



Work-life balance and workplace wellbeing in Covid-19 pandemic conditions: a pilot study in Romania

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Abstract

The end of 2019 was marked by the grim beginning of a new pandemic: Covid-19 hit China and spread across the world in a few months. 2020 saw the world experiencing new ways of working in a common effort to reduce incidence of Covid-19 infection. However, working remotely had its own impact on peoples' health and wellbeing. The purpose of the paper is to understand the impact of teleworking on workplace wellbeing through the launch of a pilot study based on a detailed survey that was applied in a private company in Timisoara. The study revealed that the quality of life worsened as respondents reported symptoms of musculoskeletal disorders, weight gains, increase of blood pressure and glycaemic index, and somatization of stress.

Keywords: Teleworking, Wellbeing, Covid-19

1 Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic turned upside down the majority of 'normal lifestyle' perspective across the world. Romania was not an exception from this, as the number of Covid-19 positive cases has been exponentially increasing since January 2020. Since March 2020, Romanian Government put in place a set of restrictions, including lockdown, teleworking and online school. November 2020 came with a new set of restrictions like those applied in the first round of lockdown, including the shift to teleworking wherever this was possible [6]. In this context, the question was: how will this affect both physical and mental health status of individuals?

For employees, a major challenge was adapting to the shift to remote work environments (i.e. teleworking), new workplace policies or procedures that limit human contact [2]. These changes have been exacerbated by a work-family conflict where professional and family roles become incompatible as these are expected to be performed at the same time in the same space throughout the day. This type of conflict can be remediated by offering employees flexible work arrangements, on-site childcare or childcare subsidies [2]. Unfortunately, such employee benefits became difficult – or even impossible in some countries – to offer in the new pandemic conditions. Work and family roles fused to an extent where adequate role boundaries were highly difficult to maintain. Another interesting aspect is that during lockdown childless families and single employees are at particularly high risks of loneliness, feelings of social exclusion and isolation [2].

In the context of these new challenges that must be addressed as soon as possible, studies on how to improve workplace wellbeing are essential. The present paper aims to highlight how teleworking impacted workplace wellbeing for employees in teleworking.

2 Literature review

Lockdown and sanitary restrictions imposed by Covid-19 pandemic marked a period of changes in habits and rules. However, studies in various parts of the world do not have consistent conclusions: in some cases, lifestyle habits and wellbeing were negatively impacted, while in other cases people started eating healthier or exercising more. Without doubt, the pandemic left traces on health and work, with major changes such as switch to teleworking and education based on online tools, increased stress, reduction of physical activity, deterioration of health status and concerns over safety and social interactions.

Exposure to emergent disease outbreaks occurred in recent years were associated with significant alteration of day-to-day life and health status [1], primarily on the basis of social distancing measures such as home isolation and quarantine. A cross-sectional study on 1,254 respondents in Spain tracked lifestyle behaviour, experience with Covid-19, self-reported health and previously diagnosed diseases. The study revealed that outdoor activities were significantly reduced during lockdown, with impact on physical activity. Further, sleep patterns and feeding habits suffered changes during lockdown; changes in diet were primarily caused by uncertainties over food supply and increasing use of comfort food [1].

As per a cross-sectional study on 995 respondents in India [3], healthier meal consumption was the major positive change, whereas reduction of physical activity, longer time spent in front of the screen (both for work-related activities and leisure) and rising stress and anxiety represented the negative sides of lockdown.

However, a very interesting conclusion was revealed by a cohort study on young adults in Switzerland: changes imposed by the pandemic context were regarded as facilitators for increased wellbeing, as lockdown represented a great opportunity for spending more time with family, partners and friends, exercising more, spending more time on hobbies and sleeping more [9]. Swiss young people engaged in activities that improve both physical and emotional life; also, the generally good health status reduced distress regarding the impact of Covid-19. This is further supported by a study on lockdown effects on UK people, where increasing participation in physical activities was associated with better mental health [5]. Nevertheless, perceived stress and anger increased after Covid-19 outbreak, backed by pre-existent emotional distress combined with stressors characterising the pandemic situation (lifestyle and economic changes) [9].

A study on 194 companies in Romania, performed during August-September 2020, showed that major advantages of remote working are lower health risks for employees, reduced costs for the company and more autonomous employees [10]. However, among the key challenges these companies face is weaker communication across the organisation, reduced time for coaching and training, and lower employee engagement [10].

