses (Eurofound, 2021).

Anxiety is a normal emotion that fulfills an adaptive function in most situations, it is the body's surveillance part. On the other hand, it is considered that anxiety is a state of apprehension, of restlessness in anticipation of a danger whose source is mostly unknown (Neffa, 2015). Jeske (2022) emphasizes in the study how important it is for employees and

employers to be aware of the state of mental health, because teleworkers can feel isolated, they can lose the support of colleagues, telecommuting could cause them tension, negative emotions and attitudes, aslo anxiety. These all can lead to poor performance through the multitude of errors they can make due to their mental exhaustion, and this level of stress and anxiety cannot be easily noticed by superiors if employees work remotely (Jeske, 2022). Burnout is the type of stress conceptualized as work-related exhaustion (Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). Employees tend to work too much overtime to prove themself, and if they don't feel appreciated for their efforts, they become frustrated. Therefore, they are prone to get angry very easily causing work conflicts, a fact due to physical and emotional exhaustion. This condition can cause them to have an emotional breakdown that prompts them to stop making any effort to accomplish their tasks, or to quit their job (UGT, 2006).

From another perspective, Delanoetje (2020) points out that telecommuters who own pets have an important support in preventing loneliness and depression, especially in the case of those who live alone. In addition to improving their mood, considering the mental and emotional benefits, pets also provide physical benefits by getting telecommuters to exercise (Delanoetje, 2020). According to another study, telecommuters who own pets spend more quality time with their family, have a well-established physical exercise routine, and their degree of socialization is higher than those without pets (Hoffman, 2021).

The several studies carried out during and post the pandemic highlighted various factors that influence remote work, the studies having different perspectives and approaches. Under these circumstances, the inquiry into the supportive and damaging elements of telecommuting is a useful research opportunity considering the reduce experience of Romanian employees in this type of work.

Research Methodology

The research was conducted using quantitative methodology to explore the well-being and work-live balance of teleworkers, and as well their preference for remote work. The data was gathered in May 2022 through the questionnaire research instrument. The questionnaire was

applied in the financial department of two companies from Cluj-Napoca. The sample consists of 205 subjects, 102 from the first company and 103 respondents from the second company. The quiz form was distributed online to the members of the two companies' departments. The questionnaire contained structured questions using the Likert scale and nominal-multidimensional scale.

Sample characteristics

The study sample includes 205 employees, with a little higher percentage of females than males. More than half of respondents from each company have the age between 26 and 35 years old. The majority, above 60%, of respondents from each company have at least a bachelor's degree. As seen in table 1 most of the respondents don't have a leading position in the company.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the respondents (n=205)

Dimension	Item	Percentage company A	Percentage company B
Gender	Masculine	46	42
	Feminine	58	54
Age	above 55 years	0	1
	46-55 years	4	0
	36-45 years	28	24
	26-35 years	54	62
	18-25 years	14	13
Study level	PhD degree	3	0
	Master's degree	27	17
	Bachelor's degree	60	66
	College degree	1	2
	High school degree	9	15
Position in the organization	Leading	20	28
	Non-Leading	80	72

Source: Authors' processing based on research data

Results

The analysis focuses on several hypotheses presented below. The linear and multiple linear regression are applied, and the following coefficients considered in the data interpretation: the beta coefficient indicating the positive or negative link between variables, the correlation coefficient representing the intensity of the correlation, the coefficient of determination (R^2) signifying the percentage in which the variation in the independent variable is explaining the variation in the dependent variable, and p -values < 0.05 of accepted hypotheses. To identify statistically significant differences between groups, is used the analysis of variance, including post-hoc test (George & Mallery, 2002). The data was analyzed using the free statistical software PSPPP.

Hypothesis 1. Loneliness is influenced by colleagues and friends' isolation.

Analyzing the link between the variables using multiple linear regression, a strong positive ((the beta coefficient being positive) direct link is observed given by the linear correlation coefficient ($R=0.79 > 0.7$). The coefficient of determination ($R^2=62\%$) shows the percentage in which the variation of loneliness is explained by the variation of isolation from friends and from colleagues' variables. The most influential factor is the isolation from friends (Beta=0.59), while isolation from colleagues is less prominent (Beta=0.26; $p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis 2. The state of depression and disappointment of teleworkers is induced by loneliness.

The linear regression shows there is a strong direct relationship ($R=0.72 > 0.7$) between the two variables. The coefficient of determination shows that the variation in the state of loneliness explains the variation in the state of depression and disappointment in proportion to 51% ($p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis 3. There is a correlation between the state of loneliness and the tense emotional state.

The linear regression indicates a direct link of average intensity ($0.3 < R=0.48 < 0.7$) between the two variables. The coefficient of determination shows that the variation in the tense state explains in proportion of 23% the variation in the loneliness state of teleworkers ($p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis 4. There is a correlation between the state of tension and the state of relaxation and calmness.

The linear regression identifies an inverse relationship of average intensity (beta=-0.49) between the tense state and the relaxed and calm state of the respondents. The variation in the state of tension is explained by the variation in the state of calmness and relaxation to the extent of 24% ($p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis 5. Between the state of tension and the state of being active and energetic is a reverse correlation.

An inverse relation of medium intensity (beta=-0.44) is observed between the tense state and the active and energetic state of the respondents. The variation of the tension state is explained in proportion of 21% by the variation of the active and energetic state ($p < 0.001$).

Hypothesis 6. The state of disappointment and depression is affected by owning or not pets.

