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Internal Communication Quality in a Telecommuting Context: A Phenomenological Exploration of Telecommuters' Communication Experiences

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Abstract: Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) mediated interactions, such as audio and video calls, are part of all companies' routines. Despite technological advances, no current ICT can perfectly mimic the unique characteristics of face-to-face interactions. As good-quality internal communication is critical to companies' operations, the increased demand for work-from-home jobs raises relevant questions regarding employees' capability to communicate properly. To better understand if the physical and temporal distance associated with the work-from-home represents a threat to employees' capacity to establish clear communications, this study explores the internal communication experiences of full-time home-based telecommuters. Adopting a transcendental phenomenological strategy and based on a mix of purposeful and snowball sampling, 23 employees were interviewed online. Two additional interviews with top managers from a company where all employees work from home were also performed. Following a thematic analysis, results did not reveal a direct relationship between physical and temporal distance and the quality of internal communication. Indeed, the increased media options adopted by employees after starting to work from home contributed to improving internal communication quality. The main identified communication issues, such as information segregation, are related to how internal communications are managed, and may happen whether employees work side-by-side or physically apart.

Keywords: home-based telecommuting; internal communication; transcendental phenomenology; online interview; thematic analysis

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1. Introduction

Clear and consistent internal communication is crucial for any company's survival (Henderson et al. 2016), mainly because many organizational activities require coordination among two or more individuals. If employees cannot understand what they are supposed to do, they cannot proceed with their activities and complete their work (Dennis et al. 2008).

For example, while being part of a team, employees work to achieve a common objective, which requires that the team members have a similar comprehension of what that objective is and everyone's role in achieving it (Antoni 2023; Henderson et al. 2016; Hinds and Weisband 2003; Malhotra and Ackfeldt 2016). Through communication, team members can share and discuss their ideas and perspectives, learn with each other, and set clear expectations regarding each other's performance, including what work they perform, how they perform it, and how they will be evaluated. Moreover, team members can establish norms regarding media usage for each situation (Hinds and Weisband 2003), improving their performance (Henderson et al. 2016).

Internal communications may vary from informal interactions during break times to formal announcements. A relevant aspect regarding all these communications is how they are established (e.g., face-to-face, email, telephone) (Welch 2012). How company members

communicate might profoundly impact how they respond (Verčič and Špoljarić 2020). It may also affect employees' sense of belonging to the company (Malhotra and Ackfeldt 2016) and the team (Chang 2005; Niinimäki et al. 2011). How communication is established may also influence the volume of shared information (Chang 2005; O'Neill et al. 2016) and whether employees will pay attention to it (Welch 2012).

Accordingly, with a myriad of media options and subjects to discuss, managers must carefully consider employees' perspectives regarding the different communication processes, adapt these processes, and not force employees to adjust to the company's preferences (Braun et al. 2015; Verčič and Špoljarić 2020; Welch 2012). Otherwise, it might damage the relationships instead of supporting them (Braun et al. 2015; Welch 2012). After all, communication should be seen as a facilitator that helps to connect employees (Verčič and Špoljarić 2020) and "link their values and goals to those of the organization" (Karanges et al. 2015, p. 130).

In this sense, to understand how home-based telecommuters evaluate their communication experiences, it is necessary first to understand what telecommuting is and how it is differentiated from similar terms, such as telework.

Even though there is no doubt that the term's popularity experienced sudden growth because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Yang et al. 2022), telework is far from being a new phenomenon (van der Meulen et al. 2019). Telework and telecommuting are terms initially presented by Jack Nilles in 1973 (Nilles 1988). Telework refers to using telecommunication means to work, including cell phone, email, or video conferencing, replacing work-related travel (Mokhtarian 1991; Nilles 1988).

Meanwhile, remote work refers to professional activities performed physically away from those who hire or supervise this work. Many professionals may be classified as remote workers, for example, field researchers or sales personnel who visit the clients on-site. These professionals often rely on telecommunication to report their activities, consequently teleworking (Mokhtarian 1991).

To be classified as telecommuters, professionals must reduce or eliminate their commuting (Kurland and Bailey 1999; Nilles 1988) and be physically distant from their supervisors (Pearlson and Saunders 2001). In this sense, telecommuting involves working remotely and teleworking (Mokhtarian 1991). Moreover, while many types of remote work are local-dependent, such as conducting research in a determined location, telecommuting might be performed anywhere as long as it offers the necessary resources. Consequently, the terms remote work, telecommuting, and telework are not synonymous. A person might telework from the office or work remotely without teleworking, and telecommuting emerges from their intersections (Mokhtarian 1991). Accordingly, Nilles (1988) argued that telecommuting is a subset of teleworking.

However, it is crucial to point out that professionals who take part of their work to be continued at home or have secondary work based at home are not telecommuting; after all, they are not reducing or eliminating their commuting (Mokhtarian 1991). Moreover, telecommuting does not necessarily require any modern telecommunication means (Nilles 1988; van der Meulen et al. 2019), even though it is unlikely to find telecommuters nowadays who do not constantly rely on different digital media to perform their jobs. Additionally, telecommuting does not need to be full-time or limited to the workers' homes (Kurland and Bailey 1999; Kurland and Egan 1999; Mokhtarian 1991; Nilles 1988).

By working physically away from the company's premises, home-based telecommuters exclusively rely on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to mediate their interactions with the rest of the company and many other stakeholders. In this sense, telecommuting reduces workers' dependence on transportation while increasing their dependence on ICT, like telephones and computers (Nilles 1988). Thus, as with any other work arrangement, home-based telecommuting offers plenty of opportunities and challenges for companies that adopt it.

Home-based telecommuting might benefit employees, companies, and society (Kurland and Egan 1999). Working from home saves time commuting and all the financial and

emotional costs associated with transportation (Mohammadi et al. 2022). Employees can wear their most comfortable clothes at home and have more control over their working schedule (Kurland and Bailey 1999; Nilles 1988). Employees may also achieve a better balance between professional and personal matters, reducing work-life conflicts (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Telecommuters may have fewer distractions (Kurland and Bailey 1999), increasing the volume of work-related information acquired (Baek 2023).

With some or all employees working from home, a company can reduce or even eliminate real estate costs (Kurland and Bailey 1999; Nilles 1988). Employers can expand their potential candidate pool (Nilles 1988; Kurland and Bailey 1999; Antoni 2023) and reduce employee turnover intention (Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Telecommuting may also increase employers' attractiveness among younger employees (Martin and MacDonnell 2012).

Furthermore, telecommuting is positively associated with job satisfaction (Gajendran and Harrison 2007), productivity (Martin and MacDonnell 2012), organizational commitment (Martin and MacDonnell 2012), work engagement (Masuda et al. 2017), and work quality (Baek 2023). It is also positively related to employee-perceived autonomy and supervisor perceptions regarding employee performance and is negatively associated with role stress (Gajendran and Harrison 2007).

Despite the numerous potential benefits of home-based telecommuting, this work arrangement also presents challenges and potential drawbacks that must be considered (Gajendran et al. 2022). One of the most apparent challenges associated with home-based telecommuting is the physical distance (Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020), leading to a replacement of in-person interactions for ICT-mediated interactions (Nilles 1988), which significantly affects internal communication (Allen et al. 2015; Wang et al. 2020; Yang et al. 2022). Thus, establishing and nurturing relationships may be more challenging in a home-based telecommuting context (Antoni 2023; Chang 2005; Torro et al. 2022). Moreover, home-based telecommuters might not work simultaneously with their co-workers due to schedule flexibility, increasing the temporal distance (Gajendran et al. 2022; Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020; van der Meulen et al. 2019). Hence, the coordination of team activities might be more challenging (Garro-Abarca et al. 2021; Kurland and Bailey 1999).