Resilience was found to help people cope with effects of lockdown. A cross-sectional study with 711 respondents confirmed that subjects with higher levels of resilience are more likely to easily overcome difficulties faced in stressful situations, including Covid-19 lockdown [7]. One of the conclusions of a study on 587 individuals in Australia (both healthcare employees and community members) is that social connection with families and friends, limiting exposure to news regarding evolution of pandemic, sufficient and high-quality sleep, healthy diet, physical activity and meditation/mindfulness are the most adequate coping strategies in this challenging period [8]. This is further supported by a study that highlights fear and anxiety as main effects of Covid-19 pandemic. To minimise such negative outcomes, coping strategies mentioned above should be combined with a positive attitude and reading of stories about people who recovered from infection with Covid-19 [4].

3 Study Methodology

The authors developed a survey to understand how workplace wellbeing was modified by the shift from traditional working systems to teleworking. The survey comprises 24 questions referring to the following aspects: working scenario (teleworking, mixed, only in the office), training for teleworking, sources of information to properly organize remote working, investments (furniture, devices, re-decoration etc.), physical health (musculoskeletal disorders, weight gain, blood pressure and glycaemic index changes, infection with Covid-19, visits to the doctor and treatment), mental health, medical leaves, physical exercise and variables for subject classification/demographic information (gender, age, work experience, whether the respondent has management position, and the industry in which the company operates).

The survey was elaborated and distributed using SurveyMonkey, an online platform dedicated to development and use of data collection tools for businesses and researchers.

For validation purposes, the authors performed a pilot study in a private company operating in waste collection industry, where 44 employees have been working remotely since March 2020. The survey was distributed via email.

Research hypothesis was that lockdown and teleworking negatively impact wellbeing, with effects on physical and mental health.

The results of this pilot study are detailed in the following chapter.

4 Results and discussion

4.1 Study results

Out of the 44 employees invited to the study, 26 provided full responses, with a response rate of 59.1%. As per Table 1, 64% of respondents are female and 36% are male; 72% are aged between 35 and 55 years old and 84% have more than 5 years of experience.

Table 1. Respondents profile – statistical analysis

Variable		No of respondents	% of respondents	Median	Mean	Standard deviation
Gender	Male	9	36%	2.00	1.64	0.48
	Female	16	64%			
Age distribution (years)	<25	2	8%	3.00	2.84	0.83
	25-35	5	20%			
	35-45	13	52%			
	45-55	5	20%			
Management position	No management position	18	72%	4.00	3.40	1.06
	Supervisor	3	12%			
	Middle management	2	8%			

Variable		No of respondents	% of respondents	Median	Mean	Standard deviation
	Top management	2	8%			
Experience in work (years)	<1	1	4%	6.00	5.28	1.78
	1-3	2	8%			
	3-5	1	4%			
	5-10	3	12%			
	10-15	5	20%			
	15-20	4	16%			
	>20	9	36%			
Type of employment	Full-time	24	96%	1.00	1.12	0.59
	Student employed full-time	1	4%			

48% of respondents have been working remotely (teleworking) since March 2020 and 44% worked in a mixed scenario (alternated teleworking with physical presence in the office). For more than half of the respondents (56%), teleworking was the main scenario for over 6 months. Further, 52% of employees benefited from trainings/informative sessions/webinars dedicated to teleworking. When analysing the sources of information used to properly organize their activity at home, discussions with peers and acquaintances were the main source of information (68%), followed by multimedia materials and demonstration videos (such as YouTube) (20%), and e-books and online articles (12%); 24% of respondents did not search for information on this matter. In addition, 44% employees invested in improvements and redecoration of a room to organise a working space, 28% invested in furniture and 8% in electronic equipment such as PC, laptop or smartphone. However, 40% of respondents did not make investments for adapting their home for teleworking. The amount spent for the above investments ranges from 0 to 1,000 lei (~200 Euro), as follows: 0 (54.2%), 8.3% below 200 lei, 16.7% between 200 and 500 lei, 8.3% between 500 and 1,000 lei, and 12.5% above 1,000 lei.

