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HR MANAGERS' PERSPECTIVES ON TELEWORK: A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW-BASED ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

Although telework is not a recent phenomenon, its relevance and visibility have expanded significantly in recent years, largely driven by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. What was once considered an alternative or complementary work arrangement quickly became an essential organizational strategy to ensure business continuity and employee safety. This sudden and widespread adoption of telework triggered profound shifts in organizational policies, management practices, and employee expectations. As organizations adapted, Human Resource Management (HRM) professionals assumed a central role in redefining procedures, supporting employees, and ensuring that telework could be implemented effectively and sustainably. In this context, it becomes crucial to understand how telework is currently structured, what advantages and limitations it presents, and how HRM professionals perceive and manage this model. It is equally important to explore how HR practices have evolved in response to this work modality demands and what characteristics define an effective teleworker in today's organizational landscape. To address these questions, a cross-sectional qualitative descriptive study was conducted, gathering data from 12 human resource managers through semi-structured interviews held via a digital platform. Thematic analysis, supported by MAXQDA software, was used to examine the data. Findings reveal that telework offers notable benefits—such as flexibility, increased productivity, and improved work–life balance—but also generates challenges related to employee engagement, communication, and the preservation of organizational culture. Although the pandemic accelerated the digitalization of HR processes, in-person onboarding continues to be preferred to support better integration. Overall, the study highlights the evolving nature of HR practices in telework contexts and underscores the need for public and organizational policies that promote balanced and sustainable implementation.

Keywords

Human Resource Management; HR Practices; Manager; Teleworker; Interview .

1. Introduction

The world of work is undergoing significant changes, driven by a variety of factors, including technological advancements, social and demographic shifts, and the impact of global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Ancillo et al., 2023). These changes are reshaping how people work, labor relations, and even the nature of work and employment itself.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated several trends in the workplace environment (Ancillo et al., 2023; Savić & Dobrijević, 2022). Telework has become more common than ever, with many companies adopting hybrid models that combine in-person and remote work. This shift has led to a re-evaluation of organizational and work policies, particularly regarding expected flexibility and telework options (Chen et al., 2023). Human resource management plays a crucial role in this transforming scenario, being responsible for developing strategies to attract, retain, and develop talent in an ever-evolving work environment.

Numerous studies have focused on the role of human resource management during the pandemic. At the onset of the pandemic, organizations immediately felt the need to implement changes in HR processes and practices in response to the emergency. Studies conducted with HR management professionals (e.g., Brandão et al., 2021; Gonçalves, 2021; Sousa et al., 2024) revealed adjustments in occupational health and safety processes to comply with official health guidelines. Actions in terms of training, recruitment, selection, and onboarding were either suspended or moderated. Furthermore, communication levels with employees needed to be heightened for purposes of information, consultation, and problem-solving.

There is now a need to further understand the current situation, aiming not only to know the immediate effects of this work model but also its long-term impacts on organizations and employees (Vleeshouwers et al., 2022). Therefore, the present study¹ aims to: (1) understand how telework is currently organized, (2) identify the main advantages and disadvantages of telework - now with some distance from the pandemic phase, (3) delve into the lessons learned in various HRM practices, and (4) describe the ideal profile of a teleworker.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

A cross-sectional qualitative descriptive study was conducted to explore the perceptions and experiences of human resource managers regarding telework.

¹ This article presents a segment of the project "Telework in the Context of Digital Transformation: An Integrative Perspective on the Past, Present, Future, and Stakeholders," which aimed to provide a comprehensive view of the telework experience, encompassing a period from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic, as well as the perspectives of various stakeholders involved.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to articulate their views in depth while providing flexibility to probe for clarification or elaboration. This methodological approach was chosen for its suitability in capturing detailed, context-rich insights into a phenomenon that is both complex and evolving (Gonçalves, Gonçalves & Marques, 2021). The study aimed not only to describe existing practices and challenges in managing telework but also to identify patterns, meanings, and implications as perceived by professionals directly involved in human resource management. By adopting a cross-sectional design, the research captured a snapshot of perspectives at a specific point in time (Cummings, 2017) offering valuable contributions to understanding how teleworking is currently framed and navigated within organizational contexts.

