Article

Transition from Office to Home Office: Lessons from Romania during COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The paper investigates experiences of employees and middle managers in relation to the transition from working from office to working from home in the context of COVID-19 pandemic in Romania. Three online focus groups were conducted to explore working experience in the new mode of work. The conclusions are multifaceted, covering four dimensions: time, spatial, social and technical, and point out how employees and middle managers understand the transition and what impact telework had on their job satisfaction and work productivity.

Keywords: teleworking; work from home; job satisfaction; work–life balance; work productivity; COVID-19

1. Introduction

Scientific and technological progress and successfully coping with change are essential when societies face crises such as the one created by SARS-CoV-2 virus. The COVID-19 pandemic brought disruptive modifications in both organizational and peoples' lives. Among these, limiting direct human contact to reduce the impact of the virus is the most salient. A result of that policy was switching from working from office (WFO) to working from home (WFH), as a temporary or alternative work arrangement [1]. WFH occurred either as a hybrid system (with occasional visits to the office) or full time. That happened either suddenly, in organizations where the remote work option had not been an option, or gradually, for those who were already working from home part of the time. An ILO report shows that "81% of workers in Europe and Central Asia, 69% of workers in Africa and 51% of workers in the Americas reside in countries where workplaces are required to remain closed in certain sectors or for some categories of workers" [2] (p. 3).

The concept of remote worker refers to a person who fulfils the job duties not from an office set up by the employer, but from a remote location, using communications technology. The idea is not a new one. More than four decades ago, Toffler talked about the idea of "electronic cottage", referring to a modern place, full of technology, allowing people to work from their own comfort [3]. In about the same period, Nilles et al. and Kraemer introduced terms such as telecommuting and telework that were also beginning to shape the idea of a new era in which people are free to work from wherever they want [4,5]. Over the years, the concept of WFH has been investigated and experimented by companies in hope to increase their profitability and performance indices [6–9]. Studies have found that (1) moderate levels of remote working can be beneficial for both employees (who benefited from the flexibility associated with remote working) and employers, e.g., by reducing expenses associated with spacious offices while increasing the productivity of the employees [10], and (2) over time, excessive levels of remote working are likely harming both the well-being and the

productivity of the employees. In addition to the above, we must take into account the fact that the adaptability of managers to this new situation also has an impact on employee productivity. Besides "the demands of the market economy, there is still an obligation to be concerned for the well-being of their employees" [11] (p. 663).

WFH is often associated with productivity because employees tend to work more hours than the regular schedule. Moreover, they can enjoy the privilege of not being interrupted by a colleague or superior who could distract them from their duties [12–14]. Accordingly, productivity is rather associated with the amount of labor than with productivity itself [13]. A study about the way software developers and consultants, working remotely, tend to organize their work schedule, revealed that longer working hours involved less time communicating with colleagues and more fragmented work, with a negative potential impact on productivity, progress on tasks and quality of the work [15].

Productivity is also closely related to job satisfaction. For most employees, job satisfaction occurs when balance between the private and professional life exists and when they can control work time [16,17]. WFH increases the satisfaction of the employees who enjoy "greater time and place flexibility, enhanced job autonomy, improved work–life balance and reduced commuting time" [18] (p. 14). The time to commute is instead becoming leisure time. Another study shows that "giving employees more control over work (flexible and part-time work) reduces employees' perceptions of negative work-home interference" [19] (p. 293). Therefore, many employees noticed an improvement in family life when WFH [14]. In addition to the personal and family side, digitalization is also associated with job satisfaction in terms of the following: "increased efficiency, productivity and accuracy; reduced paperwork, errors and lost or misplaced documents; speeded-up and shortened processes; improved problem-solving, decision-making, supervision, workload management, and corporate image, and provided greater assurance of regulatory compliance" [20] (p. 12).

However, WFH can also have negative effects on employee satisfaction, because it can create feelings of loneliness. Most home workers feel that they invest more effort in their work when working from home [21]. Hours of (unpaid) overtime and the lack of a dedicated space where the employee can work quietly and concentrate also lead to dissatisfaction. Lack of employee satisfaction leads to lack of interest in the job and therefore to absenteeism and a large staff turnover [22]. The lengthening working hours, intensification of work and the idea of constant availability "can lead to high levels of stress with negative consequences for workers' health and well-being" and "create interference between work and personal life" [23] (p. 301). Such effects can lead to sleeping disorders, stress, unhealthy lifestyle habits, increased levels of fatigue or even burnout and dissatisfaction with the job [16,24,25]. The International Labour Organization claims that the gender of the employee is an important factor when discussing that aspect [26]. Studies conducted in several countries concluded that women work the most from home. Moreover, the structure of the family greatly influences the employee's work–life balance. Some employees choose to work from home to take care of children. For others, children are a distracting factor, therefore they need to work outside the schedule, to be able to solve all tasks [26,27].