Furthermore, non-telecommuters might feel uncomfortable initiating a conversation with telecommuter co-workers, fearing causing any disturbance (Duxbury and Neufeld 1999; Kurland and Bailey 1999). Similarly, telecommuters may be afraid to start a conversation with other employees because it might pass the idea that they are taking things easy. Hence, home-based telecommuters are less likely to have informal meetings (Hinds and Weisband 2003; Koch and Denner 2022; Wang et al. 2020) and, with time, face challenges in expanding their network (Wang et al. 2020). Not surprisingly, home-based telecommuters often feel isolated from the rest of the organization (Duxbury and Neufeld 1999; Kurland and Bailey 1999; Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020; Stranzl et al. 2021). Indeed, evidence points to a positive relationship between telecommuting frequency and co-worker relationship deterioration (Allen et al. 2015; Gajendran and Harrison 2007). Moreover, for full-time home-based telecommuters, when their co-workers/managers are substituted, problems related to their relationship may arise because they need to learn how to deal with a new person with little or no face-to-face interaction (Antoni 2023; Reinsch 1997).

A study analyzing how employees communicate with their co-workers while working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions illustrated some challenges regarding communication in telecommuting. Remote working led employees to reduce their synchronous communication, such as audio and video calls, and increase the usage of more asynchronous media, like email and instant messaging. The increased usage of asynchronous media might hamper employees' capacity to convey and understand abstract/complex information (Yang et al. 2022). As good-quality internal communication is critical to the value creation process, in such a context, companies may face extra challenges, as employees might reduce the volume of information shared, negatively affecting companies' capacity to improve their activities, including developing innovative solutions (van der Meulen et al. 2019; Yang et al. 2022; Zhang and Venkatesh 2013).

The extra cognitive effort required to present and debate abstract/complex ideas through text-based media, such as chat, may lead employees to pay more attention to the parts of the information that align with their initial thoughts than those that point in a different direction. Then, instead of considering the whole picture before concluding something, employees may only consider parts of the information, ending up with an incomplete resolution (O'Neill et al. 2016). Moreover, unlike face-to-face interactions, intensive and prolonged use of text-based media to communicate abstract/ambiguous ideas may bring a series of problems for companies by negatively affecting employees' motivation maintenance and performance in similar tasks requiring complex discussions in the following days, which in the long term can diminish their productivity (Gajendran et al. 2022). Finally, using chat to mediate group interactions leads to lower perceptions of team effectiveness than face-to-face interactions, which may affect team morale (Parlamis and Dibble 2019).

Although a plausible solution for the lack of face-to-face interactions in a home-based telecommuting context would be to increase the usage of video calls, that might not be so easy to implement. While face-to-face interactions may happen spontaneously, for example, when two co-workers meet in the hallway or work side-by-side, video calls are usually scheduled. Additionally, video calls tend to have a specific discussion agenda, so participants avoid spending more time than necessary (McGloin et al. 2022).

With increasing remote work arrangement offerings (Bloom et al. 2023; Mohammadi et al. 2022; Ozimek 2020; Stranzl et al. 2021; Wigert and Agrawal 2022), more and more professionals will likely rely on text-based media to discuss complex subjects. By better understanding how employees experience remote communications, managers may decide how internal communication may be established and managed more effectively (Gajendran et al. 2022).

Considering the paramount role good-quality internal communication plays in the companies' value creation process, this study focuses on better understanding the relationship between physical and temporal distance and employee perceptions of internal communication quality. For this, the internal communication experiences of full-time home-based telecommuters were explored. Additional data regarding top managers from a company whose employees all work physically apart from each other were also collected.

Complementing prior research regarding telecommuting's potential challenges to good-quality internal communication (Yang et al. 2022), results revealed that the leading causes of internal communication issues in companies are more related to how companies manage them than the physical and temporal distance.

2. Methods

2.1. Methodological Approach and Strategy

Organizations have complex and unique contexts, leading people working in them to have their own experiences and perceptions about these experiences (Saunders et al. 2016). Considering this natural complexity of organizations, combined with the research model presented, which served as the starting point for the study, the open perspective to insights during the data collection and analysis processes resulted in an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde 2002; Saunders et al. 2016). "The preliminary analytical framework consists of articulated 'preconceptions'. Over time, it is developed according to what is discovered through the empirical fieldwork, as well as through analysis and interpretation" (Dubois and Gadde 2002, p. 555).

In such context, phenomenology may contribute to management studies by allowing researchers to rigorously and systematically address organizations' complexity and ambiguity, which requires an in-depth approach to assess how people attribute meaning to what they experience in organizations. By doing so, phenomenology contributes to developing a holistic comprehension of what people perceive as management practices and how. Therefore, phenomenology offers future studies a solid base to build and test new concepts (Anosike et al. 2012).

Nevertheless, there are many approaches to conducting a phenomenological study. Over time, different researchers developed their own ways of conducting these studies (Seidman 2013). Among them, there is transcendental phenomenology described by Clark Moustakas, who provided detailed step-by-step instructions, allowing other researchers to easily follow them (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell 2004). The present study followed the transcendental phenomenological approach. The term "transcendental" used to name this specific approach alludes to the idea of observing a phenomenon as much as possible, without preconceptions. That is, while approaching a phenomenon, researchers must try not to import meanings from past experiences (their own or third-party experiences) to categorize the different layers of this phenomenon. Consequently, researchers must allow the phenomenon of interest to speak for itself, observing the unique aspects that capture its essence and differentiate it from other phenomena (Moustakas 1994).

Despite not being a new phenomenon, home-based telecommuting was heavily boosted due to the commuting restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, turning it into an ordinary global phenomenon. With this drastic increase in telecommuting adoption, a series of relevant new aspects emerged, which consequently called for a fresh and in-depth perspective to better understand their implications. In such a context, transcendental phenomenology offers the right tools and perspective to explore how people experience their communications.

2.2. Participant Selection

To explore the relationship between physical and temporal distance and internal communication quality, the participant selection process commenced by identifying professionals currently immersed in this relationship, in this case, full-time home-based telecommuters. Selecting participants currently experiencing the phenomenon of interest is relevant because it allows the researcher to have close contact with their experiences (Moustakas 1994; Seidman 2013). Thus, adopting a purposeful sampling, except for one, all the participants were currently working as full-time home-based telecommuters. Since there is no formal definition of what constitutes a full-time home-based telecommuter, the present study defined full-time home-based telecommuters as professionals who are allowed to perform their work from home on a daily basis. In practical terms, employees are permitted to work from home 100% of the time, only having non-regular/sporadic in-person meetings in cases where the company has physical space. Moreover, no geographical boundaries were posed due to home-based telecommuters' freedom to work from virtually any place that offers the necessary infrastructure (Mokhtarian 1991). Thus, the countries of origin and current locations were not considered selection criteria.

Due to the complexity of reaching home-based telecommuters since they are not as easily accessible and visible as in a traditional workplace, snowball sampling was also implemented (Saunders et al. 2016). In this sense, after contacting five participants who fit the essential criteria by email, they were asked to introduce the study to other potential participants working under similar conditions. Then, an invitation by email or instant message to those other professionals requesting them to participate in the study was sent.

Data collection ceased when data saturation was reached, that is, when few or no new insights could be found (Saunders et al. 2016). Later, data saturation was confirmed during data codification when no theme seemed underexplored or needed more data to be supported. Data saturation was reached after a total of 23 participants had been recruited.

During the interviews with the employees, the opportunity to interview the top managers from company A emerged (the complete list of companies is presented in the following subsection). The managers were contacted by email. These additional interviews represented a valuable complementary data source since company A represents an extreme case of telecommuting as a company that operates entirely remotely. The company has no "physical" office, and all its members work from home daily across different countries.

2.3. Data Collection Process

The data collection method comprised in-depth interviews guided by a script composed of open-ended questions (Moustakas 1994; Seidman 2013). Sanders (1982) argues that quality must always be prioritized regarding the number of questions during the interview. The interviewer should focus on asking and intensively probing a few questions rather than asking many questions expecting to generate more data. Using the research model as an initial guide to delimit the questions' scope, the researchers elaborated the interview script based on initial discussions with several home-based telecommuters.

After pre-testing the script, slight changes were made to increase participants' comprehension. Still, whenever participants stated that they had never thought about one of the topics being questioned, they were instructed to answer whatever came to their minds so that the researcher could work from there. This method was quite valuable for questions in which employees felt stuck, and after sharing their first thoughts, they provided rich answers.

The same interview script was used in all interviews. Table 1—Employee Interview Script presents a simplified version with common questions to all participants. This question sequence does not necessarily represent the order in which the questions were asked during each interview since participants had total freedom to speak.

Table 1. Employee Interview Script.