The analysis of variance (one-way Anova) identifies a statistically significant differences between the groups of pets' owners ($p = 0.001 < 0.05$) in terms of the state of disappointment and depression. Furthermore, the post-hoc test (LCD) shows the statistically significant difference between the owners of no pet and the owners of one pet ($p = 0.004 < 0.05$), also between those having no pet and the owners of two pets ($p = 0.007 < 0.05$). The difference is not significant between those having no pet and the owners of three pets, as this group was not well represented, having just 7 respondents ($p = 0.092 > 0.05$).

Hypothesis 7. The WHO-5 score is significantly influenced by owning or not pets.

The one-way Anova identifies a statistically significant differences between the groups of pets' owners ($p = 0.022 < 0.05$) in terms of the WHO-5 score. Fisher's Least Significant Difference test (LCD) shows the statistically significant difference between the owners of no pet and the owners of one pet ($p = 0.01 < 0.05$), also between those having no pet and the owners of two pets ($p = 0.008 < 0.05$).

Hypothesis 8. The spending of more quality time with family is related to owning pets.

The one-way Anova identifies a statistically significant differences between the groups of pets' owners ($p=0.018<0.05$) concerning the quality time spent with family. Fisher's Least Significant Difference test (LCD) shows the statistically significant difference between the owners of no pet and the owners of one pet ($p=0.028<0.05$), also between those having no pet and the owners of two pets ($p=0.003<0.05$).

Hypothesis 9. The state of anxiety while teleworking is influenced by the difficulty in concentrating, by the state of isolation and tension, also by the feeling the work done is useless.

The multiple linear regression shows a strong direct relationship ($R=0.78>0.7$) between the dependent variable and the independent variables. The variation in the state of anxiety is explained in proportion of 30% by the variation in the capacity to concentrate, in proportion of 28% by the variation in the state of isolation, in proportion of 17%, by the variation in the state of tension, and in proportion of 25% by the feeling the work done is useless ($p<0.05$).

Hypothesis 10. The work-life balance during telecommuting is negatively influenced by the state of anxiety and depression.

The multiple linear regression shows there is a medium inverse direct relationship ($0.3<R=0.51<0.7$) between the dependent variable and the independent variables. The variation in the work-life balance is explained in proportion of 31% by the variation in the state of depression, and in proportion of 25% by the variation in the state of anxiety ($p<0.05$).

Hypothesis 11. The work-life balance during teleworking is influenced by the more relaxed home environment and the more time spent on personal activities.

The multiple linear regression identifies a medium positive direct relationship ($0.3<R=0.65<0.7$) between the dependent variable and the independent variables. The variation in the work-life balance is explained in proportion of 37% by the variation in the comfortable home environment, and in proportion of 35% by the variation in spending more time doing personal activities ($p<0.001$).

Hypothesis 12. The work-life balance influences the teleworkers' preference for continuing in the telecommuting system.

The linear regression shows a direct link of average intensity ($0.3 < R = 0.65 < 0.7$) between the two variables. The variation in the work-life balance explains in proportion of 42% the variation in the preference for remote work ($p < 0.001$).

Discussions and Conclusions

The results of this study highlight the positive or negative effects of some factors on the well-being and work-life balance of employees in the case of the two companies investigated.

Isolation from colleagues and friends affects the state of loneliness, which in turn can lead to depression or a state of agitation. On the other hand, this state of tension is inversely correlated with the state of calm and relaxation as well as with the state of being active and energetic. The isolation in time of pandemic was forced, thus it was highly affected by lack of social interaction. As in normal conditions isolation from colleagues could lead to positive effects, like lacking interruptions and work satisfaction (Fonner & Roloff, 2010).

The state of anxiety is influenced by the difficulty of concentration, the state of isolation, the tense state, and the feeling that the work done is useless. On the other hand, states of anxiety and depression negatively influence the balance between professional and private life. The states of frustration and anxiety should be more closely followed by employers in teleworkers, but also that the latter should express them, because in addition to the state of anxiety due to isolation from other people, telecommuters can still be frustrated because they don't consider themselves eligible for this type of work (Nagata, et al., 2021). But also the fact that telecommuters are prone to working overtime makes them likely to be stressed, more tired than normal, to have sleep problems, thus increasing the level of anxiety (Tavares, 2017).

An interesting result is the one related to people who own pets and their positive effect on the quality time spent with the family, a result also mentioned by Hoffman (2021). Moreover, the presence of pets has a positive effect on mental states (WHO-5), an effect considered preventive in terms of depression and loneliness (Delanoije, 2020). There is a

difference between those having no pet and those having one or two in terms of WHO-5 score. The risk of depression and anxiety is lower among pets' lovers.

The mean WHO-5 score of the sample is 76.49 and there were just 18 out of 205 persons having the WHO-5 score below 50. This indicates the risk of anxiety and depression is low among the respondents. However, the respondents with a score below 50 are subject to mental health issues. In the case of persons with a score below 28 the situation is more urgent and requests further investigations (Pop, 2010). Because prevention is essential in the management of human resources, every result of the current research that indicates a risk with repercussions on the health of the employees should be taken into account.

Work-life balance is positively affected by a relaxed home environment and the time spent on personal activities. In addition, the employees' preference to continue in the telecommuting system is due to the work-life balance they perceived in the time of remote work experience.

Due to the sample size of this study, also the unnormal time of telecommuting experience, the study requires to be performed in normal conditions of remote work and after a period. This study also enquired items concerning the ergonomic environment of teleworkers, but significant correlations were not identified. Probably the short experience of working in different conditions didn't affect their physical health in a significant way. Therefore, a later redo of the study would be essential for long term experience of telecommuting to support employees' well-being and health. Nevertheless, the study provides valuable insights into the supportive and damaging elements of telecommuting that could improve employers' approach.

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