

Grigorescu, Adriana; Mocanu, Andreea

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Kontakt/Contact

ZBW – Leibniz-Informationszentrum Wirtschaft/Leibniz Information Centre for Economics

Düsternbrooker Weg 120

24105 Kiel (Germany)

E-Mail: [rights\[at\]zbw.eu](mailto:rights[at]zbw.eu)

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Teleworking Perspectives for Romanian SMEs after the COVID-19 Pandemic

Adriana GRIGORESCU¹, Andreea MOCANU (NICOLAE)²

¹ National University of Political Studies and Public Administration 30A Expoziției Blvd., Sector 1, 010324 Bucharest, RO; Correspondent Member of the Romanian Scientists Academy 54 Spl. Independentei, 50085 Bucharest, RO;  adriana.grigorescu@snsa.ro (corresponding author)

² National University of Political Studies and Public Administration 30A Expoziției Blvd., Sector 1, 010324 Bucharest, RO;  nicolae.andreea@outlook.com

Abstract: The crisis caused by COVID-19, made us rethink our perception of the way of life. Traffic restrictions, isolation, quarantine, the need for social distance have generated new behavior by transferring null activities in the online environment. The advantage today is that the 21st century is characterized by the presence of information technology and its rapid development. The telecommute proposed by Nilles (1994), became in 2020 a very topical concept, due to the special situation in which the whole of humanity is. Although both employers and employees have refused the teleworking formula for a long time, it has now become the only possibility to maintain an acceptable level of activity. The rapid evolution of ITC technologies and applications, the entry on the labor market of the M generation have contributed to the increase of favorability for telework, in 2018 it being included in the Romanian legislation. The methodology for this article was to analyze the Romanian Classification of Activities in the National Economy (CAEN) to find out in which domains do Romanian SMEs prefer to activate and to find out the resistance to telecommuting as a way of work by finding out which of these economic sectors have implemented day to day teleworking long ago and which will. An empirical analysis of every domain was complemented by the survey results to verify to which extent telecommuting is feasible in Romanian SMEs, especially during and after the Coronavirus pandemic. It was necessary to analyze of Eurofound statistics regarding living and working during the COVID-19 pandemic to find out correlations and differences between the authors' findings and the EU27 baseline.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic; teleworking; SMEs; change; projects.

Introduction

In the last eight to ten months since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), medical specialists are looking for solutions to treat and immunize the population, especially a vaccine. However, Europe is facing a second wave of diseases that is quite strong and difficult to control. All areas of social life are undergoing unexpected transformations, one of the reasons being the prolonged duration of this crisis. Certainly, in the economic field, we are facing a crisis as well.

Figure 1 presents the official World Health Organization (WHO) timeline starting with December 31, 2019, when they accept that "a pneumonia of unknown cause" started in Wuhan, China and it was officially reported, even if there were signals from the beginning of November. The fast evolution transformed the local treat into a global one and on January 30, 2020, a Public Health Emergency of International Concern was announced. It was named COVID-19 starting with February 11, 2020, and become the main concern of most continents: Asia, North America, Australia, and Europe. (World Health Organization, 2020)

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Figure 1. World Health Organization COVID-19 Timeline
(Authors' representation of WHO Timeline - COVID-19)

Last updated on September 9, 2020, the timeline of WHO's response to COVID-19, lists the main milestones of the pandemic's evolution.

After August 28, 2020, WHO held 28 Member State sessions of briefings, and has convened international expert networks (hundreds of scientists, medical and health professionals all over the world), discussing topics like clinical management, virology, infection prevention and control, research and development, etc. to hold frequent teleconferences, since early January. (World Health Organisation, 2020)

While WHO concentrated their response to the pandemic on the medical reaction to this health crisis, the EU Council took various measures to support the health system, but also the European economy. Right after WHO indicated the concern of a disease that is highly transmissible, the EU Council activated the information-sharing mode for the EU's Integrated Political Crisis Response Mechanism (IPCR). Implications for the economy were discussed on March 4 by Eurogroup.

Starting with March 11th when the COVID-19 was declared a pandemic disease, the EU Council decided that the member states in need should be supported. Up to March 30 social implications, employment effects, economic constrict were discussed and the decision was to be created a cohesion fund and the procedure to release them. (World Health Organization, 2020)

The effects on the tourism, energy, and transport sectors are discussed in April, and on the 15th of May, the Council establishes a political agreement on the need for a safety scheme for employees. For these sectors, a temporary aid scheme is approved on May 19 and aspects related to the creative sector are discussed.

To avoid a higher downfall of the economy, on June 9 the attention dropped to the elasticity of the labor market during the health crisis and the recovery. The solutions as a flexible working program, remote work, and innovative technology, upskilling and/ or reskilling, protection of vulnerable groups were on the EC agenda. It was generally agreed that the blended work and alternative solutions to classic work must be considered and included in European and national regulation. (European Council, 2020)

While there are still no precise figures on the scale of teleworking during the COVID crisis, there are some early estimations that suggest a much larger prevalence than before the crisis. An ad hoc online survey from Eurofound last updated in July estimated that close to 40% of those currently working in the EU began to telework full-time as a result of the pandemic. (Eurofound, 2020)

Charles Michel, President of the EC, presented on July 10th his new budgetary proposal for the long-term and the recovery package, which he called “negobox”. The construction of the budget at that time summed up to €2 364 billion is:

- (1) The Multiannual Financial Framework: €1 074 billion
- (2) The COVID-19 safety nets for workers, businesses, and member states: €540 billion
- (3) The recovery fund Next Generation EU: €750 billion

Teleworking

Nowadays, ITC technology is a component of our life, the vast majority having at least one piece of equipment (PC, laptop, tablet, smartphone, etc.). This allowed the transition from classic to online activity in a fairly large proportion. Being known from 1994, most of the companies in suitable sectors of activity were already promoting it as a benefit. However, there are important segments of the population for whom access to telework or e-education is prohibited. Teleworking has reached its highest level of popularity during the COVID-19 pandemic, as more and more public and private companies introduced it as a work arrangement to keep their employees safe and to ensure continuity in delivering critical goods and services. As the Croatian Minister for the Sea, Transport and Infrastructure, Oleg Butković said in a press release, “The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on our lives and economies have highlighted the importance of digitization across all areas of the economy and society in the EU. (...) The digital transformation will not only help address the current health crisis but will also be a key engine for economic recovery, green growth, and the strategic autonomy of the EU.” (European Council, 2020)

Of course, the previous teleworking experience is one of the many factors that can make the difference from a challenging transition to a smooth one for workers, employers, and countries altogether. Especially when it comes to differences of telework prevalence between countries, there are several things to be taken into consideration: distribution of employment by company size, workers’ digital abilities, and the self-employed. (European Commission, 2020)

Although they are often used interchangeably, telecommuting has at least 3 versions, each having different implications from other points of view as well.

- ① Street work - work while traveling or in public places, implies access to the Internet and a mobile device;
- ② Satellite center - work in other premises established by the employer;

③ Home offices – work from home; suitable for information and communications, real estate transactions, retail, professional, scientific and technical activities, administrative and support service activities, etc.

All types of telework involve security risks of varying degrees, especially when it comes to sensitive personal information and cybersecurity. The increase in the volume of activity in the virtual environment has determined the ECCC and the NCC, in collaboration with other institutions, to design the procedure to shape the digital future of Europe. (European Council, 2020)

Teleworking in Romania

The Romanian Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, following the EU regulation, agreed that telework, work from home (WFH), or individualized work programs are the alternative solutions to cope with the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Companies will decide which the most effective work form is for them, as the objective is to protect both the employees and customers and to be able to keep the business running with the least possible loss. The optimal could be as well a mix of virtual and in-person work. Although efficient from some points of view, this measure is suitable only for a small part of the economic sectors. In the sectors where teleworking is not applicable, drastic measures are in order. For example, Tarom, the Romanian airline, announced that, as a last resort, will lay off up to 30% of its employees, including not only administrative personnel, but also pilots and stewardesses. (DIGI 24, 2020)

In Romania, WFH is regulated by Law no. 53/ 2003, art. 108-110, which describes this kind of work mainly by in the location of the worker, which can be the employee's home or residence and no longer the employer's perimeter. Teleworking is regulated by another Law, no. 81/ 2018, art. 2, lit. a) and it describes it as "the form of work organization through which the employee, regularly and voluntarily, fulfills his attributions specific to the position, occupation or profession he holds, in another place than the work organized by the employer, at least one day a month, using information and communication technology." (Monitorul Oficial Partea I nr. 296, 2018)

The 2 forms of telecommuting are often getting confused because they have similarities, but there are also important differences to be noted.

Neither WFH nor telework use the employer's premises, the activity can be carried out by employees from personal homes, provided that data security is ensured. The employer must ensure that the employee has all the facilities to carry out his work in optimal conditions (infrastructure, training, documents, etc.). The work schedule can be agreed upon with him/her and checks can be performed by the employer.

The differences between the two are primarily of legal source, as they are regulated by different laws (the art. 109 of the Labor Code regards WFH and the Law no. 81/2018 regards *telework*). In addition, (1) *teleworker* is also a specific qualification, in contrast to working from home employees; (2) teleworkers are usually using specific technologies as opposed to the ones who WFH and are using classic installations; (3) telework is mainly specific to activities like programming or computer science, while WFH can be attributed to a wider range of business sectors and activities, like accounting or even tailoring. (Dumitrescu & Capus , 2020)

In Romania, the authorities adopted an advantage of 75% compensation however close to 75% of the normal pay to guardians who can't work remotely and need to remain at home with kids younger than 12 years. The Romanian administration adopted on 18 March and distributed on 21 March a crisis statute (OUG) 29/2020, alongside OUG 30/2020 on supporting organizations with regards to the emergency brought about by the coronavirus. The bundle of measures introduced on 18 March (counting specialized joblessness and Intervention Fund) speaks to a budgetary exertion of 2% of GDP.

Nevertheless, workers in all sectors got to suffer and were scared of the possible consequences of the economic crisis, even more than of the COVID-19 virus. Order no. 1,376 of September 9, 2020, is the latest issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, to establish “the manner of granting financial support and the categories of goods that can be purchased according to art. 6 para. (1) of the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 132/2020 on support measures for employees and employers in the context of the epidemiological situation caused by the spread of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, as well as to stimulate employment growth” and has entered into force as of September 10, 2020. (Ministerul Muncii si Protectiei Sociale, 2020)

In other words, the Romanian Government decided to help companies and workers altogether by supporting up to 2.500 lei (approximately €513) of the equipment necessary to work remotely per employee. This measure is very new and there is still to see its effects, but there are no obvious reasons why it should not be positive.

