Mitigating leadership and the new ways of working

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Abstract

Work, one of the basic activities for every human being, and an area of major importance in any society, is also one of the domains mostly affected by transformations and implementation of new, smart technologies. On the other hand, leadership is challenged to mitigate human resources related issues and economic requests from an unstable environment, in an effective manner. Given this existing context, defined by rapid technological changes, that was speeded up by the Covid 19 pandemic, the present paper aims to review theoretical and empirical findings regarding the new ways of working (remote, from home, online) that emerged or were consolidated during and after this period, in relation with effective leadership. The article also focuses on the medium-term impact of these transformations.

The unprecedented context represented by the Covid pandemic brought new challenges for organizations, employers and employees also, in a global economy that was already struggling with rapid transformations, inequalities, risks and sometimes unpredictable movements. This paper brings new valuable insights to this domain, for both academics and researchers, and a better understanding of such a complex phenomenon helps practitioners and stakeholders meet the demands that may arise.

Keywords: leadership; personal autonomy; self-leadership; remote work; work from home.

1. Introduction

Previous research discuses work transformations as results of each industrial revolutions, from steam engine to automation and digitalization. The introduction of artificial intelligence (AI), internet of things (IoT) was already bringing new challenges and opportunities for organisations, from different domains, when the Covid 19 pandemic changed the way people lived, studied and worked all around the globe. Existing trends were speeded up by this medical crisis, emergency measures taken during the pandemic that proved to be efficient were maintained on long term, in some areas, while others remained behind. Existing literature discusses about increasing gaps, unemployment in

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some areas and lack of workforce for some domains (International Labour Organisation 2021) due to the restrictions in travelling, accessing medical, educational and other types of necessary services.

The Covid 19 outbreak brought a new, unprecedented context for the medical world in the beginning, but the impact of the sanitary crisis rapidly and radically transformed the way people worked around the world. Some of the changes implemented in the beginning of 2020, like remote work, online conferences and meetings, for some activities were maintained even after the prevalence of the virus diminished. If before the pandemic, international migration was used as a tool for improving specific deficits of the labour market, which usually lead to economic deficiencies (Porumbescu, 2018: p. 41), once remote working became so common, some of these shortages are easier addressed. Even though before 2020 some domains were already characterized by an increased share of remote capable jobs (like information technology and computer programming), working from home was not at that time such a "normality".

The following sections of this paper will discuss existing theoretical underpinnings regarding work, leadership and the impact of several variables on the labour domain. Following, the general context created due to the covid outbreak will be addressed and empirical findings about the new ways of working and their functioning after the remission of the pandemic and the general resettle are also analysed.

2. Theoretical and contextual framework

The phrase "new ways of working" will gather in this paper concepts like "telecommuting", "remote work", "work from home", "telework", which will be mostly used as interchangeable. When trying to define such concepts, the analysis of Allen and the team is a reference point (Allen et al, 2015). After reviewing existing definitions for the above mentioned concepts, they propose the following conceptualization: "Telecommuting is a work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace—typically principally from home—using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks" (Allen et al 2015: p. 40).

Previous research regarding the United States of America labour market identified the origins of the "telecommuting" concept back in the 1970, when companies tried to counterbalance the effects of the oil crises reducing energy consumption (Allen et al 2015). Since then, all around the globe, due to the changes possible because of technological development, like internet access, smaller, performant devices and other evolving communicating possibilities, remote work started to steadily gain terrain and represent an alternative. The Covid pandemic accelerated this existing trend, forced organizations to invest in equipment, apparatus, devices, the communities and governments to allocate funds and develop infrastructure, while individuals had to adapt the way they work and sometimes their houses to the context. Furthermore, recent research indicates that "the limitations on the freedom of movement favoured the development of various types of virtual communication, both in terms of interindividual relations and in the institutional level" (Porumbescu 2022: p. 289).

Usually, in a non-crisis context, working from home is preceded by a preparation period, sometimes a transition, because both hard – technological issues, but also soft – interpersonal, communicational aspects need to be addressed. Furthermore, before shifting to telework, some adjustments have to be done, the infrastructure must be adequate for

such activities. Working domains from information technology area, computer sciences, programming, web or graphic design, sometimes education and other activities deployed on dedicated online platforms were already characterized by an increasing share of remote workers or jobs that could be done not only on site, face to face. Moreover, companies providing teleworking possibilities mostly adopted a hybrid format, consisting in days in which the employees or the collaborators were present in the workplace and in person interaction between the team members, between the employees and the management was facilitated. Thus, people were less exposed to social isolation, exclusion and lack of commitment.

