Teleworking : Better Quality of Life but Risks of Isolation

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ABSTRACT

The social distancing and health protection measures taken in response to the Covid 19 pandemic have led companies to make massive use of teleworking. According to a study by the French Ministry of Labor, one employee in four teleworked during the confinement in France, two out of three of whom had not experimented with this practice, according to a study conducted by the CGT trade union. Many workers, mostly managers, thus began to work remotely for part of the week or the entire week, a practice that is causing debate as to the relevance of its generalization in the future. Memorandum 4 : overview of the studies and projects registered on WPRN database

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As summarized in a study by the University of Kennesaw in the United States reviewed on WPRN, research on telework prior to the Covid 19 pandemic shows undeniable benefits: elimination of commuting, increased productivity and motivation, reduced work stress, greater flexibility. Important challenges are also highlighted: reduction in the quality of communication between employees, difficulties in managing remote workers for the employer, reduction in creativity.

With the Covid pandemic, teleworking has entered a new dimension. Its effects are to be analyzed in the light of this change of scale. The WPRN database brings together several studies completed or in progress which allow a better understanding of the stakes.

Teleworking seems to significantly improve the quality of life of the majority of employees, notably by relieving them of sources of stress. However, the practice has also led to increased risks for the most vulnerable populations, due to difficulties in reconciling personal and private life, and its impact in terms of economic efficiency is not entirely agreed upon More studies should now study the economic impacts on work efficiency, on transformations for companies or the impacts on territorial policies.

Teleworking is very positively received by employees because it improves their quality of life and makes them more serene and concentrated.

Several studies published on WPRN have highlighted positive results concerning the perception of telework by employees. A [study](#) by the University of Ghent, conducted online among 14,000 people teleworking as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic (questionnaire by self-selection but corrected by age, gender and education level), shows a positive perception of teleworking: 65% of respondents have a good opinion of teleworking, indicating in particular a better work-life balance (at 64%) and a decrease in work-related stress and burnout risks (at 48 and 47%). Women are more likely than men to have a positive perception of telework without any definite hypothesis as to why. The hypothesis of women's still more important role in child rearing and thus the possibility of better reconciling family life and work is advanced. All the data collected correspond to the results of surveys and literature on the subject prior to Covid 19, showing a positive perception of telework, with the improvement of quality of life as a central argument.

In terms of work efficiency, the study shows that employees feel freer, more focused and less prone to stress, which can improve their productivity, or ease their relationship with their employer and encourage them to stay longer in the company. For example, the majority of respondents report that teleworking

has improved task efficiency and concentration (at 56% and 51%). Older people particularly emphasize the beneficial effect on calmness and concentration, these results being in line with studies showing

the greater need for calmness at work for older workers. A [study](#) conducted in 2012 for the French government estimated that teleworking could increase productivity by 22% through reduced absenteeism at work, improved efficiency and travel time savings.

However, a recent survey by the firm [Valoir](#) nuances this by mentioning a 1% drop in productivity in a questionnaire in which respondents were asked to subjectively analyze their productivity after the start of the pandemic. A result to be taken with caution, since it was noted in a brutal context of an unprepared transition to teleworking and was carried out on a relatively small sample.

Difficulties in reconciling family and private life may be observed and concerns are expressed by employees and employers in terms of career paths and ties to the company.

Despite a positive feeling, the shift to teleworking may also have had some negative side effects, especially since it was carried out under brutal conditions of implementation following the pandemic. Elements of literature prior to Covid, recalled in the University of Kennesaw [study](#), had indicated the risk of additional stress, difficulty in reconciling work and family life, and the perception of a lack of support from the company during a sudden shift to teleworking. The study, carried out by questionnaire over the period March-May 2020, notes that since the pandemic, there has been an increased risk of burn-out, which is more pronounced among people who have never experienced teleworking and which particularly affects women and men from less privileged social backgrounds. However, these results must be qualified insofar as they are based on self-reporting and on a relatively small sample (326 participants).

A project entitled [Working@Home](#) carried out in the United Kingdom and published by WPRN, based on in-depth interviews with a representative sample of employees and on surveys, also points to difficulties in the transition to teleworking. The disappearance of the borderline between work and personal life appears to be disruptive for a number of employees, with the

same software being used for work and socialization, for example. The difficult sharing of domestic space, particularly for people in a family life situation is reported, difficulties that are more felt by women. Gender inequalities are quite noticeable in the relationship to telework. As women continue to take more care of the home, the reconciliation of family life and teleworking, while it can lead to a better balance as seen above, can just as easily lead to feeling more harshly the tensions in more stressful and demanding family environments.

In addition, there are concerns about the link to the company and the professional future. The study from the University of Ghent notes that people with jobs that require a high degree of coordination with their colleagues experience teleworking

more negatively and this may impact work efficiency. 57% of employees express a worsening of the relationship with colleagues and 47% a loss of connection with the employer. There is also less feedback from managers to employees, which can lead to employees feeling isolated and thus to a loss of motivation. Employees express anxiety about their career development in a context of teleworking, with 27% thinking that it reduces their chances of promotion, for example. The University of Kennesaw study notes that the most significant challenges faced by professionals were related to communication and collaboration with their co-workers.

Finally, the Working@Home study notes a feeling of intensification of work experienced by employees, who feel they are being asked for more, without this being beneficial in terms of efficiency. Employees complain of online presenteeism that seems unnecessary (having to be present in front of their computer during working hours) as well as the overabundance of long meetings, which previously only required a visit to the office next door. Despite the overall positive assessment of teleworking, participants in the Working@home study recommend teleworking for no more than 1-3 days a week.

The overall result is positive: the changeover should be continued, but better organized

In short, teleworking is generally perceived as positive by the employees concerned because it provides a better quality of life, a better work-life balance and a reduction in perceived stress. However, if the majority of employees experience teleworking positively, there is a risk of mental health deterioration and a feeling of encroachment on private life, particularly for people whbuto do not have a family environment conducive to work or for people whose work requires strong interaction with colleagues. Public authorities are encouraged to take into account the risk of professional but also social isolation that may result from the widespread use of this practice for a significant number of employees. Employers are advised to encourage this practice, to have more confidence in their employees (presenteeism in teleworking is useless) but also to provide them with more support and better supervision when necessary so that the employee is not «lost» and does not lack coordination with his or her colleagues. Mixed formulas mixing teleworking and presence at work seem to be recommended for the future.

Studies to date have focused mainly on employees' perception of teleworking in terms of quality of life or stress levels. More economic issues should be explored in future research to complete the analysis of the phenomenon. Is the practice of telework, on such a scale, beneficial to business results? Has it led to productivity gains? In terms of public policies, what impact can these changes have on the territories? What upheavals in business real estate, or in the development of rural territories, many of which are seeking to benefit from the teleworking trend to attract new inhabitants?

Bibliography