Initial Questions
How do you describe your experience of working from home?
With whom do you communicate while working?
How do you communicate with these people?
How do you describe your communication experiences?

Since the study's participants were all telecommuters, they were already familiar with distant communications. Therefore, all the interviews were performed remotely, mediated by Zoom, on the most convenient day and time for the participants. The choice of conducting online interviews proved to be of great value since, as some of the participants commented during the interviews, the possibility of participating from home increased their willingness to accept the invitation for the study. Additionally, in consonance with the sampling procedures, the remote interviews allowed researchers to reach participants living in different countries, permitting accessing a more diverse set of experiences.

The interviews, which lasted approximately one hour, were conducted with both the researcher's and participants' cameras on. To ensure the accuracy of the interview transcriptions, they were recorded with the participants' consent. Participants were fully aware of when the recording started and ended, and a visual signal was present throughout the recording to indicate its ongoing status. This meticulous approach to recording the interviews allowed the researchers to fully focus on the interview itself, without the need to divide their attention between asking questions, listening to the participant's answers, and taking notes. This, in turn, facilitated asking more probing questions (Moustakas 1994; Sanders 1982; Seidman 2013). The data collection period spanned from 3 October to 15 November 2022.

Table 2—Participants' Profiles, shows all the information regarding employees' sociodemographic data. Each employee is identified by the letter "E" and a number. The number corresponds to the order of the interviews. Also, letters from A to N were used to identify the companies where employees worked.

Table 2. Participants' Profiles.

Participant	Age	Sex	Education Level	Job Area	Experience Telecommuting	Company
E1 [A]	42	Male	Ph.D.	Sales	4 Years	A
E2 [A]	38	Male	Bachelor	Technical Support	4 Years	B
E3 [A]	29	Male	Masters	Customer Support	7 Months	C
E4	38	Female	Bachelor	Customer Support	2 Years	A
E5 [A]	37	Female	High School	Information Technology	10 Years	A
E6	44	Male	Bachelor	Business Development	10 Years	D
E7	42	Female	Bachelor	Business Development	4 Years	A
E8	27	Female	Bachelor	Customer Service	2 Years	E
E9	30	Male	High School	Information Technology	3 Years	F
E10	36	Female	High School	Customer Support	2 Years	G
E11 [B]	33	Female	Ph.D.	Project Management	1 Year	H
E12	36	Female	Masters	Accounting	4 Years	A
E13	26	Female	High School	Customer Support	2 Years	C
E14	33	Female	Masters	Geoprocessing	3 Weeks	I
E15	38	Female	Masters	Project Management	4 Years	H
E16 [A]	42	Male	Masters	Human Resources	2 Years	J
E17	54	Female	Bachelor	Project Management	2 Years	K
E18	28	Female	Bachelor	Marketing	2 Years	E
E19	33	Female	Bachelor	Customer Service/Sales	2 Years	L
E20	35	Female	Masters	Project Management	2 Years	H
E21	26	Male	High School	Customer Support	3 Months	C
E22	26	Female	Masters	Information Technology	1 Year	M
E23	36	Female	Ph.D.	Marketing	3 Years	N

[A] The five initially contacted participants. [B] Participant 11 was not working as a full-time home-based telecommuter due to a recent job change.

As presented in Table 2—Participants' Profiles, the sample mainly comprised young professionals still in the beginning/medium point of their careers, with an average age of 35. Participants' ages may have influenced their experiences of working from home since when they started working, a varied selection of ICTs, including portable computers and mobile phones, were already commonly used in and out of their professional context. In line with this, most employees were highly educated, which also might have influenced their experiences since they may have, for example, a better notion of managing their remote communications. Another aspect that stands out is the proportion of females/males, in which 70% of participants were females. Despite the considerable number of female professionals, it did not influence the results. Generally, the answers seemed consistent among participants.

Another relevant aspect regarding the participants is that most had experienced telecommuting for at least one year. Consequently, they already had time to face different situations, enhancing their suitability for the study. This way, their answers were consistent, and it was not possible to identify differences between those who had been telecommuting for two or more years and those who had recently started to telecommute or had only been telecommuting for one year, for example. The same holds for the employees' education levels.

Also, Table 3—Participants' Main Job Activities presents further details regarding the nature of participants' roles in the companies. As can be noted, their roles essentially involved tasks easily performed through a computer.

Table 3. Participants' Main Job Activities.

Job Area	Main Job Activities
Sales	- Search for and contact potential clients. - Present the company's products/services.
Technical Support	- Deal with internal and external problems/doubts about IT.
Customer Support	- Clarify customers' general doubts. - Register customer's complaints/suggestions.
Information Technology	- Software development and maintenance.
Business Development	- Identify new business opportunities. - Manage corporate customers' experiences.
Customer Service	- Manage customers' experiences. - Identify upselling opportunities.
Project Management	- Supervise the execution of particular projects. - Raise funds for projects.
Accounting	- Manage customers' invoices. - Audit financial reports.
Geoprocessing	- Analyze aerial images of degraded natural environments. - Provide orientations to recover degraded areas.
Human Resources	- Manage employees' working experiences. - Manage employees' allocations to projects.
Marketing	- Plan and implement online marketing campaigns. - Analyze marketing campaigns' effectiveness.

The companies where employees work operate in varied sectors, from financial audit and payment processing to education and telecommunications. Their size, regarding the number of employees, varies from a few dozen to hundreds of thousands, with most operating internationally. Table 4—Company Descriptions presents basic information about the companies where participants worked.

Table 4. Company Descriptions.

Company	Description
A	- Sector: Logistics. - Foundation Year and Location: 2013, The Netherlands. - Main Activity: Mediate the interaction between online stores and carriers.
B	- Sector: Business consulting. - Foundation Year and Location: 1989, The United States. - Main Activity: Varied business consulting services like IT and marketing.
C	- Sector: Business process outsourcing. - Foundation Year and Location: 1978, France. - Main Activity: Customer experience services.
D	- Sector: Telecommunication. - Foundation Year and Location: 2012, Argentina. - Main Activity: Entertainment content and advertisement development.
E	- Sector: Lodging. - Foundation Year and Location: 2016, Switzerland. - Main Activity: Third-party short-time vacation property management.
F	- Sector: Logistics. - Foundation Year and Location: 2011, Netherlands. - Main Activity: Mediate the interaction between online stores and carriers.

Table 4. *Cont.*

Company	Description
G	- Sector: Business process outsourcing. - Foundation Year and Location: 1960, The Netherlands. - Main Activity: Human resource management.
H	- Sector: Economic development promotion. - Foundation Year and Location: 2011, The United Kingdom. - Main Activity: Connect companies with investors.
I	- Sector: Geoprocessing. - Foundation Year and Location: 2007, Brazil. - Main Activity: Urban geoprocessing services.
J	- Sector: Payment processing. - Foundation Year and Location: 1968, The United States. - Main Activity: Financial transaction intermediation.
K	- Sector: Education. - Foundation Year and Location: 1911, Portugal. - Main Activity: Higher education courses and academic research.
L	- Sector: Cybersecurity. - Foundation Year and Location: 2018, France. - Main Activity: Secures mobile phone payments.
M	- Sector: Business consulting and financial audit. - Foundation Year and Location: 1845, The United Kingdom. - Main Activity: Risk advisory and financial audit services.
N	- Sector: Advertising. - Foundation Year and Location: 1998, The United States. - Main Activity: Digital marketing services.

Table 5—Managers' Interview Script presents some of the questions asked during the interviews with the top managers from company A. These two interviews lasted an average of one hour and followed the same conditions as the employees' interviews. The interviews were conducted between the 17th and 18th of November 2022.

Table 5. Managers' Interview Script.

- What led you to create a virtual company?
- How do you describe your experience of working from home? - With whom do you communicate while working? - How did you teach/train employees about what activities they have to do and how to do them?

Table 6—Managers' Profiles presents the socio-demographic data regarding these two professionals. Similarly to the employees, the combination of a number and letter represents their identification (e.g., M1 for the first manager interviewed).

Table 6. Managers' Profiles.

Participant	Age	Sex	Education Level	Position	Experience Telecommuting
M1	43	Male	Masters	CEO—Founder	9 Years
M2	35	Male	Masters	COO—Co-Founder	3 Years

As Table 6—Managers' Profiles shows, the managers from company A had characteristics similar to those of most employees interviewed. Both managers had several years of experience managing a company remotely and did so voluntarily. Hence, they represented

a valuable source of information regarding remote management, providing an interesting complementary perspective on employees' experiences working from home.

2.4. Data Analysis Process

Phenomenological studies focus on the shared meanings of people's experiences. In this sense, thematic analysis is the most commonly applied data analysis method (Gill 2014; Miles et al. 2020). After data collection ceased, all the interviews were transcribed, resulting in a total of 342 pages. To make sense of the significant amount of data generated during the in-depth interviews, the first step was to reduce it to its essence. This way, through a codification process, the researchers started to search for patterns across the interviews. The analysis process did not initially use codes defined a priori. The codes and, afterwards, the themes initially emerged from the data, requiring the researchers to adopt an open perspective for the potential insights (Seidman 2013). That open perspective is referred to as epoche. This Greek word means to put aside any prejudgments, reducing the researchers' personal biases about the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas 1994). Therefore, the researchers let the participants tell their stories through their perspectives, using their own words (Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell 2004).

This way, the process started with horizonalization; the interview transcriptions were studied, and every statement relevant to the study was selected (Moustakas 1994). To be considered as relevant statements, an excerpt had to "contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it" and it should be "possible to abstract and label it" (Moustakas 1994, p. 120). If the two criteria were met, the statement represented an experience's invariant horizon and was kept. "The invariant horizons point to the unique qualities of an experience, those that stand out" (Moustakas 1994, p. 128). Any statement that did not meet these two criteria was eliminated, along with repetitive and vague expressions (Moustakas 1994).

The related invariant constituents were clustered under a common theme, representing the core elements of the experience. To ensure the themes' labels' validity, they were compared to what the participants said to evaluate if the labels represented what they said. All the analysis processes were performed using the software OneNote, Word, and Excel (version: 16.85 (24051214)).

Even though the codification process was performed by only one of the researchers, both had access to the complete data set. Moreover, when identifying the relationships among all the insights that emerged from the codification process and organizing them into themes and subthemes, both researchers shared their perspectives to ensure that the interpretation of the results truly reflected the participants' experiences, thereby contributing to increasing the results' dependability (Zeithaml et al. 2020).

Additionally, while collecting the data, including the interview transcriptions and analysis process, memos were elaborated to track what had been done and when, besides registering relevant insights. With the participants' prior permission, it was possible to recontact some of them to clarify some of their statements, ask for further details about specific situations, or discuss some initial insights. Thus, the conjunction of the many probing questions asked during the interviews, the memos, and post-data collection conversations with some participants enhanced the results' credibility, that is, "the extent to which a new theory's if-then propositions are plausible" (Zeithaml et al. 2020, p. 43).

Finally, in line with the variety of the participants' professional areas and organizational positions, the array of the companies' sectors and locations contributed to increasing the results' transferability, that is, "the extent to which a new theory's constructs and if-then propositions are valid in contexts not included in the data used to develop the theory" (Zeithaml et al. 2020, p. 43). Moreover, although a single data collection method was used, this diversity also allowed some level of data triangulation by capturing many different perspectives from different contexts, increasing the validity of the results (Carter et al. 2014).

3. Results

3.1. Employees' Experiences

3.1.1. Socialization at Work

Regarding socialization at work, some respondents commented on the difficulty of establishing and developing relationships with co-workers. Problems related to the lack of contextual signs, such as seeing other's faces or hearing their tones of voice, contribute to misunderstandings among co-workers, who might misread a message and think their colleague was rude. Additionally, spontaneous socialization moments are scarce. These factors hinder employees' ability to connect and feel they are part of the organization.

> *And, of course, because you are developing relationships in person, I think that allows, again, the bonding and the trust to develop a bit more quickly and naturally. So, I had a situation where I had communicated with a colleague about something, and I had opened up to her about a concern. And I did this on purpose to establish trust [. . .] she went to our superior to discuss the situation, which did not merit that action at all. And he completely misunderstood the situation and felt that there was a problem. [. . .] So then I have to explain things to him over a remote call. [. . .] That is really difficult. And I think that if all three of us had shared an office, for example, it would have happened differently, basically*. (E20, Job Area: Project Management—Company: H, Sector: EU Projects)

Nonetheless, some employees still feel that the lack of physical interaction may be compensated by establishing an open and constant conversation with co-workers.

> *I love working from home. My company, in particular, is completely remote [. . .] so the culture is already completely remote, right? So I feel perfectly integrated into a team, [. . .] all that experience of a more social company I continue to have [. . .].* (E23, Job Area: Marketing—Company: N, Sector: Advertising)

In the end, employees commented that video calls and, occasionally, in-person meetings represent two essential elements in building relationships while working from home. Despite not necessarily representing the best option for all work-related tasks, these two elements provide a richer communication experience regarding symbols that may be transmitted during a conversation, and play a crucial role in relationship building and maintenance.

> *[. . .] since last year, we get together once a year, in December, in the Buenos Aires office. Then we have a day or two of team building outside the company [. . .] therefore, I consider these face-to-face initiatives to be fundamental*. (E6, Job Area: Business Development—Company: D, Sector: Telecommunication)

3.1.2. Remote Learning Experience

Most employees considered the experience of learning what they would have to do as positive. The physical distance did not matter, as the company already had the information regarding their activities described and posted online. Since their work is essentially composed of tasks performed on a computer, the learning experience was considered almost the same as that of learning in person. Moreover, as employees did not have to meet face-to-face, they could easily talk to other employees who work abroad in other business units.

> *[. . .] the work we do is all on the computer, that is, if it is some program that I do not know very well, I can see what my colleague is watching, [. . .] all it takes to show their screen, what is happening. If it was something else not so digital, I think it would be difficult, but for the work I do, it is exactly what I need. I always just have to see what is on the screen*. (E21, Job Area: Customer Support—Company: C, Sector: Business Process Outsourcing)

> *And also, the training I had initially was all remote. That was an advantage. We could talk to people from many areas, which would be more complicated in person. I mean, there are people who are no longer in Portugal, and this way, we can talk all the*

time. (E22, Job Area: Information Technology—Company: M, Sector: Business Consulting/Financial Audit)

Other employees described some of the challenges they had to deal with during the learning process. Except for the less frequent communication, none of the reasons were directly associated with telecommuting. The main factors hindering employees' learning capacity were insufficient and unclear instructions.

So, I must be very honest, I was learning by myself, like figuring out based on my intuition in the beginning, whenever I could ask some colleagues, but at that time, we had a few. Today we have a lot of processes, so we have kind of like a library of processes. Whatever you need to do, it is a 90% chance it is already written step by step what you will need to do. [. . .] Back at the time, we did not really have it. (E15, Job Area: Project Management—Company: H, Sector: EU Projects)

An essential facet of the learning experience is the process of clarifying doubts. Generally, employees did not point out many difficulties in clarifying doubts. They usually send a text message to a specific person or group they think may know the answer.

I used to send a message on Slack or directly ask my bosses to explain something to me. Or when it was a more general question, I used to use the chat, where everyone from the company, everyone from the division is, and ask: "Has anyone ever had a project where this happened?" And when someone showed up saying, "Oh, I already had to deal with that". Either the person would reply with a little text on Slack if it was something simple, or we would have these small meetings of five or ten minutes. (E11, Job Area: Project Management—Company: H, Sector: EU Projects)

Because some employees work in different time zones and frequently use more asynchronous media like chats to ask questions, some employees reported it might take a while until they receive an answer.

So, when I am in doubt, it is complicated because I have to ask my manager. And usually, she is too busy and will not answer text messages. So, I try to wait to accumulate something else if it is not urgent, so I can call and already deal with several things with her in a single call to be more practical, or I end up going to other co-workers. [. . .] It was different [in person] because she was always there, so you just had to look at her and talk. It was more immediate. (E14, Job Area: Geoprocessing—Company: I, Sector: Urban Geoprocessing)

3.1.3. Experience Learning about Co-Workers' Jobs

Some employees commented that they did not know what their co-workers do. In most cases, this was associated with co-workers from departments not directly related to theirs. Since some participants worked for companies with hundreds or thousands of employees, they would naturally face difficulties knowing what each of their co-workers does. In this context, four employees mentioned that they did not know what some of their co-workers were responsible for, even when they used to work in person. However, regardless of the number of co-workers, some employees mentioned problems regarding a lack of clear internal communication.

Some of them joined the company at the same time as I did; therefore, it was easy to understand each one's role [. . .] The other people, I have no idea what they do [. . .] and maybe all the companies where I worked until now have the same deficit, having a more comprehensive, intra-company communication, which allows everyone to be able to understand the role of each one [. . .]. (E1, Job Area: Sales—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

I worked for many years at the bank, and it was a big department, and honestly, there were areas where I had no idea what they were doing there. [. . .] the IT part, I do not even know if I would understand what they were doing, so I think that ends up happening

whether you are on the site or not. (E4, Job Area: Customer Support—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

At the same time, employees also mentioned how they find out who does what in the company. Beyond the initial formal presentations when employees join the company, the answers included simple, casual conversations in which employees presented themselves to recording videos to be shared with the rest of the organization. In addition to verbal communication, some companies also provide formal documents that employees can use to ascertain the formal roles of other employees and their additional skills.

And now, the company is also making some videos for people to understand the company, internal videos of the company. And then each one records, someone from the digital image processing area records what he does. So, even a person who does not work with this at the company watches that video of him presenting and gets to know a little about that service. (E14, Job Area: Geoprocessing—Company: I, Sector: Urban Geoprocessing)

So, we have this mega spreadsheet that shows all the different projects, who is working on the projects, what they are about, and linked to the website. And we have a bunch of these different tabs. And one of the tabs, there is a list of all the employees, and we put areas of expertise. So, it is like, okay, writing experts, amateur, no experience. So, we fill this out so you can kind of go to this and see: "Oh, you know, maybe I need an editor", and you can look on the spreadsheet and see if there is anyone in the team who has that experience. (E20, Job Area: Project Management—Company: H, Sector: EU Projects)

3.1.4. Different Situations Call for Different Media

In line with the different ways employees communicate, they mentioned plenty of different specific communication means, such as Skype, WhatsApp, Zoom, and Slack. Even though the specific means used in each company were very dependent on their preferences, it was possible to identify patterns in how these employees use them.

When dealing with subjects that are hard to describe formally or that demand an in-depth debate, employees mentioned that they usually choose media that allow them to establish fast and detailed communication, such as phone or video calls. Employees can gain a richer perspective of what others say while talking on the phone or during a screen-sharing session, as they can express their ideas with more details, including tone of voice or gestures.

When it is an extended, more complex, or not a well-defined topic, yes, typically, there is a video call. [. . .] When we make software, it makes a lot of difference to see what is going on and where it is applied. Look at things, see how they move. (E5, Job Area: Information Technology—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

One of the employees also commented that she prefers to communicate via audio with one of her co-workers, who is elderly and has some difficulties dealing with textual communication.

Our work safety technique is elderly. So, sometimes, I have difficulties communicating with her via text. So I have the habit of making calls or sending an audio. (E14, Job Area: Geoprocessing—Company: I, Sector: Urban Geoprocessing)

Employees commented that textual communication is the base of their daily interactions, representing the most-used media option for communication. Text-based communication is preferred when employees must register what was said/happened to re-access this information later and continue with their work. Also, according to E17, textual communication, primarily through email, enhances communication clarity since people think for a prolonged time before sending a message compared to a spoken conversation.

[. . .] people often use the phone to be answered faster, right? And many times, it does not make it easy [. . .] I can forget what the client asked me. (E4, Job Area: Customer Support—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

> *Sometimes, the person says something and has not even thought about what he/she is saying. [. . .] If the person is writing, the person is thinking and is paying more attention to the subject than verbally*. (E17, Job Area: Project Management—Company: K, Sector: Education/Research)

In addition to factors associated with the communication task, other social factors sometimes influence respondents' media choices. In this regard, employees focused on video calls, mentioning different factors influencing their willingness to turn on their cameras. The level of intimacy between the communicators is one of the main factors. On the one hand, some said they do not need to see the others' faces because they are already close, so the visual element adds little or no relevant information. On the other hand, some mentioned that they feel uncomfortable showing their faces and workspace on camera to people they are not close to.

> *Unless the two people already know each other, then they will do a video. But any other moment, they would just do messages and maybe a call*. (E2, Job Area: Technical Support—Company: B, Sector: Business Consulting)

> *It depends. In general, I would say it is always nicer when the camera is on, and I see the face, but if it is already a person I know internally from our work, it is not such a big difference*. (E15, Job Area: Project Management—Company: H, Sector: EU Projects)

Aspects like disliking looking at one's own face or not being "socially presentable" at the moment of the call were also mentioned, along with comments about meetings with many people, eating at the moment, or just being tired of having too many meetings a week. All these factors were mentioned as demotivators to turning the camera on.

> *I sometimes start work very early [. . .] I am still in my bathrobe. So, in this situation, I do not feel like having a video call*. (E4, Job Area: Customer Support—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

> *I see the advantage but also the disadvantage because when I see someone face-to-face, I definitely act differently. I start to think about how I will act besides everything that I do on a usual call. For example, if I am dressed or sitting accordingly, if the chair is positioned correctly, and so on*. (E16, Job Area: Human Resources—Company: J, Sector: Payment Processing)

3.1.5. Distance Communication Challenges

Respondents listed a series of situations that may be divided into two groups when discussing the challenges associated with ICT-mediated communications. Firstly, there are situations where employees pointed out cases with interpretation difficulties due to some limitations of specific media options, like the limited capability to convey contextual signals. These interpretation difficulties refer to employees' capability to understand what others say and to be understood. In this sense, most limitations were associated with text-based media.

> *[. . .] the chat message, as much as it is said to be live, is not live. It is delayed text that appears at one time. A voice you can interrupt someone. [. . .] You cannot write everything in Caps Lock because people will be really offended*. (E2, Job Area: Technical Support—Company: B, Sector: Business Consulting)

To compensate for these limitations, some employees use emojis to add some extra information to, for example, indicate the tone of the message. At the same time, others try to avoid dubious phrases, writing objective and short messages.

> *It is just that you have to be a little careful with communication. [. . .] try to make shorter, more structured texts. But this is also something learned, how to convey a message more clearly and quickly in written form*. (E5, Job Area: Information Technology—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

> *We have a lot of emojis, so we work a lot with emojis to also convey some emotion to what you are saying because if it is just text, period, it seems rude*. (E8, Job Area: Customer Service—Company: E, Sector: Lodging)

Despite the possibility of utilizing media options that can convey a more varied set of signals, such as video calls, that is not always an option. With many employees working worldwide, internet connection is not always stable, consequently sometimes forcing them to use only text or voice-based communication. Another situation is that while some employees work from home and others share the same physical workspace, they do not always clearly understand what is going on in each context. In this sense, remote employees sometimes miss a significant part of what is happening in the company, affecting their ability to interpret their co-workers' reactions.

> *I think it is a challenge not to be in the same environment as the person. I really feel this with my manager. She is sometimes there at the company, in person. She is going through things there, she has an emotional and psychological state very different from mine, and if I were at the company, maybe I would be in the same or would see that she is like this*. (E14, Job Area: Geoprocessing—Company: I, Sector: Urban Geoprocessing)

Secondly, there are the other group's situations, which include difficulties related to delays in communication. Employees mentioned very different causes for the delays in communication. They varied from problems in knowing who is online/available to talk to situations regarding employees working in different time zones. Technical problems were also mentioned, such as failures of the computer microphone or connection problems, delaying the start of a conversation.

> *I think physical contact helps a lot. In the end, you live together much more, while in remote work, several times you can be working on the same document as the person but working alone. So, you write the alignment part, and I write the innovation part, and you stay there for five, six hours just writing that, without talking to anyone. To do this with someone who is working alongside you, you can already make small punctual comments, raise questions and see if the person likes or dislikes that, whereas if you are completely remote, you think: "Wow, I am not going to call the person, I will not bother"*. (E11, Job Area: Project Management—Company: H, Sector: EU Projects)

In addition to listing the challenges they face while communicating due to the physical distance, employees also commented about factors critical to overcoming these problems. Respondents mentioned the essential role that video plays in enhancing communication comprehension. Video calls were also cited as a relevant means of humanizing ICT-mediated communications, as well as a facilitator to establishing trust between the communicators.

> *And above all, when there are onboardings, if there is screen sharing, I show my face, I explain, and I try to humanize the company and the product as much as possible. And then we have support and talk to customers. And I think it gives a bit of confidence, especially because there are many people who are suspicious and who are not used to everything being online*. (E7, Job Area: Business Development—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

Furthermore, employees reinforced the importance of adapting the communication to the situation. In this respect, some suggested that the content of meetings should be shared before they take place, whenever possible, so that there will be enough time to digest it. Similarly, doing so will allow employees to assimilate the information at a time most convenient to them rather than at a specified time that might not be the most appropriate. Consequently, whenever they have a meeting to debate the information sent, employees will already know what the discussion is about and may ask questions. The same holds for instructions on how to perform certain activities. Employees mentioned that sending a written document in advance is essential in ensuring they do not have to rely on the notes they take during a meeting.

Sometimes it is more irritating at the office because I cannot mark it as unread and come back later, the person is talking to me, and I must spend time at that moment. Working from home allows me to optimize the time for communications [. . .]. (E18, Job Area: Marketing—Company: E, Sector: Lodging)

I am not one to immediately ask the right questions. I often need my time to digest and then go back to a certain subject. (E19, Job Area: Customer Service/Sales—Company: L, Sector: Cybersecurity)

Despite having great flexibility to manage their time for communications, eleven employees commented that they tend to work simultaneously because a significant part of these communications happens in real time.

[. . .] so we work on New York time, an American company. Although there are people in India, South Africa, and all over the world, we all work the same time, more or less [. . .] so anyone I want to talk to during work I can usually reach them in the morning. (E23, Job Area: Marketing—Company: N, Sector: Advertising)

3.1.6. Distance Communication Advantages

Despite all the challenges associated with ICT-mediated communications, employees also pointed out the advantages of communicating remotely. Among the advantages stated was the facility to refer to specific contents, like a topic, that may be easily demonstrated while sharing the screen. Similarly, another commonly cited advantage was the possibility of quickly sharing information throughout the organization without the requirement for intermediaries, preserving the integrity of the message.

Yes, completely, because afterward, we can share screens, and he manages to show me exactly what he is talking about and where the issue is. It turns out to be easier for the two of us to be sitting in front of the computer than for him to be describing the situation and for me to be listening to him talking. (E3, Job Area: Customer Support—Company: C, Sector: Business Process Outsourcing)

Here, for me, it does not matter which floor they are on [. . .] I go to the relevant chat group, and everyone in that group reads that message, whereas, in person, I would have to go from table to table asking. (E9, Job Area: Information Technology—Company: F, Sector: Logistics)

We obviously have a number of shared chats on different topics that everyone is free to join. The company encourages any questions or discussions to be carried out in those general chats rather than private conversations so that other people can benefit from them. (E19, Job Area: Customer Service/Sales—Company: L, Sector: Cybersecurity)

Employees said that when companies operate in shifts or different time zones, ICT-mediated communications enable the company to keep all employees informed of what is happening anytime and anywhere. Moreover, they said it is much easier to talk to many people at the same time online than face-to-face, as people do not have to meet at the same physical place.

I think working remotely leads people to assume that communication will be more difficult, so they take measures to make communication flow more easily [. . .]. (E18, Job Area: Marketing—Company: E, Sector: Lodging)

3.1.7. Summarizing Employees' Experiences

Next, Table 7—Summary of Results displays a summary of employees' answers, which makes it possible to have a condensed perspective regarding their experiences working from home. It is possible to note interesting patterns in the results. For example, 22 respondents answered that their communication choice varied based on the task, whether they were communicating about a routine activity or a complex situation. At the same time, 20 respondents answered that they could communicate effectively despite the problems associated with ICT-mediated communications. In other words, they could

understand what others said and make themselves understood. Similarly, 18 respondents said they mostly talk to their direct co-workers, and 11 also commented that this work arrangement might lead to a lonely working experience. Finally, another relevant pattern observed was that 18 respondents said their co-workers could see their contribution to the company, and 22 said they felt they had a fair performance evaluation.

Table 7. Summary of Results.

Topic	Responses		Non-Respondents
Control over the working schedule	Increased (N = 20)	Same (N = 2)	(N = 1)
Work/life balance	Increased (N = 16)	-	(N = 7)
Productivity at work	Increased (N = 14)	-	(N = 9)
Main social interactions at work	Direct co-workers (N = 18)	Diverse (N = 5)	-
Main media	Text-based (N = 15)	Others (N = 7)	(N = 1)
Media choice	Dependent on the task (N = 22)	-	(N = 1)
Communication effectiveness	Effective (N = 20)	Partially (N = 3)	-
Working schedule	Similar to co-workers (N = 15)	Different (N = 3)	(N = 5)
Co-workers see my contribution	Clear (N = 18)	Partially (N = 5)	-
Performance evaluation	Fair (N = 22)	-	(N = 1)
Lonely work	Yes (N = 11)	No (N = 4)	(N = 8)

3.2. Communication in a Virtual Company—The Perspective of Company A

This section describes Company A, an extreme case of telecommuting, in which all the employees and the top managers work from home, and there is no physical office.

Founded in 2013, Company A is based in the Netherlands and operates in logistics. Company A's core activity is offering IT solutions to connect online stores to carriers, facilitating shipping management. The company mainly focuses on the Dutch, Portuguese, and Spanish markets. In 2021, the company also started to develop a new product, directly targeting the carriers, leading the company in a new strategic direction and to a geographical expansion of its operations to Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Africa, and South America.

Despite starting, as most companies do, with a specific physical space for the company operations, its managers soon realized it made no sense to have a physical office where everyone would go to work. Thus, they started to operate "distributed". That means the company no longer had an office, and all organizational members could work from virtually anywhere in the world.

According to them, establishing a company where all employees work from home is a matter of understanding the contextual differences. That is, managers need to consider what jobs can be performed remotely, how to hire the right employees, and how to manage the employee onboarding process so that the new professionals understand what they must do and how to communicate while physically away. They also mentioned some benefits of operating this way, such as having no geographical boundaries to hire. Another benefit is the reduced temptation to judge employees' performance based on how much time they work every day or if they seem busy during their working time.

> *I do not want to build a company where policing your people is a big factor, and that is almost inevitable when you have a physical company. You automatically look at your colleague, and sooner or later, you get annoyed when you put in, I do not know, ten hours a day, and the guy next to you only puts in six, seven hours a day. Then, sooner or later, that becomes an issue. But it says nothing about productivity. [. . .] And sort of being fully distributed, fully remote, basically takes away the opportunity to take those kinds of fake markers for performance.* (M1, Position: CEO—Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

In association with this indirect observation of employee work, both managers commented that when evaluating employees' performance, they do so based on the outputs, which are generally metrics regarding employees' tasks.

So, there are metrics to be seen in the software. So that also gives the high over inputs on the direction that we are going. (M2, Position: COO—Co-Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

Complementing this output-based perspective, the managers also directly talk to employees to hear how things are going.

Of course, it is hard to give someone physically a tap on the back. But I generally say that I think someone did a good job when I think they did a good job. [. . .] I think a lot of these things are basically the same as in a physical organization. Because of the lack of presence, you need to be more conscious about your communication around it. (M1, Position: CEO—Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

In this sense, employees seem to agree that these conversations effectively clarify situations regarding their performance and other topics, such as conflicts with other stakeholders, as related by E4.

They had already fired a customer who was quite relevant because he was very rude to me. [. . .] Therefore, I know that he is aware of my workload, and I can tell from our conversations and everything that happens that they are happy with my performance and that everything is in order with what I do. (E4, Job Area: Customer Support—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

During the discussion about the company's long-term objectives, both managers mentioned that there is no formal planning regarding, for example, the new strategic direction the organization wants to pursue. Similarly, the company has no formal statement presenting its core values, mission, vision, or purpose. According to M2, formal communication regarding the company's mission or vision is more useful to those outside the organization who do not directly experience internal changes. He also argued that not all employees must thoroughly comprehend the company's new strategic direction. Despite the lack of this formalization, the managers think employees know what the company aims for in the long term.

No, none of that is formalized. [. . .] I think the general direction is pretty clear to most people [. . .] Bottom line growth, setting hard targets for me never worked. (M1, Position: CEO—Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

And it might also differ per person depending on the job they perform, depending on the market that they are in. Because I believe it is less relevant to know that transition or to be consciously aware of that transition for someone that performs customer support on the broker segment, on the small, medium-sized company segment, because they still need to perform that job well, right?. (M2, Position: COO—Co-Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

This lack of formalization is reflected in the short-term objectives of the employees, who reported a high level of autonomy regarding what tasks they perform and when and how they perform them.

We are all aware of what we have to do because if we do not, it could harm the company in some way, and indirectly, it will harm us as there will be no money to pay our wages. [. . .] And each of us does what has to be done without someone evaluating us in the background. (E1, Job Area: Sales—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

I am my own boss and my own employer. I do not have anyone monitoring me [. . .] to see if I am working or evaluating how hard I work. [. . .] I think it is noticeable what I do and that they are happy with my work. (E4, Job Area: Customer Support—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

Contrasting this autonomy attributed to them, some employees also reported a lack of direction regarding the company's long-term objectives or a feeling that some employees were unaware of these objectives, including this change in the strategic direction related to developing the new product targeting the carriers.

> *We know more or less where it [the organization] wants to go. But I think that the organization does not do this task to create communication at all, so the information does not reach us either. [. . .] There were, in the beginning, in the first year or in the first two years, semestral or annual emails saying like: "Ah, we did this well, we got here, we plan to go there". Today this does not exist anymore. [. . .] So, it depends on the company itself, I think not so much if you work from home or not*. (E12, Job Area: Accounting—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

Supporting this justification presented by employees, managers commented that they do not believe all employees must know about all the activities in the company or the significant changes in the company's interests. This is because they believe that for most employees, this information is irrelevant to their jobs and might distract them from their designated tasks, which must be performed regardless of higher-level changes in the company. Hence, it was possible to note a contrast between employees' autonomy and self-perceptions of responsibility and the managers' perceptions of employees' capacity to keep the focus on their work when dealing with information not directly associated with their routine tasks.

> *So, although being a small team, there is a lot of activity that does not really interlink with what another person is doing, right? Because business development in the corporate segment has nothing to do with business development in an SMB segment in a specific market. [. . .] Well, for someone in service on the Dutch market, interesting to know what kind of conversations on corporate business development today, tomorrow, and the day after tomorrow I have, does not matter, does not matter*. (M2, Position: COO—Co-Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

According to the managers, the requirement to have all communications mediated via ICTs due to the physical distance between all organizational members is not necessarily a limitation, nor is it so different from communication in a physical workplace. Indeed, M1 argued that it contributes to internal communication quality. Once people in this context have less access to contextual information, they will compensate for it by being more explicit and careful when transmitting a message. Likewise, M2 said that whether working in person or from home, employees need to access and integrate "hard inputs", information available in the software, with "intangible inputs" obtained during social interactions for work. The big difference is that instead of having these social interactions face-to-face, they happen during calls or chat conversations.

> *[. . .] I think database visualization is important whether you work remotely or physically together. [. . .] the individual experiences on micro events during a day might add information to those metrics and might give, you know, soft inputs that you cannot get out of data and high-level data. So, both are important, but the way you bring those soft inputs within a team would probably mean like: "hey, let us grab a coffee", and then I share my soft inputs around the micro experience that I just had. Whereas in our situation, that would be you share something on the group chat. It could be the same thing*. (M2, Position: COO—Co-Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

E7 also reinforced the perspective that being remote does not negatively affect her communication capability, stating that she feels no limitation regarding the interaction among co-workers.

> *So, I do not feel constraints in the communication between employees. I feel constraints in the company's communication with us to communicate the objectives and strategy and all that stuff. However, among peers, I do not feel any restrictions*. (E7, Job Area: Business Development—Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

Managers also commented on how organizational members must be aware of their responsibility to proactively communicate their status regarding tasks' progress or their feelings. Without constant passive communication, which usually happens in an in-person workplace where, due to the simple fact of sharing the same physical space, employees and their supervisors can see and hear what is happening around them, people must take the

initiative to communicate. Without this active communication, the managers said they miss many contextual signals, consequently affecting their perceptions of employees' working experience and how they evaluate their performance.

> *In the end, especially for the roles that are much less objectively measurable, you need to rely much more on long-term achievements, the feeling of commitment, and the assessment of your colleagues on their performance. [. . .] So what becomes much more important is that people take the initiative to communicate about that. [. . .] If there is an assumed deadline, I take that for granted unless told otherwise.* (M1, Position: CEO—Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

M1 also stated that it is crucial to make it clear to new employees from the beginning of their journey in the company that they must be ready to communicate actively.

> *[. . .] even in the recruiting process, we make it very clear to people that it is everybody's responsibility to communicate. That comes to performance but also for private things or whatever because you do not spend physical time [. . .] you need to overcompensate in verbal communication in order to get the same level of humanity or sort of mutual understanding and interpretation of where someone is, how somebody feels [. . .].* (M1, Position: CEO—Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

Finally, despite being great supporters of virtual companies, both managers mentioned it is unlikely that any company will be able to have 100% of its interactions mediated by ICTs. Aside from the casual in-person meetings with employees, which help to create a community feeling, there is the difficulty of building trust when completely remote. In this sense, despite mentioning that they built thousands of relationships with online stores by being completely remote, the same cannot be said about their market segment focused on carriers, composed of big international companies.

> *[. . .] with the corporate client segment, [. . .] where I believe trust is a very important component when selling our solution to clients that decide to use our technology for a very important part of their business, then trust needs to be built with those potential clients.* (M2, Position: COO—Co-Founder, Company: A, Sector: Logistics)

Similarly to what employees from the different companies mentioned, it becomes clear that the current ICTs seem far from replacing face-to-face interactions when the objective is building trust between stakeholders, especially when what is at stake is highly relevant, as both top managers mentioned regarding big deals involving substantial financial resources.

In this section, it was possible to identify many similarities with what the 23 employees discussed, such as the relevance of having constant and open conversations between employees and supervisors to clarify and improve a fair performance evaluation. Similarly, managers also reinforced the perspective that whether working from home or in person, sharing the same physical space with other organizational members, a substantial share of the communication is mediated by ICTs. Moreover, it was possible to reinforce the notion that, in the end, the cause of most of the problems regarding internal communication, like clarity about the company's long-term objectives, does not seem to be related to the work arrangement itself but how communications are managed.

4. Discussion

Interestingly, despite their more extensive control over their working routines, most employees said they follow a similar timetable. That happens because a significant number of their tasks require fast and continuous interaction with other organizational members and external stakeholders. Consequently, this more significant control over the work routine does not necessarily contribute to an increased temporal distance. This increased temporal distance, often mentioned in the telecommuting literature (e.g., van der Meulen et al. 2019), is, to a greater extent, related to the employee's time zone. For example, telecommuters on the same team may work in the same time zone, quickly allowing them to work simultaneously. Meanwhile, global teams usually have employees working in different time zones, naturally facing extra barriers to achieve simultaneous work, as some employees

may need to work out of "social hours". Accordingly, employees' geographical locations represent a prominent factor behind temporal distance, which may happen regardless of whether the work arrangement is telecommuting.

Also, results revealed that when the company has some employees working on-premises and others from home, the communication among organizational members tends to be worse than when all employees are full-time home-based telecommuters. In the first case, employees at home miss much of what is happening in the company, mainly because their co-workers on the company's premises will not take time to inform them about every detail. The employees working physically close to each other will also have more opportunities to develop their relationships among themselves, leaving telecommuters on the sidelines. Meanwhile, when all employees work from home, all their communications are ICT-mediated. Hence, almost all employees can participate and directly interact with any organizational member, whether or not they are currently available.

Despite the challenges associated with ICT-mediated communications, especially text-based media (Gajendran et al. 2022; O'Neill et al. 2016; van der Meulen et al. 2019; Yang et al. 2022), employees could, in most cases, communicate effectively, despite the physical distance separating them. Indeed, their communication quality increased due to the variety of media options they used after working from home. Before working from home, employees were used to relying mainly on face-to-face interactions. With an increased variety of media options, employees could choose the media that best met their communication needs for each context.

In this sense, even though telecommuters tend to increase their text-based communications usage while reducing the use of other media options capable of conveying a more diverse set of symbols, such as video calls (Yang et al. 2022), that does not seem to represent a real threat to employees' communication capabilities, and consequently companies' operations. Since most of the time employees are performing predictable tasks, the increased text-based media usage does not negatively affect their performance. That happens because most of these predictable tasks do not require that employees share and discuss significant amounts of new and complex information. Moreover, as results demonstrated, employees adapt their communications to the context, so they rely on phone or video calls whenever they feel it will be too complex to describe something by text. Therefore, one cannot assume that the lack of face-to-face communication will necessarily lead to worse communication.

Ultimately, telecommuting does not seem to hinder good-quality internal communication. Indeed, the leading causes behind miscommunication were frequency inconsistency, information segregation, and lack of clarity. In many cases, employees reported being constantly updated about internal procedure changes, the release of new products, and other relevant events right after joining the company. However, these updates became sparse with time, leading to inconsistent communication frequency. Similarly, employees reported information segregation problems, which the managers confirmed. That is, only some of the employees are communicated with about certain things, and/or only part of the information is shared with employees. Among the main reasons behind this information segregation is that the communicators, sometimes the managers themselves, think that not everyone needs to know about specific situations or that employees only need to know certain aspects. Lastly, there is the problem regarding the lack of clarity in communication. This problem manifests when employees receive information lacking critical contextual information that allows them to comprehend what is being said, especially when they were not directly involved in the situation, and/or when the terms utilized during the communication are not familiar to all involved, such as technical terms.

These three problematic situations may happen whether the communication is ICT-mediated, employees share the same physical space and work simultaneously, or are physically and temporally apart. In other words, the leading causes of internal communication problems are associated with how internal communications are managed.

5. Conclusions

With the changes in how people communicate, primarily due to relevant developments in ICT, the possibilities for how companies can manage their operations have expanded. One of these possibilities is creating and disseminating new work arrangements, like telecommuting.

Even though telecommuting is far from being a new phenomenon, it was not a popular topic or work arrangement in most companies until the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a drastic increase in its popularity worldwide. Consequently, it is essential to understand how telecommuting may contribute to companies' capability to create sustainable value-creation processes.

Accordingly, this study explored home-based telecommuters' communication experiences to better understand the relationship between physical and temporal distance and internal communication quality as perceived by telecommuters. Complementing the employees' perspectives, based on interviews with two top managers, it was also possible to explore how internal communications happen in a company where all organizational members work from home. In the end, results demonstrated that the main challenges preventing companies from establishing good-quality internal communications are related to how these communications are managed and not to the physical and temporal distance.

5.1. Theoretical Contributions

By adopting a phenomenological approach to explore how employees working from home perceive their communications with other organizational members, this study helped shed light on previous studies' observations. First, results confirmed that employees tend to rely more on text-based media after starting to work from home. At first glance, that may represent a red flag to companies, as employees would probably face extra challenges in sharing and discussing more complex and abstract thoughts (Yang et al. 2022), which usually require more synchronous and in-depth discussions that are better conducted by face-to-face interactions or video calls (Dennis et al. 2008), but it might not be a real threat.

This negative perspective regarding telecommuters' communication behaviors is mainly based on studies that demonstrated the long-term harmful effects of excessive text-based media usage to present and discuss abstract ideas (Gajendran et al. 2022; O'Neill et al. 2016; Parlamis and Dibble 2019).

However, as the results demonstrated, employees consider the context before choosing which media option better fits the situation. This way, whenever they feel that the topic to be communicated is complex, not well-structured and/or demands some debate to be better developed, they opt for media options that allow them to convey complementary signals and establish synchronous communication, such as phone, video calls, screen-sharing sessions, or even a combination of multiple means. Meanwhile, most of their text-based communication is used to register relevant aspects they may need to re-access later, which is usually the case in most interactions. Therefore, it is possible to argue that this tendency to increase text-based media usage may increase internal communication quality, as employees may register more information than they would do while working in person, where, due to the physical proximity, employees naturally tend to rely more on spoken conversations.

Thus, the results do not indicate any inherent telecommuting problem preventing companies from pursuing their objectives due to issues regarding internal communication quality. The main problems found in this study relate to how internal communication is managed, regardless of whether it is ICT-mediated.

5.2. Managerial Implications

Recognizing and understanding the different media resources and matching them to the context is crucial to employees' capability to work in favor of the company's objectives, regardless of their work arrangement. In other words, whether employees work in the office side by side or physically and/or temporally apart, they must communicate ade-

quately. Therefore, companies should promote training sessions to present the different media options and explain how organizational members might use them to maximize communication quality—for example, orienting employees to avoid using text-based communication solely when discussing more abstract subjects and opting for media options that allow the conveyance of images/audio that may help to clarify these ideas. Similarly, whenever communicating an extended amount of information that takes time to be digested, transmitting this information only during a meeting should be avoided. Whenever possible, this information should be sent in advance by email, for example, so employees may take the time to process all the information and, if necessary, recheck it.

In line with this, companies should provide different means of communication to all organizational members. This way, employees can choose the options that better meet their communication needs. Also, companies should include items referring to how employees establish their communications in the employee performance evaluation process. Consequently, companies may incentivize employees to constantly care about how they establish their communications.

Companies should also reinforce the importance of increasing active interactions among organizational members to offset the natural decrease in passive interactions in telecommuting contexts. Then, companies should incentivize managers and employees to have regular meetings to establish synchronous communication and share their ideas and experiences that might not have been noted due to the physical distance between them. This approach can help keep organizational members informed about work and personal experiences, fostering trust and maintaining a sense of unity despite the distance.

Finally, managers should regularly evaluate the perceived quality of internal communications, analyzing, for example, whether the information is reaching all intended recipients and retaining its integrity, whether organizational members are being updated at an adequate frequency, and whether they can understand what is being communicated. The perceived quality of internal communication might be measured through semestral surveys in which all organizational members may participate. Moreover, companies may promote moments where employees express their insights into how internal communication may be improved. In the end, by including all employees in internal communication management, companies have the opportunity to gather new ideas and motivate employees by showing that their perspectives matter and that the organization is listening to them.

5.3. Limitations and Future Research

Despite having a significant number of employee interviews from different areas and companies, which allowed data saturation, the same may not be said about the managers. Similarly, employees' sociodemographic characteristics were similar, potentially biasing the results.

There is plenty of room for further exploration regarding other stakeholders' perspectives. Thus, future research should expand the scope of data sources to encompass other stakeholders, such as customers, managers, shareholders, suppliers, and local communities. These different perspectives may further reveal how they perceive ICT-mediated communications with companies. Similarly, employees from different demographics should also be queried. Therefore, future research would benefit from a more diversified sample, including job nature (jobs not easily performed on a computer), potentially obtaining different and complementary insights.

Also, the present study's qualitative nature made measuring a series of factors impossible. For example, measuring the frequency with which employees used the media options was impossible. According to most employees, the most frequent media options are text-based. Nevertheless, it is unknown how frequent this usage is or how often they use audio or video-based communications.

Future studies could also adopt alternative data collection methods such as researcher-directed diaries. Thus, instead of only basing their descriptions on memories regarding situations that might have happened long ago, participants can take notes right after the

situation of interest, providing a richer perspective (Braun and Clarke 2013). In addition to providing new insights, researcher-directed diaries represent an alternative way of conducting phenomenological studies, usually based on interviews. Researchers may also access a longitudinal perspective by conducting digital ethnographic studies (Pink et al. 2016), including participating in employees' digital interactions and observing how employees use the different communication media options.

Also, although conducting online interviews proved to be of great value for this study by allowing researchers to reach a more diverse group of participants, it also had drawbacks. Not rarely, technical problems, including an unstable internet connection, significantly disturbed the interviews by affecting the audio quality. In this context, there were moments when participants/researchers could not listen to or understand what the other party was saying. Then, it was often necessary to ask participants to repeat what they said to recapitulate parts of the missing information. Later, during the transcriptions of the interviews, the audio quality problems were even more extensive than perceived by the researchers, which prevented parts of some interviews from being transcribed.

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