WFH can have both positive and negative effects, depending on the context, duration and proportion, employees' stage of life, etc. Researchers consider that flexible work arrangements, including WFH system, will continue to be developed and implemented into the future despite having many disadvantages [28]. The complexity of this matter makes it clear that in order to better understand the (long term) effects of teleworking under the COVID-19 circumstances, more studies should pursue the subject. In this study we investigate the impact of transition from WFO to WFH on job satisfaction and work productivity, within the COVID-19 Romanian context. Notably, in Romania, before the pandemic, only 1.4% of employees and self-employed people were working from home usually or sometimes. Different surveys show that, as a consequence of COVID-19, between 5% and 13% of companies and public managers were expecting to implement full-time teleworking, while 32% to 48% were anticipating hybrid mode [18].

Considering these, we aimed to observe what kind of impact the transition from WFO to WFH imposed, and how employees and employers perceived all these changes. More specifically, we wanted to understand the type of interventions undertaken by different organizations, why these interventions were effective or not (impact on job satisfaction and work productivity) and how this phenomenon is helpful for organizational and individual learning. The results of the study are useful for researchers and human resources specialists, in both academic field and cross-business areas. People managers/team leaders/training specialists can also take advantage of the learnings this study led to—they all can build on the needs/tensions this research unveiled.

The following section introduces the study design. Based on the data collected from three focus groups organized with Romanian employees and middle managers, the impact of the teleworking on the professional and personal lives is presented next. A discussion of the findings concludes the paper.

2. Data and Methodology

Teleworking or WFH has been defined as a system of work organization through which the employee, regularly and voluntarily, fulfils his/her professional duties in another place than the workplace organized by the employer, by means of the information and communication technology. Although the two terms "teleworking" and "WFH" are not quite similar, within the context of this study (COVID-19 pandemic), we used them referring to the jobs that could be performed from home with the use of technology. Considering the abrupt transition from WFO to WFH, we aimed to give voice both to employees and managers on this subject. We explored how they experienced the change and what impact WFH system had on their job satisfaction and work productivity.

2.1. Research Objectives

We investigated several faces of the WFH system. They were approached from a dual, managerial and employee, perspective. Thus, the study aimed to understand the meanings that both employees and middle managers attributed to their work experiences, behaviors and attitudes or perceptions towards teleworking and work productivity. The specific research objectives were:

O1 To reveal meanings, perceptions and attitudes towards transition from WFO to WFH;
O2 To explore job satisfaction, emotional health and work–life balance in the WFH system;
O3 To investigate work productivity understandings in WFH system.

2.2. Study Design

Three online focus groups (FGs) were conducted to better understand the experiences of the workers and managers during the transition from WFO system to WFH in Romania. Two FGs targeted employees and one FG targeted employers (middle managers). We considered it relevant to take into account two groups of employees because previous studies revealed variability across age groups in the impact this pandemic had on employment and several work-related aspects (i.e., occupational risk, remote work) [29]. The sampling criteria were:

- General criteria: participants performed remote work during the last year; in each FG are 3 male and 3 female; participants perform different jobs (mainly white collar jobs, suitable for faster implementation in the WFH system) and come from organizations with mixed field of activities; participants are from different magnet cities from Romania: Bucharest, Timișoara, Cluj-Napoca, Iași, Sibiu.
- Particular criteria: FG 1–6 employees aged 35–50, families with children; FG 2–6 employees aged 25–35, alone or couples without children; FG 3–6 middle level managers responsible for assessing the work performance of subordinates, experienced in coordinating teams of 5–16 members, both in online and offline.

The participants were recruited by a marketing research company via its network of field operators. The operators received the recruitment criteria and the profile of the

relevant respondents and recruited the respondents based on the purposeful sampling strategy. The selected respondents were subsequently verified as eligible and relevant, based on a recruitment questionnaire applied by telephone by the recruitment coordinator. If they met the desired criteria for the project, they were invited to participate in the focus group and were incentivized with gift vouchers.