2.2 Participants

Twelve human resource managers were interviewed, all holding leadership roles in the field of human resource management. The majority of participants were female ($n=11$), with ages ranging from 28 to 58 years ($M=40.42$; $SD=8.837$) and an average of 7.58 years of experience ($SD=5.92$) in human resources. The organizations where the interviewees currently work (identified with the letters A – L) included four small companies (A, C, D, and I), seven medium-sized companies (B, E, F, G, H, J, and K), and one large company (L). Further details about the participants and the organizations where they work are provided in Table 1.

2.3 Data Collection Instrument

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection, supported by an interview guide developed based on a literature review of telework studies, particularly those conducted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Brandão et al., 2021; Gonçalves et al., 2021). This prior research informed the identification of key themes and challenges relevant to remote work from an HR perspective. The interview guide was subsequently discussed and validated by the research team to ensure methodological coherence and contextual relevance.

2.4 Data Collection Procedures

Considering the defined objectives and the importance of accessing the perspectives of human resource managers, a snowball sampling method was used. The research team identified potential interviewees within relevant groups for the study by leveraging their network of contacts and institutional connections. Data were collected between July 4 and September 25, 2023. The interviews were conducted synchronously online, totaling 5 hours of recorded time, with an average duration of 23 minutes and 14 seconds per interview. At the beginning of each interview, informed consent was presented, and at the end of the guide, an overview of the project to which this study belongs was provided.

Table 1. Characterization of the Participants

Interview	Humam Resource Manager				Organization		
	Age	Gender	Education level	Tenure (years)	Business Area	Nationality	Dimension
A	39	F	Master's Degree	1	IT	Portuguese	90
B	47	F	Master's Degree	15	Pharmaceutical	Italian	130
C	29	F	Bachelor's Degree	4	IT	German	23
D	35	F	Bachelor's Degree	1	IT	British	70
E	48	F	Bachelor's Degree	18	Biotechnology	Portuguese	280
F	40	F	Master's Degree	1	Professional Training	Portuguese	100
G	40	F	Bachelor's Degree	6	Food Service	Portuguese	300
H	31	F	Bachelor's Degree	12	Logistics	Danish	300
I	58	F	12 years of school	7	Hospitality	Spanish	60
J	46	F	PhD	13	Media	Portuguese	300
K	28	F	Bachelor's Degree	3	Contact Center	Portuguese	250
L	44	M	Master's Degree	10	Contact Center	Franch	1200

Note. F-Female; M- Male

2.5 Data Collection Procedures

The interviews were transcribed and validated, ensuring the quality of the collected information, resulting in a corpus of 31,262 words for analysis. The data were analyzed using thematic categorical content analysis. The three phases outlined by Bardin (2011) were followed: (1) Pre-analysis, (2) Exploration of the material, and (3) Treatment of the results obtained and interpretation (Figure 1). MAXQDA software was used to support data analysis.

