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Telework & Isolation During Covid-19 Crisis

Short Paper

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we witnessed a massive implementation of telework in the IT field market. This paper retraces how IT employees dealt with social and professional isolation all along this experience. We rely on Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory for our study.

Keywords: Telework, Isolation, Covid-19, Information Systems, Grounded Theory

Aim, literature review and research question

COVID-19 pandemic led millions of people across the world to telework, thus provoking a “de facto” global experiment of remote working (Kniffin et al., 2021). This extensive implementation of teleworking is very interesting to study as, without these circumstances, many companies would not have adopted or experienced telework in such a scale. In addition, even if we have already a large body of academic research on remote working, none of the previous studies was conducted at a time when telework was practiced massively as during the pandemic and such for a long period, thus some of the previously accumulated knowledge on telework might lack contextual relevance regarding the Covid-19 crisis. Indeed, the existing knowledge on remote working has mostly been generated from a context in which remote working was occasionally or infrequently practiced by a limited number of people but not all or most (Wang et al., 2021). Until now, the studies were mostly focused on understanding whether or not to implement remote working. Now that remote working has been imposed and adopted in such a scale, it is interesting to understand how to get the most out of it while studying this global real time adoption (Wang et al., 2021).

International organizations agree that the COVID-19 crisis will have a considerable impact on society, both in the short and in the long term (Remuzzi and Remuzzi, 2020). More specifically, Covid crisis, while making telework more popular and visible may influence the future of work organization.

To carry out our research, we decided to concentrate on the IT Labor market. The IT Labor Market is one of the best suited industry to telecommuting thanks to new technologies and dematerialized information used in this field. IT industry is considered to be the early adopter of telework and the industry that fed the evolution of virtual offices since the very beginning (Hill et al., 2003). The first empirical studies on telework were conducted within this industry (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016). Studying telework under Covid-19 crisis in the IT labor market would let us clarify this phenomenon in this specific field and be able to induce what could occur in other industries that have adopted telework afterwards.

Isolation is an asymmetric form of aloneness caused by the absence of social relationships or the lack of desired social interactions. Isolation of telecommuters can appear professionally and/or socially. Social isolation is related to the relationships with colleagues and company while professional isolation is related to promotion, recognition, and rewards (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). According to various academic studies, social and professional isolation were considered as being high risks for teleworkers in a normal world (Bentley et al., 2016). They were one of the main blockers for telework adoption for both employees and employers. Since March 2020, several millions were teleworking, this teleworking may have led to social or professional isolation which could affect job performance (Contreras et al., 2020). We would like to study social and professional isolation under this massive telework adoption in order to see if they still have the

same extent and consequences on teleworkers and on performance as previously or not. Indeed, the impact of social and professional isolation on telework could be influenced by telecommuting frequency, location of telework and organizational context (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007).

Hence, our present project aims to answer the following research question: How did the IT labor market employees deal with social and professional isolation: interactions, relationships, visibility, promotions etc. while working from home during the Covid-19 crisis.

Grounded theory approach

We decided to take a grounded theory approach in order to have insights on how companies and employees dealt with Covid-19 massive telework experience. Our approach relies on Glaser and Strauss's grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 2017; Creswell, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory allows researchers to have a deep understanding of a phenomenon emerging from the data, it is 'inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents' while using qualitative research methods in which 'data collection, analysis, and theory stand in reciprocal relationship with each other' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 23). Grounded theory is an appropriate approach in our case as we are dealing with a very special situation, which had never occurred previously, the massive telework experience, with all employees working from home at the same time and thus there should be much learning to discover and to take from this case. In order to answer our research question and within our grounded theory approach, we intend to use longitudinal qualitative interviews.

Longitudinal qualitative interviews

Longitudinal qualitative interviews are conducted with the same people several times in a roughly fixed intervals or around certain events over a time period sufficient to allow for the collection of data on specified conditions of change (Vogl et al., 2018). Longitudinal research permits to study how people experience, interpret, and respond to change. As interviews occur serially with the same persons, we are able to identify and understand the meaning of temporal change to them, we can study how they interpret and respond to the changes. Longitudinal research helps explore development at individuals, groups and societal levels (Hermanowicz, 2013). For all of these reasons, we considered this method in the purpose to answer our research questions.

In the literature, no specific time-span is defined for longitudinal studies. The number and frequency of serial interviews vary from study to study. It should be an amount of time sufficient for change to appear and to be examined from one point to another (Hermanowicz, 2013; Vogl et al., 2018). For our study, an approximate six months interval was used at the beginning and then a one-year interval. These intervals were chosen in order to be able to maintain a close follow up of the Covid-19 situation progress. To date, we conducted four series of interviews covering all the Covid-19 period since its beginning until two years after.

