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**Abstract**

Teleworking has been often introduced as a means of responding to turbulent events such as epidemics, wars, natural disasters, financial crisis. However, only few studies explore how individuals make sense of the practice when faced with the uncertainty caused by macro level factors, especially before Covid-19. The existing limited literature reveals that the context of crisis can alter employee experiences of telework. We have recently contributed to this literature with a study exploring how employees experienced telework during the financial crisis of 2008. Our key finding is that in the context of financial crisis, employees interpret telework as a potential threat to their jobs and careers prospects. In this impact paper, we highlight how telework may be used as a means of dealing with crises, we present a few studies that explore telework in context and, based on our review of the literature and our own study, we draw some general implications that could be relevant for employees, managers and governments alike.

Telework, turbulent context, employee experiences, financial crisis.

## Employee experiences of telework in times of crisis

### Telework as a means to deal with global and regional crisis

Global and regional events such as epidemics, wars, climate change, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, financial crisis, have changed the parameters regarding the way work is performed and the way the workforce is managed. Because such events create uncertainty, disrupt the regular flow of work, and threaten the general well-being of individuals, employers and governments must take urgent action. Flexible working, and in particular telework, has been introduced as a means to respond to such events in an effort to minimize uncertainty and the discontinuity of work while ensuring employee protection. The practice is defined as "*work that is conducted away from the usual place of business but mostly at home and that is often supported by telecommunications, internet access or computer*" (Kossek, Lautsch and Eaton, 2005: 348). In particular, Covid-19, "*pushed the incidence of telework to an unprecedented tipping point*" with many regions including the United States, Europe and Asia reporting record rates of teleworking (Chong, Huang and Chang, 2020: 1408). Never before has a human resource practice been adopted on such a scale and pace, sparking interest within the research community, with scholars trying to answer how employees have responded to teleworking during the Covid-19 crisis.

### The literature on telework

While there is already a plethora of research examining the consequences of telework for employees and organisations (e.g. Bloom et al., 2015), few explore how individuals make sense of the practice under the uncertainty caused by macro level factors, particularly pre Covid-19. Only a few studies have been conducted at a time when telework was introduced as a temporary or permanent measure to deal with turbulent contexts and events, such as natural disasters (e.g. Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, 2015). Therefore, some of the "accumulated knowledge on remote working might lack contextual relevance" (Wang et al., 2021:17) and the existing evidence might not be applicable in different social, economic and political circumstances. In addition, one criticism in the literature is that although telework may be seen as an employee-centered practice, because it often serves employees' interests, the positive side of telework may have been inflated (Wang et al., 2021). Another criticism is that research needs to consider the dynamic nature of employee experiences. Employees may initially experience a practice positively but, as they are more frequently exposed to it, their views may change. Over time, some may reconsider their suitability for the practice or think differently about whether or not the practice benefits them (Bloom et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2021).

Indeed, evidence shows that a turbulent macro-economic context can alter employee experiences at work and that for specific categories of employees such change can be for the worse. Indicatively, in the context of Covid-19, Çoban (2021) examines the telework experiences of professional, middle-class, married women with childcare responsibilities, in Turkey. Her findings show that telework puts employees' careers in jeopardy and threatens their employment while it "consolidates their roles as traditional housewives" risking alienating them from the labour market. The experience of those women is overall a negative one and telework therefore within the Covid-19 context may not be an ideal option for them. Another study (Wang et al., 2021) conducted within the Covid-19 context on different employees, i.e. Chinese employees of different genders and family responsibilities, among other factors, identified four main challenges related to telework. During the pandemic, teleworkers experienced challenges related to interference (more interruptions from family), ineffective communication (online communication is more challenging that offline communication), procrastination and loneliness. According to their study, social support and job autonomy attenuated some of these negative effects while workload and monitoring aggravated them. The most significant moderator was found to be self-discipline. It appears that less disciplined employees experienced more challenges related to telework than more disciplined employees, suggesting that they are perhaps less suitable for the practice. Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson (2015) examined individuals' experience of telework in a different crisis context, that of Christchurch's earthquakes in New Zealand. Their research focused on managers, team leaders and staff and revealed that during a natural disaster crisis, team leaders had less positive experiences compared to other types of employees, mainly due to greater work demands forced upon them related to maintaining employee monitoring and coordinating operations.