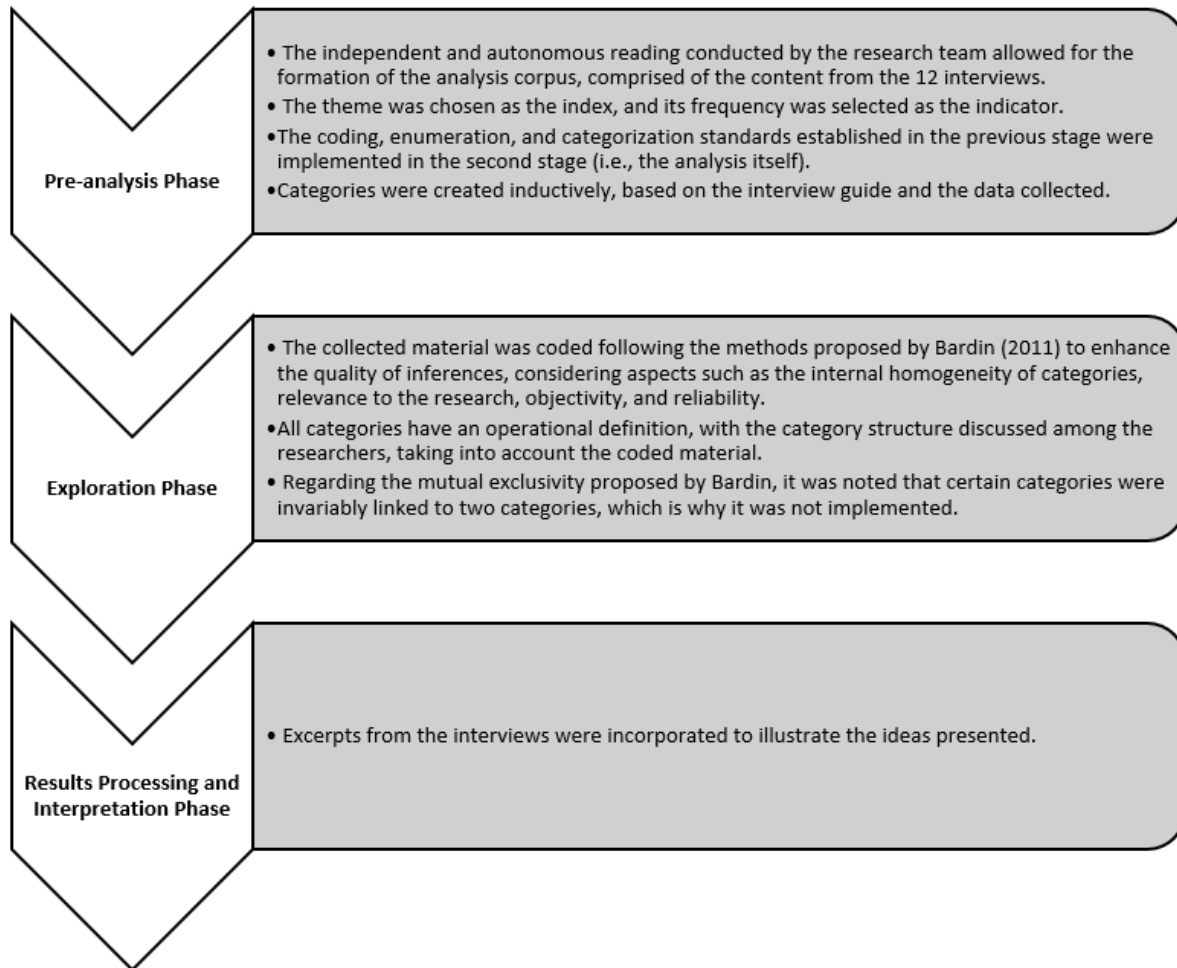


Figure 1. Phases of the Data Analysis Process

3. Results

The results are presented according to the research questions derived from the objectives: (1) How is telework organized? (2) What are the advantages and disadvantages of telework? (3) What human resource management practices are being implemented? (4) What is the profile of a teleworker?

3.1 How is telework organized?

The data indicate a diversity of work arrangements, including full-time telework, hybrid models, and a return to fully on-site work. In some cases, these different arrangements coexist within the same organization, depending on the type of tasks and whether they are suitable for telework (e.g., “There are different modalities depending on the characteristics of the functions themselves. We have roles where telework is impossible, others where telework is permitted once a week for more corporate,

cross-functional roles, and others where there is a mandatory in-office period each day, with the remaining time available for telework if the person prefers” Interview J).

Hybrid work organization varies from 1 to 3 days in the office, weekly rotations, and flexible schedules without a set number of days for physical office presence. For example: “We have a hybrid work policy where we ask people to be in one of our three offices at least once a week...” (Interview A); “Some follow the hybrid model, others are 100% on-site, and some telework only when convenient, but the norm is three days in the office and two at home.” (Interview K); “... we opted for every other week for each person to telework” (Interview F); “... there is total freedom. If you want to go to the office, you go; if you don’t, you can stay home every day if you prefer.” (Interview C).

