Emergency Remote Work in Portugal: Evaluation, Effects, and Recommendations

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Abstract. The recent pandemic caused by COVID-19 has forced unprecedented professional and social changes that affect the way people work, learn and live. Even in an era in which the digitalization of the workplace had been already widely announced, employers and employees had not expected such an urgent digital immersion of jobs with broad impacts on the professional, personal, financial and social dimensions of the workforce. In this paper, the main consequences, challenges, and effects of remote work in Portugal are reported, together with a set of recommendations for employers and workers, which were captured in survey-based research. Results show that professionals are not unanimous towards the benefits of remote work, and while some would like to resume in-person work, a substantial amount of professional, personal and financial benefits are associated to the possibility of working from home. Additionally, and according to pressing changes, professionals put forward several recommendations for employers and peers regarding workload and time management, employee assistance and self-regulated work.

Keywords: Emergency remote work · Remote work · COVID-19 · Digital transformation

1 Introduction

Globalization and digital transformation shaped the work and provided a set of tools that allowed remote work to expand as never seen before. Remote work (RW) was already a reality for some particular industry clusters and job profiles, but hardly a widely accepted or an adopted form of work. However, given the social distancing imposed by the COVID-19 (SRA-CoV-2) pandemic, RW emerged as the only viable solution to maintain labor at a large scale, even in the situations where it was unforeseeable and, in many cases, happened under inappropriate conditions. In the press, a growing body of voices states that this will be our reality for the upcoming years, as it will be difficult for everyone to go back to the old forms of living and working. In fact, the pandemic situation taught us that remote work is possible for almost all kinds of jobs. Therefore, citizens’ global literacy is at higher stake and risk,
considering the multiplicity of social and digital skills required to function in a democratically pluralistic, shared community, across geographical and international contexts, in work and life [1]. Nevertheless, this transition and the adoption of remote work, for some workers were not done without pain as it represented, in some cases, sharing the house all day with the other members of the family, sometimes sharing equipment and even managing/bounding their working hours, without a clear distinction between work, leisure and family time. This scenario may differ from country to country, as such, in this paper, the authors present the results of a study conducted in Portugal, regarding the core challenges of the transition to RW. The aim is to identify and evaluate the main impacts, effects, and recommendations in the transition from face-to-face work to the remote work in Portugal. This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 contextualizes RW. Results presented in Sect. 4 are divided in two parts: quantitative evaluation of the professional and personal-financial aspects of RW, followed by its positive and negative aspects, finalizing with a set of recommendations for co-workers and employers.

2 Background

Globalization and the recent changes brought by the Industrial Revolution are gaining momentum; industries worldwide were adjusting processes and human resources to the new technology-immersed workplace [2–4]. And this is happening because technology and digitalization are a reality, a global phenomenon, determinant in companies and individual growth. As such, the level of use and quality conditions of technological adoption is as, or even more important, than possessing access or technological knowledge [5]. The changes occurring in work and people may be more visible in the following areas: organization of work; the relationship between private and working life; the format of work, communication and collaboration; performance and talent management; organizational hierarchies [6–9], just to name a few. Technology is in the midst of most changes that occur daily [10], and if till recently we could look at technology and digitalization as an opportunity for companies and organizations [11, 12], today they constitute a social requirement as everyone is using it to work, to shop, to study and even to get entertainment. Looking at the job market, it is possible to observe that in many countries, the digital transformation has increased the opportunity for employees to perform their work from home [2], which is designated as remote work or telework. Remote work can be defined as performing professional tasks outside the facilities of the company/organization, [13]. Furthermore, [14] have defined four types of remote work: Home-Based Telecommuting; Satellite Office; Neighborhood/Work Centre; and Mobile Work. In Home-Based Telecommuting, employees work from their homes. In Satellite Office, employers work in a convenient location for both the employee and the employer. In a Neighborhood/Work Centre configuration, the employees work in a place convenient for both the worker and the employer, but there may be workers from other companies in the same location. In the Mobile Work mode, the employee performs the activities in any space outside the company [14].
According to the literature, it is possible to identify some characteristics associated to RW, namely [15]: (1) Minimum physical requirements; (2) Individual control over work pace; (3) Defined deliverables; (4) Need for concentration; (5) Defined milestones; (6) Relatively low need for communications. Chen, et al. [16] state that technology allows companies to better communicate with different audiences: customers, partners or employees. For that reason, the authors point out that going virtual becomes beneficial for companies because it allows conducting virtual meetings with customers or employees, online courses/training of virtual teams that could guide sales or product development [16]. The study developed by [17] showed that the adherence or not to RW is associated with motivations and constraints. In general, the research shows that, for example, working women performing administrative tasks have primarily identified family, personal benefits, and reduced stress as motivations to opt for RW when compared to men, managers and qualified professionals. As constraints, women indicated the unwillingness of supervisors to adopt RW and the probability of not having recognition and visibility before management. Administrative workers identified as main constraints to RW the lack of willingness of supervisors or lack of job suitability. Also, social seclusion is a constraint referred by administrative workers, skilled professionals and managers [17].

