

CURRENT SITUATION AND PERSPECTIVE REGARDING TELEWORK IN THE PERCEPTION OF MANAGERS FROM SMALL AND MEDIUM- SIZED ENTERPRISES

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Abstract:

The interest of specialists and practitioners in telework peaked in recent times, in the context of the pandemic, on the one hand, and also in the context of the extension of the use of information technology, on the other hand.

In this paper, we propose to understand, identify and delineate certain relevant aspects, but also some possible evolutions regarding telework within a predictable time frame of one year, through conducting a circumstantial enquiry among managers and entrepreneurs from some small and medium-sized enterprises in Romania (the municipality of Bucharest and the surrounding areas, namely Ilfov county). The main elements that we took into account are the following: aspects concerning the carrying out of economic activity under the conditions of telework, tele-employees and the perception regarding professional and personal life, the challenges of teleworking.

Managers who participated in the enquiry admit that there are certain causes which limit the activity of the company they represent, and telework, equipment and insufficient demand determine this phenomenon. On the other hand, managers characterize the impact of telework, currently carried out, on the company's turnover as being a positive one. The managers' perception regarding telework in the context of putting an end to the pandemic is that it will decrease, firstly due to the necessity of direct human contact.

Keywords: telework, teleworking employees, challenges regarding telework, circumstantial enquiry.

1. Introduction

In the context of the SARS-COV-19 pandemic, telework has been and continues to be a solution for carrying out economic activities, therefore for the survival, maintenance and/or development of activities, on the one hand, but also for safeguarding and maintaining jobs, on the other hand. It can be asserted that the pandemic imposed telework, in Romania at least, as in other states this type of activity is better developed. In the current context, telework seems to be or truly is the saving solution. The development of technology allows teleworking, even via smartphone, but also creates new jobs, and has negative effects on personal and social life (Lapierre et al., 2016).

Several studies discuss the need for management to manifest a positive attitude towards telework in order for such an activity to manifest positive results (Beham et al., 2015; Silva et al., 2019; Green et al., 2020), and while telework benefits for employees become organizational benefits, implementing a telework program is ultimately a top-management decision (Harker Martin and MacDonnell, 2012). Managerial perception is, therefore, essential for telework adoption and it requires evidence that organizational outcomes of telework could outweigh the costs and consequences of the alternative.

The current study investigates the perceptions of managers in the context of telework. In doing so, we seek to compare positive and negative views on the organizational impact, on life and on the macroeconomic impact of telework. The results contribute to a better understanding of the telework phenomenon and allow an anticipatory approach of the challenges that supervisors face in managing telework. We begin by reviewing the relevant literature in the context of telework, focusing especially on studies and statistics published under recent SARS-COV-19 restrictions, and on the literature focusing on positive and negative results of telework implementation. Secondly, in order to establish the perceptions of managers on the impact of telework conditions, we use a qualitative study under the form of a circumstantial enquiry on their field of activity. We focus on the present and future situation of the unit they lead, the economic climate in which it developed, and the perceived professional impact it exerts. Finally, based on the results of our empirical analysis, we provide implications for future research and practice.

2. Literature review

The concept of telework appeared and was developed during the '70s, being an alternative way of working. Nilles (1975) uses the concept of "telecommuting network" as a substitute / alternative to ordinary work using modern communications.

A report by Eurofund and The International Labor Office (2021) states: "Working from home, far away or outside the space of an organization, other than in a traditional way, has become a widespread phenomenon." Hoeven and Van Zoonen (2015) support the idea of the proliferation of telework as an effect of employees and organizations' access to new technologies.

In Romania, telework is regulated by Law no. 81/2018 (Labour Inspection, 2018), being defined as "the form of work organization through which the employee, regularly and voluntarily, fulfills the attributions specific to the position, occupation or profession he has, in another place than the work organized by the employer, at least one day a month, using information and communication technology (ICT)".

In the US, for example, President Barack Obama signed the "Telework Enhancement Act" in 2010, which requires all companies to set policies for telework. Thus, work from home is officially recognized. The official definition of "telework" can be found in the "Telework Enhancement Act" of 2010: "the term 'telework' or 'teleworking' refers to a work

arrangement according to which an employee carries out the duties and responsibilities of his or her position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which he or she would otherwise work." In practice, "telework" is a work arrangement that allows someone to perform work, during any part of regular, paid hours, at an approved and agreed upon alternative worksite (home, telework center). This definition of telework comprises what is generally known as remote work, but does not include any part of work done while on official travel or mobile work (OPM, 2021).

