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Home-Office During COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil: Perceived Influences on Performance and Competency Management

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Abstract

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Keywords

compulsory telework, COVID-19, performance management, competency management, work design, Brazil, interviews, generic qualitative research, narrative, reflection

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Home-Office During COVID-19 Pandemic in Brazil: Perceived Influences on Performance and Competency Management

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There has never been so much flexibility and organizational capacity to adjust to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on work. This article examines beliefs and perceptions related to new arrangements imposed by compulsory telework on skills and performance management practices, as well as identifying related advantages and disadvantages associated. This paper draws on 17 in-depth interviews using the collaborative interactive action research method. The authors study how leaders acted in multiple ways, aiming to reduce the negative effects on workers and work design and provide greater balance of actions. The perspective of multiple levels of action was adopted, considering human and social behavior and organizational arrangements made at a macro level. The sense of collectivity and the search for the standardization of routines were privileged in the interpretation of the answers. The main results reflect the influence of compulsory telework to performance factors, essential competencies required, and the main advantages and disadvantages associated to the construct. This study is relevant for organization studies, especially in the kinds of organizational contexts where there is still unpreparedness to deal with the effects of the pandemic or have uncoordinated telework practices.

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Introduction

The year 2020 was characterized as a year of great ruptures and profound transformations which demanded a quick response from the world society. These ruptures and transformations relate to the serious pandemic that has broken out on the planet, leading to the need to rethink the various ways of acting and relating socially. The work arrangements and aspects of work design have become, in addition to so many other spheres of life, brutally affected by the impacts of the pandemic.

With the advent of the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 COVID-19 coronavirus, which has high transmissibility and global dissemination (Brasil, 2021), even organizations that had not planned to adopt flexible work arrangements were forced to implement telework as a strategy to meet the recommendations of public health agencies, safeguard the health of its employees, and not interrupt their productive activities. Telework is no longer an optional modality of work (Coelho Jr. et al., 2020), a notion that prevailed in pre-pandemic Brazil from the completion of a desired profile for teleworkers and became compulsory for those who would (and could) perform, from then on, from home.

Performing work activities in any location is not a new reality for many professionals, workers, and organizations. The first studies on work activities carried out outside the traditional physical environment of organizations date back to the 1970s (Diab-Bahman & Al-

Enzi, 2020; Sakuda & Vasconcelos, 2005). The term “teleworking” comes from the word “teleworking,” which refers to “...a word that designates the round trip between home and work” (Sakuda & Vasconcelos, 2005, p. 40). With the spread of information and communication technologies, more flexible work arrangements (home-office, remote work, teleworking, distance work, among others), have become a possible and attractive alternative (Rocha & Amador, 2018).

In the Brazilian public sector, there is evidence of experiences with the adoption of teleworking in public administration bodies and entities since 2006 (by the Federal Data Processing Service), with subsequent regulation and implementation of this work arrangement by other bodies and entities, such as the Federal Court of Accounts in 2009, the Superior Labor Court in 2012, the Federal Comptroller General in 2015, the Federal Supreme Court in 2018, and the National Institute of Social Security in 2018 (Faria, 2020; Vilarinho et al., 2021). As of 2018, with the regulation of the “telework” theme by the Ministry of Economy through Normative Instruction No. 01 of August 31, 2018, replaced by Normative Instruction No. 65 of July 30, 2020, other institutions also started to adopt, first in a pilot phase, telework (complete, partial, or by activity).

Considering the pandemic situation, all the planning that was underway in public institutions, for the systematic implementation of telework, gave way to new measures to meet an emergency contingency (pandemic). The pandemic required urgent decision-making to enable workers to perform work activities remotely, so that there was no discontinuity in the provision of services. The situation that, at first, seemed to be resolved in a short time horizon, worsened and entered 2021 with even greater severity and concerns on the part of the entire planet.

In this way, a large contingent of workers in the Brazilian public sector was subjected to the compulsory telework regime, remaining, until then, in this modality, since March of 2020. Telework has become part of the daily lives of millions of Brazilian public workers, which makes us reflect on what changes, from the point of view of performance management and competency management, actually happened to adapt to these new times.

It is important, therefore, to discuss, in the light of an empirical report, the adaptations, updates, or even practical actions in management by Brazilian public organizations seeking to adapt to the unpredictable effects of the pandemic. This circumstance led to the following research question: what were the influences of compulsory telework, in times of pandemic, on performance management and competence management in Brazilian public administration bodies? As secondary research questions, we have: which adaptations had to be made, in the practices of competence and performance management, in Brazilian public organizations? What has changed? What were the perceived advantages and disadvantages of adopting compulsory telework during the pandemic?

As a general objective, we have: to describe the influences of compulsory telework, in times of pandemic, on performance management and competency management in Brazilian public administration bodies, as well as advantages and disadvantages. As specific goals, we have: to describe impacts, from the perspective of public servants responsible for competency management and performance management, in Brazilian public organizations, of the COVID-19 pandemic on these practices; to describe the perceived advantages of adopting the compulsory telework regime in Brazilian public organizations during the pandemic; and describe perceived disadvantages.

We then conducted a qualitative study with 17 public servants from Brazilian organizations, of which ten were managers responsible for the adaptation of performance and competence management practices in the operating bodies. This empirical diagnosis was carried out with public servants directly responsible for the management of these practices within the organizations surveyed.

The qualitative perspective adopted here refers to the study of individual and group social actions which has the work scenario as the locus, carrying out an intensive examination of the data. We sought, through the analysis of microprocesses and based on the free narrative and expression (often disordered) of the interviewees' ideas, to give interpretive meaning to the speeches. Emphasis was placed on the descriptive and inductive character in the presentation and analysis of the arguments, aiming to understand the meaning that people give to their lives and to their personal and professional experiences.