To compare the two types of measures, there must be said that at an international level, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) proposed a new way of taxation that focuses mainly on multinational companies, but brings an important benefit worldwide. In 2019, OECD proposed the Digital Economy Project, based on two pillars. The first Pillar targets the revenues generated by consumers and the second Pillar is a minimum effective tax rate that targets mainly the Base erosion and profit shifting (BEPS) strategies of multinational companies and tries to end tax avoidance. The analysis of this proposal revealed in February that the project would enhance tax collection sums by approximately 4% globally, which would translate into close to \$100 billion annually, without affecting labor costs. (Sas, 2020)

COVID-19 impact and future of the work from home

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and health security restrictions had a strong impact on economic activity. According to the International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook (2020) the real GDP growth is mainly negative compared with the situation in 2019 when most of the countries registered positive growth, except a few countries.

It is obvious for the business environment that they should change the paradigm of work from classic to other ways that are allowing employees to avoid agglomeration, to respect social distancing, to apply the health security regulations, and to keep the costs under control.

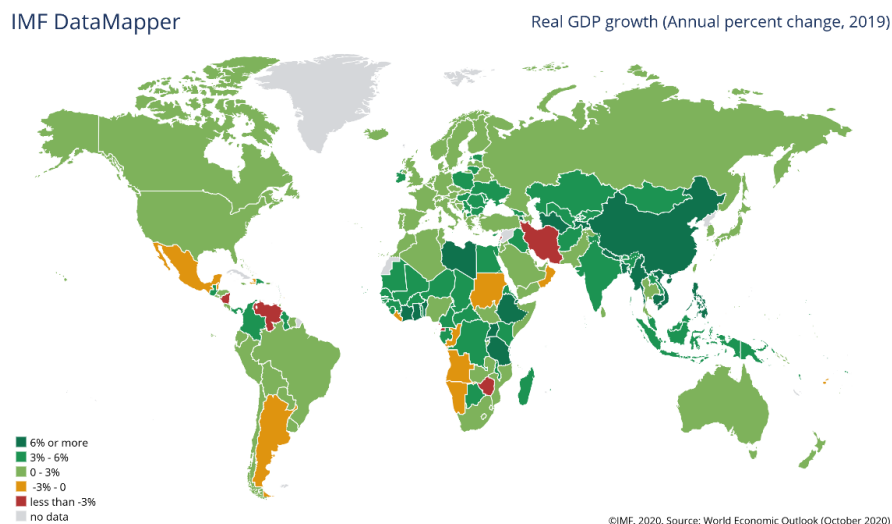


Figure 2a. Real GDP growth in the world 2019-2020
(Authors capture INF DATAMAPPER, 2020)

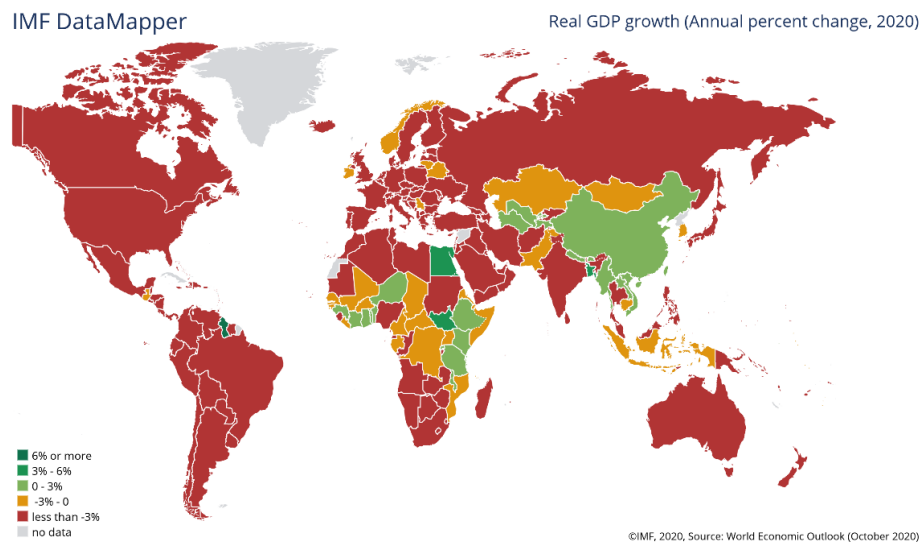


Figure 2b. Real GDP growth in the world 2019-2020
(Authors capture INF DATAMAPPER, 2020)

Newman (2020) setup 10 digital transformations for 2020 and later for 2021, which we are presenting comparatively in Figure 3.

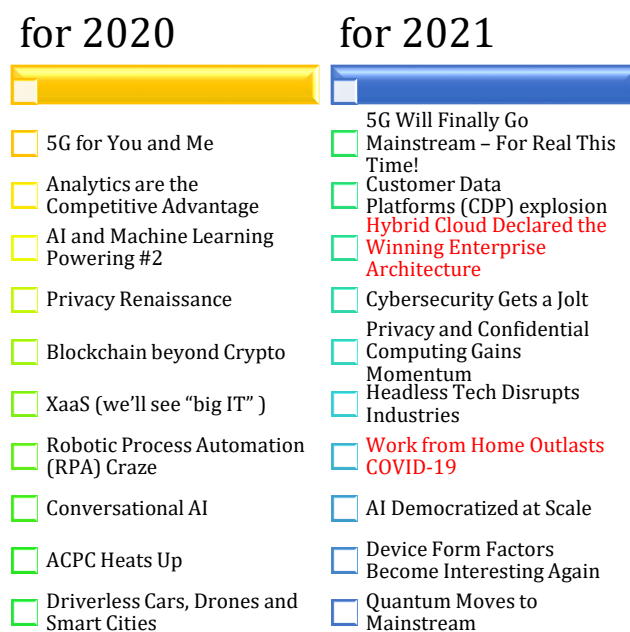


Figure 3. Ten Digital Transformation 2020 versus 2021
(Authors' representation of Newman considerations)

Trends as 5G, AI, RPA, and CDP were considered since 2019, but the COVID-19 crisis introduced two new dimensions:

- Hybrid Cloud
- Work from Home

McKinsey Global Institute published on September 23rd the results of a study done on 800 executives, half of them based in the US and the rest in Canada, Australia, China, India, and Europe (France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom) that shows the effects of the health crisis on digitalization deployment. As can be seen in Figure 2 the digitalization is known to accelerate the adoption of changes, especially on employee interaction and

cooperation (85%). This perception reflects the changes lots of companies had to take on to overcome the restrictions, to keep the workforce active and the business running.

Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, how has your company's or business area's adoption of the following technology trends changed? % of respondents (n = 800)

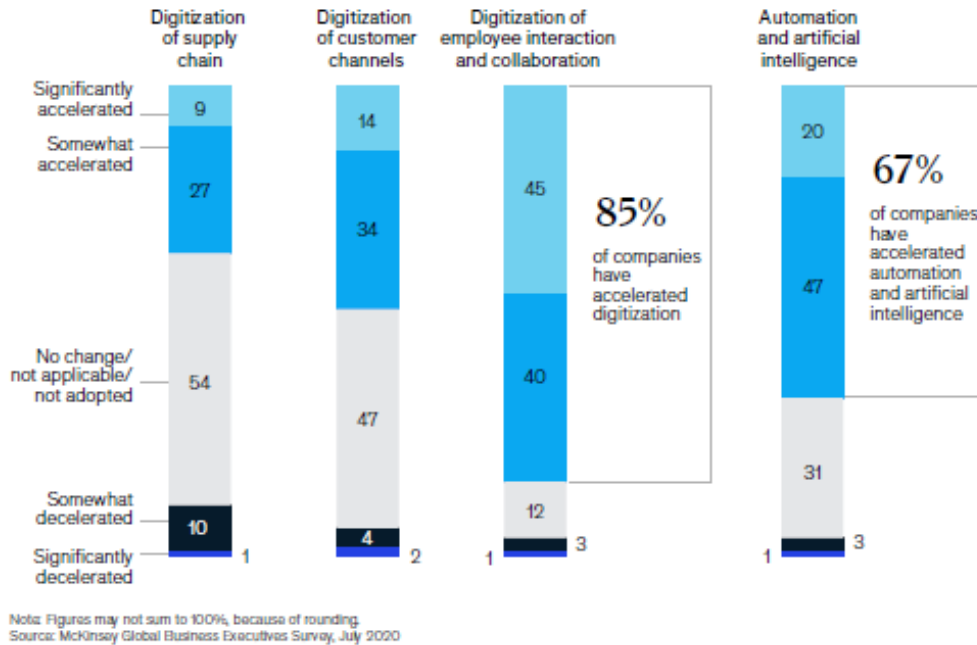


Figure 4. Perception of acceleration of digitalization deployment
(Capture from McKinsey Global Institute, 2020)

Also, the study highlights that the last few months had an effect on an increased availability to higher personnel:

- Health and safety – 83%
- Technology and automation – 68%
- Digital learning and agile ways of working – 45%.

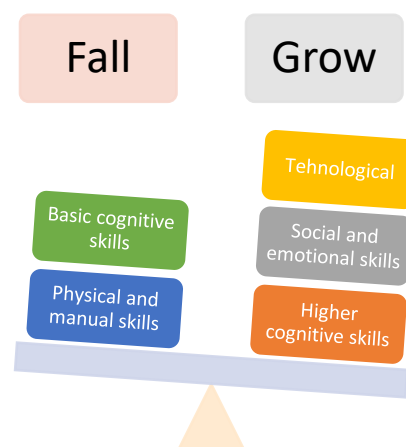


Figure 5. Skills shift and demand
(Authors representation of Skills shift McKinsey Global Institute, 2020)

At the same time according to McKinsey (2020), the demand for skilled personnel and work will grow in Europe in the near future. The most vulnerable categories are less-educated, young people, and people easily replaced by automation. The net growth of jobs

is expected for secondary and tertiary education. Economies based on highly skilled and more educated workforce seems to be the most sustainable one.



Figure 6. Perception of change needs of the companies
(Capture from McKinsey Global Institute, 2020)

Not only the labor market will face spectacular changes, but the companies will also face lots of challenges. The future of work in Europe, a study of McKinsey Global Institute (2020) reveals the opinions of executives from different types of businesses, where they are expecting to implement the changes and so "use of technology and systems" is ranked the third, closely followed by "core processes and how the company is run". On the fifth place "approach to talent and skills needed", followed by "new cultural aspiration and behavior/mindsets" that strongly relates to businesses with skilled personnel. The approach of innovation is completing the idea that all this will drive us into a new world of work.

Methodology

The research question regards the evolution of telecommuting during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Romanian SMEs. To answer the research question were used (1) statistical data analysis to find out for how many of the Romanian SMEs is teleworking applicable and to find out which are the European tendencies on the subject and (2) a

survey to see if and how this type of work style changed the lives of the ones who had the opportunity to try it.

Analysis of statistical data

As a reference point for the Romanian SMEs' relevant indicators and distribution by economic sectors, this research was used the last available statistical data, provided by the National Institute of Statistics in 2017. The statistical data regarding the Romanian SMEs were analyzed in two ways: first, regarding the distribution of Romanian SMEs in the economic sectors and second, regarding their importance in terms of the number of employees, fiscal value, and net investment.

The survey data regarding the quality of life registered during the COVID-19 pandemic registered by Eurofound was analyzed and used to compare the Romanian situation identified by the authors' survey and the baseline identified in Europe. (Eurofound, 2020)

Survey

The sample chosen for the survey consists of workers from various companies and with different backgrounds to find out if employees believe that teleworking will be a valid option when the restrictions will be lifted.

Although at the moment only 83.33% of the 42 interviewed people are in a teleworking position, all of them had the chance to WFH at some point during their careers. They answered 20 questions about the benefits and disadvantages of telework, as people who have worked every day from home for at least 2 months since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. For the researchers, it was important to choose people who know what it is like to be in both situations - telework as a benefit and as status quo - to assure that the results are not biased.

Research and results

Being the backbone of the economy in many European and non-European countries, SMEs are the subject of the current research and always of interest for many researchers and institutions, and they remained so even during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The challenges that SMEs have to face in these turbulent times and their fragility, but also the significant weight that they occupy in the national economies as a whole have determined the European Council to elaborate a support strategy based on 3 pillars. The first and most important pillar is to support the rapid transformation into sustainable and digital companies. The second is to reduce bureaucracy and facilitate market access by ensuring greater flexibility and competitiveness. Increasing access to finance is an older concern of the EU Council, which has now become a stringent requirement for small business survival.

A report was done by the Digital Innovation Hubs Working Group 1 highlight that "while 54% of large companies are highly digitized, only 17% of SMEs have successfully integrated digital technologies into their businesses". (Working Group on Digital Innovation Centers, 2018)

In the period 2015-2017, the number of SMEs remained constant, except for the services which experienced an increase of about 10,000 companies per year, reaching in 2019 a total of over 700,000 companies in Romania. It is noteworthy that the level of broad turnover exceeded 1,500 billion in 2018. The services and trade sectors, which are expanding, are part of the seven sectors analyzed.

If grouped by branches of activity, the Romanian SMEs sample had the following structure: Industrial - 31.81%; Trade Sector - 30.32%; Services - 29.25%; Transports - 4.72%; Constructions - 3.91%. (Consiliul National al Intreprinderilor Private Mici si Mijlocii din Romania, 2019)

The COVID confinement measures have split the economic sectors into 5 categories, by the impact these measures had:

- (1) Essential and fully active (health, utilities, food and beverage production) – employment has not suffered significant changes
- (2) Active via telework (part of the public administration, telecommunications, finance, education, research, etc.) – most significant change suffered is teleworking
- (3) Mostly essential and partly active (retail, chemicals, and paper manufacturing) – not suitable to telework
- (4) Mostly non-essential and partly active (construction, computer repairs, and manufacturing) – not suitable to telework, continue activities under strict conditions
- (5) Closed (tourism-related activities, restaurants, leisure, and recreational activities) – not suitable to telework, considered utterly non-essential (Fana , Tolan , Torrejon Perez , Urzi Brancati , & Fernandez Macias , 2020)

“The industry or the specifics of the activity is a determining factor in the decision to return to the office. According to the Bookster study, most of the IT (54%) and Telecom (70%) companies will continue to work entirely from home. Retail (72%), Banking (68%), Automotive (58%), Services (56%), Consulting (55%), FMCG (60%), and even Pharma (71%) industries opt for a partial return of workers to the offices.” (inCont.ro, 2020)

As seen in Figure 7, in Europe, the Eurofound survey shows that in July more than one respondent in three worked from home, but it was more about people with tertiary qualifications (74%) and less about secondary qualifications (34%) or primary education (14%).

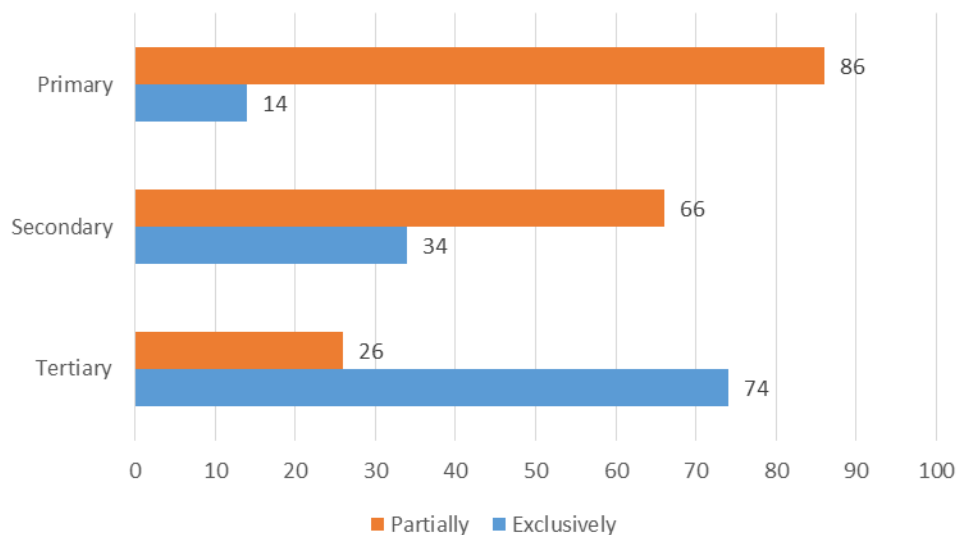


Figure 7. Education impact on working from home
(Authors' representation of Figure 20, Eurofound, 2020)

Among the Romanian private economic sectors, the two most suitable for teleworking are commerce/ retail and services, especially banking.

According to the Eurofound research, across Europe, public administration, financial services, education, and other services are the economic sectors that lead when talking about teleworking exclusively.

The 42 employees who have completed the survey, have worked from home before, have worked only from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and now they have been

presented to the perspective of permanently teleworking. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, none of the interviewed people worked permanently from home.

60% are managers and 40% have non-management positions. Most of the respondents have to go less than 20km from their residence to their workplaces (57.14%); the rest is split between 19.04% 1-5km distances, 14.28% 21-50km distances, and 9.52% 51km or more distances to the workplace.

It is important to point out that 40.48% said they drove alone to work and 28.57% of those do it 5 days/week. Only 19.05% are carpooling, 35.71% take public transportation and barely 4.76% are walking to work.

One of the very few positive sides we can find to this pandemic is the significantly smaller carbon footprint, an important decrease of fossil fuel usage, and lower levels of air and water pollution than the last year. (Breland, 2020; McGrath, 2020)

Asked about the IT equipment they have at home, *modem* and *computer/laptop* recorded the higher rate, but by introducing the *tablet* option the rate could have probably been at 100% too. That means that a large segment of the population owns or can use an IT device from home. (Figure 8)

The *modem* variable in Figure 8 got 100% of the answers because all the interviewed employees live in urban areas in flat buildings and this is the most common option to provide access to landline internet. *Microsoft Office* got many answers (83.33%) but not all, as Linux is popular in Romania in the latest years and it has its suite of desktop productivity applications. Also, many Romanians have printers (66.66%), but not for professional use, so only 40.47% have also the function of a copy machine. (Figure 8)

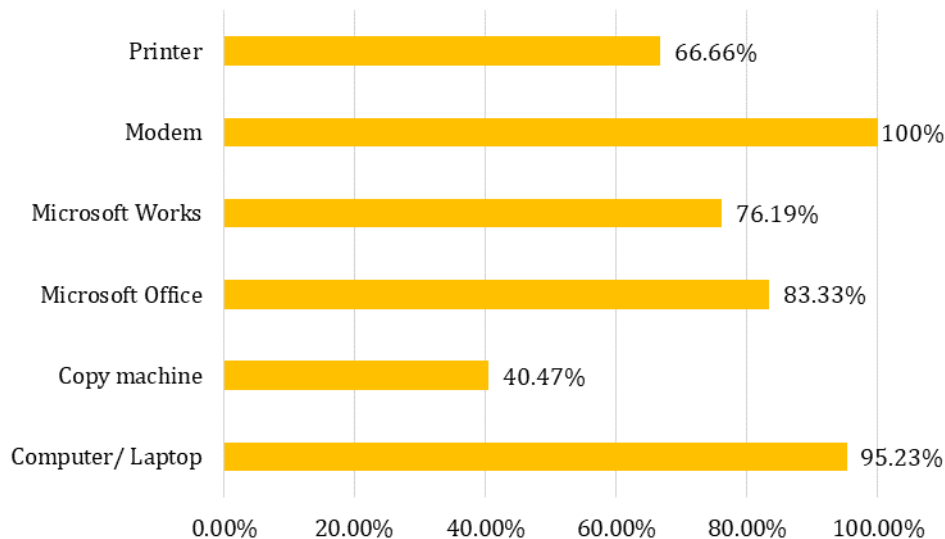


Figure 8. Most common office equipment employees have at home
(Authors' representation)

One of the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic was multinational companies' executives thinking about profit and Governments doing too little to stop them, meaning many people were laid off, or suffered important salary cuts, or were sent to WFH with lower salaries (at best). It should be noted that not only almost none of the salaries remained intact, but also employees have now higher living costs and even equipment costs, as not all companies ensured the necessary infrastructure.

All this translates into high levels of anxiety, high quantitative and intense work demands, afterhours, and a work-life balance way more difficult to maintain. Of course, the ones that

got to keep their jobs consider themselves lucky and try to focus on the positives of the situation.

Another extremely negative consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, besides the obvious health crisis, is the increasing violence against women and girls. According to a document written by WHO, "Violence against women tends to increase during every type of emergency, including epidemics. Women who are displaced, refugees, and living in conflict-affected areas are particularly vulnerable. While data are scarce, reports from China, the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries suggest an increase in domestic violence cases since the COVID-19 outbreak." (World Health Organization, 2020)

On the positive side of the situation, most of the interviewed people answered teleworking has helped them to spend time on their objectives and tasks (65%) and only one person answered that they strongly disagree with this sentence. (Figure 9)

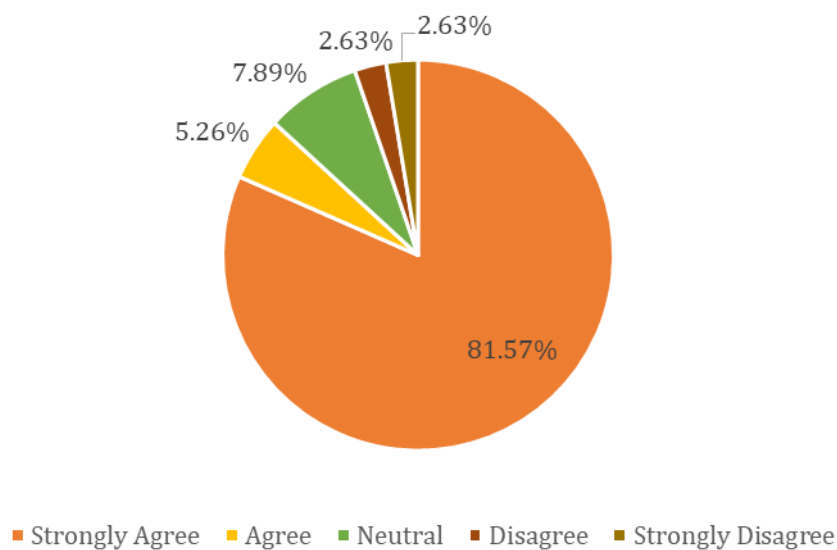


Figure 9. Telecommuting has helped to spend time on objectives and tasks
(Authors' representation)

Trade is divided into three categories, all of which can be carried out to some extent online, which is why they have all been analyzed.

Considering other economic indicators, trade ranks second after services, which brings together a diverse range of activities under the same name. However, trade is a job-creating sector, with over 720 thousand Romanians employed and generating about 353 thousand lei per year in tax value. The proportions of the number of employees, the tax value, and the net investment indicators are mainly the same as in the number of companies.

The services sector is the other important economic sector where teleworking is mainly applicable. This sector has ten subcategories and not all of them are equally sensitive to switch to teleworking during the health crisis or regularly in the near future.

Plus, not all employees *want* to telework. The Eurofound research shows that "The more regular their experience of teleworking, the more likely they were to indicate a preference for teleworking post-crisis and at a greater frequency. Meanwhile, nearly half (45%) of those respondents who had not worked from home during the crisis indicated they would prefer never to telework." (Eurofound, 2020)

During an Extraordinary G20 Tourism Ministers' Meeting, held on 24 April 2020, Guy Ryder, International Labor Organization (ILO) Director-General said that "The immediate imperative is to assure the survival of tourism enterprises through the large-scale public support without which they will disappear before the virus does. And that support must extend to the workers concerned who would otherwise have no income or social protection". (International Labor Organization, 2020)

The global efforts to counter the COVID-19 pandemic have imposed restrictions on the mobility of people, which has affected international tourism that has fallen by 45% to 70%. The domestic tourism industries were also substantially affected as a result of the social distance rules, although it took over part of the demand for international tourism during the summer and seemed to register a recovery.

According to the Eurofound survey, "People across Europe have experienced an upturn in their situation overall post-lockdown, with increases in working hours and lower levels of job insecurity reported in July compared to April. However, large inequalities between specific groups across the EU have emerged." (Eurofound, 2020)

The educational system was innovative and very flexible, replacing the regular class with various obligations such as blended teaching. Video conferencing, virtual classes, online platforms, national television, videos, interactive materials and games, worksheets, etc., are some of the solutions used depending on nature and educational level. (International Labor Organization, 2020)

The Romanian health system was on the front line since the COVID-19 pandemic crisis started, even if it is facing a lack of infrastructure and workforce, considering both the public and private sectors. To support the ones directly involved in the fight with the disease, part of them transferred their work on-line. Specialties as family doctors, homeopaths, philologists, psychiatrists, and others are giving medical advises and services by phone or other virtual channels and are issuing the prescriptions through email. Part of them is involved in assisting and monitoring the persons in quarantine or isolated as well.

"Young people are emerging as some of the lockdown's biggest losers who, along with those out of work, report the lowest levels of well-being, despite some improvement since the onset of the pandemic. While life satisfaction and optimism increased since April, young people continue to feel excluded from society and remain at greatest risk of depression showing how restrictions during lockdown affect them more", as the Eurofound study shows. (Eurofound, 2020)

The transport sector has experienced different challenges depending on the category. While passenger air transport has fallen close to bankruptcy for many companies, freight transport has grown substantially. Courier and home delivery companies have been hiring heavily in recent months.

Although most SMEs did the best they could regardless of their activity sector, the measures taken by the Governments to support those who lost their job (even if they were rapidly introduced in most countries), did not help more than half of unemployed respondents, that say they did not yet get any official financial support. (Eurofound, 2020)

In the sectors where teleworking was possible, the psychological state is overall better, not only the economic one. The response numbers for the survey overwhelmingly point in the same direction – teleworking is good and many benefits can come from it if you stay positive. (Figure 10)

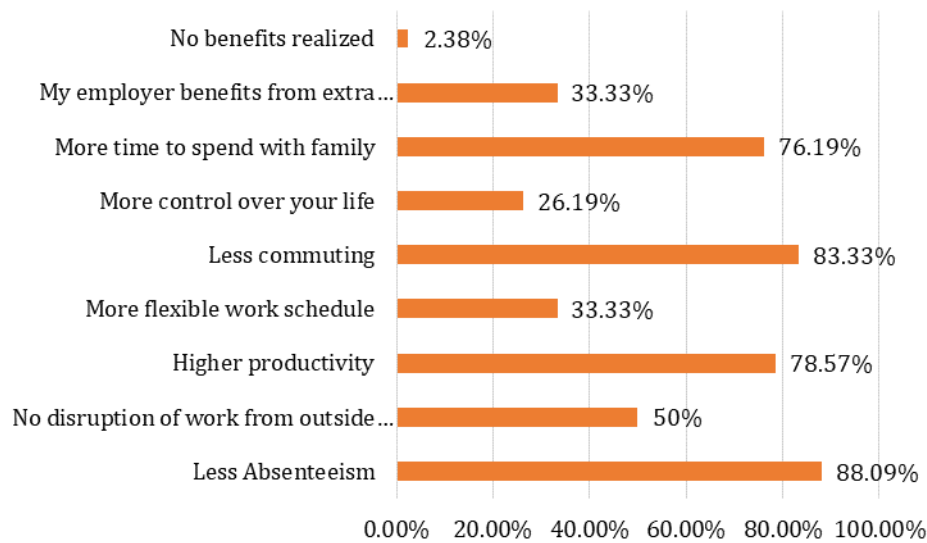


Figure 10. Benefits obtained by teleworking
(Authors' representation)

The most important benefits of teleworking identified by employees are *less absenteeism* (88.09%) and *less commuting* (83.33%). The Eurofound survey shows that “respondents in July indicated satisfaction in particular with the quality of their work (77%), somewhat less with the amount of work performed (69%) with 70% ‘overall [...] satisfied with the experience of working from home.’ The same study shows that “78% of employees in the July round of the e-survey indicated a preference for working from home at least occasionally if there were no COVID-19 restrictions” and we are talking about Europe. (Eurofound, 2020)

Conclusions

In conclusion, telecommuting has both benefits and limits. The COVID-19 crisis speed up the deployment of new working methods, which has become part of the world of work nowadays. The business environment will face significant changes in terms of business approach, technology, personnel, and individuals will change their behavior and expectations.

The study done by the consulting firm Human Performance Development International (HPDI), whose respondents come from a variety of fields from IT and banking to the automotive or pharmaceutical component industry, shows the main problems faced by employees working at a distance. Thus, 36% of respondents mentioned the lack of understanding of emotions and personal feelings as the main impediment to working from home. Poor transmission of information was the biggest challenge for 28% of employees included in the research, and 23% were particularly dissatisfied with the increase in response times, in the absence of direct interaction. In a proportion of 13%, the employees considered that their activity was hampered especially by problems related to the communication channels, respectively to the various video platforms they used. (inCont.ro, 2020)

Also, “Pandemics like COVID-19 can exacerbate not only violence within the home but other forms of VAWG. Violence against female healthcare workers as well as migrant or domestic workers increases. Xenophobia-related violence, harassment, and other forms of violence in public spaces and online are more prevalent and the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse in exchange for health care services and social safety net benefits becomes more likely. Some groups of women may experience multiple and intersecting

forms of discrimination making them even more vulnerable to violence.” (UN Women, WHO, 2020)

Also, “The food security and nutritional status of the most vulnerable population groups is likely to deteriorate further due to the health and socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic” (World Health Organization, 2020) and “a preliminary assessment suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic may add between 83 and 132 million people to the total number of undernourished in the world in 2020 depending on the economic growth scenario.” (Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN, 2020)

When talking about differences in the impact of the taken measures to contain COVID-19 pandemic’s effects, it is of most importance to take into consideration the level of sectoral specialization of the respective countries, as there are cases where the majority of the country’s economy relies on sectors that have been shut down completely as they were seen as non-essential. (Fana, Tolan , Torrejon Perez , Urzi Brancati , & Fernandez Macias , 2020)

In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic hurried up a development that would have happened anyway – heavy industrialization and technologizing of all companies in the extractive industry, manufacturing industry, production and supply of electric and thermal energy, gases, hot water and air-conditioned, water distribution; sanitation, waste management, decontamination activities and in constructions, and heavy digitalization of all the others, but it also deepened the gap between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the blessed and the less fortunate, even at country levels.

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