The adoption of telework as a result of the Covid-19 situation by both public institutions and private companies relies on the citizens'/employees' responsibility and the social initiative to reduce the impact of economic inactivity and ensure the continuity of their employers' performance (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). Furthermore, in order for telework conditions to allow the organisation to flourish, an organisational culture based on mutual trust is necessary (Baruch, 2000), as well as the use of multiple ICT tools, to allow efficient communication and supervision (Park& Cho, 2020).

Although telework was practiced in many companies before the pandemic, it was not extended to the current level; the pandemic took businesses and employees by surprise. Some age groups proved more flexible in the new context (35-49 years), while others (50+ years) proved to be either hesitant or slower to adapt. Varlamova and Previtali (2020) state: "The lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a change in work arrangements and forced many employers to provide the possibility or even obligation to work from home to their employees. The introduction of these modalities has been drastic, and many organizations, managers, as well as employees, were not prepared for this change."

Telework seems to become the new normal, an aspect supported by Eurofund statistics, which highlight the fact that 40% of employees work from home, using modern technology, as an effect of the pandemic. Regarding Romania, in July 2020, approximately 22-24% of employees worked from home, compared to 1% in the same period, in 2019.

The following figure (Fig. no. 1.) shows the situation of working from home by country, as a consequence of the pandemic.

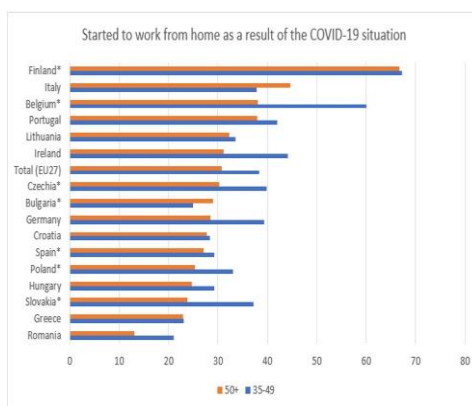


Fig. no. 1: The situation regarding the work from home by country

Source: Based on Eurofound (2020), Living, working and COVID-19 dataset, Dublin, <http://eurofound.link/covid19data>. Excluded EU countries had insufficient data, data on countries marked with () is low reliable.*

It is interesting to know who works from home. According to Oprica (Business Magazin, 2021): "In general, people with a high level of education and who perform tasks with a high degree of added value from the point of view of knowledge work from home." The same author supports the idea that telework is closely linked to "the quality of housing, which is also a consequence of education." In other words, in order to carry out the telework activity under favorable conditions, an adequate space is needed, which will ensure the right environment, as it will also make its mark on personal life.

On the other hand, López-Igual and Rodríguez-Modroño (2020) emphasize that the most common determinants of telework are currently still self-employment, namely the high educational levels, the service industry and other non-manual occupations, especially those that require high-skills. In addition, factors such as age, urban residence, high status, better working conditions have less significance with the expansion of telework. The more telework is adopted by companies, factors which were initially required for this type of work evolve or disappear, and we see new teleworkers become available. However, although major focus has been placed on teleworkers' perceptions in general or as subordinates, managers' telework impact perceptions should not be overlooked, as Park & Cho (2020) assess, namely that managers are required to consider multiple organizational consequences of telework when making managerial decisions, because supervising employees and company results from afar may pose new challenges (Golden & Fromen, 2011).

Telework can also imply increased expectations concerning employee work performance, availability, and accessibility (Lott & Abendroth, 2020; Putman et al., 2014), suggesting that the use of telework by managers may be associated with longer working hours, an increase in work intensity, as well as conflicts between professional and personal life (Chung, 2019). Due to reduced physical visibility and spatial separation, managers must overcome the difficulty of behaviour-based control, and must employ the use of ICT to follow-up on employees, as well as a series of control mechanisms to increase the visibility of telework outputs (Bathini & Kandathil, 2020).

Recent research on companies adjusting to the Covid-19 pandemic (Barrero et al., 2020; Buchheim et al., 2020; Papanikolaou and Schmidt, 2020) reveals that companies with high work-from-home quotas registered lower financial declines and less job cuts. Despite the economic effects of the pandemic, opportunities for a greener economy, increased online communication and the adoption of new technologies may create a basis for a breakthrough in telework implementation (Alipour et al., 2020).