Understanding how public sector professionals are experiencing teleworking during the pandemic becomes essential, considering that discussions on applications and implications of telework have gained new momentum in Brazil due to the scenario of combating COVID-19 (Vilarinho et al., 2021). The gap in the production of knowledge about the effects of telework in various organizational contexts had already been pointed out in recent research carried out by Coelho Jr. et al. (2020) and Andrade et al. (2019).

In addition to contributing to filling a theoretical gap, this study may also support managerial decision-making on policies and practices that need to be improved with a view to the successful implementation and management of telework. There is also the possibility of using research information for critical reflection by society and regulatory bodies on the impacts of teleworking on work organization, in labor relations, in the lives of the actors involved (employees and employers) and also in their families (work/family dynamics).

Theoretical Framework

Changes in work arrangements and in the profiles of professionals have been occurring at an accelerated pace in the last two decades, which can be attributed to technological changes in production and management in organizations (Vilarinho et al., 2021). More flexible and hybrid organizational arrangements, based on a balance between face-to-face work and remote work, have provoked reflections on aspects related to work design and performance and competency management (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Donnelly & Johns, 2020; Sakuda & Vasconcelos, 2005).

These transformations also reached the Brazilian public administration (Andrade et al., 2019; Donnelly & Johns, 2020). The experiences with telework took place during the years before the pandemic. First, in 2006, by the Federal Data Processing Service (Faria, 2020) and, in the following years, by other bodies, such as the Federal Court of Accounts in 2009, the Federal Revenue Service of Brazil in 2012, and the Federal Comptroller General in 2015.

As of 2018, the federal government regulated the telework modality in the executive branch, with the publication of Normative Instruction No. 1/2018. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic context, the institutions abruptly determined that most of their workforce would start carrying out their activities remotely in telework to minimize the proliferation of the coronavirus (COVID-19). This led to the review and edition of regulations to safeguard the change in the locus of work.

The publication of Normative Instruction No. 65/2020, for example, sought to provide greater clarity on the rules and implementation process of teleworking, especially, due to the pandemic context, which prompted the agencies to expand the adoption of this labor modality. This normative, in its third article, defines that, within the scope of the Federal Public Administration, teleworking occurs when the “fulfillment of the working day” is carried out outside the physical premises of the body, whether total or partial, “remotely and with the use of technological resources, to carry out activities that are subject to control and have previously defined goals, deadlines and deliveries” (Brasil, 2020, p. 2).

The adoption of telework in the public sector presents itself as a strategy for the modernization of existing work arrangements, seeking to adapt the work design to the demands

of public institutions and aiming to provide services with greater added value to the population. Conditions are promoted aimed at providing more flexible working hours for workers.

It is evident that due to the pandemic caused by COVID-19, the entire process of adopting telework was accelerated on a global scale (Parker, 2020), demonstrating the need to integrate existing technologies into daily work routines. There was an awareness that working at a distance using available technologies is possible, even in jobs that have previously been performed only in-person (Nagel, 2020).

Advantages and disadvantages are commonly associated with teleworking (Andrade et al., 2019; Bae & Kim, 2016; Donnelly & Johns, 2020; Sobratt, 2020). Increased job satisfaction (Bae & Kim, 2016; Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2020; Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Morgan, 2004; Ronda et al., 2016), favorable effects on productivity and delivery of better results (Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Morgan, 2004; Parker, 2020), greater autonomy to carry out tasks, reduced turnover and absenteeism, better use of time (with reduced travel to work), cost reduction, flexibility in working hours, promotion of work/family balance, and other advantages are associated with telework (Morgan, 2004; Nakrosiené et al., 2019; Sobratt, 2020; Suh & Lee, 2017). The governance and sustainability of telework needs to be continuously monitored and supervised.

As for the disadvantages, the literature points to social isolation, difficulties related to adaptation and technological infrastructure, lower frequency of information exchange, difficulties related to the skills gap oriented to telework, conflicts in the work/family dynamics (constant interruptions), managerial unpreparedness, lack of time organization, impacts on knowledge management, exhaustive demands that lead to overload and exhaustion, and the need to adapt to the new work arrangement are the main ones pointed out (Andrade et al., 2019; Fonner & Roloff, 2010; Lembrechts et al., 2018; Nakrosiené et al., 2019; Parker, 2020; Ronda et al., 2016; Suh & Lee, 2017).

It is also noteworthy that the impacts on organizational practices and policies related to performance management and competency management are visible. These practices need to be adapted to the particularities required for telework as an eventual renegotiation of goals and a new definition of how the work results will be measured. Performance management seeks to extract information about the worker's behavior; therefore, the context in which the worker performs their duties needs to be considered when planning and analyzing (Coelho Jr., 2011).

In relation to performance in teleworking, Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi (2020) point out that one of the positive aspects refers to the strength that this modality has in stimulating time planning skills, development of autonomy, and search for better levels of productivity. However, talking about the "productivity" of teleworkers requires attention, as this cannot happen at the expense of the mental health of workers.

The preparation of workers to perform their activities remotely is another essential factor to be considered. Therefore, developing the skills of professionals for this new context becomes essential. Diagnosing whether professionals have the necessary skills to perform their duties is a relevant factor to help manage organizational effectiveness, aiming to achieve better results (Cobucci et al., 2013). Competency management thus becomes essential and inseparable from performance management.

In the context of telework, the authors point out that developing technical skills to deal with information and communication technologies, for example, becomes important to adapt to this type of work (Carcamo & Munoz-Villegas, 2009; Kowalski & Swanson, 2005). Each professional on a teleworking basis will require a specific development plan, consistent both with their stage of development and with the results they need to deliver. Thus, there is a need for constant identification of skills gaps for performance in telework.

Methods

This research has a cross-sectional approach based on the premise that individuals build mental models that guide their behavior based on their social interaction at work. These mental models were profoundly impacted by the change in work routine caused by COVID-19, hence the interest in identifying and deepening beliefs (human and social, shared among peers) of workers related to home-office impacts on performance and competency management practices.

The work environment started to be experienced in the personal space of the house. There was no prior planning due to the pandemic. Workers had to adapt their routines and abilities to new times, sometimes under conditions of profound stress and burnout. The dynamics of the work-family relationship were deeply shaken.

We sought, then, to deepen the analysis and interpretation of this phenomenon, providing further clarification and understanding from the perspective of workers (Saunders et al., 2007). It is based on the collection of primary data directly with occupants of positions related to human resources management in nine different Brazilian organizations.

We carried out 17 in-depth interviews with Brazilian workers on a teleworking basis during the pandemic period. Study participants were selected for convenience and accessibility, while the number of interviews followed the saturation criterion (Bailyn & Fletcher, 2007) so that the reiteration of arguments demonstrated the sample sufficiency. Contact with participants was made via email and via the WhatsApp messaging app. All information about the survey was presented to each of the respondents. The research objectives were presented, and it was shown how each respondent would collaborate. We guarantee the confidentiality and anonymity of the answers, so that the research team would not know whose answers were given, since the analyses were carried out in a grouped and compared way.

We used a semi-structured interview script built from the literature on telework and incorporating open questions about the pandemic scenario to promote discussions related to the theme. With that, we address issues related to telework, the changes caused in the performance and development of skills, and the influence of the pandemic on work. In this aspect, questions such as “What are the main advantages and disadvantages of telework?” and “What have been the impacts of telework towards your relationship with coworkers? And with your family and personal life?” During this section of the interview, we searched for the major influences that telework imposed on the professional and personal lifestyle and relationships, as well as the support the interviewees received from their respective organizations.

In addition, we carried out inquiries related to the performance and competencies management with questions aimed at the individual perspective and the vision of team managers and managers in the human resources area in order to understand the impacts of telework on management and on personal development. With this, we sought questions such as “What competencies have been required with telework? Have any trainings been offered? Were they effective?” and “When the next performance evaluation occurs, do you consider it’s going to be fair? Did your performance increased with telework?”

In total, we carried out 17 interviews. We used the technique of in-depth interviews through the free association of ideas by the interviewees. As stated previously, respondents were selected for accessibility and convenience. Either they were managers responsible for implementing organizational policies and practices for adapting work design, or they were professionals who knew a lot about legislation and the daily lives of organizations in times of a pandemic. The choice was made, therefore, for its affinity with the subject under study. Most participants are Brazilian public servants and work in organizations of the Brazilian federal public administration. Its performance, therefore, is extremely important to meet the collective needs of Brazilian citizens users.

As a profile of the participants, we interviewed eleven females and six males. They were predominantly married (70.58%) and aged between 36 and 45 years old (41.76%). Regarding the workplace, we received responses from workers from nine different public organizations that are part of the executive branch of the government or independent public regulators. These organizations were the Ministry of Health (29.41%), the Public Ministry of Labor (17.65%), the National Department of Transport Infrastructure (11.76%), the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Information (11.76%), the Ministry of Economy (5.88%), the Nation School of Public Administration (5.88%), the Armed Forces Hospital (5.88%), and the Federal Institute of Amazonas (5.88%).

Among the interviewees, ten worked in management positions (58.82%), five of which were human resources managers. Most of them had experiences as leaders for less than three years (90%). All 17 participants worked in the human resources department of the different companies for which they worked, and five of them had previously worked at telework (29.41%), mostly up to one year of experience (80%).

Table 1 provides the profile of the interviewees, highlighting gender, age range, marital status, number of dependents and children living in the same household, and length of service.

Table 1
Profile of the 17 interviewees

Sex	Age	Marital Status	Number of dependents and children	Time of service
Female	26 to 35	Married	0	< 1 y.
	36 to 45			1 to 3 y.
	46 to 56	Single	1	3 to 6 y.
	56 to 60			6 to 9 y.
Male	> 60	Divorced	2	9 to 12 y.
				> 15 y.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

All respondents were directly involved and were responsible for planning actions aimed at adapting workers to the compulsory home-office regime imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. They were, therefore, people who worked directly with people development, performance, and competency management. They were strategic people to carry out organizational human resources policies. They implemented human resources actions in adapting work to the devastating impacts of the pandemic.

The period for conducting the interviews was between December of 2020 and June of 2021. During the interviews, we followed the pre-established script and gave room for the participants to express their answers and related opinions regarding the subject. With that, the interviews lasted on average between 20 and 110 minutes, varying alongside with the participants' objectivity and general thoughts about the questions.

All 17 interviews were individual. Each of the interviews was conducted through online meetings on the Microsoft Teams virtual platform. Two interviews (E4 and E9) were carried out by telephone, due to the difficulty of access by the participants to the platform, cases in which the answers were promptly recorded by the authors in a written document, during the interview.

All interviews were recorded with prior permission and formal agreement with the free and informed consent form to participate. The purpose of the research was explained to each respondent, and they gave formal consent and agreement to their participation. Only after this procedure did we start the interview. The interviewee had autonomy to stop the interview whenever they wanted. There were no complications in the 17 interviews concerning the participants' disposition to talk about the subjects discussed, the agreement to be recorded or the questions asked.

After conducting the interviews, we analyzed their respective records and recordings, providing the categorization of the main aspects identified. We carried out thematic analysis according to the recommendations by Braun et al. (2019) and Niemisto et al. (2020). The questions were self-reflective in nature, based on the reality of work and through active and dialogic interaction between interviewer and interviewee. The active interaction was based on the recommendations by Bailyn and Fletcher (2007), discussing issues related to work design, impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers, and impacts of the pandemic on the redesign of organizational policies and practices related to performance and competency management.

Some of the interviewees found it easier to convey their ideas while others did not. Some felt more comfortable citing examples from their daily lives while others expressed opinions more based on reports from colleagues. We respected all of the participants' forms of verbalization in order to develop a welcoming environment for greater freedom of speech and sharing of opinions. It is important to emphasize that the self-report was always seen as true and representative of the work reality of each of the 17 respondents. No judgment was made about their opinions and convictions. During rapport with each respondent, confidentiality of responses was guaranteed. The anonymity was preserved, so that the researcher did not know whose answers were being given. For each interview, a specific code was generated, to further ensure the confidentiality of everything that was expressed.

As for the number of interviews carried out, the recommendations by Boddy (2016) about the recommended or appropriate size for conducting qualitative research were followed. It was understood that, given the urgency caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (about how organizational policies and practices should be compulsorily redesigned with a view to adapting to the new times of home office), we should target professionals working in the human resources area for our research. This is because it would be up to these professionals to understand the new reality and then act to transform it. The current scientific zeitgeist needs to incorporate the "pandemic effect" in the context of their theories, including organizational and management.

The search for interviews with human resources professionals was driven by the new scientific paradigm based on compulsory home-office adjustment throughout Brazil (focus of this research), seeking to answer the central question: what organizations would do to adapt to the new times? Organizations could not stop even during the pandemic! What strategies for redesigning human resources policies and practices have been adopted by different Brazilian companies? These were central questions in all 17 interviews, developed along the arguments of each of the interviewees. We will also use examples of literal excerpts from the statements of the 17 interviewees, to better empirically illustrate the arguments that were presented and developed.

We freely interpreted the content of the speeches presented by the 17 interviewees exploring the literal language used by them to express their experiences. Using a generic

qualitative research design, considering important recommendations from Ferguson (2023), Kirshner (2023) and Nowell et al. (2017), and we transcribed all the speeches, building our interpretative narrative in light of the arguments presented. Theoretical saturation, with its advantages and disadvantages (Boddy, 2016), was the criterion used to close the interviews. Saturation occurred when no new arguments were presented or new ways of approaching the phenomenon under study did not appear. The organizational context generates the source of meaning for individuals. Even working in nine different organizations, we identified a lot of homogeneity in the set of organizational policies and practices that were adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Saturation occurred when no more diversity was identified in the arguments presented by the interviewees, allowing us to have a comprehensive and systemic view of the phenomena currently studied.

Given our intersectional approach, our premise was that patterns or themes common to organizational actions that were developed over the past few months would emerge over the 17 interviews. Even if there were nine different organizations, the common identity between the actions carried out would be sought in the analyses carried out. The categorization of organizational human resources policies and practices would provide an applied framework of how these Brazilian organizations were managing to deal with the adversities of the pandemic in terms of performance and competency management. Each respondent, from their point of view, and based on their organizational experience, provided very precious information about how the actions were being carried out, thus allowing the establishment of analysis categories around the issues discussed.

The thematic analysis (Braun et. al., 2019) of the content of the interviews indicated the existence of three major macro-transversal and homogeneous categories: “advantages and disadvantages of compulsory telework,” “influences of compulsory telework on performance management,” and “influences of compulsory telework on competency management.” These categories will serve as a guiding line for the presentation and discussion of the results, under the interpretive/dialogical perspective of the 17 interviewees.

Results

Overall, the perceptions of the 17 respondents indicated that adaptations to performance management urgently needed to be made in an unstructured manner, without any kind of prior planning, and that the competences previously mapped (before the pandemic) did not take into account the daily reality of the home-office. New competencies would have to be developed on a compulsory basis. The main advantage attributed to telework was the improvement in the quality of time dedicated to family and work, while the main disadvantage observed referred to the conflicts that arose in the dynamics of this relationship (work/family).

Organizational Support and Quality in Deliveries

We identified, from the perspectives of the 17 respondents, changes that occurred in the performance of individuals during telework. The quality of deliveries improved, according to respondents, as there were not as many distractions in remote work as there were in face-to-face. Productivity also increased, according to the perception of respondents (Caillier, 2013). It is noteworthy that telework provides greater autonomy and accountability for those involved, which requires a more proactive and focused posture (Aderaldo et al., 2017). According to that, the respondents I7 and I16 observed:

I think I deliver better, I can concentrate better at home, less distraction, more focus. I need to solve things on my own, this is something I really feel in

teleworking, you have to solve things alone because you can't be all the time calling someone to solve it, right (I7).

I think that my work improved, I'm more dedicated. I think that at a face-to-face work, the people would come and talk, besides having a lot of people in the room without a door, it got in the way a little (I16).

The new configuration of work routines without proper planning resulted in short-term problems related to infrastructure and the need to adapt the home environment to work requirements. In order to carry out the activities, teleworkers had to organize themselves in relation to equipment and physical space. Some of the interviewees stated that the institution did not offer support at first, so that some have disbursed a sum for the purchase of basic work tools (internet speed upgrade, for example). Only after a few months did organizations manage to make some materials and resources available with due control, which contributed so that public servants could then perform their duties. Interviewee I17 exposes that, "At first no, but after a while the government issued a statement where people who didn't have support for working from home, could take their work computer and work from home," while participant I16 mentions the support received from the organization:

They allowed us to pick up technological equipment from the place, even a chair we could take it, in a standardized and regulatory way, in addition to technical support to configure the machines to access the internal network, with video tutorials, text or with remote access (I16).

Workday and Performance

As there was no planning for teleworking, this influenced the verified performance. An increase in working hours was pointed out, causing work overload precisely because a start and end time for working hours was not defined, which made the work exclusive and even compete with the family (Tahavori, 2014). Participant I1 related the conformity with the work increase, "I've already adapted, but I still can't fit into 8 hours of work like I used to, so I'm working more, but I'm not unhappy about it [...]." Otherwise, respondent I17 has shown discontent regarding the subject: "Sometimes I feel that it has increased a bit, so it happens that I receive a message at 8 p.m, outside the time we are used to, so it gives the feeling that the working hours have increased."

Changing the Performance Management Cycle

Most respondents said they have adapted to the new way of organizing and carrying out their activities. According to Trope (1999), the implementation of telework can generate a culture shock and thus affect the individual's performance. Furthermore, the interviewees stated that there was no renegotiation of goals; that is, the goals agreed until then had not contemplated the context of remote work.

It is noteworthy that, logically, this would be the first action expected in performance management during the pandemic. This had consequences for monitoring and evaluating performance, based on pre-pandemic targets. Thus, the performance management cycle may have been compromised, as the goals were not adapted to telework. These aspects can be exemplified by interviewee I6: "We didn't do it, maybe we even needed it, but we didn't." Participant I16 also related the ongoing development of metrics, and their further implications:

“We don’t have a database to know what is ideal to achieve, because we are still creating. The indicators will apply not only telework, but also to face-to-face work.”

Regarding the evaluation criteria, most respondents said that there are many difficulties in measuring the punctuality and attendance of teleworkers. Performance criteria based on delivery of results gained importance. Finally, for those interviewed, the performance evaluation is uncertain in this period, but they are optimistic, arguing that it will be fair, as demonstrated by the participants I5 and I8.

I think that obsolete things that appear in the evaluations made even less sense, such as punctuality, attendance, etc. Things that were very physical and very old from work, right, like clocking in, etc. So I think these obsolete aspects have become more evident because they are late (I5).

I think the very ability to deliver results and specially to demonstrate the work that is done [...] It is not enough for us to do the work, we need to communicate, we need to demonstrate how it is done, we have to quantify this work, pay more attention to this income statement. So the result dimension gained more emphasis than the effort (I8).

The adaptation of the performance management cycle during the pandemic is still being planned, as there is still no basis for writing performance indicators under a telework regime. It is not yet known which is the ideal to be reached. There was no period for adapting the cycle to telework. Some organizations have even opted to repeat past performance appraisal scores, generating unreliable information about human performance during telework. Interviewee I15 considered that the managers required adjustments to the new format - “This is a box of surprises, because I think that performance management teams have to redesign their instruments for capturing information, because you are not in a normal regime” - as well as I17, “[...] what must be implemented are delivery mechanisms, because we don’t have these monitoring mechanisms and this ends up hurting a little bit. Some criteria need to be adapted and it is certain that we will need to make adjustments.”

Monitoring

Regarding monitoring, the way found by teleworkers was the control through the delivery of results (Felstead et al., 2003). According to the interviewees, there were training meetings for leveling and supervision based on filling in electronic worksheets. Feedback, both from peers and from management, occurs predominantly during follow-up meetings, or in informal conversations with co-workers. The monitoring was perceived by respondents I17 - “Not strictly, but large deliveries are monitored based on the result that is delivered” – and I14 - “So we have attendance list that I fill in a spreadsheet saying that event they had so many people that you were one who participated in the full load.” These quotes exemplify the increase of monitoring from the employee’s perspective.

From the perspective of managers only, the performance of subordinates is being managed through meetings, continuous feedback, and control of results delivery. They recognize that it is necessary to create strategies to integrate the team and, thus, improve performance. As mentioned, support messages are used on WhatsApp, sharing of work-related news, more relaxed meetings, daily conversations with the team and attempts to reinforce the team’s sense of belonging.

Influences of Compulsory Telework on Competency Management

Technology Related Competencies

Competency-based management was also impacted due to the compulsory adoption of telework during the pandemic. According to the interviewees' reports, the mapping of skills done so far disregarded skills developed in teleworking. The need for technological skills to perform the tasks, and communication skills between colleagues and managers was identified. Competency-based management needs to be dynamic and adaptive to new work arrangements (Cobucci et al., 2013). As stated by one of the interviewees, there has been a new need for hard-skills development, regarding the use of technology for work-related processes.

Competencies that we need are people who have greater management with the technology matters, I include myself in it, kind of functional illiterate, like in the sense that we have a computer and I sometimes don't know how to handle something (I14).

Knowledge about information security, virtual meeting and activity performance software, and general computer knowledge have become essential. The interest in learning new knowledge about technology portrays an attitude characteristic of the telework model (Carcamo & Munoz-Villegas, 2009). Interviewees I7 and I4 also related the challenges imposed by the use of technology imposed by telework, even when already required for work: "Informatics, in general, from video conferences to normal computer use" - "Needed knowledge, which they should already have, about information security, passwords, email, and antivirus."

Communication and Teamwork Competencies

Another technical competence mentioned was communication, which started to demand greater objectivity both in virtual meetings and in the sending of e-mails related to work. Despite its objectivity, communication has become vital for the harmony between teammates and managers, maintaining the sharing of information, although there has been a significant reduction in interpersonal contact compared to the face-to-face routine.

In teleworking, communication is one of the main predictors of its success, and related skills are necessary to avoid isolation and maintain the sense of belonging to the organization (Kowalski & Swanson, 2005). Interviewee I16 perceived communication as a needed competency to telework's success: "Communication in teleworking is a competency that should be developed as much as possible, as it is fundamental. If the colleague does not give you feedback, he stops communicating, all the work is jeopardized."

Respondents indicated an exponential use of the WhatsApp application as a means of contacting co-workers, as well as the use of software, such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, to carry out virtual meetings, in addition to the use of institutional email. Part of the interviewees reported the need to adopt "digital etiquette;" that is, behaviors suitable for the virtual meeting environment such as posture in front of the camera, taking care of the microphone, and paying attention to avoid interruptions during the speech of colleagues, such as exposed by participant I5: "For many it is still difficult to work with meetings software [...], digital etiquette, camera on or off, microphone, interruptions."

Alongside that, some interviewees related the search of greater patience and listening skills, when dealing with the particularities of co-workers, as essential competencies.

Interviewee I8 related some of the unique aspects concerning communicating via video conferences:

Communication, since mediated by technologies, needed to be reviewed in the way we communicated, non-verbally and verbally, doing events by video conferences, recording videos. Since I'm a psychologist, I am trained to talk to people, but when they don't turn on the cameras, only by audio, it requires other postures, attention to certain aspects (I8).

Despite this, it was also pointed out the drop in the need for formal clothing to carry out the work, as well as attendance and punctuality with face-to-face working hours, given the flexibility of the remote regime. It is noted that attendance has become important for the time of synchronous virtual meetings.

The importance of teamwork has also increased, considering the need to coordinate and execute work demands from afar, that usually were part of the team's routine procedures, as pointed out by participant I12: "The most needed competency, first of all, teamwork [...], despite being far apart, knowing how to work in a team has never been as important as it is now."

Leadership Competencies

Regarding the skills needed by team managers, leadership was the main one appointed, relating to the ability to motivate team members, manage at a distance, respect the spaces and difficulties of subordinates. Negotiation, management, and empathy skills were also mentioned, as observed in participant's I10 experience: "The leadership, the motivation, in my case I had a lot to know how to motivate my team, many 'oh I can't handle it', yes you can, let's do it, slowly, step by step, we can do it." In this context, it became essential to keep the team aligned for the performance of activities, as well as providing ongoing support and support actions (Van Wart et al, 2017).

Adaptability and Organization Competencies

The ability to adapt was a widely mentioned behavioral competence due to the abrupt adoption of telework amidst the scenario of uncertainties caused by the pandemic. Participant I6 discussed the need for adaptation on each employee: "Our teleworking was forced [...], I think the ease of adaptation is what will make a server suffer less from an imposed telework."

The easiness of adaptation was also affected by the work/family balance, which required the development of new professional skills. Interviewee I6 exposed their opinion regarding the imposed work arrangement, and the different impacts on each public server: "The adaptation was good because I didn't have a small child and other demands, I kept myself organized with my family demands." On a similar perspective, interviewee I2 brought the impact felt by their family with telework imposition:

In the beginning, the stress started to influence the others in my family, with the pandemic and adapting to a new routine. After passing this stress, I started to reconcile the routine properly, to keep better track of my son and aspects of the school, having an effect on this (I2).

Furthermore, organizational and time management skills have gained importance. During the interviews, the ability to research and analyze information was also identified as an

essential characteristic for the execution of tasks. Some participants developed these competencies as a mean to facilitate the adaptation process to telework, as exposed from interviewees I1 and I14:

Extracting as much information as possible from the sites, doing research, we need to improve our system and we will definitely need it, so you have more time for operational activities, to communicate, and you have more time to flow better (I1).

I joke that I have waitress syndrome. When a meeting comes up I have everything written down, I need a list, to organize myself and list tasks. I have created a routine, I go in early in the morning and check my e-mails, as soon as a meeting is scheduled I note it on the agenda and on the calendar beside it, I always monitor the systems, the processes with me and with the team, analysis. I tried to study time management, even in relation to staying 8 hours in front of the computer, I don't have to be glued to my chair. I write down everything from every meeting (I14).

Self-Management Competencies

Most respondents reported that the training offered by the organization was not sufficient for telework, requiring hands-on learning and autonomous search for information. Managerial competencies became much more required. A minority of interviewees' organizations carried out prior planning to offer training aimed at teleworking (even though the model already existed before the pandemic).

Considering all the organizations in which the interviewees worked, none had a mapping of specific telework competencies, a gap found for further analysis. Team managers stated that they do not have the time or conditions to identify competency gaps of their subordinates, which would generate input for the design of capabilities. The people development strategies used relate to following the institution's training plan, the establishment of parameters during meetings, and the reinforcement of existing courses.

The informal identification of the need for training also prevails without formal knowledge management instruments or analysis of the effectiveness of the training carried out. The aggravation of existing difficulties in the face-to-face regime was identified with the emergence of many demands and the difficulty to provide support to managers and other workers. Part of the organizations had competency-based management models that were still being implemented or immature, a major obstacle in understanding the pandemic scenario and in decision-making.

The interviewees also mentioned the need for self-management, planning, and independence to solve problems, as well as the flexibility to reconcile demands. Interviewee I4 exposed the managers' emphasis on meeting to discuss results, but no support to the demanded work: "No, they are lost, they only have meetings to demand and remind, show the process flow, mistakes to be corrected, but there is no focus on the telework itself." With this, most participants pointed out the need for independence and the development of needed competencies on their own, since their organizations did not guarantee the proper support for that. Respondent I7 addresses their thoughts concerning the differences between telework and previous routines from the office:

I think this need to solve things on your own, this is something I really feel in teleworking, you can't keep calling someone to solve it all the time, that's

something that in person you turn to the side and say “hey, so-and-so, help me here with something” [...] you have to be creative with the possibilities (I7).

Part of the interviewees also indicated the development of a positive attitude towards telework and the importance of creativity to solve the challenges imposed, as described by interviewee I6: “[...] we needed to seek new paths, be creative, with different possibilities, out of the usual box.”

Advantages and Disadvantages Associated with Compulsory Telework During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Time Saving, Flexibility and Closeness to Family

Overall, respondents cited more advantages associated with teleworking than disadvantages. Among the most cited, the following stand out: the reduction of commuting time to the workplace, gain of time, flexibility of schedules, closeness to the family, comfort of working at home, delivery of work by results, and other aspects related to the quality of life of teleworkers. It is noted that teleworking promotes positive effects on the balance between work and family, since the free time obtained by the absence of commuting can be directed towards family activities and domestic responsibilities, characteristic related to increased job satisfaction (Ronda et al., 2016; Solís, 2017). Participant I13 exposed the gain of time with telework - “Much in time saving [...], the servers do not need to travel from home to work, this generates a very reasonable saving of time” – as I10 displayed satisfaction on being closer to their family:

I feel more willing at work, I'm really happy to be with my baby all day, I had recently been away from him, I had just returned from maternity leave, so, like, you have a small child, [...] it brought me more happiness to be with him during the day (I10).

Productivity Gain and Cost Reduction

In addition, teleworking provided productivity gains, as well as reducing sources of distraction in the face-to-face environment, greater willingness to work and greater concentration on performing activities. Increased efficiency in performing tasks, due to the absence of distractions with co-workers, and greater possibility of staying focused, represent arguments for teleworking (Nakrosienė et al., 2019). Interviewee I8 related the gain in concentration brought by telework:

It was also an advantage that I was able to concentrate more on the work I'm doing, because there we worked with a lot of people in the room, and I had this difficulty, here I can concentrate more on work (I8).

Another reported advantage was the cost reduction, both at an individual level, with food and transport costs, and for the organization, with expenses for the maintenance of the physical space (Rocha & Amador, 2018). Participant I16 reinforced the cost reduction by the organization: “Very! very much. I'm not part of the area that takes care of contracts, but I'm in the superintendence, so in these meetings I heard the comment regarding the organization's savings on energy, water bill.”

Work Overload and Lack of Privacy

Regarding the main disadvantages, the abrupt adoption of telework required a quick and intense adaptation of agents and public organizations (Parker, 2020). The remote work format generated a perception of increased working hours for most respondents, associated with a loss of sense of time and time limits. It is estimated that there was a feeling of work overload related to the increase in demands and demonstrate performance through deliveries, as discussed by interviewee I17 - “I feel tired, overloaded with this way of working, mainly because we continue to demand face-to-face work from our managers and servers” – as well, as I1 and I13:

On the downside, I think the way it happened, right, a sudden way, without planning, and the issue of domestic routines, this was a factor that impacted, right, on my own performance, until I managed to put the routine in order (I1).

With this number of meetings, it's difficult to do your work, your work to enter the processes, check, what needs to be done, what other people have done [...], when I had these meetings, it took me all day, I would go in at night to do this follow-up (I13).

Part of the interviewees also pointed out the lack of privacy and difficulties in reconciling work and family demands. These perceptions can lead to greater work-related stress, reducing satisfaction (Suh & Lee, 2017). Interviewee I15 related the absence of boundaries after telework's imposition:

What is the boundary between private and public life, working life? This boundary becomes thinner, because at 7 pm, someone from work calls you and you must answer. [...] You must give your number out so people can find you (I15).

Another disadvantage concerns the increase in productivity charges, which led to mental exhaustion in some cases. One of the interviewees reported that she needed a period of absence from work, due to signs of burnout. The feeling of isolation can promote discomfort of individuals in telecommuting, since, less exposed to the decision-making processes of their colleagues, they seek to show themselves present through technological resources, generating a greater amount of work and stress in its execution (Johnson et al, 2020; Suh & Lee, 2017). Respondents I1 and I8 discussed the impacts of telework on productivity and their excesses:

There is the issue of demand, right, demands for more productivity, this became more intense, we had to show a lot more that we were able to work on this model, that it would work, so, perhaps because of the lack of preparation of the entire context, the heads and everything, it remained in that environment: will people really work with teleworking? (I1).

In my case, as I do a little separate work [...] there was also this from people not knowing what I'm doing, the other people in the section. So I ended up with a more isolated job. In the beginning I got really sick [...], it was the first mental health leave I took, it was at the beginning of the pandemic, because I reached a level of stress that I really had a breakdown [...], it got to a point when my body just said enough, I was exhausted (I8).

Technological Difficulties and Costs Increased

Some respondents pointed to the greatest vulnerability to information security attacks, as participant I3 stated - “With that hack attack we had, everything was removed, and now I have no prediction of coming back, so sometimes things are still a little difficult because of that, but I was able to meet the demands.” The use of virtual connections to perform work has made organizations even more susceptible to security issues, requiring data protection policies (Stephens et al., 2020). With the adoption of telework, part of the interviewees also reported the difficulty of accessing and using the technology, requiring an adaptation to perform certain tasks. Interviewee I13 brought this subject, revealing the obstacles imposed to older colleagues:

There are some older, older people, right, we have about four cases of ours there that they have a certain difficulty in working with a computer, they are people who have not yet become attached to this form. [...] There is a certain difficulty, people cannot access it very easily, and this creates a big psychological barrier for them (I13).

Despite representing part of the work routine, the pandemic scenario made adapting to the use of technology fast and mandatory (Nagel, 2020). In this sense, even with a reduction in food and transport costs, part of those interviewed reported an increase in energy costs and the need to purchase more powerful internet packages to work in telework. Participant I15 related the absorption of costs - “You take on all costs, energy, having equipment that can help you do your work, which the institution previously offered” – as I17 described the disadvantage and the lack of support from the organization:

Expenses increase, for sure, energy increase, food increase too, because we are at home 24 hours a day, the company saved money, but the server had to spend more, and the organization even took away the transportation allowance, and I understand, the server is not spending money on transportation, but is spending money on other things that were not foreseen, like computer, printer, internet, energy? and they are not giving support, so I think they should think about a home office allowance (I17).

Discussion

The present study had as a main objective to describe perceptions related to the new arrangements imposed by the compulsory telework about competency and performance management practices considering the reality of nine different Brazilian organizations, in addition to identifying advantages and disadvantages associated with it. To this end, we conducted and analyzed, through thematic content analysis, 17 in-depth interviews from a semi-structured script, with managers (n=10) and non-managing Brazilian civil workers (n=7) under compulsory telework regime during the pandemic period.

All 17 respondents were responsible for the implementation of human resources strategies and policies; therefore, they had strategic attributions to the adaptation to the new times due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Performance Management at Telework

As a result, through thematic content analysis, we identified advantages and disadvantages associated with compulsory telework due to the pandemic. In addition, new

technological and performance-related planning/updating competencies were described. There were no systematic practices for renegotiating performance targets, so the management cycles need to be updated considering the condition of the pandemic.

The control and monitoring of performance started to be carried out, during the pandemic, by the quality, quantity, and consistency of deliveries/results. There was a significant improvement in productivity during telework, and the need for greater communication between team members and their managers, in order to allow the continuity of the service. Importantly, this productivity gain needs to be considered in light of the overload and burnout reported by some of the interviewees. Its impacts on the physical and mental health of workers need to be investigated.

It is important to emphasize that this productivity gain must be considered in light of the overload and exhaustion reported by some of the interviewees. It is estimated that there was a sense of work overload related to increased demands and demonstration of performance through deliveries. Perceptions of this type can lead to increased work-related stress, reducing satisfaction (Suh & Lee, 2017). Thus, the proper management of work becomes essential to have greater balance and not lead the worker to physical and mental exhaustion. A study on this aspect pointed out the increase in the workday, causing work overload precisely because there was not a defined start and end time of the workday, which made the work exclusive and even competitive with the family (Tahavori, 2014).

The need for greater communication between team members and their managers, in order to allow the service continuity, was another evidence of this study. This finding is in line with another study that points out that, in telecommuting, communication is one of the main predictors of its success, and related skills are needed to avoid isolation and maintain a sense of belonging to the organization (Kowalski & Swanson, 2005).

Essential Competencies for Telework

The development of skills necessary for the remote regime took place mainly in an informal way. There was a lack of planning and preparation of organizations for telework, posing challenges to human resource managers during the pandemic. Certain competencies were essential to telework, such as communication, adaptability, organization, and performance self-management.

Developing skills to use technology to perform the activities in remote work was essential for workers to accomplish their deliverables. Despite representing part of the work routine, the pandemic scenario made it quick and mandatory to adapt to the use of technology (Nagel, 2020).

Regarding the competencies needed by team managers, leadership was pointed out as essential, relating to the ability to motivate team members, manage from a distance, and respect the spaces and difficulties of subordinates. Negotiation, management, and empathy skills were also mentioned. On this, the literature points out that it is essential to keep the team aligned to carry out the activities, in addition to providing continuous support and support actions (Van Wart et al, 2017).

Furthermore, we identified that none of the work organizations had a competency mapping specific to the home office, an aspect that hindered the provision of targeted training and revealed a poorly adaptive and mature competency-based management in most of the public organizations studied. This result was surprising given that the practice of telecommuting was already a reality in part of the institutional context researched, considering that, with the regulation of the topic since 2018, several public organizations had started the implementation of remote work in the Brazilian federal government. This highlights that,

despite the fact that the organizations had started the implementation of this work arrangement, the development of competencies of professionals for telework had not been carried out.

Limitations and Research Agenda

As a limitation, this study was cross-sectional research, based on the perception of workers also impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that the interviews were conducted at a distance can also be a limitation to be mentioned, as much of the informal was lost in face-to-face communication. It was not possible to register from a distance any gestural behavior or any different reaction that could be the object of joint reflection with the respondent. During an interview, the invisible or intangible can be as important as the explicit behavior manifested through a speech.

The results of this study highlighted the need for future studies that investigate the impacts of the pandemic and telework on the culture of public organizations. In addition, this study relied on the point of view of agents of the federal public administration, essentially in the context of Brazil, not making it possible to make generalizations of the results to other contexts, so that new research in other spaces also represent opportunities to explore the scientific field. The impacts of the pandemic in underdeveloped countries, or in the third world, such as Brazil, need to be further explored in all spheres and scenarios.

Therefore, we suggest future research regarding such mapping, duly contextualized to telework, as well as more in-depth analyzes on the maturity of the practice of competency management in public organizations, are carried out.

Finally, we conclude that the results pointed out in this study can serve as a basis to reinforce the possibility of teleworking as a work model, overcoming the obstacles/disadvantages discussed here. Furthermore, the pandemic emerged abruptly before the public administration so that a better understanding of the influences of the phenomenon on performance management and competency management can help in the planning and execution of new management practices that are more effective and closer to the teleworker.

We suggest future studies that investigate the impacts of the pandemic and teleworking on the culture of public organizations. Participant observation, secondary data analysis, and ethnography itself (social immersion in the work environment) may help the researcher in the study of these matters. Focus groups may also contribute to identify homogeneous or heterogeneous perceptions about the theme, allowing the identification of new facets of this construct.

Adapting organizational cultures to this new pandemic scenario is also an important research agenda. Organizational cultures need to be more organic, continually adapting to the internal and external constraints of work organizations. This organizational plasticity was, perhaps, one of the main contributions that the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the reality of work organizations.

Researchers can use this study's results as a basis for new approaches regarding the telework on different contexts, exploring the impacts of telework on other types of organizations, such as in the private or third sector. Managers may also have a better understanding of the nuances that telework generates on performance management, the need for new competencies, and for a healthy life-work balance.

Alongside that, public agents can use the results previously discussed for the development of public policies. With that, public and private organizations may benefit from the advantages of telework, but also provide solutions for the difficulties surrounded by it.

Conclusion

We believe that the general objective of the research was fully achieved. The results demonstrate the viability of telework as a work modality provided that certain conditions are met. There is, then, the need for the continuous performance of managers and the establishment of organizational policies and practices aimed at minimizing the difficulties encountered in adapting to telework and in its permanence.

The pandemic scenario represented a strong negative influence on the performance and learning of respondents, mainly causing stress, anxiety, and isolation in order to affect their mental health and task performance. After adapting to the scenario, most participants began to deal with natural obstacles related to fulfilling demands.

With the completion of this research, we expect to contribute to the consolidation of telework not only in the Brazilian public administration, but as well as in its global understanding, given the wide possibility of exploring and deepening this contemporary phenomenon. The home office is here to stay; therefore, the search for a description of its good governance practices needs to be relentless and based on the pillars of scientific knowledge.

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