Our sample

In a grounded theory approach, the sample chosen should be able to 'contribute to the evolving theory' (Creswell, 1998, p. 118). Our initial sample comprises 20 persons working for 15 companies, from both public and private sectors, located in France, Belgium and the United Kingdom. Some companies had already implemented and adopted teleworking before the Covid-19 crisis whereas some others had only used it very occasionally or exceptionally and thus started with this practice in March 2020.

To guarantee a systemic view of the telecommuting situation, the ILO (Eurofound and ILO, 2017) considers different modalities of teleworking: regular home-base telework; occasional telework and high frequency telework. Based on that, we chose various types of companies in our sample, companies practicing high frequency of telework, companies with clearly defined telework programs, companies with occasional telework and finally we had as well companies with almost no telework or very rarely permitted. Our sample comprises companies from both public and private sector. We selected our interviewees from our network connections and based on their companies telecommuting practices so that we have the 4 categories of teleworking modalities represented, their age and sex and on their ability to perform all their jobs remotely. Our selection of employees which jobs and tasks could be totally done remotely is intended in order to have a homogeneous sample where telework is totally feasible and achievable from a technical point of view, we

can thus concentrate on human aspects rather than technical ones. Our initial sample comprises 9 women and 11 men. 6 of them are people managers and the 14 others individual contributors or contractors. Regarding their family situations, 6 of our interviewees are single, 6 are in a couple, 6 are in a couple with small kids, and 2 in a couple with children aged above 16 years old. We divided our sample in 3 categories depending on their age: 25-35; 35-45 and 45+, as according to previous studies, age is one of the demographic variables, which participate, in explaining telecommuting behavior (Walls et al., 2007).

Data collection procedure

For all of our interviews, data was collected from participants via calls or videos interviews. Our interviews lasted between 40mn to 1h30mn. All conversations were digitally recorded with participants' consent. We proceeded with semi-structured interviews, focused on a list of open-ended questions that were asked to all interviewees whilst also offering flexibility to discuss specific issues related to each individual. As participants might sometimes narrowly focus on some specific aspects of telework, we conceived a list of questions for each series before proceeding with the interviews. This helped us make sure to cover various topics in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Our first interviews series were realized from the 10th of April until the 4th of May 2020, 3 to 6 weeks after the lockdown started mid of March 2020 and 1 week before countries started lifting it on the 11th of May 2020. The key topics discussed concerned the nature of people's work, the interactions they have with other teams, the telework practice in their companies and in their teams before the lockdown, the positive and negative of teleworking, the lockdown announcement, the changes that occurred during the lockdown period regarding their works and the relations they had with their companies, their feelings and expectations about the future, etc. With each employee, we tried to understand the motives for the implementation or non-implementation of teleworking before the Covid-19 crisis.

Our second interviews series was conducted between August and September 2020, 5 to 6 months after the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, no lockdown during this period though many Covid-19 restrictions were still maintained. We were able to interview 13 persons from our first sample. We had 7 interviews fewer than the first series due to the fact that some participants moved to other companies, left their jobs, or weren't available anymore for additional interviews. Participants were asked to describe their experience of remote working, how the situation evolved in their company after the first lockdown, managerial practices, meetings, communication, relationships, job tasks and organization etc. They were encouraged to share their perception about their visibility, productivity, the challenges they encountered, the advantages and drawbacks, as well as the forecasts for the future and how they see things in the coming months.

Our third interviews series was led in April 2021, one year after the beginning of Covid-19 crisis, and during a new lockdown period. We were able to proceed with 12 persons as one of our early participants quit her work and took a maternity leave. We discussed how the situation evolved since spring 2020, changes that occurred regarding the management practices, employees' evaluations, communication and relationships, internal mobility, skills and competencies training plan, workload etc. as well as the participants' perception of their evolution, visibility, challenges and difficulties encountered, their preferences, the impact on their private life etc. We talked also about their predictions for the future.

Our fourth interview series was conducted with the same 12 persons, from April to June 2022, two years after the crisis had started, no lockdown no restrictions during this period, and we rediscussed the evolution of the situation as in the third series.

Data analysis

Our interviews were all transcribed. In order to develop a grounded theory from data, Strauss and Corbin (1990) distinguish between three kinds of coding procedures: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For our first interviews series, we started the coding process with 15 interviews. We first coded the transcripts in an open-ended manner. Afterwards, we proceeded with an axial coding, we compared the elements coded in all interviews, and combined similar codes in a general category. We pursued with selective coding which is the process of choosing the core category and relating it with the other categories from axial coding. In parallel, we pursued our interviews until data saturation. In our case some of the categories were communication and meetings, visibility, physical contacts, challenges, productivity etc. Interviews indicated that there were some specific challenges due to the lockdown and

covid-19 contexts independently from telework, like feelings of isolation, stress, need to educate and look after small kids at home due to schools' closure etc. At this stage, we have an initial coding frame. As mentioned previously, this frame has been enhanced through the interviews series. Please note that by this date, we analyzed the first three series. The fourth one we are currently transcribing it.