What was new regarding remote work during the Covid 19 pandemic was the unexpected, unprogrammed and usually not enough prepared shift to teleworking for jobs that never before experienced this type of functioning. In most of the cases, no preparation or transition were possible, the employees had to use their personal, in-house resources to try to do their jobs in this "new normal". The infrastructure was not adapted for such activities in some situations, other times people lack the necessary technical skills to perform their work and thus many jobs and activities were deployed on the "crisis mode", meaning that the performance before the covid pandemic, in the face-to-face context, was not reached through teleworking in all situations.

Besides the aspects pertaining to the work domain, work from home during the pandemic also brought a set of challenges due to the pause imposed in children education, daily care facilities, kindergarten and schools. There were also situations in which both parents had to work from home and also share their space and devices with other family members, like the spouse or the children who had online classes. Such aspects brought to light discussions regarding work-family interactions and even conflict in some cases or blurry boundaries between work and nonwork (Allen et al 2021, Schieman et al 2021 Schieman and Badawy 2020).

One key aspect that has to be mentioned here is the fact that not all type of jobs can be performed remotely. Previous research emphasized that mostly white-collars jobs, requesting a higher level of education, are more likely to be converted to teleworking (Wang et al 2020: p. 17). In return, there are several types of professional activities, usually those performed by manual workers, the ones that request a special infrastructure or equipment and machines, or the ones that need personal, physical presence, like care and medical services, that can be done only face to face, or from the organizations` site. Those workers were also confronted with other types of challenges and difficulties in mitigating family and professional roles, protecting their health and sometimes new requests or limitations emerged (Warren and Lyonette: p. 2021).

For those who were forced to suddenly and unprepared shift to teleworking both advantages and disadvantages should be addressed (Wang et al 2021). Research regarding the effects of working from home undertaken before the Covid 19 context showed that work-family conflict can be influenced in both negative and positive ways by telework (Allen et al 2015). On the other hand, the number, age and the needs of the family components living in the same household also interferes with teleworking and may represent an extra burden, especially in the case of families with children that needed support from their parents for the online classes, meals preparation or help with their homework (Galanti et al 2021: p. 427)

Recalling theoretical benchmarks necessary when trying to understand the way leadership and the new ways of working interact, in the following lines the Job Demands – Resources (JD-R) model of Demerouti (2021) will be briefly reviewed, together with a

synthesis of leadership implication. According to the Job Demands – Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al 2001), a framework that served research, we can distinguish between 1. job demands, referring to the work aspects that may have a negative impact on the employee, like overwhelming requests, stress, burnout and other physical and psychological disfunctions and 2. job resources. In contrast with job demands, the resources refer to those job-related aspects that have a positive impact on employees wellbeing and organizational performance, fostering engagement, motivation and satisfaction. Acknowledging that the individual also has a great influence in mitigating his/her own professional functioning, to the aspects regarding the job – demands and resources – personal resources should also be addressed when trying to understand this topic (Galanti et al. 2021: p. 426). Job autonomy and self-leadership are considered to be key personal resources necessary and efficient in the cases of remote workers (Gajendran and Harrison 2007; Muller and Niessen 2019).

From the organizational side, the way in which the work roles, tasks, activities, interactions are outlined, influences a series of professional and personal outcomes. The impact that leadership has on an organization`s functioning, job performance, employees satisfaction, wellbeing and mental health is already extensively researched and well established (Skakon et al 2010, Montano et al 2017). Behavioral leadership theories are centered on what actions, activities, behaviors are visible and try to correlate specific variables pertaining to the management behavior with organizational outcomes, focusing on what can be learned, facilitated and improved. Contextual perspectives add to our understanding the specificity of the situation, as a contextual variable that shapes management and leadership. A valuable perspective in understanding the way that the covid 19 pandemic can interact with the relation between leadership and the new ways of working is the one of Efimov and collaborators (Efimov et al 2022). According to their scoping review, "virtual leadership is not a leadership style, but rather a specific contextual condition for leadership" (Efimov et al 2022: 02). Thus, face-to-face leadership was replaced during the pandemic with virtual or hybrid leadership in many situations. These transformations reclaimed adaptability for both sides – management and subordinates and challenged all existing habits. In the following section some empirical findings regarding available administrative data (Eurostat 2021), results of sociological investigations and surveys are discussed.

3. Empirical underpinnings

Data from Eurostat (2021) show that in the European Union, in 2006, only one in ten employees worked from home usually or sometimes, while in 2019 this category represented almost 14 percent of the total employed persons. This share increased in 2020, reaching 22 percent (Eurostat 2021). Also, an Eurofound report estimated that approximately half of the Europeans worked from home during 2020, at least partially (Ahrendt et al 2020). Both investigations regarded employees in general, without deeper analysis concerning the type of job deployed, if it is or not remote-capable totally or partially at least.

