

Article

Sustainability Analysis, Implications, and Effects of the Teleworking System in Romania

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic is a mobilizing circumstance for rethinking the economic activities of companies, as well as reorganizing the way employees work. To comply with the regulations imposed worldwide, most economic activities were transferred to the online environment. The purpose of the paper is to carry out an investigation of the Romanian telework system implemented during the pandemic based on the perception of employees and employers. Our research was conducted based on an online opinion poll in which 438 respondents participated. The questionnaire included the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, methods and techniques for implementing telework among Romanian companies, and a correlation of the advantages and opportunities with the limits experienced both among companies and employees in carrying out this process. The results showed that 7.80% of companies wanted to maintain the conditions implemented for telework, 12.30% wanted to expand flexible practices to promote telework, and 27.60% would not make any changes in terms of telework methods. At the same time, 81.10% of employees preferred office work rather than teleworking. Successful implementation of the telework system involves efficient management that coordinates and motivates the performance of remote employees.

Keywords: telework; virtual working; remote working; homeworking; flexible working



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1. Introduction

The economy, labor market, and society are all in a state of continuous change mainly generated by globalization, digitalization, technical and technological progress, climate change, and demographic changes, but also by a new factor that requires a radical and proactive change: the pandemic generated by COVID-19 [1]. The COVID-19 pandemic radically transformed people's lives worldwide, with consequences for the health of people directly affected by the virus and significant implications for the way they live and work, profoundly affecting their physical and mental wellbeing [2]. The pandemic generated the reorganization of the business environment, implementation of IT and communications solutions, and migration of activities to the online environment as much as possible. In this context, employers were forced to reorganize their businesses and quickly implement telework to ensure the continuity of economic activities and the protection of employees' health. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, most European Union (EU) Member States implemented measures to deter the spread of the virus, including measures directly affecting jobs. The labor market was and continues to be affected by this health crisis. Therefore, all actors working in society (economic entities, employers, employees, and social partners)

had to implement best practices to help protect employees and their families and ensure the continuity of economic activity and society as a whole [3–6].

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is a real test for digitization. In a brief period, ways and means had to be found to maintain various administrative services while protecting employees and the population. In many cases, home office work (teleworking, also known as remote work) was relied upon to protect employees and their overall health. The COVID-19 pandemic meaningfully changed the labor situation and work-related stress of many individuals who began working from home by teleworking. In addition to teleworking, numerous families experienced challenging conditions when helping their children, who, similarly limited at home, took distance-education courses. According to Thulin et al., (2019), there are several empirical studies on how employees establish their everyday work [7]. In teleworking, the worker is available anyplace and anytime, and this need is based on the request of the employer [8]. When teleworking, distance is disregarded, and the worker's technical outline and self-discipline are significant in the worker's plan to labor efficiently and effectively [9]. This labor arrangement makes concentrated use of computer-based methods of communication to preserve contact among labor teams and maintain the excellent organization of individuals and projects [10,11]. Even if digitization is not a clearly defined term in the world of work, it can be understood as part of the computerization of work concerning automation efforts [12–15]. It is a process of streamlining work, the beginnings of which can be traced back to the advent of computers [13–21], but which has been massively strengthened by the general spread of computers and, most recently, by the general availability of Internet connections.

In the spring of 2020, there were decisive changes in teleworking. Thanks to measures to reduce the COVID-19 pandemic and promote “social distance” worldwide, teleworking suddenly gained importance. In this context, the question arises as to how telework will remain important even after the pandemic. The crisis caused by the pandemic further increased the importance of digitalization. Instead of physical meetings, employees are now given tools to enable virtual conferencing and working from home [22]. Bitkom President Achim Berg considered the breakdown of existing structures an urgent need: “The COVID-19 pandemic and the severe damage to public life require a radical rethinking of the culture of many companies. For whom the home office is often a foreign word, public employers are even more challenged. Digital technologies are the key to ensuring the functionality of businesses and public institutions, such as offices and schools, even in this extraordinary crisis” [23]. During the state of emergency, digital technologies maintained public life—whether in the office, at remote school, or via online shopping [24]. In addition, IT services are available to users in a digital environment over the Internet and do not require direct access to a company's IT infrastructure. The exact opposite is the case with working from the office [25,26].

This paper aims to carry out an analysis of the Romanian telework system during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the perspectives of the main actors involved in the working process (employees and employers). Our investigation was based on a questionnaire comprising the categories of working time, individual and organizational, work–life balance, occupational health, and wellbeing, helping to identify the main benefits generated by telework for the employee and employer, but also to identify the main barriers to the implementation of telework in Romania. The topicality and innovative character of the paper lie in the analysis undertaken and the need for in-depth research to identify the possible issues arising from the use of the telework system. This research is useful because Romania has the lowest percentage of employees involved in telework processes in the EU-27. This paper comprises an introduction; a literature review section with selected research relevant to the undertaken scientific approach; and sections covering the materials and methods, results, discussion, and conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Given that the present study includes the categories of working time, individual and organization, work–life balance, health at work, and wellbeing, which are essential for the implementation of telework, the literature review section examines studies published before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This section presents the bibliometric analysis of published articles on telework. The bibliometric analysis uses the Web of Science Core Collection database as the primary source of information because this database is characterized by multidisciplinary and a high level of quality in terms of published scientific papers. The bibliometric analysis is useful to highlight the topicality of the research topic at the international level. It also highlights the multidisciplinary nature of existing studies and the interconnection between telework and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2021, 858 articles had the word “telework” as a keyword, but given that this research focuses on the analysis of the telework system during the COVID-19 pandemic, we refined the search and identified 248 published articles for 2019–2021. All documents, such as articles, books, book chapters, book reviews, proceedings papers, and reviews, were included. Figure 1 shows a bibliometric map made with VOS software based on the most representative links between keywords and authors. In this representation, the keyword has a significant weight and significant influence on the undertaken research.

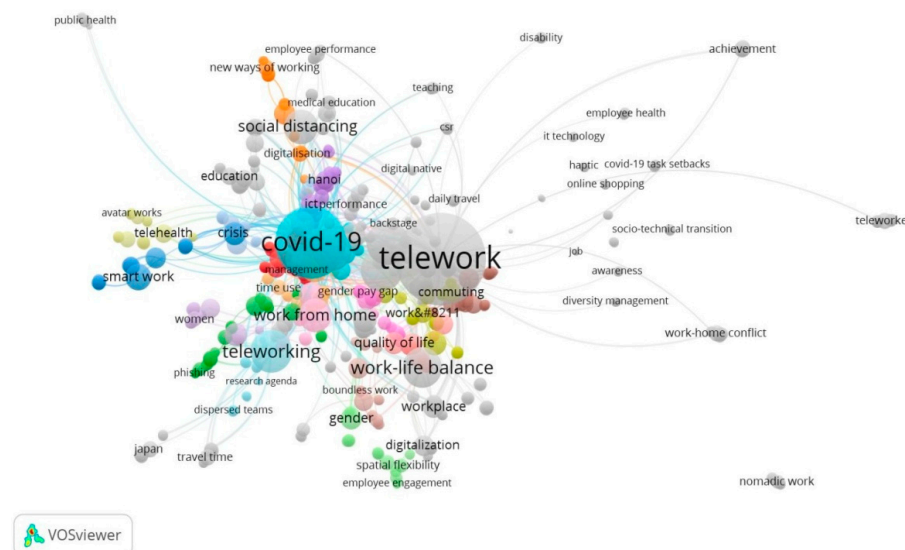


Figure 1. Mapping connections of co-occurrence of author keywords.

Articles on telework are published in specialized or multidisciplinary journals. The applicability of telework in various fields has led to the definition of a portfolio of journals that have become vector scientific research. The selection of data collected from the WOS database and the bibliometric map highlights the most common journals that have published articles on telework, namely: New Technology, Work and Employment, Journal of organizational behavior, British journal of management, Sustainability, Journal of Vocational Behavior, and Journal of Transport Geography (Figure 2).

Following the bibliometric analysis, the research approach presents the primary research that analyzed the telework system, both during the COVID-19 pandemic and the preceding pandemic.

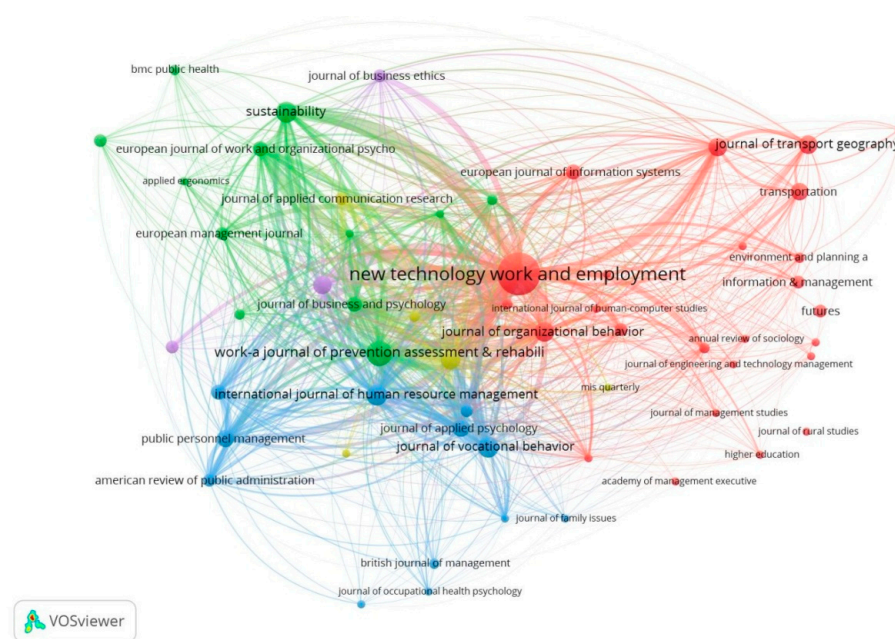


Figure 2. Mapping of the most representative connections of journal co-citations.

2.1. Working Time, Individual and Organizational

Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés (2020) consider that the pandemic generated by COVID-19 leads to a significant organization of telework not only as a temporary emergency measure during periods of environmental or health disasters but as a strategy of costs reduction concerning the organization's infrastructure, as well as a means to reduce pollution related to labor mobility and to generate a favorable climate to combine work and family life [27].

Harker Martin and MacDonnell (2012) find, following a meta-analysis, that teleworking is a factor that contributes to increasing productivity, maintaining employees, strengthening organizational commitment, and improving organizational performance [28]. Nakrošienė, Bučiūnienė, and Goštautaitė (2019) found that the most critical factors that impact the different results of teleworking are: reduced communication with colleagues, trust and assistance of the supervisor, adequacy of the home workplace, and the possibility to take care of family members when working in telework [29].

Gálvez, Tirado, and Martínez (2020) consider that the impact of telework on employees' daily lives is directly influenced by factors such as the support provided by their organization, both from senior management and from their non-teleworking colleagues. The established autonomy degree is based on organizing one's own time and space and the assigned tasks. The degree of penalty associated (or not) with this new form of work adopted by the organization and organizational culture, including successes, failures, and misunderstandings resulting from the implementation of telework, are intertwined with cultural issues in organizations that may encourage or stifle such experiences; achieving a work-life balance can lead to a productive harmony between the individual, the organization, and the community [30]. Dima et al., (2019) find that the sources of satisfaction (career development opportunities, working conditions, and remuneration) in the work-life balance in telework activities have a similar impact to those in traditional work activities [31]. Ellidér (2020) examines how teleworking influences daily travel in terms of identifying the travel demand, travel mode, and peak hourly traffic level and finds that teleworking contributes to reducing travel demand, the use of active transportation, and traffic congestion [32]. In addition, Kazekami (2020) observes that teleworking is more significant for workers who commute more than 1 h and that reducing the commuting time and avoiding the commuter's rush contributes to increased labor productivity [33].

Although teleworking can generate many benefits for both the organization and employees, the implementation of this way of working can encounter various barriers, such as (i) skepticism of the traditional management of the company generated by fears arising from the misconceptions about telework, reduced confidence in the continuing productivity of the employees when working remotely, and lack of management skills concerning teleworkers; (ii) information technology, budgetary constraints, and information security; (iii) identification of the resources necessary for the development of the telework program, etc. [34–39].

2.2. Work–Life Balance, Occupational Health and Wellbeing

The implementation of telework involves an assessment made by the organization regarding the living conditions of the worker; it is essential to investigate the responsibilities of the subject in the family to see if he is responsible for caring for others (children, adults, seniors); assessing and strengthening individual time-management abilities; as well as acquire and organize a quiet space to work at home [40–43].

Telework can have a positive effect on children’s development, as they receive more attention, parental care, and more involvement from parents in educational activities, which contribute to the development of cognitive skills. Telework can also have a positive effect on the wellbeing of parents, who can enjoy spending more time with their children [44–47]. Women and workers with children involved in teleworking processes experience low levels of time control, thus highlighting the role of the family and their expectations of telework results [7,48,49].

There is a need for a balance between the work and family responsibilities of teleworkers, especially among women, as the expectations of family members may increase in their ability to participate more in household chores because they work from home [50–52]. Conflicts may arise because of the work–family relationship, in principle related to overtime, increased workloads, and difficulty [53]. Solís (2016) identifies the main factors influencing the relationship between work and family, namely the space used to work at home, the presence of people at home during the work time of the teleworker, the number of telework days, and the responsibilities of the worker outside of the work environment [54]. The management of these conflicts can be carried out, on the one hand, by teleworkers who effectively delimit the work–family relationship and, on the other hand, through the human resources management of the organization who must identify and assess the teleworker’s family situation and establish tasks and responsibilities that can be performed within standard working time [55].

Organizations and human resource managers should pay close attention to the detrimental effect of occupational isolation, the pressure on employees that may arise because of their increased availability requirements, and the lack of boundaries between work and non-work, which can lead to longer working hours that are detrimental to the long-term wellbeing and productivity of both employees and the organization [56–58]. Lorenzo Munar, the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, states that isolation due to teleworking can negatively impact teleworkers’ occupational health and wellbeing [59]. In addition, the isolation feeling can become a factor in not teleworking. Lott and Abendroth (2020) indicate that not teleworking is also linked to cultural barriers, gender inequality, and the stigmatization of employees who use flexible work arrangements, which is more common among women compared to men. Therefore, women telework less often, as they fear career sanctions, stigmatization, and the impairment of promotion prospects [60].

Raišienė et al., (2020) find that teleworking poses similar challenges for both older members of Generation X and members of the Baby Boomer generation, namely time management, self-organization, an overload of information and tasks during telework, a lack of team spirit and motivation, and difficulty in establishing a work–life balance. For the younger members of Generation X and Millennials, the above-mentioned challenges are not significant, as they have an attitude that emphasizes the advantages of teleworking and increased adaptability to information technology tools [61].

2.3. Telework in Romania

In Romania, telework is defined as “the form of work organization through which the employee, regularly and voluntarily, fulfills his attributions specific to the position, occupation, or profession he holds, in another place than the work organized by the employer, at least one day a month, using information and communication technology” [62]. Telework activity is based on the parties’ agreement and is expressly provided in the individual employment contract once it is created for the newly hired staff or an additional act to the existing individual employment contract [62]. At the same time, the employer has the following obligations regarding the safety and health of the teleworker at work [62–64]:

- (i) To ensure the means related to the information and communication technology and/or the safe work equipment necessary for the performance of the work;
- (ii) To install, verify, and maintain the necessary work equipment;
- (iii) To ensure conditions for the teleworker to receive adequate training in the field of occupational safety and health, particularly in the form of information and work instructions specific to the place where the telework activity is carried out and the use of display screen equipment at employment, when changing the workplace, when introducing new work equipment, and when introducing any new working procedure.

The teleworker has the following obligations:

- (i) To inform the employer about the work equipment used and the existing conditions at the places where the telework activity is carried out and to allow him access, as far as possible, in order to establish and implement security and occupational health measures necessary according to the clauses of the individual employment contract or in order to investigate the events;
- (ii) Not to change the safety and health conditions at work from the places where they telework;
- (iii) Only use work equipment that does not pose a danger to his safety and health;
- (iv) Comply with the specific rules and restrictions established by the employer regarding the internet networks used or regarding the use of the equipment provided [62–64].

According to the agreement negotiated by the Employers’ Federation of Financial Services in Romania and the relevant unions in the sector, the work schedule of teleworkers will be established jointly. Teleworkers must meet with superiors and colleagues at least once a month. The employer only has the right to control/supervise the employee’s workplace during working hours. Work performed outside an employee’s regular working hours should be considered additional work [65,66].

In Romania, the spring of 2020 brought a series of challenges to both the medical sector and the economic sector. Thus, Romanian organizations were forced to adapt their work programs and policies according to the new restrictions imposed by the national authorities. Under the given conditions, teleworking was the optimal option to carry out work in professional safety and security conditions. Numerous studies have analyzed the effects of telework in various fields, such as that of Miron et al., (2021), who analyzed the relationship between the welfare of employees and how they carry out their work, physically at the organization’s headquarters or by teleworking [67]. Nemțeanu et al., (2021) propose a new approach based on telework autonomy and employee interaction reduction by developing the Theory of Self-Regulation and the Theory of Social Exchange to obtain the most viable solutions to reduce counterproductive behavior [68]. At the same time, the study of Mihalcea et al., (2021) analyzes the contextual factors (family, work, and organizational factors) as well as the individual factors that influence the indicators of adaptation to telework, namely labor productivity, work performance, and job satisfaction, showing that family-specific factors (more precisely, good telework conditions) and individual factors (self-organizing strategies) are significant predictors for all three indicators of telework adaptation during the pandemic [69].

Regarding job satisfaction offered by the telework system, Petcu et al., (2021) found a significant link between professional skills, the autonomy offered by the telework system, the organizational climate, and job satisfaction [70]. Grigorescu and Mocanu (2020) also pointed out that employees are much more productive if they have higher satisfaction and wellbeing at work [71]. Suciuc and Petre (2022) support the extension of the telework system in Romania both for the advantages offered to organizations, on the one hand, and for the benefits that employees can enjoy [72]. Research by Iordache et al., (2021) addresses the issue of the adoption of telework and elaborates feasible scenarios meant to contribute to the improvement of the telework system in Romania [73].

The purpose of this research, based on the gap in the literature, is to provide a holistic analysis and overview of pre-pandemic and pandemic telework. The attitude toward teleworks and the future intentions toward telework can significantly contribute to the sustainability goals of the 2030 agenda “A blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people and the world by 2030”. Thus, we consider that this research can be considered a holistic analysis in terms of work with the advantages and disadvantages it can offer, which can significantly contribute to the organization of post-pandemic activity in order to optimize both human and natural resources. In addition, it contributes to the literature as a complex approach for an emerging country and allows us to identify cases in which telework can be considered efficient and useful and in which cases it is not to introduce improvements. It can also be a guide for future policies for operators, government, and employers on the organization and behavior of distance work. The implications of teleworking are not just about companies and employees; teleworking is also about sustainability and wellbeing, key factors that can influence employers’ and companies’ decisions.

3. Material and Methods

In order to achieve the purpose of the paper, namely the analysis of the telework system implemented in Romania during the COVID-19 pandemic, an opinion survey was developed based on a questionnaire structured in items aimed at working time, the individual and the organization, work–life balance, occupational health, and wellbeing to identify the main benefits generated by telework for employees and employers, and at the same time identify the main barriers to the implementation of telework in Romania. The questionnaire followed topics such as how to carry out work—physical, telework, or hybrid; actual working time in telework; the number of employees involved in telework; the possibility to continue using the telework system after the pandemic period; and the degree of appreciation, opportunities, benefits, and limitations felt by employees as a result of teleworking. The questionnaires were completed online with the help of a platform hosted at www.isondaje.ro. Prior to sending the questionnaire, we discussed the applicability of the telework system with the legal representatives of the companies selected to participate in the study during the state of emergency and the state of alert started at the national level, which were due to the pandemic situation generated by the COVID-19 virus. The questionnaire was completed by 438 respondents; the profile of the respondents participating in the study is summarized in Table 1.

The presented information shows that most respondents participating in the study were women (67%) and fell into the age category of 25–35 years (34.47%). Regarding educational levels, 36.30% were university graduates at the bachelor’s level, and 27.63% fell into the category of master’s degree. On the other hand, in terms of experience, most respondents, 34.70%, had been working for at least 11 years and at most 15 years. From a legal point of view, 94.75% of the respondents participating in the study were involved in labor relations based on an individual employment agreement concluded for an indefinite period, and only 5.25% had signed fixed-term agreements. Additionally, the majority of respondents participating in the study, 92.69%, worked full time (8 h/day), while 7.31% worked based on a part-time contract. Regarding their role in the company’s activity, 34.93% of the respondents were executive staff, while 46.35% had team coordination and

management responsibilities at the departmental and operational offices level, and 18.72% were part of the top management category. In most cases, the professionals participating in this study worked in companies in industry 18.49%, education 16.66%, and public administration 14.38%.

Table 1. Profile of respondents.

Age	Under 25	76	Field of activity	Industry	81
	25–35 years	151		Trade	68
	35–50 years	128		Construction	14
	50–65 years	63		Agriculture	9
	Over 65	20		Travel	21
Gender	Male	144	Field of activity	Communications	27
	Female	294		Health	28
Educational level	Secondary School	51	Form of legal organization	Education	73
	Podt-secondary School	28		Finance	54
	University (bachelor’s degree)	159		Public Administration	63
	University (master’s degree)	121		Partnership	0
	Doctoral/postdoctoral studies	79		Limited partnership	2
Empl. Agreement Duration	Indefinite	415	Form of legal organization	Corporation	124
	Determined	23		Limited liability company	254
Employment Agreement Type	Full-time EA	406	Staff category	Authorized person	58
	Part-time EA	32		Top management	82
Experience	Under 5 years	49	Staff category	Middle management	101
	5–10 years	71		Low management	102
	11–15 years	152		Execution staff	153
	15–20 years	91	Teleworked before COVID-19	Yes	128
	Over 20 years	75		No	310

Starting on 11 March 2020, Romanian employers began to physically shut down the economic activity of companies, preparing for the transition of employees to remote work and helping the efforts to stop the spread of coronavirus. In Romania, teleworking was regulated by Law 81/2018 on the regulation of teleworking activity, according to which the employee can perform his duties remotely through a PC, tablet, smartphone, and a viable internet connection. The survey looked at the degree of implementation of the telework system in Romania due to the state of emergency. Additionally, it compared telework before the pandemic and examined the challenges and benefits experienced by the people involved. At the national level, teleworking represented less than 1% at the beginning of March 2020. However, from the studies carried out at an intentional level, even if many companies had to close their physical activity and move online, Romania remains at the bottom of the ranking, being the only state EU member state in which telework made up less than 20% of work arrangements during the pandemic [74].

From the profile of the respondents participating in the study, it was observed that only 128 (29.22%) professionals teleworked prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, while the remaining 310 (70.78%) worked remotely for the first time. Compared to telework performed until this period, which was somewhat optional and left to the discretion of the employer and the employee, telework during the COVID-19 crisis is mandatory, full-time, and daily. The data collected were centralized and recorded using Microsoft Excel; creating the database required interpreting the results. The statistical analysis and interpretation of the collected data and the graphical representations were performed using the professional IBM SPSS Statistics 21 application. Statistical methods and tools were used, namely Test Chi2, Kendall, cross-analysis—Crosstable, Cramer’s V statistical index, Pearson correlation, and Spearman’s rank correlation index.

4. Results

During the state of emergency in Romania, 208 (47.49%) of the surveyed companies carried out activity both via the traditional system and through telework, 109 (24.88%) continued activity in the traditional system—physical work at work, and 121 (27.63%) achieved economic activity 100% through the telework system.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics for the actual time worked, the fixed work schedule, the sustainability of the telework work environment, the applied working methods, the optimal period of telework in one week, and the continued use of telework after overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic. The descriptive values report a minimum value of 1 (representing one day) for the actual time worked in the telework system, a maximum of 6 (equivalent to the occasional variable), and an average value of 5.17 (which means that most respondents occasionally worked through telework, 58.70%). The working time in hours per day reveals a minimum of 1 (4 h/day), a maximum of 4 (equivalent to 8 h/day), and an average value of 1.83 (which indicates an average working time between 4 and 8 h/day in the teleworking system).

Table 2. Statistical description of items specific to telework.

	Descriptive Statistics									
	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
							Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Actual time worked by telework/day	438	5	1	6	5.17	1.270	−1.595	0.117	1.575	0.233
Actual time worked by telework/hour	438	3	1	4	1.83	1.063	0.736	0.117	−1.041	0.233
Fixed working hours	438	1	1	2	1.19	0.391	1.609	0.117	0.592	0.233
Sustainability of the work environment through telework compared to the work environment offered by office work	438	2	1	3	1.89	0.558	−0.035	0.117	0.081	0.233
Methods of work	438	2	1	3	2.13	0.924	−0.271	0.117	−1.778	0.233
The optimal period of teleworking	438	4	1	5	2.24	1.153	0.828	0.117	0.053	0.233
Modify long-term flexible/remote working methods after overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic	438	3	1	4	3.20	1.028	−1.091	0.117	−0.056	0.233
Valid N (listwise)	438									

Similarly, 81.30% of respondents stated they had a fixed work schedule, while 18.70% of respondents worked through a flexible work schedule. Regarding the sustainability of the telework work environment, compared to the work environment offered by office work, the minimum recorded value is 1, the maximum is 3, and 1.89 is the average value (suggesting that most respondents consider that the physical work environment in the office is optimal compared to the work environment through telework). The optimal period of teleworking in terms of the respondents participating in the study reports a minimum of 1 (representing one day), a maximum of 5 (5 days), and 2.24 as an average value, which suggests that the optimal period desired by employees to carry out telework is two days/week). Regarding the possibility of changing long-term working methods (physical presence at work versus the possibility of a flexible/distance program), most managers of companies participating in this study, 52.30%, will not make any changes in this regard, preferring that employees physically show themselves at work after overcoming the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the crosstable analysis of the four items through the contingency table, most respondents, both male and female respondents, use a computer/laptop as the main tool in carrying out telework activity (Table 3). Additionally, regardless of age, computers are the primary tool used. Regarding the method of implementing teleworking, there is a corroboration of the three variables: email, telephone calls, and online conferences.

Table 3. Crosstable analysis of items: age, gender, work instruments, and methods in the implementation of telework.

Gender	Instruments	Age					Total
		<25 Age	25–35	35–50	50–65	>65 Age	
Male	Computer/Laptop	9	26	19	6	6	66
	Tablet	0	1	5	0	0	6
	Phone	7	11	12	4	0	34
	All the above	8	14	7	8	1	38
	Total	24	52	43	18	7	144
Female	Computer/Laptop	33	54	54	24	12	177
	Tablet	0	2	5	2	0	9
	Phone	10	21	13	9	0	53
	All the above	9	22	13	10	1	55
	Total	52	99	85	45	13	294
Grand Total		76	151	128	63	20	438
Male	Methods						
	Email	4	11	15	7	3	40
	Phone calls	9	14	12	3	0	38
	Online conferences	0	4	2	0	1	7
	All the above	11	23	14	8	3	59
Female	Total	24	52	43	18	7	144
	Email	15	35	31	16	6	103
	Phone calls	12	20	20	10	0	62
	Online conferences	5	9	7	3	2	26
	All the above	20	35	27	16	5	103
Grand Total		52	99	85	45	13	294
Grand Total		76	151	128	63	20	438

The Pearson coefficient analysis (Table 4) was used in testing the relationship between teleworking and work tasks, the office relationships with colleagues, and professional development. The value of the Pearson coefficient is positive (0.468–0.535), which highlights a relationship of a relatively high dependency between these variables and Sig. <0.05 shows the directly proportional high-intensity relationship between the level of the three variables. Thus, 54% of the respondents consider that telework negatively affects fulfilling tasks and work objectives, 72.10% consider that telework affects relations with the team and managers, and 62.60% mention that telework affects professional development and promotions.

Table 4. Pearson correlations.

		Correlations		
		Telework Negatively Affected the Performance of Tasks/Goals	Telework Affected Relations with Colleagues, Work Team, Superiors	Teleworking Affects Professional Development and Promotion
Telework negatively affected the performance of tasks/goals	Pearson Correlation	1	0.468 **	0.535 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000
Telework affected relations with colleagues, work team, superiors	Pearson Correlation	0.468 **	1	0.511 **
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000
Teleworking affects professional development and promotion	Pearson Correlation	0.535 **	0.511 **	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	
N		438	438	438

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation matrix analysis (Table 5) demonstrates high correlations between the 13 variables established to measure the advantages and opportunities offered using telework by Romanian companies during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the interrelationships between the benefits of teleworking, such as flexibility in the work schedule, greater availability to solve work tasks and family responsibilities, and lower stress

levels, were greater than 0.70. Similarly, the interrelationships between the opportunities offered by telework, based on increased efficiency in employee work, financial savings, a balance between personal and professional life, opportunities in leisure activities, and improved health, also have high values in the range of 0.768–0.897. As can be seen, most variables are correlated with each other, as the intercorrelation coefficient is over 0.5. The results show that the values are different for each item included in the survey, showing that respondents resonated differently with the telework system. However, given the high number of interrelationships between the tools specific to the telework system, the factorial model presented is applicable.

Table 5. Correlation matrix.

		TWS	TWF	TCF	TLSL	TDPE	TALD	AW	EPW	ICW	FS	BPP	OPS	IH
Correlation	Telework work schedule (TWS)	1.000	0.766	0.713	0.706	0.660	0.572	0.342	0.734	0.349	0.630	0.716	0.645	0.647
	The available time through which they can solve the work tasks and responsibilities within the family (TWF)	0.766	1.000	0.865	0.825	0.762	0.720	0.345	0.813	0.269	0.785	0.857	0.759	0.786
	Telework allows me to spend more time with my family (TCF)	0.713	0.865	1.000	0.824	0.769	0.706	0.311	0.774	0.220	0.756	0.866	0.809	0.814
	Telework has led to lower stress levels (TLSL)	0.706	0.825	0.824	1.000	0.797	0.731	0.350	0.794	0.302	0.769	0.860	0.756	0.820
	Telework has led to a decrease in personal expenses (TDPE)	0.660	0.762	0.769	0.797	1.000	0.702	0.262	0.754	0.225	0.853	0.777	0.721	0.761
	Telework allows the avoidance of labor disputes (TALD)	0.572	0.720	0.706	0.731	0.702	1.000	0.308	0.727	0.300	0.756	0.770	0.695	0.737
	Better empowerment/autonomy in work (AW)	0.342	0.345	0.311	0.350	0.262	0.308	1.000	0.441	0.433	0.267	0.351	0.326	0.323
	Better work efficiency/productivity (EPW)	0.734	0.813	0.774	0.794	0.754	0.727	0.441	1.000	0.362	0.802	0.858	0.797	0.795
	Increased commitment to work (ICW)	0.349	0.269	0.220	0.302	0.225	0.300	0.433	0.362	1.000	0.224	0.309	0.261	0.303
	Financial savings (FS)	0.630	0.785	0.756	0.769	0.853	0.756	0.267	0.802	0.224	1.000	0.853	0.768	0.815
	A better balance between professional life and personal life (BPP)	0.716	0.857	0.866	0.860	0.777	0.770	0.351	0.858	0.309	0.853	1.000	0.869	0.897
	An opportunity for sports or more regular leisure activities (OPS)	0.645	0.759	0.809	0.756	0.721	0.695	0.326	0.797	0.261	0.768	0.869	1.000	0.889
	Improved health (IH)	0.647	0.786	0.814	0.820	0.761	0.737	0.323	0.795	0.303	0.815	0.897	0.889	1.000

Bartlett's Test of Sphericity assessed (Table 6) the sufficiency of the correlation matrix and generated a 6506.203 value and an associated level of significance smaller than 0.001. Therefore, the hypothesis stating that the correlation matrix is an identity matrix can be rejected. The correlation matrix has significant correspondences among at least some of the variables. The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy is 0.946, indicating items for each factor.

Table 6. KMO and Bartlett's Test.

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy		0.946
Approx. Chi-Square		6506.203
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	df	78
	Sig.	0.000

The calculations of the factorial analysis show that only 2 factors, out of the 13 analyzed, register a value higher than 1, i.e., they represent more than one variable (Table 7). The rotation of the factor shows that the first factor justifies 64.268% of the variance, and the second factor accounts for 14.324% of the variance, which proves that these factors are superiorly unitary out of the remaining 11 factors.

Table 7. Factors extracted.

Component	Total Variance Explained								
	Initial Eigen Values			Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings		
	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %	Total	% Variance	Cumulative %
1	9.004	69.261	69.261	9.004	69.261	69.261	8.355	64.268	64.268
2	1.213	9.331	78.592	1.213	9.331	78.592	1.862	14.324	78.592
3	0.577	4.438	83.030						
4	0.488	3.756	86.786						
5	0.380	2.925	89.710						
6	0.301	2.318	92.029						
7	0.257	1.973	94.002						
8	0.192	1.476	95.478						
9	0.181	1.393	96.871						
10	0.145	1.118	97.989						
11	0.107	0.825	98.814						
12	0.087	0.670	99.484						
13	0.067	0.516	100.000						

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

5. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a significant impasse for the Romanian economic sector, so companies were forced to close their business totally or partially, and those whose field of activity allowed transferred their activity to the online environment. Under these conditions, the telework system represented an opportunity to continue economic activities under the safety conditions imposed by law. The effect of telework was analyzed by different researchers and from different perspectives [63,64,67–73].

This research presents the results of an opinion poll on the telework system implemented by Romanian companies due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Starting in March 2020, Romanian employers started to suspend the physical activity carried out at the workplace and transfer employees to the telework system to comply with legal regulations to halt the spread of COVID-19. The survey primarily aimed to assess the telework system's use before the pandemic and especially during the critical months due to the national emergency/alert situation. From the survey results, it can be observed that 70.78% of respondents did not use the telecommuting system before the establishment of the state of emergency generated by the COVID-19 virus. However, due to the restrictions imposed, companies were forced to use telework, either for all employees (as in the case of the 27.63% of respondents participating in the study) or only partially (for 47.49%). However, 24.88% of the participants in the study continued to work in the traditional system, physical work at work, as the work activities did not allow telework. Concerning the majority of employees (121) who worked exclusively in telework, results show that this process is widespread among employees in the field of education (31 respondents in this field had worked through telework), industry (28), finance (17), public administration (14), communications (13), trade (12), and tourism (6). For other fields of activity, work activity is performed either in a hybrid system or only through the physical presence of employees at work, as is the case of health, agriculture, and construction. Our results are in line with the results obtained by Grigorescu and Mocanu [71], who concluded that the pandemic was the main factor for remote working, and the study of Eurofound, who found that 2020 had more than 40% of workers working full time remotely.

Regarding the actual time worked in the telework system, most of the respondents occasionally worked (58.70%), not having an imposed number of days in which they carried out telework. Moreover, 22.60% of the respondents stated that they worked all five days

through telework. A total of 18.80% of the respondents worked in the telework system for up to four days a week. Regarding the number of hours worked per day through telework, 4 h/day was the most frequently used variant, 58.70% of respondents; followed by the variable 8 h/day in the case of 26% of respondents; and 6 h/day for 15.30% of respondents. The optimal period for carrying out teleworking in a week, according to the respondents, was 1–2 days (64.38%), 3 days (23.30%), and 4–5 days (12.32%). It can be noted that teleworking offers flexibility to employees; 81.30% of participants mentioned that they had a fixed schedule in which they perform their duties, and only 18.70% of respondents carried out work activities based on a variable schedule.

At the same time, 208 employees worked in a hybrid system during the analyzed period, 121 employees used the telework system exclusively, and 109 employees were physically present at work. At the same time, in the analysis of the questionnaire results, at the national level, the companies made the material and technical resources necessary to carry out telework work activities available to employees; thus, 64.80% had efficient material and technological resources.

The appreciation of the telework system according to the respondents, similar to Petcu et al., (2021) [70], highlights the following: (i) 31.70% were not satisfied with the telework work schedule; (ii) 54.10% considered that telework did not contribute to an increase in available time in which work tasks can be solved, nor did it ensure a balance between the actual time worked and family responsibilities; (iii) 57.10% considered that teleworking did not contribute to reducing stress levels; (iv) 50.70% considered that teleworking contributes to a decrease in personal expenses (especially those generated by moving between home and work); (v) 58.40% considered that teleworking leads to isolation; (vi) 56.60% considered that teleworking contributes to the appearance of imbalances in the relational system both between colleagues and between colleagues and managers; and (vii) 40.90% considered that telework does not lead to a decrease in the profitability and profitability of the company's activity.

Among the qualities needed to implement the telework system, 20.9% of respondents considered responsibility as the essential variable, 20.40% organization and 20.30% considered efficiency in working time management as the essential variable, 18.80% considered concentration as the essential variable, 11.20% considered flexibility as the essential variable, and only 8.40% considered independence as the quality required for the successful use of the telework system. A total of 38.40% of respondents considered autonomy in performing work tasks as the main advantage offered by telework to employees, while 18% considered flexibility offered by remote work, 17.40% considered low pressure from managers, 15.50% considered time savings due to a lack of commuting, and 10.70% agreed that teleworking offers a quieter work environment compared to office work. At the same time, among the advantages offered by telework at the company level, 35.20% of respondents considered greater autonomy as the main advantage, 24.40% considered cost efficiency, 13.50% considered the optimization of office space, 10.20% considered an increase in labor productivity, 8% considered an image gain for the employer, and 8.70% considered a decrease in absenteeism. Such key motives have been strongly confirmed by previous telework literature [5,7,27].

Similar to the studies of Dima et al. [31] and Miron et al. [67], we also remarked on the disadvantages brought by telework in the activity carried out by the employees participating in the study; 38% identified a decrease in social relations at work, 25.10% identified increased difficulty in separating working hours from personal time, 28.60% identified a delay in the possibilities of professional promotion, and 8.30% identified a lack of professional development (participation in training courses, workshops, seminars, and professional conferences). At the same time, at the level of companies, the following disadvantages can be highlighted: (i) difficulty in managing remote employees (24.30%); (ii) increased difficulty in controlling and managing the activity of employees (4.2%); (iii) difficulties in evaluating employee performance (10.20%); (iv) additional costs related to IT equipment and software made available to employees (11.10%); (v) additional costs

for employee training (25.50%); (vi) additional data security costs; and (vii) difficulties in ensuring occupational health and safety (15.8%). This accentuates the need for a nuanced approach attending to situated contexts when measuring and discussing the implications of telework on the work–life balance, as also argued by, for example, Sostero et al. [5].

Regarding the continued use of telework after overcoming the pandemic situation, 7.80% of companies want to maintain the conditions implemented to carry out telework activities and 12.30% want to expand flexible practices to promote increased use of telework even after the pandemic. Additionally, 27.60% of companies will not change teleworking methods, and 52.30% prefer that employees work physically at work after lifting the restrictions imposed at the national and international levels [60–67]. Once the pandemic risks have reduced and the exceptionality disappears, companies may offer their employees the possibility to continue teleworking, or, conversely, their presence may be required at the workplace [27]. Meanwhile, most of the respondents stated that they prefer office work (81.10%) to telework (18.90%). It is expected that in the near future, Romanian companies and employees will become aware of the importance of telework in the context of accelerated globalization of flows and digitization of an increasing number of activities as it accounts for an improvement in employees' quality of life, reduced traffic road, pollutant emissions, and costs of using workspaces, similar to the results of Petcu et al., (2021) [70]. Petcu et al., (2021) [70] underline the importance of the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) and 169 targets that involve the responsibility of a more inclusive, equitable, prosperous, and sustainable future in an approach that includes social, economic, and environmental dimensions.

6. Conclusions

This paper provides important insights into what telework means, which was a significant stressor during the COVID-19 pandemic, and can serve as a basis for organizing work in the future and after overcoming this health crisis, and more than that, as a basis for further investigation. Working away from home is a potential threat to psychological wellbeing that needs to be controlled. It has practical implications that are of interest to companies introducing teleworking from home to employees. Thus, the results of the empirical analysis described in this article show that, on average, working from home is associated with a higher workload for employees compared to working at the company's premises. Therefore, the fear that home office work will tempt employees to be lazy cannot be confirmed. This conclusion can be reached even if it is considered that the estimated results do not refer to causal effects but only to correlations or conditional associations.

The novelty of this research aims to address the situation regarding telework during the pandemic in Romania from a holistic perspective, and we can consider it to serve as a guide for approaching teleworking in the post-pandemic period as well. The literature contains a series of research in this field [3–5,7–9,12,14,15,17,19,20,27,34,37,40,42,49,54,57], but none of the current research has aimed at such a detailed analysis for Romania [63–65,67–73]. So, we consider it to be important to analyze the situation in Romania to offer managers solutions for teleworking after the pandemic period to achieve the sustainability goals of the 2030 agenda "A blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people and the world by 2030".

Restrictions, economic disruptions, travel constraints, school closures, and other isolation measures have significantly impacted employers and companies [75]. The number of employees living in countries with work-related restrictions generated by COVID-19 is very high, 93% at the beginning of 2021. Thus, the disturbances generated by this virus were massively felt in the labor market. In 2020, it was estimated that 8.80% of global working hours were lost compared to the last quarter of 2019 [76]. Under these conditions, telework, usually applied for limited periods, has come to be implemented full-time for more and more companies to reduce the risk of contracting and spreading the virus. In early 2020, several governments recommended that companies facilitate conditions for the implementation of telework. Although telework seems to be the answer

to avoid the total closure of companies, it has raised difficulties for those who apply it. Research has demonstrated that managerial resistance to teleworking is a significant barrier to its effective practice and the installation of work equipment and compliance with occupational safety and health standards lead to difficulties for employees working remotely [32]. Additionally, organizational training, employee training, and managers' desire to experiment with new methods to effectively lead their remote teams are essential factors in the successful adoption of teleworking [77].

In addition, spatially flexible employment constellations can bring significant benefits to organizations in that new employees can be recruited outside the immediate local area, which can be seen as a managerial implication that can also help the organization better organize the work of employees and access specialized employers. Like all personnel policy instruments, the implementation of work from home has potential opportunities as well as risks. The main risk is the development of a degree of social isolation by home workers. Home office workers can easily disappear from the employer's point of view, putting them at a disadvantage in the distribution of work tasks or career competition. Working outside the company building could also make it challenging to communicate with supervisors and colleagues.

Another critical factor in the implementation of telework is the efficient communication between managers and employees of the company, the existence of a collaborative relationship, and the maintenance of a flexible work schedule for people working through telework [78]. At the same time, it is much easier for companies and employees with previous work experience to adapt to the new working conditions.

As a practical implication of increasing employee productivity, employers can also benefit from cost benefits. The main thing to think about here is the control cost, which is eliminated when employees work outside the company building. Additionally, costs for office space or heating and energy can also be saved. After all, a company could increase its attractiveness as an employer by offering office work at home, attracting new employees and limiting the turnover of existing employees. The main argument against the use of remote work in economic theory is the incentive for the workers concerned to abuse the freedom of action gained outside the employer's direct control by withholding performance. On average, working from home contributes to increased work desire, which can be explained by working the employees' intrinsic motivation due to the granted autonomy.

This research is mainly limited by the sample of respondents, which can be extended to increase the results' complexity. As future research directions, an analysis of the effect of telework on companies' economic and financial indicators is proposed, as well as the identification of medium- and long-term economic and social effects of the telework system implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic in Romanian companies.

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