Overall, the aforementioned examples reveal that employee experience is somehow negative during crisis, and that the repercussions for certain categories of employees such as women with children, employees who lack discipline and employees with higher levels of responsibility, may be even more severe.

## Telework during financial crises

Although there are similarities between crisis situations, in that they often cause economic recession and that employees experience more difficult working conditions, there are also major differences. In crisis contexts such as during a pandemic, a natural disaster, or a terrorist attack, telework can be mandated by the government and be practiced full-time. In addition, the introduction of teleworking is more abrupt and, as such, organizations are less prepared to deal with, for example, issues related to cyber security or the necessary remote systems so employees can directly switch over to telework. Under the aforementioned types of crises, the line between personal and professional life becomes even more blurred as schools may be closed and people may be advised to stay at home, forcing employees to work while caring for their children or others. By contrast, in a financial crisis, telework is not necessarily abruptly introduced so organizations may be better prepared for the switch. For employees, telework can be practiced occasionally and on a more voluntary basis, when the home environment allows it. Given these differences, it is important to explore how employees experience telework under different types of crisis contexts.

The financial crisis of 2008 had a significant impact on workers' lives, affecting work arrangements, pay and working conditions. Despite its impact and significance, little is known about the extent to which the crisis and the economic uncertainty that came hand in hand with it, played a role in shaping workers' understandings of telework. In our forthcoming paper for the Human Resource Management Journal, we tried to address this gap in the literature by examining how workers make sense of and respond to telework in the context of macro level uncertainty and crisis.

We drew on the premises of signaling theory (Spence, 1973) to consider telework as a signal sent by the organization to employees and argue that employees' interpretation of that signal will largely depend on the environment in which it is sent out. We analyzed interview data collected from the Spanish branch of a major international consultancy firm. We focused on professional knowledge workers in areas such as strategy, finance, and operations.

Our key finding is that in the context of financial crisis, employees interpret telework as a potential threat to their jobs and careers prospects. In the literature, telework is often presented as an employee-centered practice that benefits individuals (Avgoustaki and Bessa, 2019) and may pose a threat to organizations if teleworkers behave opportunistically (Peters and Van der Lippe, 2007). In contrast, our study indicates employees may feel threatened because, in accepting telework, they may be putting their careers and even their jobs at risk. Therefore, it appears that employees have not interpreted the signal as intended by the organization because it was interpreted within a financial crisis context. The meaning that employees ascribed to telework exceeds formal human resource policies and practices (Cañibano, 2019). This suggests that "the meaning of telework is not predetermined, but continually shaped socially, in light of events that go beyond the firm's boundaries" (Cañibano and Avgoustaki, 2022).

## General implications

Based on our study and our review of the literature, we draw some general implications that could be relevant for employees, managers and governments alike.

1. Companies operating under uncertain environments caused by macro level crises often need to reassess the spatial nature of work.
2. Telework can be implemented by companies or can be government driven in an effort to deal with uncertainty, securing the continuity of work, and protecting employee health and general well-being.
3. During crises, it is the human resource function that becomes the primary source of change as it must address the needs of employees by promoting, if not new, then different ways of working.
4. Employees and employers may need to consider the fit between teleworking and the individual. As we observe in certain studies, which took into consideration the crisis context within which telework was implemented, certain categories of employees, e.g. women with children, team leaders, and employees who lack discipline, may have a negative experience of telework.
5. Employers may need to consider the fit between teleworking and the environment. In the context of the financial crisis in Spain, employees seemed to experience telework in a negative light and interpret it as a threat. Employers could try to reduce any negative interpretations by providing job security and career opportunities.

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