Results based on our data analysis as per today and Next Steps

A first analysis, on how employees remediate isolation during Covid-19 massive telework experience, was conducted with the first three series. This analysis provided us with insights into telework practice during a crisis context and how the use of Information systems by the IT labor market employees helped in reducing one of the most known telework drawbacks, isolation. An Information System provides the necessary activities and conditions to support an organization, it assists employees in performing their tasks and activities more efficiently while generating and enhancing coherence within the workplace environment. It enables the collective working amongst the employees as it makes common meaning and sharing of information become easier (Velu et al., 2019). Results showed that employees were able to adjust the use of Information Systems effectively to overcome Covid crisis obstacles.

During the first weeks of the massive telework experience there was an increase in the number of online meetings organized by companies and new types of meetings were scheduled: coffee breaks, activities, etc. in order to remediate to the risk of social isolation. The use of slack channels or other social tools to communicate and keep the informal connections became popular as well. This helped a lot in contributing to the sense of belongingness and to keep employees connected. After a few months of teleworking, activities meetings started decreasing as well as employees' participation. Most employees were overloaded, didn't have time for these meetings and they didn't feel any longer the need for it. On the other hand, they started organizing by themselves specific convivial meetings with employees they used to befriend with. We can add that all along the massive telework experience, due to the highest number of meetings between teams' members, relationships between a one team's members were reinforced. The risk of being socially isolated identified by previous studies when teleworking with a high frequency has been remediated successfully thanks to the efforts provided by the organization during the first weeks of Covid-19 crisis and afterwards thanks to individuals' initiatives. Indeed, throughout the crisis, employees managed to find their own ways and methods based on their companies' Information Systems to maintain relations with their own networks and stay connected.

All along Covid-19 pandemic, companies and employees invested a lot in internal communication. Formalizing and diffusing information kept all employees at the same level of information and contributed to a better sense of belongingness. Indeed, organizations must care and work on employees needs of communication in order to build and maintain a sense of belongingness (Eren and Vardarlier, 2013). Efficient communication help leaders create a shared context for employees to work together despite geographic distance (Chewning et al., 2013). When talking about visibility and recognition, our findings point to a differential experience between private sector and public sector employees during the first phase of lockdown. It seems that for private sector employees this was a challenging aspect to deal with at the beginning as visibility used to rely on the ability to be on site, to have physical exchanges with colleagues and management. This point wasn't mentioned at all by public sector employees and didn't make them feel anxious. Most probably this is due to the fact that in public organizations, bureaucratic nature dictates often who will be promoted and who will receive a reward more than did individual merit or interpersonal networking contrary to private sector (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Our study showed that after almost one year teleworking, private sector employees found their own ways through the IS, tools and new practices, in order to show their work and be visible. Thus, regarding professional isolation: visibility, recognition, belongingness, etc. we can state that employees adjusted to the massive telework experience while using IS tools and proceeding differently than in the physical world. This required additional effort and time from their side but let them remediated to this potential drawback.

A few challenges remain nevertheless. Mainly when facing conflictual situations, physical interactions stay essential in these cases. Even if it was possible to realize remotely all tasks and communications, physical contact remains important and essential to deal with sensitive and delicate situations. Indeed, in such contexts, parties need to see how others behave and react, they need to adapt their speeches according to others' feelings and to be able to convince audiences.... Videoconferencing helps but could not provide all the elements needed to cope with such situations. Today's technology solutions still are not able to deal with

the problem of telepresence and can't provide a sense of being in a different place (Stahl et al., 2018), thus we would infer that sensitive situations and meetings should preferably be held physically at this stage.

Another challenge is the situation of people living alone who started to feel uncomfortable with the long lasting telework experience because of highest stress and a decrease in motivation due to the routine. Future research should focus on their situation.

Our first analysis highlights how employees developed and adjusted their use of IS and reconfigured established processes via the utilization of meetings and various communication and collaborative tools (mails, slack channels, tchat, etc.) dynamically throughout the different periods of crisis in order to respond to their needs and remedy to telework challenges and drawbacks and stay away from isolation.

Now, with our fourth interview series being completed in June 2022, our data collection phasis has been finalized. Indeed, analyzing data covering the situation during 2 years should let us have an overview of the massive telework experience triggered by the Covid crisis. We plan to follow up with our longitudinal approach and work on analyzing the fourth series of interviews. We will pursue focusing on social and professional isolation aspects during the massive telework experience. We will proceed with the analysis of the four series of interviews in order to study how employees dealt with interactions, relationships, visibility, promotions and future job expectations all along these two years.

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