Researchers also believe that RW can provide a better interconnection between professional, domestic and leisure activities, enhancing flexibility in the organization of personal time [18]. The research conducted by Kazekami [19] in Japan, aimed to study factors influencing productivity, such as work-life balance, happiness, satisfaction with life, the displacement of workers to the company, work interruptions or the number of working hours on telework. The main conclusions point out, among others, the fact that productivity is influenced by working hours: working an excessive amount of hours leads to decreased productivity, which in turn increases when working hours are adequate. Generally, if workers spend more than 1 h travelling to the company, RW tends to allow them to improve their productivity. Additionally, RW increases life satisfaction, happiness, job satisfaction, and reduces the stress of balancing work and household tasks. Although stress does not directly reduce productivity, stress decreases life satisfaction, so it is important to have a balance between work and household tasks. On the other hand, the study also shows that it can be difficult to maintain concentration in the presence of children, family, or neighbours [19].

There have been many reasons, and factors contributing to the disbelieve in remote work as a large-scale, efficient work format. Despite some advantages, which are mainly identified by employees, there are other issues, especially pointed out by organizations, such as required technology infrastructure, HR training, keeping attendance, monitoring progress, etc. In any case, the option for RW can present some gains and losses such as a better balance between professional and personal life. Still, in contrast, RW can lead to social secluding due to the lack of contact with colleagues, and for that reason worsen the work-life balance This is an evidence of «polysemy: it liberates and enslaves, it is a trap and an opportunity», it fulfils and sacrifices [20].

In March 2020, more than 16 million U.S. knowledge workers were in RW [21]. In Portugal, there were more than 68 thousand public service workers in RW [22]. In this scenario, technology became central to society and organizations, because the technology allowed communication between workers and companies and between
companies and their customers; and tools needed as the cloud-based management tool, instant messaging service, professional videoconferencing services or mobile internet, artificial intelligence, big data analytics and cloud computing [23–25].

At present, many workers are still adapting to this new reality. Businesses are also reinventing themselves and managers are trying to balance the need to supervise employees with trust, allowing them to manage their time and space. At the moment, all this is necessary and even more now that companies and people are suffering collateral effects caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, because around the world 1.6 billion people may lose their income; 436 million companies are at high risk of disruption, with about half (232 million) being in wholesale and retail trade; 45% of the world’s GDP is accounted for by self-employment; and the level of poverty is already increasing [26]. The pandemic situation led to the confinement of millions of people, and RW was the solution found all over the world [27, 28]. In Portugal, there’s the emerging notion that RW may be here to stay [29]. A study conducted during April 2020 shows that companies (45%) and workers (55%) want to keep pursuing RW. Among the reasons given are more productivity and increased quality of life [30].

In 2015, only one-fifth of European workers were able to work remotely: in Portugal, only 8% were in remote working mode, showing Italy the lowest level (5%) and Denmark the highest level (38%) [31]. Despite its low expression, in 2010 Portugal had as much as 2464 employees in RW, but in 2014 it decreased to 805. In this period, precariouslyness has also increased, with a higher number of workers on fixed-term contracts [32]. Among the reasons for Portugal not fully embracing RW are the organizational culture with rigid, traditional hierarchies; low levels of digital literacy; unions with low visibility; low levels of education and salary; or the fact that Portugal has recently experienced an economic crisis that destroyed jobs and businesses [33, 34] even though the economy had been showing signs of positive evolution until the recent pandemic was registered.

3 Methodology

The main objective of this work was to identify the impacts, effects, and workers’ recommendations during the transition from face-to-face to RW in Portugal. To achieve the goal, an exploratory survey-based random sampling research was carried out. Exploratory study is characterized by employing a single data collection method to obtain a first view of the issues being analyzed. The goal is to provide a current view of how workers are adhering to RW and its impacts, effects, and recommendations. Respondents were provided with a list of positive and negative statements. Each item on the questionnaire was presented in a labelled 4-point Likert scale, anchored at 1 = “Totally disagree”, 2 = “Partially disagree”, 3 = “Partially agree”, and 4 = “Totally agree”. Higher scores represent a higher level of agreement with the item/issue. The answers to open questions were coded into categories and computed in frequencies. The survey was disseminated through social media (personal, institutional), public groups, and by email, in May 2020, for a month. Survey data were analyzed in IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0.
4 Results

Overall, 156 questionnaires were excluded because they were not fully answered. A dataset with 323 responses was pre-processed. The entries of respondents who did not reside in Portugal and/or who are not currently employed were then removed, resulting in a final dataset of 305 valid responses (N = 305) which was used for analysis.

4.1 Demographics

Most of the respondents are female (73%), aged between 40 to 49 years old (n = 121), living in Northern Portugal (74%), and have completed some level of higher education (38%). Regarding the employment status, most (69%) have a permanent employment contract for more than 10 or 20 years with that organization, and most of the employers are private (63%).

Regarding the work mode, 80% of respondents are working remotely (n = 244). Among the remaining 20%, which are not, ≈58% would like to be in remote work, while the remaining 42% prefer to continue in the traditional working model.

The confinement restrictions imposed by COVID-19 are the reason why 98% of the workers have moved to RW (n = 244), and for ≈87%, this is the first time in RW for the current job. Only 9% have experienced RW in previous jobs, and only 14%, overall, have received training to work remotely. Among the participants that are not currently in remote work, 57% would like to have had the opportunity to be.

The participants were able to provide additional information regarding the training in an open-ended question. From the responses obtained (n = 53), 35% of the participants believe that they did not need any type of training to enter RW, 13% report having received formal training provided by the employer, and 9% received only guidelines or instructions. Participants also received support from their peers to manage RW (9%), and some (13%) attended online training on their own initiative.

4.2 Professional and Personal-Financial Assessment of Remote Work

Respondents were provided with a list of 32 positive and negative statements concerning professional and personal-financial aspects of remote work. Cronbach’s alpha, a measure of intercorrelation among measurement items used as an indicator of internal consistency [35] was calculated for the non-demographic. Items worded negatively were reverse coded, and results show Cronbach’s α = 0.86, indicating acceptably high internal consistency (≥0.70 is considered the minimum acceptable for use in research [36, 37]).

For all items, the minimum value is 1 (“Totally disagree”), and the maximum value is 4 (“Totally agree”). The vast majority of the respondents indicate (A10) RW is useful but only in certain circumstances. In fact, most (A11) feel that they work more in RW (x̄ = 3.08), though opinions are split concerning (A12) an increase in the tasks they usually perform, with the tendency on for a slight rise. However, it is evident that most workers have easily adjusted to RW (x̄ = 3.36), despite only about half of them (A6) believe that all their regular tasks are feasible in RW (x̄ = 2.51). Among some of the possible benefits of RW, the highest level of agreement is verified for (A2) feeling that there are fewer conflicts between colleagues (x̄ = 2.82), (A3) a better balance between
work and household tasks ($\bar{x} = 2.80$), (A4) better control of the schedule ($\bar{x} = 98.8$) and (A4) increased focus on their tasks ($\bar{x} = 2.59$).

Concerning motivation and productivity, the level of agreement is split evenly for (A7) feeling more motivated in performing tasks ($\bar{x} = 2.50$) and for (A8) feeling more productive ($\bar{x} = 2.46$), though the majority feels that (A9) the stress levels have not reduced ($\bar{x} = 2.38$; Mo = 1), despite (A21) not having difficulties in creating work methodologies and rhythm ($\bar{x} = 2.09$) Regarding workflow management and cooperation, respondents tend to believe that (A14) that RW does not make teamwork more difficult ($\bar{x} = 2.75$), that (A17) it does allow to manage teams ($\bar{x} = 2.19$), and they do not (A19) find it difficult to contact their co-workers ($\bar{x} = 2.12$). However, respondents do not believe that (A10) they can better share their tasks with co-workers ($\bar{x} = 2.27$); thus, we believe that is unrelated to RW circumstances. Most of the respondents also (A20) disagree that they have been subject to increased monitoring of their work ($\bar{x} = 2.11$).

With regards to career management, opinions are split towards (A16) foreseeing difficulties in career advancement ($\bar{x} = 2.40$), and towards (A15) RW not being adequate for supervisor/manager’s job positions. However, the most frequent answer is that it is not ($Mo = 3$). Respondents also tend to disagree with RW prejudicing professional prestige ($\bar{x} = 2.18$) and, notably, most do not believe (A22) it will be challenging to go back to a face-to-face job ($\bar{x} = 1.82$). In fact, when asked what they would like to happen when normality is restored, 65% answered that they would like to go back to their regular workplace, 18% would like to remain in RW, and 17% have not formed an opinion yet.

In general, respondents tend to agree that RW allows to (B1) protect the environment ($\bar{x} = 3.79$), (B2) save time in traffic ($\bar{x} = 3.49$), and (B3) have more family time ($\bar{x} = 2.98$). However, for most, this does not mean (B5) more free time ($\bar{x} = 2.12$), as RW (B7) invades their family environment ($\bar{x} = 2.82$). It is almost unanimous that workers (A6) feel socially isolated ($\bar{x} = 3.45$), but the level of agreement regarding (B4) being advantageous not to leave home is comparatively markedly lower ($\bar{x} = 2.67$).

Finally, there is a very high level of agreement towards RW allowing to (B8) save money on fuel ($\bar{x} = 3.80$), and simultaneously imposing (B9) higher electricity and water expenses ($\bar{x} = 3.43$), as well in (B22) food ($\bar{x} = 2.78$).

### 4.3 Positive and Negative Effects of Remote Work

Participants were asked to report on the positive and negative effects of RW openly, according to their recent experience. The open responses were coded into categories and computed in frequencies.

Concerning the adverse effects of RW, the participants ($n = 70$) raised sixteen major issues related to professional, personal, and health-related issues. The top five most referred categories consist of (NE1) lack of in-person interaction with colleagues/students/clients (19 mentions), (NE2) an increase on the workload and frequent overlook of the daily limit of working hours (16 mentions), the (NE3) worsening of the health condition (11 mentions), the (NE4) absence of oral and written feedback (10 mentions), and the (NE5) struggle in balancing work and family duties (10 mentions). In fact, participants mention that hierarchical superiors “believe that being home means not having schedules and ask for things they would not ask in face-to-face work” and that
“the employer does not respect working hours and requires a response at all hours and days of the week”. In some cases, this is reportedly worsened by a “(…) decreased dialogue between colleagues to share ideas [and] detachment from reality”, which causes (NE8) difficulties in teamwork and cooperation, although not for the majority of the participants, as seen in the previous section. In the professional sphere, participants also report feeling (NE6) higher pressure from the employer/clients (NE11) lack of enough resources at home to perform the job, (NE10) technical difficulties, and (NE12) lack of support from the employer.

The worsening of the health condition has been, in some cases, caused by “Reduced socialization communication to bright up the day”, “Depersonalization” and “Isolation” and the most common reported issues that consist of “Depression”, “Anxiety crisis”, “Monotony”, “Bad posture”, “Back pain”, “Sleep disorders”, “Eye and ear soreness” and “Exhaustion”. Increased (NE9) stress and tiredness, together with (NE13) changes in eating habits, are two of the problems, also referred by the participants. The struggle to balance work and family duties is aggravated by the (NE16) lack of focus, the fact that (NE14) activities take longer time to be completed, and the need to (NE15) share the resources and devices available at home among family members and by.

Concerning the positive effects of RW, the top 5 mentions in the open-ended questions reveal that participants (n = 74) feel that they can (PE01) better manage their time (21 mentions), believe that there is benefit in (PE02) not having to commute to work (10 mentions), feel they have (PE03) more time for their family (9 mentions), feel (PE04) less stressed (9 mentions), mentioning “more calm, more patience, more willingness to do chores” and that RW allows them to (PE05) save money (8 mentions). Some of these aspects are in contradiction to the adverse effects of RW previously mentioned since some participants struggle with time management, balance work, and life duties and feel more stressed. These are indicators that the effects of RW are far from consensual among workers and are also intrinsically linked to their job description, given autonomy and organizational culture, and personality, to name a few. For instance, as seen in the previous section, participants report spending more money in electricity, water, and food overall, but in some cases (n = 8) the notion is that there are money savings in RW, namely in “gas” and “makeup and clothes”.

It is also curious to notice that the (PE06) reduction of social interactions, although generally understood as a downside of RW, has produced positive effects for some of the participants (n = 7) who believe that they benefit from not having “unnecessary interruptions from colleagues”, not having to “deal with other people bad temper”, being able to get separation from “colleagues and superiors with whom [they] have a bad relationship” and reporting “fewer arguments in the team”. These also tend to report a (PE07) better management of their workload and (PE09) increased productivity. A tiny portion of participants also refers to (PE11) improvement of the health condition, with reference to “not being forced to eat badly in a canteen or cheap restaurant” and (PE12) more time for hobbies and sports.

The two most uncontroversial effects mentioned by participants consist of the (PE08) improvement of professional skills, namely those related to “digital skills”, and the (PE10) increased comfort.
4.4 Recommendations for Employers and Co-workers

Participants were also asked to provide recommendations for employers regarding RW, according to their recent experience. Participants (n = 61) have provided a total of 12 recommendations, which are mainly aimed at employers. The top five recommendations consist of (RE01) having greater flexibility in working hours (14 mentions), (RE02) not overloading workers so that they can better manage family demands (13 mentions), which is an apparent reference to emergency remote work in statements such as “be a little more flexible in the management of work, i.e., not want everything to be exactly the same as face-to-face work situation. For an atypical situation, exceptional measures.” Recommendations follow with a (RE03) better organization of the work and tasks to be conducted (13 mentions), a (RE04) better balance between in-person work and RW, remitting to a future in which RW would be a regular component the work contract (9 mentions), invest in the (RE05) improvement of the relationship between employers and workers (7 mentions), and (RE06) provision of the digital tools and equipment required for RW (7 mentions).

Additional recommendations for employers include (RE07) conduct frequent meetings, (RE10) co-fund workers expenses with electricity and necessary work equipment, (RE11) provide adequate training, and (RE12) assist workers in time management.

The main recommendations for peers include (RE08) maintaining a daily working routine and (RE09) keeping healthy habits, mentioning “Discipline”, “Commitment”, and “Physical exercise”.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, the main impacts, challenges, and effects of remote work in Portugal were reported, which were captured in survey-based research. Results show that professionals are not unanimous towards the benefits of remote work, and while some would like to resume in-person work, a substantial amount of professional, personal, and financial benefits are associated with the possibility of working from home. The greatest benefits are felt in productivity, financial gain, and a better balance between professional and family demands, while the higher risks refer to health issues of prolonged use of technologies and devices.

Most of the participants put forward recommendations for employers, which require them to better plan the workload and schedules of remote work, in an overall attempt to help employees to better answer professional and personal demands at the same time. In this context, working by goals, rather than by daily or weekly hours, appears to be a possible positive strategy. As for peers, most professionals recommend keeping discipline, commitment, and a healthy daily routine.

This work is, however, limited by the sample size, which may not be as comprehensive as desired. Nonetheless, the results capture an overall evaluation of the COVID-19 imposed remote at early stages, still during the mandatory confinement period in Portugal.
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