An extensive study developed in the United States of America (Barrero et al 2021) investigated projections regarding telework and their data were further analysed by the World Economic Forum. Findings are presented in a synthesized and suggestive manner in Figure 1, below.
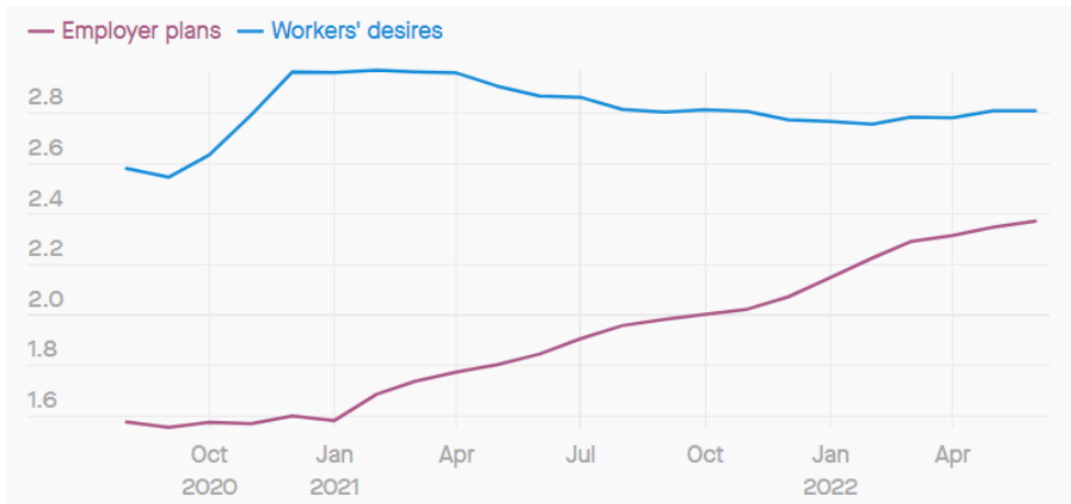
Figure 1. Desired number of working from home days per week – employers versus workers projections
Source: World Economic Forum 2022, available at
https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/07/work-from-home-employers-workers-work-life

Analysing the graph one can easily see a narrowing gap between employers` and employees` perspectives. If in October 2020 workers were thinking at approximately two and a half days per week in which they were working remote, at the beginning of 2021 their desire reached its peak, getting close to an average of three days. For the entire 2021 and the beginning of 2022 workers desires remained stable, at an average of 2.7 working from days per week. On contrary, employers plans had a less consistent evolution, but with a visible increasing trend in the number of WFH days. Thus, their expectations increased from less than two days in the end of 2020 to more than two days at the beginning of 2022 (2.2 – January 2022, 2.4 – April 2022).

Another research developed by Gallup (Clifton and Holliday 2022) investigated employees projections regarding their working arrangements and results are represented in the following table. Only remote capable jobs were targeted.

Table 1. Employees work location before the pandemic, shortly after the lockdown and their future projections

Work location	Before pandemic	February 2022	Anticipated location after 2022	Preferred location
Totally remote	8%	39%	24%	32%
Hybrid	32%	42%	52%	59%

Totally on site	60%	19%	23%	9%

Source: own elaboration based on the data available at
https://www.gallup.com/workplace/395627/old-workplace-gone-board.aspx?utm_source=workplace&utm

Looking at the numbers one can easily see that six out of ten questioned persons would prefer a hybrid work arrangement, although four out of ten persons had a hybrid program in 2022 and half of the respondents anticipate it for the following period (Clifton and Holliday 2022). Even if before the pandemic 60 percent of the workers in the study worked exclusively on site, only 9 percent want to do their jobs in the same way in the future (idem). Such findings, regarding employees expectations and desires are valuable when planning human resources policies and management strategies on short, medium and even long -term.

4. Discussions

Remote work gain a lot of terrain not on purpose, but because of abrupt, contextual needs, caused by the pandemic context. Actual trends show that work from home, at least partially, became a new normality for many domains and organizations. As every change, transforming teleworking into a highly effective process for the employees and for the organizations also, requires the attention and efforts of all actors involved. Both advantages and shortcomings should be addressed, as remote, hybrid and on-site working can all bring risks and also opportunities. The data presented by the World Economic Forum in the previous section shows that employers try to make steps in the direction requested by the employees, in terms of working from home availability. Besides such a rough indicator, like the number of days, leadership should also focus on a series of soft transformations in the way work is designed and jobs are projected in order to tackle various new, emerging issues of hybrid or remote work.

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