In terms of managing hybrid workers, the interviewees’ experiences show a mix of direct supervision by team leaders (e.g., “The team leader organizes and sets the best day of the week for everyone to come in,” Interview A), individual employee decisions (e.g., “There’s no set policy... People communicate on Slack, and if some go in, others may join. But there are no fixed days; it’s mostly spontaneous...” Interview C), or by proposal to the supervisor (e.g., “It’s always a negotiation between the supervisor and the employee. The employee makes a proposal, and the supervisor either approves or suggests changes,” Interview J).

The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the current organizational model is evident. For example, “As flexible as we are now? No. The sales team was always out on the road, so remote visits didn’t exist. In the office, there were situations where for family or health reasons, people stayed home as needed. Now it’s entirely different in terms of flexibility. If we have a full agenda of Zoom meetings, it makes no sense to drive 60 kilometers to the office. People work from home, and schedules are adjusted according to the nature and volume of work.” (Interview B).

Although interviewees generally expressed a positive organizational stance on telework, some mentioned exceptions to this trend: “Culturally, remote work isn’t well-regarded and isn’t used unless necessary, such as for health reasons or occasional remote tasks.” (Interview E); “But the company’s founders and the executive board are not in favor of telework or full remote. Even hybrid has been a struggle, as they prefer everyone to be in the office daily.” (Interview A).

It is worth noting that only two organizations offered telework before the pandemic (D and H), and organization C did not exist pre-pandemic. Thus, the other nine organizations did not offer telework or hybrid options before the pandemic, making this a relatively recent development.

3.2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of telework?

The advantages mentioned by participants were analyzed, resulting in seven themes: (1) increased productivity (n=6, e.g., “we need greater concentration, and probably at home or somewhere outside the company, where there’s no open space or people moving around and interrupting us, it’s sometimes easier. So, if we’re in a more isolated place, like home or somewhere else, concentration can sometimes be an advantage” - Interview E), (2) work-life balance (n=6, e.g., “They feel they can organize their personal life more easily alongside their professional life.” - Interview F), (3) savings on

commuting time (n=4, e.g., “There are many people who, for example, lose a lot of time commuting, whether by public transport or private transport...” - Interview I), (4) better utilization of space associated with financial benefits (n=4, e.g., “... optimizing space and making it easier to move people between rooms and workspace allocations... so, financially, it’s also more advantageous” - Interview L), (5) improvements in attraction/recruitment processes (n=4, e.g., “For me, the main advantage is recruiting people who work for the company. Because with telework, we can hire people from anywhere in the country, meaning we’re no longer limited to where we have a physical office.” - Interview D), (6) improved quality of life (n=1, e.g., “I think it would also improve people’s quality of life.” - Interview A), and (7) supervisor focus management (n=1, e.g., “...supervision can focus on the fact that, generally, when someone works remotely, they’re autonomous. If they’re autonomous, we can relax, and thus supervision and operations can focus on a new team, trainees, or a group of operators with more difficulties, or a more aggressive campaign.” - Interview K).

Co-occurrences, Figure 2, were analyzed revealing an association between work-life balance, productivity, and savings on commuting time (e.g., “... being able to work from home provides a much better work-life balance, as I don’t lose time in traffic, and those hours can be dedicated to my tasks. The benefit is the freedom to be present, to complete tasks at any time, without losing time in public transport, traffic, and similar issues.” - Interview C). The relationship between improvements in attraction/recruitment processes and better optimization of physical space is also highlighted (e.g., “For our company, remote work is a great asset because we can attract a more diverse range of people without being limited by physical space.” - Interview D).

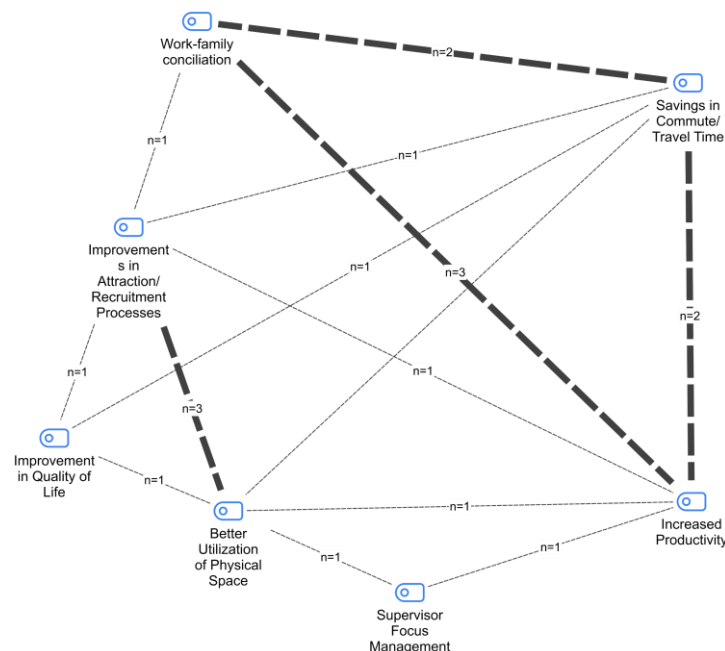


Figure 2. Co-occurrences of Telework advantages

The analysis of the disadvantages associated with telework from the perspective of the interviewees identified eight themes: (1) Emotional disconnection (n=7, e.g., “We also feel some emotional disconnection from those who spend more time at home and only come to the office occasionally.” - Interview B), (2) Decline in team communication and cohesion (n=6, e.g., “Whether we like it or not, if I’m working through a screen, I only talk to you about essentials, jot down topics on a piece of paper, we schedule, talk, conclude, and each goes back to their tasks. If we spend a whole day side by side, I invite you for a coffee, a break outside, anything, and we end up talking about informal things, like a piece of news.

This builds a more informal relationship that brings a different kind of unity.” - Interview A), (3) Loss of identity (n=5, e.g., “I think this issue of acculturation and the lack thereof, for me, is the biggest disadvantage.” - Interview L), (4) Occurrence of misuse/non-compliance (n=2, e.g., “We’ve noticed that people get a bit lax and take advantage. Like, ‘I just went to the pharmacy to get medicine,’ but it turns into a 90-minute break... If they were here in person, that wouldn’t happen, obviously.” - Interview F), (5) Decreased productivity (n=1, e.g., “Our business is an emotional one.

We’re talking about social communication. Social communication doesn’t happen at home; it happens in the streets, where everything is happening, among different stakeholders and colleagues... remote work reduces that a bit.” - Interview J), (6) Increased conflicts (n=1, “We don’t know each other well, which can lead to conflicts... without necessary breaks during the day, like coffee breaks or venting sessions, we end up carrying a lot of those emotions.” - Interview H), (7) Loss of work-life boundaries (n=1, e.g., “... if I don’t manage my schedule well, I can easily lose track and mix professional and personal life.” - Interview C), and (8) Penalizations in performance evaluation and career development (n=1, “There’s a need to overcome the physical absence of the person here in the office for evaluations, compensation and benefits reviews, talent identification, and career and succession planning... So, we still face some resistance.” - Interview B).

The co-occurrence (Figure 3) analysis highlights the loss of identity and culture, as well as the decline in team communication and cohesion (e.g., “It’s really about people feeling like they know who they work with, truly understanding everyone’s culture... It no longer feels like the company as a whole.” - Interview D), along with the connection between these factors and emotional disconnection (e.g., “The disadvantages I find... are mostly related to psychological aspects and other soft skills, namely teamwork, camaraderie, and personal interaction... Telework tends to diminish these.” - Interview E).

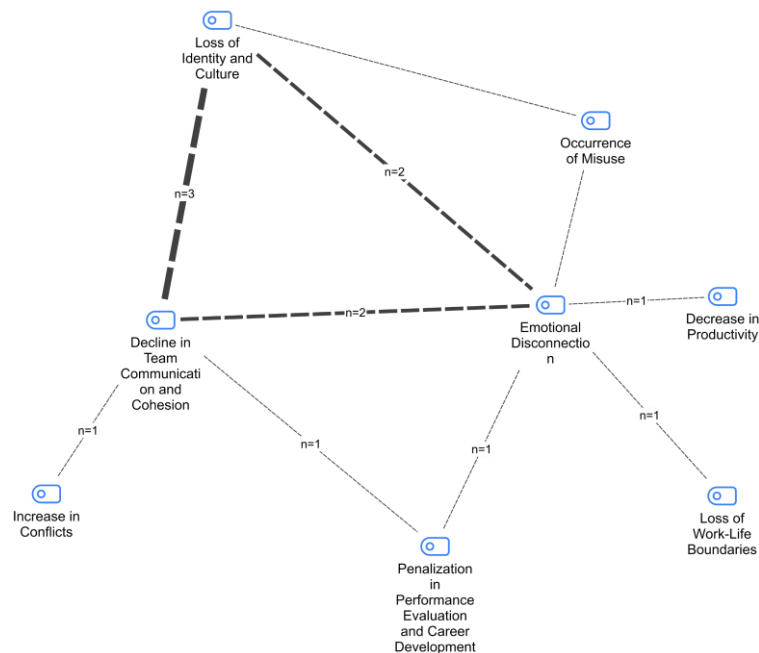


Figure 3. Co-occurrences of Telework Disadvantages

3.3 What HR practices are being implemented?

Four HR practices were examined: (1) attraction, recruitment, and selection; (2) onboarding and integration; (3) training; and (4) performance evaluation.

The post-COVID shift in attraction, recruitment, and selection is one of the most significant changes, both due to the digitalization of processes (e.g., “I think since the pandemic we’ve become very accustomed to conducting interviews entirely online, through video calls. So, the entire process is carried out online...” - Interview C) and because telework has become an attraction factor for candidates (e.g., “What we started to clearly notice was the question, ‘What is your work model?’ This was the first question that became part of the candidate’s vocabulary, which we didn’t encounter pre-pandemic. It was, I would say, the biggest change.” - Interview B); “In tech, full remote is allowed because we know there’s greater appeal for people who work fully remote. Also, as a global company, if talent isn’t in the country, we can hire abroad with them reporting to the country...” - Interview H) and the possibility of diversifying geographical hiring zones (e.g., “At the time, and we’re still doing this, it’s our perspective to hire people from outside the Lisbon area to work 100% remotely.

We are in Lisbon, based in Saldanha, but if I have the capacity to provide online training and have people working from Porto, Leiria, Aveiro, Coimbra, places where there’s less job availability—this is true, at least in these sectors there’s less job supply—we’ve been able to allocate people to control training and oversee operations.” - Interview K).

In terms of onboarding and integration, our interviewees reported a preference for initial onboarding in person, except for geographically distant employees (e.g., “For onboarding, if the person is based in Portugal, we ask that they come to the office... If it’s someone not based in Portugal, then yes, onboarding is done remotely via Zoom, Teams, or a similar platform.” - Interview A); “... the first day is always in the office... We’re prepared for the entire process to be digital, except for the first day.” (Interview C).

The interviewees shared that training is currently conducted online, with investments in training platforms. Even when training sessions are held in person, there is an option for online participation (e.g., “... we have several training modalities. For example, on the e-learning platform Udemy, everything is remote, so there’s no need for another option. Any internal training we have is always conducted in person and remotely simultaneously... There’s always the option to participate either in person or remotely.” - Interview A).

In terms of performance evaluation, digitalization of the process is evident (e.g., “... everything is managed through our internal platform, and all data is recorded on that platform. So, there’s no need to go to the office. All questions are answered on our platform, followed by an almost status-like meeting to discuss what was shared on HiBob, our platform, so no, it’s not done in person.” - Interview C). Nonetheless, some organizations maintain in-person meetings for performance evaluations (e.g., “... we ask that the person be present at the site during this phase... we conduct the performance evaluation, including self-assessment and online evaluation, and then the meeting is held in person.” - Interview F).

The introduction of digital metrics due to telework was reported by two interviewees (e.g., “The only change we made was the creation of digital metrics that we didn’t have before, particularly for the sales team, where there was some resistance to carrying out digital visits... we created a metric to evaluate digital visits. This was the only change we made in terms of performance management and evaluation.” - Interview B).

3.4 What is the profile of a teleworker?

Thirteen competencies were identified and categorized into personal (n=9), interpersonal (n=7), and instrumental (n=6) skills.

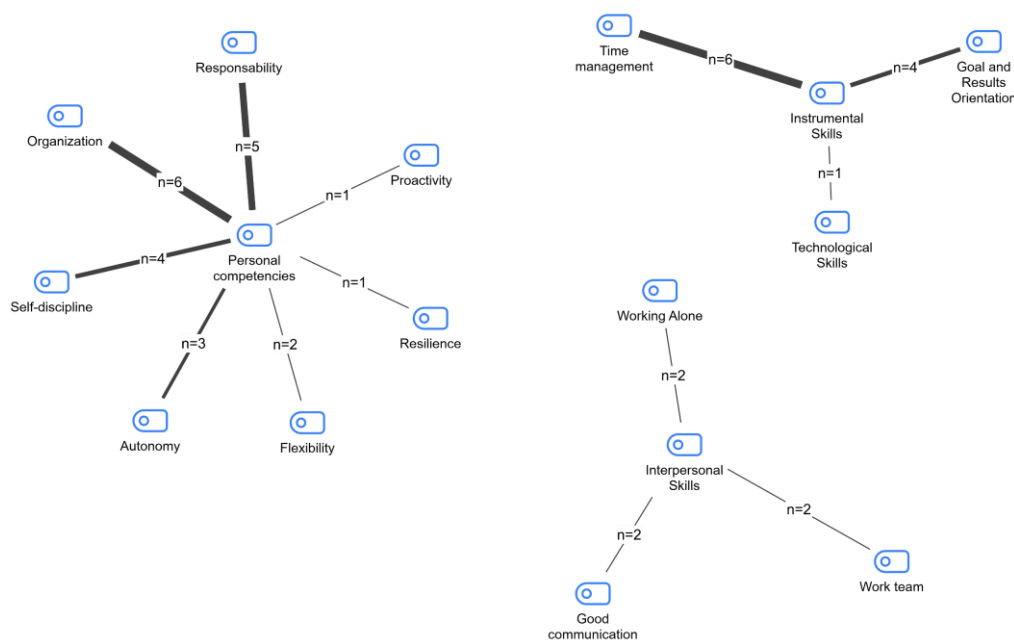


Figure 4. Teleworker competencies

Providing examples of the most frequently mentioned characteristics in the interviewees' responses, instrumental competencies highlighted include effective time management (e.g., “Above all, a person working remotely must be responsible and know how to manage their time very well.” - Interview A), work-life boundaries (e.g., “... you will continue to work the required hours, but it will intrude on your personal life.” - Interview C), and a focus on goals and results (e.g., “I think it has to be someone... focused and very goal-oriented, productivity-driven.” - Interview I).

Regarding personal competencies, organization (e.g., “It has to be someone who is organized...” - Interview G), responsibility (e.g., “Above all, a person working remotely must be responsible.” - Interview A), and self-discipline (e.g., “They must be disciplined in the sense of following a routine, like taking a one-hour lunch break and maintaining discipline...” - Interview D) were highlighted.

In terms of interpersonal competencies, there were contrasting perspectives, with some emphasizing the importance of teamwork for teleworkers (e.g., “Collaborative people, people who enjoy working in a team.” - Interview B), while others preferred someone who likes working independently (e.g., “... someone who likes working alone.” - Interview C).