Regarding the managers' perceived impact of telework on employees, academic research shows ambivalent results, especially in the case of enforced telework (Mattern et al., 2021).

The main benefits comprise increased productivity and autonomy, reduced times for commuting, a healthier balance between work and private life, lower employer overheads,

new skills acquired by employees and managers (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). The main problems may include technological stress, social isolation, lack of peer support, presenteeism, unclear work and private life boundaries, career disadvantages, role overload and stress (Mattern et al., 2021, Dettmers et al., 2016). This lack of physical boundaries makes it difficult for the entire enterprise to balance the work and private settings, especially in the work from home setting, in which some of the employees have no prior experience and must cope with all of the changes of the new work environment, including with the technological adaptation (Mazmanian & Erickson, 2014). Although the use of collaboration platforms such as Microsoft Teams facilitates collaboration, employees may witness increased communication volumes and be prone to experience lower performance and increased stress levels (Stephens et al., 2017).

3. Research methodology

The present research falls under the category of qualitative research and is realised with a view to allowing a better understanding of the issues tackled in this paper. The obtained results are of a qualitative nature and cannot be extrapolated.

The circumstantial enquiry targets managers/ specialists/ professionals in their respective field of activity, as they have an overview of the current and future situation of the unit they lead and the economic climate in which the activity is carried out. The main characteristic of circumstantial enquiries is that, instead of exact numbers, the usual answer is an appreciation of the indicator in relation to the "normal" level (INSSE, 2021). The received answers are processed and the final result is obtained under the form of a circumstantial percentage point balance, which represents the difference between the percentage of those who indicated the positive variant of the phenomenon and the percentage of those who indicated the negative variant. The answers "normal", "the same", "indifferent", "approximately the same" are ignored.

A positive circumstantial balance shows that favorable answers are more numerous than unfavorable ones and, thus, a favorable evolution (tendency) of the phenomenon.

A negative circumstantial balance shows that unfavorable answers are more numerous than favorable ones and, thus, an unfavorable evolution (tendency) of the phenomenon.

For a better understanding of the importance and relevance of this method, we present below a series of methodological aspects that we took into account.

3.1 The preliminary phase of the research

Understanding the phenomenon of telework is the problem of decision makers. Through this research we propose to delimit certain coordinates which target a time frame of one year regarding the investigated phenomenon.

The goal of the research is to know better, identify and delineate some possible evolutions concerning telework, within a predictable time frame. Regarding the objectives of the research, we intend:

- to identify the tendencies of improvement or worsening of the socio-economic situation;
- to evaluate the increasing or decreasing evolution of the turnover;
- to establish possibilities for the carrying out of telework activities;
- to know the positive or negative impact of telework on professional and personal life;
- to make evaluations concerning the extension or not of telework in the next year;
- to determine the positive or negative impact of telework on the turnover;
- to determine the perception regarding the evolution of the number of employees (increase vs. decrease);
- to establish the causes which impact the evolution of the number of employees;
- to highlight some tendencies concerning the number of employees in the next year;
- to identify the most relevant challenges regarding the limitation of the company's activity.

Taking into account the previously presented analysis of the literature, we consider the following hypotheses:

- H1: The socio-economic situation in Romania will be approximately the same;
- H2: The evolution of the turnover will be decreasing;
- H3: Telework is carried out in a major proportion;
- H4: The impact of telework on professional life is positive;
- H5: In the next year, telework will be approximately the same;
- H6: Telework has a positive impact on the turnover;
- H7: The decrease of the number of teleworkers, as a result of the pandemic;
- H8: In the context of the end of the pandemic, telework within the company will be reduced;
- H9: The most important challenges regarding telework are: getting infected with Covid, the work program, proper equipments.
- H10: Identifying telework as an important cause for the limitation of the company's activity.

We think that the obtained information will contribute to a better understanding of the investigated phenomenon, namely telework, as well as to an anticipatory approach of the related issues; also, it allows the formulation of a certain perspective on telework in a time frame of one year.

3.2 Research design

The primary information that our research is based on (sources of information) are obtained from small and medium-sized organizations, through their representatives (managers or entrepreneurs/business owners), who responded to our enquiry.

Regarding the selection of the modality of gathering and structuring information, the used method is that of self-registration (organization managers fill in the form, which was sent to them by e-mail, according to instructions). The sample includes 58 managers, coordinators, entrepreneurs, professionals with at least 5 years of experience in their field of work, who coordinate activities from the sphere of services of some organizations and carry out economic activities mostly in Bucharest and Ilfov county.