The FGs took place online, on the ZOOM platform, between 26th and 27th of July 2021. The recruited participants connected from their personal computers and from their own comfort. The focus groups were organized after working hours, to allow a very good attention to questions and to minimize disturbance. The discussions were facilitated by an experienced moderator. We have used a semi-structured interview guide to capture the practical, functional, rational and emotional impact that WFH has generated. We looked at lived experiences during COVID-19 period, in order to understand how professional life and roles were challenged. The discussion topics followed the research objectives and were set so that they provide unique insights into the specific working context and individual and social situations created during the transition from WFO system to WFH in Romania. Discussions were audio and video recorded (consent from all participants was obtained), so the gestures and facial expressions of each participant could also reinforce the analysis. The analysis was based on audio recordings, written transcripts, moderators' observations and notes. The analyses were channeled to provide a deep understanding of the two segments (employees and managers), going beyond the individual opinions and demographic characteristics. The coding procedure accounted for identification of main topics and ideas mentioned recurrently or as exceptions. Verbatim examples are offered in the results section. Strategies used for analyzing the results of focus groups were: exploring key differences (among different segments, respondents' profiles), patterns recognition, comparison versus opposition.

3. Results

This section presents the results of the group interviews, clustered in three subsections according to our research objective. The meanings, perceptions and attitudes toward the transition from WFO and WFH are structured around five main dimensions (personal, time, spatial, social, and technical), as they were revealed by the thematic analysis. Positive and negative opinions and feelings about job satisfaction, emotional health and work–life balance in the WFH context are presented next. The last part of the results section is focused on the understandings given to work productivity during the WFH period.

3.1. O1 Meanings, Perceptions and Attitudes towards Transition from WFO to WFH

Overall, the pandemic triggered by the SARS-CoV2 virus represented a period of changes on multiple levels (personal, social, economic) and required fast adaptation. A comparative analysis reveals that differences between WFH and WFO took place into different dimensions:

Personal dimension. For some participants, the transition brought uncertainty, fear, insecurity, anxiety, isolation (loneliness) and stress. Verbatim expressions of these feelings are presented below:

> *This period involved an extraordinary limitation from a social point of view. Being the type of person that takes his energy from the people with whom he interacts, during the last year and a half I felt very constrained—A prisoner of the walls (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children). I had a strange, negative feeling about it. I've experienced a state of anxiety, loneliness. And a little bit of fear because I had no idea about what was going to happen since it was something totally new. I have realized that we were not educated for this type of situation, we do not know how to react and how to behave (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children). It was a challenging period defined by stress and anxiety. I think the uncertainty has still remained but we have all adapted, the workload is still the same as before (FG3, managers).*

Time dimension. WFO was limited to the standard working hours (i.e., 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.)—time dedicated to focusing on the job-related tasks, with cigarette or meal breaks which also played a socializing role. In the WFH context, the concept of "working hours" changed its meaning, since time dedicated to job duties blended with household chores and time allocated to personal activities (e.g., looking after children, hobbies). While the perceived benefit is that of flexibility, ability to organize time according to personal needs, the drawback is the perception that time is no longer split equitably. A general idea depicted was that everybody works more time. An example is the disappearance of barriers related to time zones, for those working with other countries—i.e., the ability to set meetings after hours. Additionally, respondents, especially employees, encounter a difficulty in disconnecting from the job and focusing on other duties, due to "always laying back with my laptop on".

Sometimes I work until 10 p.m. in the evening. This did not happen while working from the office, because I used to leave my laptop at the office (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children). I feel that I've worked harder. The time that I used to spend on the way to my job is now spent on actually working (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).

Spatial dimension. In the case of regular work, WFO brings the benefit of a formal working space, a set-up designed to facilitate focus on one's tasks. In the case of WFH, the idea of working in one's personal space has the benefit of convenience; however, where the available space does not enable setting up a dedicated work area, employees find themselves forced to work in the same space where other household activities are carried on, and that may have a negative effect on their mood, productivity, ability to focus, etc.

It is very difficult to differentiate your personal life from the professional one when you WFH. I work in the kitchen; I also eat there—At some point it became difficult to focus (FG3, managers). When I started working from home I didn't even have an office-desk. I had to buy a desk, a chair, I brought my computer from work—And I have occupied a space within the house that was not designated for such an activity (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).

Social dimension. It refers to the ability to socialize with colleagues. This is the aspect that employees miss the most, even if there are online alternatives for team meetings, they cannot fully replace direct interaction.

At work, there are more unproductive intervals. For instance, it takes you 3 min to go to the bathroom—you meet someone there—start a small talk and turn back after 10–15 min. The big difference between WFH and WFO is that there you have the socializing part (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children). We tried all sorts of ways to work again as a team, with meetings on Zoom in order to keep in touch with each other and work together as we did while working from the office. This adaptation stage took some time (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children). We also tried to share things that weren't exactly related to the job in order to keep in touch. We had a weekly meeting in which we used to share info about what we've read, what we've watched on Netflix, etc. After a while, when we got used to quarantine, these meetings did not happen on a weekly basis anymore (FG3, managers).

Technical dimension. WFH has also required a number of changes and adjustments in terms of technical infrastructure (VPN, security/privacy settings, etc.), which companies' IT staff handled. Moreover, an adjustment to the resources available at home was required, e.g., high speed internet. Some differences in the workflow arose until all these changes became functional and integrated by employees (a learning process was required).

In the adaptation process, the company was in charge with the technical part—the IT department made possible several connections. (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children)

3.2. O2 Job Satisfaction, Emotional Health and Work–Life Balance in the WFH System

Switch from WFO to WFH had a strong emotional impact on the employees, especially since that happened suddenly, in a context dominated by uncertainty and health risks.

In that very uncertain context at the beginning of the pandemics, I appreciated that I could stay at home because I did not want to expose my family at all (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children). Maybe one of the good things was related to safety—Many colleagues did not feel comfortable exposing their children by coming to work (FG3, managers).

A number of positive aspects, sources of satisfaction are pointed out, but especially sources of stress and dissatisfaction are underlined. Same aspects can bring both good and bad things in respondents' lives, depending on context, emotions they trigger.

The first positive aspect is the flexibility in terms of work schedule and the possibility of multitasking, mixing work-related activities with personal ones—which vary based on age segment (e.g., while those aged 35+ tend to allocate time to family duties or to spend time with children, the younger employees focus on their hobbies or their well-being).

When you WFH, you have the possibility to mix the activities—during the working hours you can clean the house or wash some clothes, because you can catch up by working after the classical working hours (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children). One of the advantages is the flexibility—meaning that you have the possibility to do other things as well. For instance, you can take a nap, since there are no supervisors around (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children). You have immediate access to both work related stuff and house duties. For instance, you can start cooking and stop answering an email (FG3, managers).

The second aspect is the possibility to work from the comfort of one's own home. In the short term, employees appreciate the familiarity of working from home. However, in the long term they feel the risk of falling into a rut, of feeling lonely and even feeling fatigue due to "the same scenery". These feelings appear, especially in situations where the space is not very permissive and multiple activities are performed in the same place. However, for people who are single, there is also one more benefit of being able to work from home, because they work in peace, and they are able to focus better on more complicated tasks (vs. working in an open space office). In addition, for several people, the comfort of home is associated with relaxation rather than concentration and therefore there is a risk of feeling "in a permanent torpor", which obviously has a negative impact on productivity. Another thing that has a negative impact on one's state of mind and may lead to loss of zest for work or loss of motivation is giving up routines such as beautification (e.g., putting on make-up, dressing up in different clothes, perhaps more elegant).

First of all, in the case of multinationals each space is designed in a certain way, the colors are chosen in a certain way to put you in a certain mental state that enables you to function. The ambient is designed, organized, it puts you in a certain mood. At home you get into a state of torpor which didn't happen at the office (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children). I am a bit more productive at the office than at home because the office vibe helps boost my energy. At home I can drink a dozen cups of coffee, the effect is not the same, and working in a team matters a lot too. When you make a mistake, here you talk to the walls, at the office someone may give you an answer (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).

The third aspect is time and money saved on commuting. On the one hand, this can be a benefit, because people are able to invest in personal activities, from chores to administrative tasks or even time spent with the family. They can start work in a relaxed state, removing the stress that can accumulate standing in traffic or to prepare themselves for work. Additionally, they can connect to the work much quicker and be more productive in this case. However, for people that are more than 35 years old, with family and children, this commuting time can represent a break or a moment of reset, which enables them to disconnect from work and connect better to the family, thus spending better quality, albeit

less time with the loved one. In the new arrangements, spending the whole day indoors with the family, trying to juggle work responsibilities and the needs of the loved ones, increases their stress level, requires more mental and physical energy, actually reducing the quality time spent together. On the other hand, for younger employees, there is a risk that the saved time is allocated to work, which in the long term run may lead to burnout.

> *I feel that all these moments when my little girl needed me and I couldn't be there for her, pushed me away. I sometimes get irritated and lose my temper. No matter how much I would like to be able to say that I spent more time with her, this actually didn't happen. I used to come home calm from the office, give her my entire attention and we used to go to the park. After a whole day of mommy this and mommy that while I'm trying to focus, I am out of commission (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children). It is kind of difficult for me to associate my house with my workplace; it's difficult to make this mental switch. However, the advantage is that you do not waste so much time and nerves in traffic, you do not need to wake up earlier—so you may start a little bit more rested (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).*

The fourth, negative, aspect is related to limited socializing options especially in the pandemic context and for the youngest segment. This means fewer opportunities to brainstorm, exchange knowledge, connect with the others, receive informal feedback, and synchronize with the colleagues in a more fluid way.

> *For me it was a massive drawback for my personal development. Being home alone, I didn't interact with many people, only with my laptop, whereas when I was going to the office. I had lots of activities with my colleagues. And the mere fact of talking to someone motivated us somehow, information reaches you differently, you find out about things that you like opportunities for promotion. (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).*

The fifth, negative, aspect refers to communication challenges due to the lack of access to non-verbal communication, which impacts both the productivity and the relationships (between co-workers, between managers and direct reports, etc.). Managers have noticed that not everybody got on board with the video call option (reasons were: fear of the unknown, discomfort, not wanting to give others access to their private life, etc.).

> *When working in a team it was often a lot easier to just walk up to the closest colleague and ask a question, talk to them. Now when the whole team meets on Zoom, rather than explain, you prefer to just keep your mouth shut and not ask anything. You don't want to expose yourself in front of everybody because you don't want to appear like you don't know what you're doing or you're not good at your job. At the office you were able to do this discreetly (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).*

The last, negative, aspect refers to limited direct learning options, from exposure to other people's experience, especially important in the case of newcomers and those that are interested in evolving ("*when we were in the office there were things I used to pick up on the fly, from colleagues . . . now I am sometimes embarrassed to bother them, or there are things that simply don't come up*" FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).

Moreover, middle managers pointed out some negative aspects with whom they met while WFH and coordinating their team remotely.

First of all, they mentioned the difficulties they faced in conveying clear messages to their team members, due to uncertainty they had to deal with. This put pressure on them to find safe and effective solutions to create stability in the team, both for employees who had to switch to WFH but also for those who were not able to do that. They also felt that the pandemic prompted them to give more negative news to the people (e.g., job reductions, benefits cuts, no growth and no promotions despite the results), which impacted the employees both at an emotional level but also on team cohesion).

> *It was sad because I wasn't able to say that everything was going to be fine, when one didn't know what tomorrow would bring. One of the challenges was to provide counselling and instill confidence when there wasn't much certainty around. You have*

to be this communication channel between the company's decisions and your team. Uncertainty ruled to a certain extent and you are a counsellor, a source of energy for everyone. Communication to the employees was a challenge, keeping your cool when you didn't know yourself what was going to happen (FG3, managers).

We lost a lot of business and were forced to cut down the benefits. It was difficult to make them feel safe under these circumstances (FG3, managers).

WFH deprived managers of the possibility to observe their people. Not seeing people and only waiting for them to find the courage to open up on the problems they deal with, made it difficult for managers to anticipate some issues and solve them before becoming critical. Counselling was seen as less effective in an online environment. Even if some managers organize online 1:1 meeting, they feel the results are poorer compared to when they had the chance to stay face to face with their subordinates.

I noticed that when you were there in the office with them you saw things differently, especially with the newcomers. When you explained something to them, or provided some training, you could see whether they were paying attention or not. On Teams they may even be watching a movie; you can't know what they're up to. And you can't see if they need help or if they hesitate, perhaps they don't ask even if they don't know how to do something (FG3, managers).

WFH put pressure on middle managers in finding a balance to keep people engaged ("*after a while, I had the feeling that they are becoming lazy, unmotivated*"), maintaining the supervision, but also showing confidence, not making people feel controlled.