Additionally, three testimonials highlighted specific themes, such as the importance of the employee being committed to the job and the organization (e.g., “They need to be fully committed, so they really need to enjoy what they do.” - Interview F; “They need to be committed to the project they’re part of and to the company, obviously.” - Interview K) and prior work experience (e.g., “There are professionals who are just starting out, who are juniors, and if they’re immediately faced with a 100% telework situation, I think they don’t yet have the maturity to handle a role like that. I think they’d need to gain experience in the field first to get into the rhythm, the schedule, the day-to-day management, and then move to a hybrid model.” - Interview E).

It is also worth mentioning that one of the interviewees does not see a need for a differentiated profile for a teleworker: “I might say something very countercultural, but I don’t believe the profile of a teleworker is different from the profile of someone who comes to work in the office... I already look for those same qualities, and if I can ensure I find those people, they’ll be just as good here in the office as they would be at home or anywhere else they’re working.” - Interview B.

4. Discussion and Final Considerations

HR professionals’ perception of the adoption of telework is highly favorable, with the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic clearly evident in the current work organization model. In 2019, approximately 1 in 20 (5.5%) of employed people aged 20 to 64 in the European Union (EU) were teleworking. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was significant, and by 2020, this figure reached 12.3%, subsequently rising to 13.5% in 2021 (Eurostat, 2023). Nevertheless, there is currently a variety of work organization models, with planning tending to center around direct management by supervisors or autonomous team management. Notably, only two of these organizations offered telework options before the pandemic (D and H), while the remaining nine did not, making telework or hybrid work a relatively recent reality that only began during the pandemic period.

The findings of the present study align with various studies that emphasize the pandemic’s impact on telework, in which numerous organizations were forced to cease on-site activities and adopt telework, maintaining this model to the present day (Brandão et al., 2022; Gonçalves et al., 2021; Kawaguchi & Motegi, 2021; Michinov et al., 2022).

Several telework advantages and disadvantages highlighted in the literature (e.g., Brandão et al., 2022; Ferreira et al., 2021; Vleeshouwers et al., 2022) were confirmed, such as reduced commuting time and improved work-life balance. This study notably reinforces the potential of telework for attracting and retaining talent, especially in competitive sectors, as it offers the flexibility that many workers seek today, making telework a competitive advantage in recruiting qualified professionals. However, several disadvantages were also reported, including social isolation and reduced team cohesion. The lack of physical interaction may be seen as an obstacle to communication, crucial for the development of interpersonal relationships and for maintaining organizational culture. Isolation can also impact, among other aspects, innovation (e.g., Peng et al., 2017), which often arises from spontaneous and dynamic interactions in the workplace.

The digitalization of HR management processes emerged as a key adaptation during the pandemic and remains essential. Technological tools are used for recruitment, training, and performance evaluation processes. However, there is still a preference for in-person formats when onboarding new employees and during performance feedback interviews.

Regarding the ideal teleworker profile, the results seem to align with the literature on identified characteristics, highlighting personal competencies as especially relevant (Gavoille & Hazans, 2022; Henke et al., 2022).

The discussion of this study's results on telework from the perspective of HR managers reflects the significant transformation in work and management practices intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, with hybrid models now becoming more prevalent. Adapting to this model requires balancing the benefits and challenges of telework, underscoring the importance of ongoing monitoring of telework implementation in Portugal.

Although this study does not present a longitudinal perspective, it aimed to achieve an integrated view of telework, focusing on HR managers as the primary drivers of telework policies and practices within organizations (Zhong et al., 2021) and with a critical role in managing the pandemic crisis (Brandão et al., 2021). This study seeks to document and inform organizations to improve their telework policies and foster a positive work environment in the future.

Ethical Approval: All ethical standards concerning the protection of study participants were met, in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and national research committees and with 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study, ensuring respect for confidentiality and voluntariness principles.

Declaration of Conflicts of Interest: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. The data is available only upon request to the author.

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