The questionnaire also includes a set of questions regarding physical and mental health. Respondents were asked to rate from 1 (no pain) to 5 (unbearable pain) the discomfort felt in certain body regions. The results are presented in Figure 1. As expected, neck, shoulders and back were the main regions where respondents reported pain – these are the regions primarily affected by working in front of a computer/laptop. However, only one respondent reported unbearable pain in the lower back region. Long hours spent sitting, combined sometimes with inappropriate furniture and inadequate time organisation (long hours spent sitting without breaks) are the most common causes for these pains. Nevertheless, few respondents paid a visit to the doctor for musculoskeletal disorders (17.4%). Furthermore, 60% employees reported weight gains (32% gained 1-2 kg and 28% gained 3-4 kg); 3 respondents had high blood pressure (12%), 3 reported a slight increase in glycaemic index and 1 mentioned accentuated increase of glycaemic index. As mental health was not left apart, the most frequent psychosocial symptoms reported were exhaustion (32%), incapacity to relax (28%), headaches (20%), anxiety (16%) and insomnia (16%). Majority of employees were not affected by Covid-19 (88%). Since March 2020, 32% of respondents went to the doctor, 16% are under treatment prescribed by a specialist, 4% are under homeopath treatment and 4% are under naturist treatment. 12% of them had medical leave for 1 week (8%) or maximum a month (4%).

Considering that physical activity is highly important for overall wellbeing, 52% of respondents performed moderate physical activity and 12% vigorous physical activity. 36% did not perform any type of physical activity. 68% of respondents used to perform physical activity before Covid-19 pandemic.

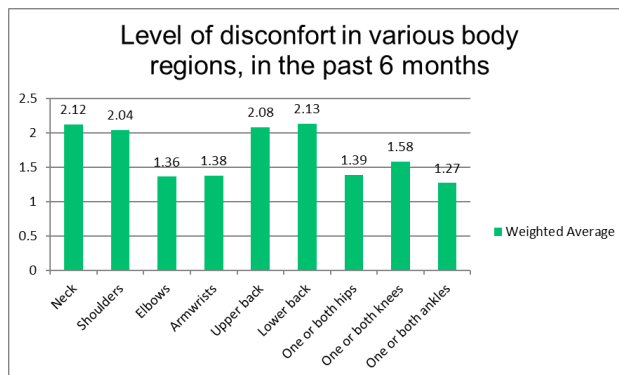


Figure 1. Level of discomfort by body region in the past 6 months – weighted average

4.2 Discussion

The hypothesis of the study was that sanitary restrictions and teleworking would impact workplace wellbeing, as it fuses with aspects from personal life to an extent where there is no clear limit between work and private life (as these all take place in the same space for the whole day).

After 6 months, respondents have already started to feel pain (moderate levels, but still a question mark on the long-term impact of such arrangements), gained weight, reported symptoms of stress and mental unwellness and followed treatments to ameliorate the symptoms. A positive aspect is that respondents performed physical activity, which is proved to reduce stress and improve the overall state of wellbeing.

Since majority of employees are aged between 35 and 55 years, the age is not necessarily a factor that would explain some of the symptoms. However, the large number of female respondents might explain high incidence of mental health symptoms, as social inequity forces women to take responsibility for aspects such as childcare and children education, online schooling (children need to be helped/supervised during online classes, especially in the first years of school), houseware etc., which all completely merged with job responsibilities in the moment when lockdown was officially put in place.

The authors consider that the results of the pilot study validate the survey as a proper tool for evaluating workplace wellbeing and will further perform a cross-sectional study to understand the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on workplace wellbeing of Romanian employees.

5 Conclusion

Negative outcome of Covid-19 pandemic consists in reduced outdoor activity, fear, anxiety, and reduced wellbeing. The pilot study highlights the negative effects of lockdown and teleworking on employees' physical and mental health (neck, shoulders and back pain, weight gains, rising glycaemic index, anxiety, headaches, impossibility to relax, reduced quality of sleep). Further, 32% of respondents required medical assistance for reported symptoms. To improve their working conditions, employees made investments in furniture and devices and they gathered information

primarily from acquittances and peers. Moreover, 64% employees performed physical activities since March 2020, a reduction from the 68% who used to perform physical activities before the pandemic.

Nevertheless, the negative impact of Covid-19 pandemic on work-life balance and workplace wellbeing should not be minimised: new strategies for improving quality of life for people working in remote scenario, finding new ways of social bonding in the context of social distancing and alternation of home and office working should be immediately addressed in order to reduce the long-term negative outcomes.

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