3.3. O3 Work Productivity Understandings in the WFH System

This section presents the meanings the employees and managers associated with work productivity in the transition process from WFO to WFH, structured around the following dimensions as revealed by the analysis: general perspectives, productivity indicators and employees' productivity assessment process, productivity influencers and work monitoring.

3.3.1. General Perspectives on Work Productivity

With the employees' words, productivity means: "*The ability to complete certain tasks within a certain period of time*"; "*Doing things as well as possible and as fast as possible*"; "*Completing your tasks in a timely manner*". While the less than 35+ y.o. segment is focused rather on speed, the 35+ y.o. employees also tend to consider the importance of quality ("*Doing the job in a responsible manner*"). On a rational level, job continuity and the income derived from it depend on productivity (including also potential wage increases and promotion). Moreover, on an emotional level being productive attracts respect and appreciation from co-workers and managers, which in turn leads to boost self-confidence.

A summary definition of productivity by managers is very similar to the employees' perceptions: "*I start the day by making notes, I make a to-do list for the day and if at the end of the day I have ticked off everything on the list, it means I was productive*"; "*I am most productive when my Inbox is empty, and everything is taken care of. I have a daily, weekly and monthly to-do list*". However, in the managers' perception productivity is not merely about completing specific tasks but is rather part of a broader process: the objectives that need to be achieved, targets to be reached, turnover, etc. ("*A productive day is when you manage to solve some problems that have appeared within the workflow. Or when you help some colleagues to better understand what they have to do. In any scenario, a productive day is a day without so many calls, when you can focus on work—FG3, managers*"). A comparative analysis reveals a perception, especially amongst employees, that the pace of work has intensified after the switch to WFH, due to multiple fostering factors.

On one hand, there are blurred lines separating work and personal life resulting from the disappearance of working hours. This favours time allocated to work, with regard to productivity. For instance, "downtime" associated with the regular work (e.g., travel

to/from work, cigarette/meal breaks with colleagues, etc.) is now dedicated to work ("*I wake up with the coffee straight in front of the laptop and start working*"). However, this has a negative impact on the personal life. There is a perception that it is becoming increasingly challenging to "disconnect" from work. Managers who have noticed this trend indicate that they encourage their staff to not work longer than the normal business hours, especially in organizations where overtime is not paid.

On the other hand, the lack of direct interaction that solves some issues fast, comes with the perception that the workload is bigger (e.g., more emails requiring reply) and implicitly the work pace more intense. This does not necessarily mean increased productivity, but rather a different way of doing things. Moreover, in some situations there is a perceived shortening of time allocated to certain tasks, probably as a consequence of the above. The intensification of the work pace may also create a feeling of *working under pressure*, which may have a negative effect on productivity, or on the quality of work, respectively.

> *The company used to have a minibus that came around at 5.30 p.m. and picked us up. Now that we are home, we usually work longer. There is no more fixed, organized working schedule, you work after hours too if required. I can't say I feel good about this, because my mind is somehow focused on solving that thing, I can't switch anymore between home and work (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children). A productive day was when I had the chance to stay alone and just work, without meetings and other administrative tasks (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children).*

3.3.2. Productivity Indicators and Employees' Productivity Assessment Process

Usually, productive time is differentiated from unproductive time (meetings, administrative tasks, etc.). The productivity indicators are typically set along with the job description, in the form of objectives or targets to achieve, and are periodically assessed. Depending on the job specificity and organization profile, the activities are either declarative/subjective (harder to assess directly, over short timeframes) or quantifiable (e.g., number of calls, emails, completed transactions, reports, etc.).

> *In my case, an objective assessment is not possible because I am the only measuring tool. I alone organize myself, my diary, and how many candidates I can meet. Nobody can assess except based on how quickly I manage to fill a position, or to find the right person for the open positions. (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children)*

Productivity assessment tools were in place even before the switch to WFH. Besides showing the productivity level, this also reflects the team workload. For the moment, these evaluation methods remained the same. A change might have occurred (in some companies) in how they are implemented—more time needed to run all evaluations, they happen after a longer period of time, etc. There were also comments that evaluation processes were currently on hold in some companies. From the managers' perspective, such reviews are useful for providing salary increases or bonuses, promotions, determining the right team size, organizing internal resources, etc. They are also important and useful especially during the trial period, when they have to decide if they keep or not a certain employee. Employees are generally reluctant regarding the effectiveness of some evaluating methods, finding them too subjective, limited to some key performance indicators (KPIs) only, sometimes at a declarative level only (the employer could hardly verify what the employee claims to be doing during his working hours) and, in a nutshell, some formalities that must be ticked or, sometimes, they feel decisions have been already made before the actual assessment.

Informally, every employee assesses his own productivity based on the tasks completed at the end of a day/week. Formally, the assessment is performed at regular time intervals, most often by the direct supervisor. Topics covered during this review are the actual productivity as well as aspects related to soft skills, team integration, mission, long term plans, etc.

Nothing has changed in this regard with WFH, it's the same, I fill it out daily. And for performance twice a year. You set your objectives and from 1 to 5 get the result. Twice a year and you have the objective setting in the beginning and at the end one draws the line. There is a discussion, and you enter there during the year. I decided to get some Excel training, ticking boxes and so on. This in the case of a potential promotion or if you want to apply for a job, the grade matters a lot (FG1, 35–50 y.o., families with children).

Now I feel that everything takes a lot longer, including the review. There is a delay, just like we all used to present in the past. It's one thing to be in the office and communicate face to face and another thing to send an email or contact by Skype. The communication is much harder, and it's the same with the procedures, it's harder to complete them (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).

Middle managers specify different ways that they use to assess productivity of their teams: evaluation based on tasks (monitored through different specific digital tools, ex. Umbrella app); daily meetings, including also providing oral feedback regarding productivity; regular productivity assessments (annual/at every 6 months) which can have the form of open discussions between employee and manager or be more structured (different forms with scalable KPIs*).*

Generally, we have annual evaluations. But, for some positions, we set clear targets and, if they do not meet their goals, we organise a discussion and try to explain to them the impact on business. In some cases we decide to end the collaboration (FG3, managers). We have an internal procedure based on which we tend to evaluate employees more carefully during the trial period. Afterwards, it's difficult to fire them so we want to be sure we make the best decision (FG3, managers).

3.3.3. Productivity Influencers

Productivity may be influenced by a number of factors, both related to the context and related to an individual employee or the organization.

External influences affecting employee's mood or their capability to focus on job tasks refer to the availability of a dedicated working area, impact of limited outings and socializing, the interference with other family members and other distracting factors (such as noise made by co-workers in normal working conditions or by neighbours in WFH context).

On an emotional level, employees mentioned some personal influences on work productivity: individual state of mind, specific to each day, influenced by a variety of factors, from sleep quality to potential family issues; the level of stress, a result of limited access to information, short deadlines, etc.; feelings of appreciation (important emotional driver especially for the young ones, with big need for feedback and validation); not feeling controlled, which could induce a lack of trust in their employees. In fact, encouraging autonomy might have a good impact on respondents' engagement with the company while WFH. In addition, labour productivity can be influenced by the benefits/rewards that employees receive. They mention that financial motivation, possibility for personal and professional development and career promotion perspective may increase the motivation. In the WFH context, certain organizations have offered the option to attend online seminars on various topics, including topics such as mental health or parenting, and this was appreciated by the employees.

Productivity is also be influenced by organizational/work related aspects. Some of them, such as "*clear definition of roles, responsibilities and tasks on individual and team level*", "*equitably spread workload across the team*" and "*accurate and efficient communication*", were mentioned only by middle managers, while others were mentioned by both managers and employees: schedule (involvement in unproductive activities such as meetings, calls, etc.); resources (infrastructure required for carrying out the work in optimum conditions); atmosphere (harmony, healthy relationships, positive vibe inside the organisation, security); team spirit (interaction with co-workers, team integration to team atmosphere and support received from management). The employees' first and foremost wish is "*to feel that they are understood*".

There is a gap between how employees and managers assess the implication that organisations can have regarding WFH. Some managers do not consider that companies could have done more in order to sustain productivity in WFH. They feel that giving access to IT devices, providing necessary furniture to help them create an efficient setup at home, and offering training were all relevant and sufficient actions. Employees consider that there are things that organisations can conduct in order to provide better support for their employees, on different levels: emotionally (events, team buildings, actions that can encourage social interaction, actions proving that companies trust their people and have no suspicious regarding the quality of their job when working from home); professionally (growth/ learning opportunities, mainly for the young segment); operationally (providing technical equipment, furniture and other essential material stuff).

3.3.4. Work Monitoring

The employees' activity is monitored both in WFO and WFH conditions, via the tools provided by the organization (e.g., allocation of a task by the manager and monitoring its completion) and through the managers' direct or indirect supervision techniques. The switch to WFH raised the need for additional control over the employees' activities. Control tools were therefore implemented, monitoring the employees' activities during working hours.

> *It's also important that we, the managers, find certain methods to take the people's pulse during the day. (FG3, managers).*

Moreover, managers felt the need to develop new techniques for controlling their team, to replace the direct monitoring they used to conduct when WFO and to adapt to the online environment (e.g., ad hoc calls). Such an approach reflects a certain mistrust in the relationship between employer and employee, especially where productivity is not necessarily quantifiable but rather relies on the employee's own statements. Employees are aware of the mistrust of employers. Whilst they find it justified at some point, especially in the new context, they feel that productivity primarily depend on peoples' feelings of responsibility.

> *Even though I am an engineer and clients no longer call me, but rather I call the clients' managers, I have a login program running permanently, I have to be present. Not necessarily active, but to have a status. One can see when I'm on lunch, cigarette or toilet break. Or when I'm in a meeting. I feel it's ok from the company's perspective, I personally see it as an automated thing. If someone wants to be tenacious, they will be productive anyway. If they want to have results over time, they will not cheat themselves. The message is that there isn't much trust in the employees (FG2, 25–35 y.o., alone or couples without children).*

4. Discussions

COVID-19 pandemic has changed the dynamics of working practices and imposed flexible working conditions for which some people have been less prepared.

In this study, we aimed to offer readers a comprehensive understanding of how the transition from WFO to WFH impacted employees' and middle managers' work and life. Our findings offer practical implications for organizations and managers in addressing the pitfalls of WFH. The conclusions of the study fall within the results of other analysis found in the literature, which see flexible working practices as having multidimensional aspects and social implications [28]. In our research, the most important differences between WFH and WFO over the transition process caused by COVID-19 pandemic, manifested on five main dimensions: personal, time (working schedule), spatial (working environment), social interaction (socialization) and technical (use of technology). There are differences among segments of employees, in terms of combination and prioritization of these five dimensions, and these differences have an impact on the way the organizations should design their WFH models.

Young employees have a huge need for networking and social interaction in a learning and growing environment; it is a great challenge for WFH systems to answer these needs. Young employees expressed a clear desire to have tangible experiences, to be "seen" by their organisations and to receive constant (formal and informal) feedback. It is important for companies to create strategies to address these needs, the risk being less motivated, engaged and enthusiastic young employees.

Employees with children mentioned how difficult it was to maintain a balance between work and increased family needs (caused by pandemic restrictions). Companies should show them good understanding from this perspective, by undertaking practical measures to ease the pressure (rethinking the working schedule, providing the employees with the necessary furniture as they share the private resources with other family members, etc.).

Managers lived the pandemic on two levels: as employees (and from this role there is an overlap with the learnings collected from the other segments) and as people coordinators. As team leaders, they seemed to confront with some major challenges: remaining a coherent communicator, helping people to adjust to WFH and feel comfortable with this, keeping the team spirit alive and creating a new working pace.

Different studies consider WFH as a good practice for work–life balance [27,30], while others claim that it leads to work–life conflicts [31,32]. Our study reflected that advantage and disadvantage are mixed together and that employees and managers are still trying to figure out how they can improve the WFH experience. There are good chances that companies which address the specific problems created by WFH, uplift their brand as employers, transmitting the idea of a people-oriented organisation.

COVID-19 came with challenges and lessons learned. It represents a significant inflection point for research into flexible working systems innovations but also pitfalls. Studies suggest that the combination of benefits from the usage of digital technologies and cost savings for organizations will make the WFH system rise in the future [33]. However, we consider there is still much to learn about the real price of flexibility and working freedom in a digital world. The long-term effects of WFH on individuals and groups mental and physical health are still at the early stages of investigation. What counts the most is that each stakeholder (employee, manager, organisation) is aware of them and develops WFH models that suit their contextual needs. Within this framework, there is a need for research on a wider range of contexts to enhance the existing understanding of WHF to avoid the blind adoption of practices from other contexts [28]. Our study is aimed at moving organizations toward the adaptation of practices that have a contextual fit.

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