



Journal of Business and Social Science Review
Issue: Vol. 2; No.1; January 2021 pp.119-125
ISSN 2690-0866(Print) 2690-0874 (Online)
Website: www.jbssrnet.com
E-mail: editor@jbssrnet.com
Doi: 10.48150/jbssr.v2no1.2021.a9

HOME - BASED TELECOMMUTING IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19: THE CHALLENGES OF GREEK TELEWORKERS

Dr. Konstantina Ragazou
Postdoctoral Researcher
University of Thessaly
Volos, Greece
Email: koragazo@uth.gr

ABSTRACT

The ongoing spread of COVID-19 since December (2019) has significantly affected the way people around the world live and work. Regarding the labour market, millions of workers, both in private and public sectors in several countries have been forced to stop working for some time, as part of the implementation of the restrictive measures implemented by each country to reduce the transmission of the virus and protect employees. However, a non-negligible part of the labour force continued to work outside the workplace through telecommuting. In Greece, telecommuting has been one of the most important interventions for the continuation of the operation of both government services and businesses. But different factors contributed to the distraction of teleworkers' concentration during the performance of their job duties remotely. In this context the survey's objective is twofold: (i) highlight those factors which are related to the distraction of the concentration of teleworkers and (ii) exam how each one of them affects telecommuters by their gender. The research methodology was based on a national survey through structured questionnaires on a representative sample of the Greek workforce using telecommuting. The risk ratio was employed for the interpretation of the results in order to estimate the strength of the association between males and females telecommuters and the factors that disrupt them more during telecommuting.

Keywords: Business continuity, COVID-19, Greece, Risk Ratio, Telecommuting, Workforce.

INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of the new Coronavirus (COVID-19) and its rapid spread led millions of people around the world to adapt to a new daily routine. A few measures were put into place by governments globally to protect public health. Lockdowns, social distancing, movement restrictions were some of the most implemented measures adopted from many countries. As a result, the unprecedented crisis of the new Coronavirus has fundamentally changed society in so many ways starting from taught to appreciate the importance of public health.

Beyond its serious implications for people's health, COVID-19 was significantly affected businesses which have to adapt to a new environment. Businesses were called to adapt to unprecedented conditions such as to protect their employees and to maintain their business continuity, in an unforeseen time horizon. In a world that is chugging along as normal and business operations only have the usual risks to monitor, it can be easy to put aside business continuity planning. But anything can happen at any time, and businesses must be ready to pivot operations quickly, efficiently, and safely as and when is needed. The quick global spread of coronavirus has thrown the world into disarray. The markets are in a nosedive, governments are shutting down entire countries and most organizations have to embrace remote working as quick as they can in order to keep the lights on and keep clients serviced. Those who do not have the capability to support workers at home – and that are not essential services such as healthcare or sanitation – are currently going through a trial by fire, with operations stymied and revenue under threat.

In Greece telecommuting has suddenly experienced an upturn. Businesses rushed to set up work-from-home arrangements or took out subscriptions for online meetings and cloud collaboration technology. Telecommuters had to adjust to the new working conditions which caused to them a series of concerns with the major to be:

(i) how they will distinguish work from personal life and (ii) how they will handle with all the disruptions comes from daily routine. Teleworking gives employees the flexibility to manage working time, but there is still a risk that the boundaries between free time and working time will not be visible.

The aim of this paper is to assess the main factors lying behind the disruption of the concentration of teleworkers in Greece. To the purpose of the current study, a web-based survey was launched to several Greek telecommuters, to capture the most disruptive factors during teleworking in the context of COVID-19. The article is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual background of telecommuting, a short chronicle of COVID-19 and highlighted the importance of telecommuting in this turbulent period which contributed to the protection of employees' health and business continuity. Section 3 and 4 present the materials and method, as the results and discussion that obtained by the statistical analysis. Finally, Section 5 and 6 concludes the paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COVID-19 ESTABLISHED TELECOMMUTING

At the end of 2019, a new outbreak of global threat appeared in the city of Wuhan in Hubei Province in China. It was a new coronavirus, COVID-19 as was characterized by the World Health Organization (WHO), that had led to nearly 300 confirmed infections in humans in China with several deaths to have been reported. