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The employees' perspective on the challenges faced when starting a new job remotely

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Abstract

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Due to the mandatory lockdown, resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, employees had to start working remotely and companies had to change their onboarding experience to online. So, this research goal is to discover if employees that started working remotely faced new challenges. For that, a qualitative approach was conducted, and it was concluded that these employees miss more the office than the remaining, since they did not had a previous personal experience with the colleagues.

Keywords: Human Resources Management, Telework, Starting a new job, Onboarding

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Introduction

The work market is becoming more and more competitive once employees have many possibilities when choosing their job. In order to guarantee a good initial adaptation for the collaborator, human resources management has an important role in integrating the new employees in the company and making the transition smooth for the existing ones (Snell 2006).

But with COVID-19, came the mandatory lockdown and with it, telework became the only solution for companies to continue working (Garrigues 2021). This brought many new challenges including how to adapt the already existing onboarding experiences to online and how to perform it remotely (Dai and De Meuse 2007). And this innates the research question that this work project hopes to answer which is: do employees who start a new job remotely face new challenges? The goal is to help companies understand if they should do something different according to the necessities of their employees, found with the investigation.

Therefore, to answer the research question, this manuscript was divided into three main parts. The first one, literature review, explores the already existing theory, giving a framework of the subject. After there is a description of the methodology used. In this project a qualitative approach was adopted, in order to obtain new insights on the experiences lived by employees that started their job remotely and a total of fourteen interviews were made. Finally, it is presented the findings and a conclusion with recommendations for future research.

Literature Review

Telework

Telework is considered to be a *“labor provision performed with legal subordination, usually outside the company and through the use of information and communication technologies”* as described in the Portuguese Labour Code, decree law n. °7/2009, subsection V, article 165.º (DRE 2009). However, the initial idea of teleworking dates back to the 1970s

(Pyöriä 2011). During the oil crisis it was found that if the US reduced commuting, they did not have to import oil, saving this way the national economy (Mann and Holdsworth 2003). So, in order to achieve it, they started to incentivize people to work from home or a location other than the central offices or production facilities, using new technologies to communicate with their co-workers (Pyöriä 2011; Mann and Holdsworth 2003).

Although the strategy did not work, telework was born, and the decrease of commuting can be seen as its first big advantage. This benefit, nowadays, continues to be very important once sustainable development is a highly discussed topic and companies are more preoccupied with their environmental footprint and in an effort to try to reduce it (Pyöriä 2011).

But other benefits exist, and in 2012, Martin and MacDonnell performed a data analysis which concluded that telework is positively related to five organizational outcomes (productivity, performance, retention, and organizational commitment), proving this way the effectiveness of telework and its benefits for companies. Moreover, this work arrangement creates flexibility to employees when organizing their schedules; decreases interruptions; and increases working hours, which are the main factors that lead to a growth in productivity (Mann and Holdsworth 2003). There is also a lower turnover once it is perceived that teleworkers are more engaged with the job than other workers (Brumm 2016).

Furthermore, through telework firms are able to reduce overheads, via the decrease of office space, which leads to the reduction of heating and electricity costs (Mann and Holdsworth 2003). And, during complicated times, such as pandemics, natural disasters, or acts of terrorism, it permits companies to continue working (Martin and MacDonnell 2012).

For employees, besides the enhanced flexibility and the inexistence of commuting time (if decided to work from home), telework can increase worker autonomy and reduce “*the stress related to home-work transport*” according to Nedelcu research (2020). Besides that, it was found that telework may improve job satisfaction and work-life balance (Baert et al. 2020).

With all these benefits it makes us question why telework is not performed by more companies. Despite the fact that in 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent mandatory lockdown, around 40% of the UE workforce teleworked fulltime, before that only 15% had experienced it (European Commission 2020). One of the main reasons for this event is the apparent loss of command by managers to control employees and their working hours. With telework the relationship between employees and managers must be based on trust, and the control must be accomplished via the analysis of employee performance and output, but managers are reluctant to surrender their authority (Pyöriä 2011).

In addition, telework can be very solitary. The social and professional isolation may cause the loss of social labor relations and damage the employees' mental health (Baert et al. 2020; Nedelcu 2020). And although the employees are able to work in a more relaxed environment and can better manage their work and family life, this can be a breaking point for them. In an interview conducted by Nedelcu (2020) a respondent stated: "the mental costs (loneliness, dissatisfaction, depression) of a daily digital workload would be much too high". To overcome this, employees seek coworking spaces, which are "*shared workplaces utilized by different sorts of knowledge professionals, mostly freelancers, working in various degrees of specialization in the vast domain of the knowledge industry*" (Gandini 2015), in order to feel as a part of a community (Siqueira, Dias, and Medeiros 2019).

Moreover, working remotely also decreases the immediate feedback received, which is usually frequent in an office space (Baert et al. 2020); makes separating work and private life harder, with the increased difficulty in disconnecting from work, and can lead to missed opportunities or delays in career evolution (Nedelcu 2020; Carnevale and Hatak 2020).

All these advantages and disadvantages of telework lead to discussion of the importance of hybrid work arrangements, that consist of a mix between days at the work office and other days from a remote location, which is very talked about nowadays (Miranda 2021). That is why

Pyöriä (2011) stated that *“part-time telework may boost individual and organizational productivity without jeopardizing relations with peers”*.

Starting a new job

According to Robert P. Bauman (1995) starting a new job *“can mean moving within the same function or department, (...) moving to a new unit or even country in the same organization; or it can mean starting in a new organization”*.

But in all these cases, the employee faces some challenges and enters in an adaptation period, which usually corresponds to the first three months. This period is crucial once the new employee, depending on the new job, has to adapt to the new chores, coworkers, understanding the dynamics of the company and group, for then show what he got per say. So, this first three months are very important for long-term success. (Robert 1995).

Onboarding

All employees when enter a company or even when only change teams inside the same company, experience onboarding. It consists of strategies companies adopt to integrate new employees in the company, helping them, this way, with the transition (Dewey 2021). All companies have a process, so doing nothing is also considered a strategy that firms can implement (Harpelund, Højberg, and Nielsen 2019).

The process main goal is to create a good first impression on the employees, which can decrease turnover and create, for the workers, a greater engagement to the company from day one, encouraging them to contribute immediately, reducing this way the productivity curve (Dai and De Meuse 2007; Dewey 2021). Despite these advantages Harpelund, Højberg, and Nielsen (2019) asserted that an American study concluded that only 13% of the organizations established funds for onboarding activities, proving that companies do not spare many resources on these events yet.

Nevertheless, onboarding activities can be done through “intensive meetings, PowerPoint lectures, online self-teaching modules, company videos, printed materials, and orientation sessions”, between others and done individually or in group. The content of this activities consists of a vary of information that can include for example an overview of the company’s operations, organizational vision and values, and also employees’ benefits, insurance, pay schedules, vacations and other essential company policies and also interactions with the new colleagues (Dewey 2021).

But all this information can be overwhelming or even confused to the employees, having in this such way a different effect on them than the intended. It can also be perceived as impersonal once many companies do not adapt the presentation to each employee, adopting sometimes a one-size-fits-all approach, leading employees to learn things that they will not use. Besides that, it does not take into account the years of experience of the employees and their background. Other common mistake organizations make is adopting many computer-mediated programs, losing this way the much-needed human contact (Dewey 2021).

In order to prevent the ‘too much information’ effect, companies can disperse the onboarding experience throughout the time. Usually, the programs last around fourteen days, but Harpelund, Højberg, and Nielsen (2019) in their book entitled “Onboarding: Getting New Hires off to a Flying Start” suggest extending it to between three to six months.

Starting a new job remotely

The research analyzed gives a good overview of the challenges faced by every employee while in telework, but there is few information when referring to the specific group which is employees who started working remotely.

Elizabeth Derickson (2020) indicates that one of the main difficulties this type of collaborators can encounter is the increased difficulty in learning while not working alongside coworkers once we learn through visualization. Moreover, interaction via text can negatively

influence the concept of self if the employee is rejected by a colleague or receives indifference (Derickson 2020).

Methodology

Research method

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative approach was adopted. The goal is to obtain information about personal experiences faced by employees that started a new job during telework, discovering this way their opinions on the topic and struggles faced during this period.

Fourteen interviews, via Microsoft Teams, were performed between 17 and 30 April 2021. In the last interviews no more new information was added so it was concluded that the research was saturated, and no more interviews needed to be made (Grossoehme 2014; Morse 1995). All the interviewed are Portuguese workers in the management sector for the purpose of decreasing bias and cultural differences, but their backgrounds are different to include diverse perspectives in the research (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007). Nine respondents stated that it was their first job, five said it was their first job in the management sector and the remaining had already a previous experience in the area.

The interviews took between 15 to 30 minutes and were hold in Portuguese and then transcribed to English. The guidelines can be found in *Appendix 1: Interview guideline*. The number of questions and the time consumed with the interviews was deliberated in order to be more effective and less time consuming for the interviewed, this way preventing fatigue. Additionally, semi-structure interviews were considered once they are an effective way to gather relevant information about a specific and occasional topic (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007).

To facilitate, the interview was divided in three parts. First, three introductory questions about the interviewed current job and previous ones. Next, four questions concerning their

onboarding process and lastly, three questions regarding their experience with telework. All participants in the beginning of the interview were guaranteed anonymity and informed that the call would be recorded.

Data analysis

The analysis followed, to obtain conclusions from the interviews, was based on the well-known methods for achieving grounded-theory after Gioia (Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013).

After the interviews were transcribed, they were scanned for common dominators. From that, twenty-four 1st order categories were reached, which then lead to five 2nd order terms. These last terms were obtained by gathering information from the 1st order categories and revising existing literature. The final step aggregated even further the terms, leading to the final three dimensions. All these three steps can be seen in *Figure 1*.

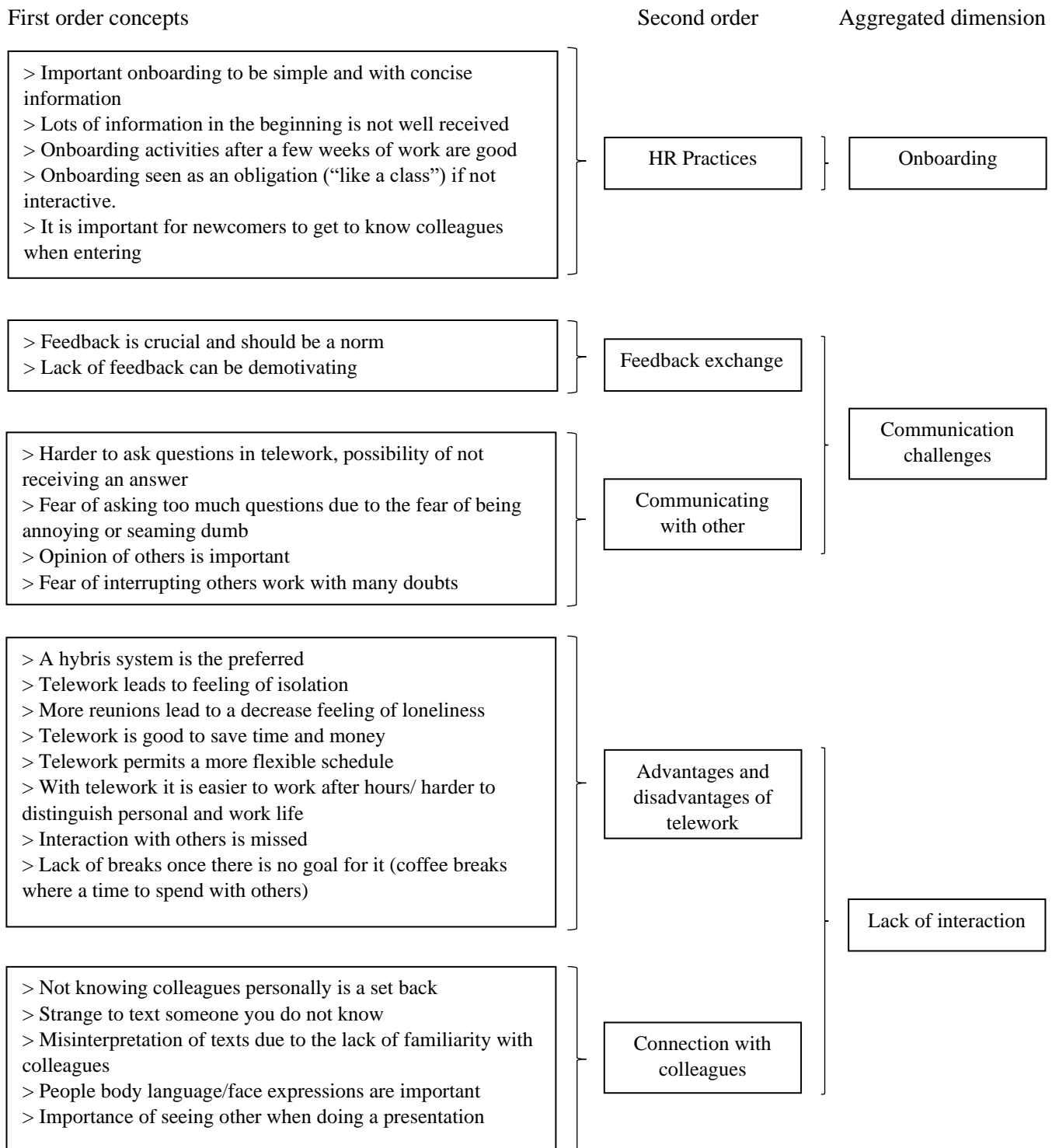


Figure 1: Data Structure

Findings

Onboarding: the employee first interaction with the company

With the interviews, it was possible to understand how present onboarding activities are in companies, with only two respondents saying that they had no activities. Nevertheless, 64% stated that it happened all in the first week which is below the averaged of fourteen days that Harpelund, Højberg, and Nielsen (2019) indicated, being the percentage of employees that had an onboarding process more disperse in time a minority.

Onboarding experiences are helpful for the new employees and are a good first interaction with the company and colleagues. But in order to make a great impact on the employees, the activities need to be well organized and with concise and simple information. Most of the questioned complained about the amount of information received in such a short period of time. Many companies pass too much information and also some details that are better to pass after the employee is already comfortable in the company because passing it on the first day only will overwhelm them and make them confused with things, that they do not understand yet.

One interviewed even stated that once she received so much information, she had the feeling that she needed to study it all, to remember, and other said that she had presentations of the company multiple departments two months after the job started and that it made much more sense when comparing doing it in the beginning, once she was already familiarized with the terms used and composition of the teams. With these two testimonials, it is possible to understand two distinct examples of what is a not that well achieved onboarding experience, once the employee was somewhat discontent, and a well achieved one, with the employee happy with the situation and the organization of the events.

Furthermore, the most useful part of the onboarding activities, for the employees, is the interaction with others and the opportunity to get to know the new colleagues once it makes it

easier the following interactions that they will have, which will already be in a role performance context.

Communication challenges

With the interviews it was possible to conclude that the new employees, who once did not meet the colleagues in person have more fears and are more reluctant when talking to them, generating this way communications problems. Although these feelings never stopped them from taking doubts or expressing their ideas, the truth is that these situations are overthought by the new collaborators, even though none of the interviewed had complaints against their coworkers, only saying that they were really nice and always ready to help.

This was visible when talking about taking doubts, new employees have a hard time asking questions, many shared their fear of seeming dumb while doing it or being annoying and interrupting other work with too many questions.

Examples: *“I had always some apprehension, but the colleagues were super nice and open, always saying I could call when I need it and ask every doubt, which turns it easier. Although, I think in the office it would be different because when having a doubt I could just turn to them and ask. In telework, I need to text and wait for an answer or call and interrupt others’ work, I get more dependent on the others.”*

Also, the employees that feel they do not receive feedback or not enough do not have sufficient trust to ask for it and feel like if it was in the office space it would be a more usual thing because the managers would be in more contact with their work and would give instant feedback, as stated by an interviewed: *“Although they say when the work is good or not, I think it is harder to give the information compared to the office. If I was next to them, I could show it right away and receive immediate feedback.”*

The last difficulty pointed by the interviewed was making online presentations without being able to see the colleagues, they are presenting it to, faces. With this derives the

conversation about the importance of body language and facial expressions. During a presentation, it is important for the presenter to see others' faces to understand if they are following the discussion, if they have doubts, if they are talking too fast, all this is possible to understand analyzing a person reactions and expressions. A respondent commented the following about the topic: *"I hate it. I am presenting and all people are really quiet, and I do not know if they have questions or they are waiting for the end or if it is supposed for me to be asking if they have questions or doubts. And also I am not seeing the facial expressions they are making and with that I could understand if I am talking too quickly or not. I think it makes it harder and I do not like in-person presentations but I think this is even worse."*

Lack of interaction with others

It was noticeable during the interviews that the most missed thing about working in an office was the interaction with others, either when taking coffee breaks or during lunchtime, for example. This was even seen in first-time employees that do not know any different, but that subconsciously make a connection with their time in university and also state that it is a challenge.

Although breaks are an important part of the job and even incentivized by companies, in telework workers make fewer pauses once they do not have a goal for it. They do not have a colleague to chat with, to drink coffee with, and this is an important connection time between colleagues in the office that is lost in telework if companies do not take action.

"We are encouraged to take breaks in telework but because I am alone, I forget the world keeps spinning and when I notice, it is already lunchtime or is the end of the workday."

Also, knowing colleagues personally would improve some of the communication problems discussed in the previous topic once a physical interaction would increase trust and consequently the connection between coworkers. This is the reason why respondents think companies should organize personal meetings between employees, or activities, like the

following idea an interviewed shared: *“I think a visit, with due precautions, to the office and a formal and in person presentation to the colleagues would help.”*

Besides that, when asked about the future work arrangement they would prefer, 86% of respondents answered hybrid, with only two or three days in the office, and they would like to choose the weekdays passed in the company physical facilities. The only reason why they would like some days in the office is to interact with their colleagues. Either because they miss the contact with others, they want to meet the colleagues in person, or because they are suffering from isolation and loneliness as a side effect of telework. *“I think the distance is hard, I talk with my colleagues every day, but I do not really know them, I have never seen them, I think I would not know how to interact with them personally and this way I do not know how far I can go with them per se, which way I should talk (informal or formal). The lack of physical contact makes it all seem fictional.”*

Important to notice that employees that have many reunions per day or a lot of contact with colleagues, via email or text, do not suffer as much or at all from isolation when comparing with workers with few meetings and interactions with others.

But the reasons for wanting to keep working remotely are many, including the time saved in transports and traffic; the reduction of costs, either with commuting or lunch; the possibility to pass more time with loved ones, either family, roommates, or pets. Additionally, telework permits a more flexible schedule and permits employees to do things not related to work that if they were in the office could not do. Even though this has a setback, once working from home complicates the division of work and family time. Employees tend to work after hours, as seen in the subsequent statements: *“many times after finishing working, I came to check my computer, and if we were in the office this would not happen. And I notice I work more hours”*, *“It is harder to disconnect from work because there is not that thing that*

separates the two, like when we work in an office we tend to use the commute to disconnect and arrive home with a clear head.”

Regarding this hybrid model: *“For me ideally would be hybrid, people can complain about telework but it permits me to better use my time, save money on meals, manage my workload, decrease distractions, and gives me more flexibility to manage my working hours, and saving time in commuting. And the office would help in the interaction with others and break the routine of being alone at home and create good distractions.”*

Discussion

Many of the conclusions retrieved from the interviews were already mentioned in previous existing research. Baert et al. (2020) and Pyöriä (2011) had already addressed the problem of decreased feedback due to reduced face-to-face interactions, concluding that telework also weakens ties with colleagues and employer and it is important to create a systematic feedback system.

Additionally, Pyöriä (2011) also addressed the difficulty of asking questions, stating that *“it is easier to exchange ideas and to ask for help with complex problems if one works under the same roof with others.”*

Lastly, Nedelcu (2020) had addressed the dissatisfaction of employees caused by the loss of social relations, team spirit and the risk of isolation

In a research conducted by Nicholas Bloom (2021), 29% of the quizzed answered that would like to perform telework five days per week. So, the main conclusion of this report is the fact that new employees once do not know the facilities of the company neither their colleagues, in person, are more eager to get back to the office than other workers. Being this, the main obstacle they face.

In future research, it should be interesting to compare the experiences of new employees directly with the experiences of cowers, in terms of telework and also onboarding in the office.

In order to achieve a more diverse point of view, the comparison could give new insights on the topic.

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Appendix

General information
1. Since when are you in your current job and which is the position?
2. Have you worked from the office, or was it always in telework? (If already worked from the office, when?)
3. Is it your first job? If not, what was your previous position?
Evaluation of onboarding experience
4. When you entered the company did you have any type of integration activities? E.g.: PowerPoint presentations; meetings; interactions with colleagues
5. Did you like the experience? Was it all in the begging or disperse?
6. Do you think the method adopted by your company had some disadvantages?
7. How do you think companies can improve employees' integration?
Evaluation of telework experience
8. Do you think you passed by some difficulties due to telework? E.g.: asking doubts; divide personal and work life, understanding if are doing a good job (feedback); online presentations
9. If you had a previous job and it was not performed remotely, did you notice any differences compared to telework?
10. In the future, which work arrangement do you think you would prefer? - Only telework, only in the office; or a mix between the two

Appendix 1: Interview guideline