The enquiry took place between February and March 2021, via e-mail.

3.3 Methods

The gathering of information was made through a google form (questionnaire) sent via e-mail. The situation regarding the positions occupied by the investigated managers/entrepreneurs is presented in the table below.

Table no. 1: Positions occupied by respondents

Current no.	Position	No. of investigated persons
1.	Coordinating teacher/ Training coordinator	8
2.	Administrator/ Entrepreneur	7
3.	IT Coordinator	3
4.	Activity coordinator in public institutions	5
5.	Quality manager	2
6.	Marketing/ market research coordinator	6
7.	Project/ team manager/ coordinator	3
8.	Accountant/ chief economist/ chief financial officer	6
9.	Sales/ commercial/ logistic manager	10
10.	Travel agency coordinator	1
11.	Real estate agency coordinator	1
12.	Pharmacy supervisor	1
13.	Product manager	4
14.	Medical care manager	1
TOTAL		58

Processing the information implied preparing the data and information in order to be analyzed and interpreting everything through the use of editing, codification and tabulation.

Table no. 2: Question text and abbreviation

Code	Question	Negative	Neutral	Positive
q1	1. How do you evaluate the evolution of the socio-economic situation in the following year:	it will get worse	it will remain approximately the same	it will improve
q2	2. How do you evaluate your company's demand (turnover) in the following year:	it will decrease	it will remain approximately the same	it will increase
q3	3. Have there been teleworking activities in your company in the past year?	no	hybrid	yes
q4	4. What is your opinion regarding the impact of telework on the professional life of employees?	negative	neutral	positive
q5	5. Do you think that telework in the following year:	will decrease	will remain approximately the same	will increase
q6	6. How do you characterize the impact of telework from your company on the turnover?	negative	indifferent/satisfactory	positive
q7	7. How do you think that the telework in your company will impact the turnover in the following year?	low/ very low	indifferent	good/ very good
q8	8. Do you estimate that the number of employees from your company in the past year:	decreased	remained approximately the same	increased
q9	9. Do you estimate that the number of teleworking employees from your company in the following year:	will decrease	will remain approximately the same	will increase
q10	10. Do you estimate that, in the context of the end of the pandemic, telework within your company:	will be reduced	will remain approximately the same	will expand

q11	11. How do you evaluate the impact of telework on the personal life of the employees from your company?	negative	indifferent/ satisfactory	positive
q13	13. Are there causes which limit the economic situation of your company?	no	-	yes
q14	14. If the demand/ turnover of your company increases, could you increase the volume of the activity with your current resources?	no	-	yes

Moreover, we employed open questions (q8.1, q 12, q 13.1, q 14.1), thus giving the respondent the possibility to nuance an answer to a closed question. These questions target the finding of answers to problems such as: the identification of the causes which make their mark on the evolution of the number of employees, the main challenges of telework within the respective company, the identification of the causes which limit the company’s activity, the extent to which the company’s activity could increase, using the current resources, in the context of a higher demand.

The analysis and interpretation of information takes into account the highlighting of some more important aspects drawn from the conducted research.

The presentation of the research results includes the main elements emphasized after the enquiry was conducted.

4. Research results

In the following table we present the percentage of the evaluations for each question, as it resulted from the given questionnaires; these are the analysis elements on the basis of which we determined the circumstantial balance.

Table no. 3: The evaluations’ percentage

Question	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Positive (%)
q1	25.9	44.8	29.3
q2	12.3	61.4	26.3
q3	6.9	24.1	69.0
q4	24.1	27.6	48.3
q5	19.0	51.7	29.3
q6	19.0	37.9	43.1

q7	13.8	43.1	43.1
q8	28.1	63.2	8.8
q9	29.8	54.4	15.8
q10	44.8	36.2	19.0
q11	26.3	28.1	45.6
q13	43.1	-	56.9
q14	37.9	-	62.1

Regarding the general socio-economic evolution, managers estimate a slight improvement, almost imperceptible, the circumstantial balance being of 3.4%; we can state that the estimates are moderate. We evaluate it as being a moderate opinion of a rather sustained current situation. Thus, hypothesis H1 is confirmed.

According to the estimates, the turnover/ demand will register an increase in the following year, the circumstantial balance being of 14%. We think that the managers' opinion is interesting, to say the least, in the previously mentioned context concerning the general evolution of the socio-economic situation. Therefore, we underline the cautious optimism of professionals who estimate an increase in demand for the company they represent in the context of a relatively constant general climate. Thus, hypothesis H2 is ruled out.

The enquired managers were asked to give an answer regarding the concrete situation of the company they represent in relation to the carried out telework activity and the obtained results show that in 69% of the cases this type of activity is exclusive, in 24.1% of the cases there was a hybrid work program, and in 6.9% of the cases there were no telework activities. As the majority of them are in the service sector, the fact that the telework activities are carried out in a significant proportion is understandable, as the specificity of the work allows this. Thus, hypothesis H3 is confirmed.

It is interesting to see the managers' perception concerning the impact of telework on the professional life of those who carry out remote activities: positive 48.3%, neutral 27.6% and negative 24.1%. Therefore, the circumstantial balance is of 24.2%, which shows a positive perception in relation to the impact of telework on the employees' professional life. Thus, hypothesis H4 is confirmed.

The tendencies of telework in the following year are of major importance for companies and for employees. As a result of our research, we notice a moderate positive tendency for extension, which has a circumstantial balance of 10.3%. Thus, we can state that hypothesis H5 is partially true, telework remaining approximately the same within the time frame of one year, with a slight tendency to extend.

Managers characterize the impact of telework (currently carried out) on the company's turnover as being a positive one and the circumstantial balance is relevant in this sense: 24.1%. Therefore, telework does not have a negative influence on the company's turnover, which is encouraging given the fact that the pandemic is still a hot topic, telework will be

maintained, at least at the current level, and the perception concerning the effects on the profession are positive.

Regarding the impact of telework on the following year's turnover, the managers' perception is positive, the circumstantial balance being of 29.3%. Thus, hypothesis H6 is confirmed.

In relation to the evaluations of the number of employees from the company they represent, as a result of the pandemic in the past year, managers state that it declined, the circumstantial balance being negative, of -19.3%. Their efforts were concentrated on maintaining the jobs, a goal which could not be entirely achieved, as some activities were reduced. The causes which led to this situation are numerous (q 8.1), but the most relevant are: financial aspects, restructuring, low demand (fewer orders), outsourcing, the employees' professional reorientation, new opportunities.

Within a time frame of one year, the managers' perception is that the number of teleworkers from their company will decrease, the circumstantial balance being of -14%; we notice a cautiously optimistic perception in the idea of a reduction of the pandemic's effects and of a return to the previous work form. Thus, hypothesis H7 is confirmed.

The managers' point of view, their perception regarding telework in the context of the end of the pandemic is that it will be reduced and the negative circumstantial balance of -25.8% is relevant in this sense. Thus, hypothesis H8 is confirmed.

Carrying out telework activities also implies a series of challenges for which managers had to find proper solutions. We grouped these challenges into several relevant categories:

- *Getting infected with Covid – 19*: identifying the most adequate prevention measures in the workspace (for those situations in which the physical presence was necessary), finding solutions in order to replace the colleagues who got sick and could not work;
- *Client networking*: the lack of the face-to-face contact, of the direct relation with clients, the impossibility to connect when infections were reported with the provider or the beneficiary;
- *Work program*: adapting to the new reality, the lack of a clear and orderly work program, coordinating the employees' activity with the program of their children who studied online (an issue accentuated also by the lack of sufficient space in the home), combining, sometimes in an unfortunate manner, the work routine with the personal one;
- *The connection with colleagues and subordinates*: the lack of social relations, difficult and slow communication, which brought frustrations, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, difficulties in carrying out work tasks, but also house chores, prolonged business meetings, the migration of the workflow towards the electronic variant in a short amount of time, the difficulty of following up on work results, communication with other departments;
- *Work equipment and employee training*: providing equipment and giving them to employees, internet speed, the fact that there are internal computer programs that

employees cannot access from home, the digitalization of each employee and training them in remote connections.

Thus, hypothesis H9 is confirmed.

Managers admit that there are causes which limit the company’s activity, the circumstantial balance being 13.8%. Regarding the causes which determine this phenomenon, we notice the following (presented in the descending order of their mention):

Table no. 4: Recorded frequencies

Current no.	Mentioned cause	The frequency with which it was mentioned (no. of responses)
1.	Insufficient demand	16
2.	Work force/ telework	15
3.	Equipment	6
4.	Problems with suppliers	4
5.	Financial aspects	4
6.	Other problems	13

Thus, hypothesis H10 is confirmed.

The following figure (Figure no.2) sums up the evaluations’ results, taking into account the three enquired aspects: positive, neutral and negative.

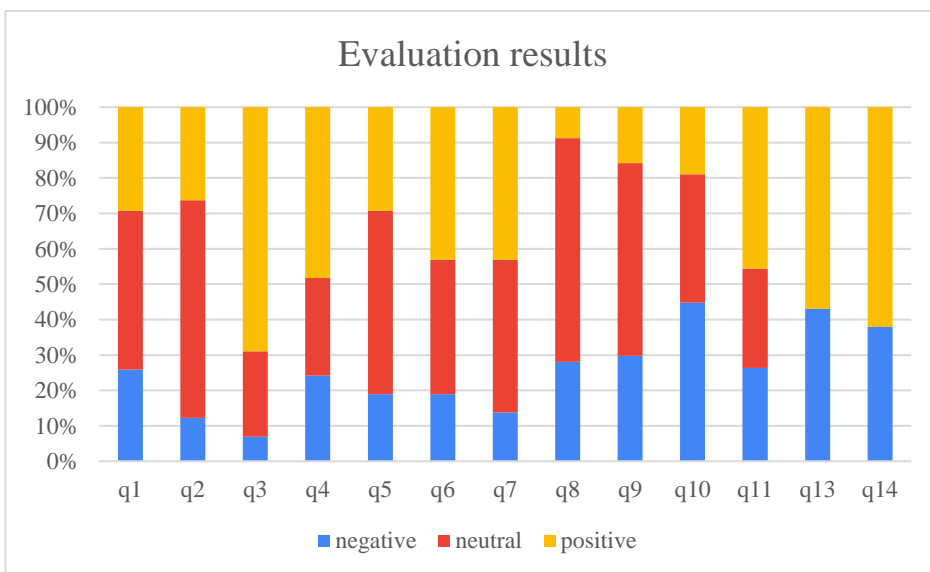


Figure no. 2: Evaluation results

5. Conclusions

The present article contributes to the literature through the obtained qualitative information on the enquired subject, which is currently a hot topic. The telework phenomenon is tackled through the eyes of managers/ entrepreneurs from small and medium-sized companies, who have an experience of at least 5 years, from two perspectives: the concrete one, the perception regarding the activity carried out in the first year of the pandemic, and the future one, within a time frame of one year.

Analyzing the activity carried out in the last year, the managers' perception is that telework has a positive impact on the activity. The pandemic is the premise of a new paradigm regarding economic activity and the enquired managers stated that they had to face new challenges especially in relation to the organization and coordination of work, but also concerning the continuation of the activity. Hygiene in the workplace has new meanings, especially prevention, (re)creating (new) circuits for coming to and leaving work (where office activities were carried out, for example).

Working from home (remote) using equipment and modern technologies meant, in some cases, new costs, purchases of such equipment, training programs or costs with the discounted expenses required by employees in order for them to be able to carry out their activity (electricity, internet etc.).

From the analysis of the answers, an interesting aspect emerges, namely that during the pandemic certain company resources were not used, the main cause being a decrease in demand and, implicitly, of the turnover.

Regarding an increase in demand, managers declared that they can increase the volume of the activity with the resources that they currently have, the circumstantial balance being of 24.2%. The increase of the activity volume can be achieved, according to the managers' estimates, with percentage points which vary between 20 and 50, or even more.

After the pandemic, telework will be reduced, this is the managers' perception (or maybe it is wishful thinking), despite the fact that it currently has a positive impact on the turnover and also on the professional and personal life of employees. This perception could (seems to) come from the necessity to return to the previous way of working or from the desire to control, an attribute of management which was less exercised during the pandemic and which requires the managers' creativity.

From the point of view of managerial implications, the results of this research highlighted the fact that telework is the new reality of economic activity, but it will have a major role in the future, and in this sense, companies will be restructured, internal regulations will have to be rethought, as well as job descriptions, employment contracts, internal marketing, teleworker motivation, bonuses, workspace etc.

The study's main limitation is that the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire population, as previously mentioned, due to the specificity of the carried-out enquiry, which is a qualitative one. In other words, the results of the performed research can serve as a basis for conducting a future quantitative study.

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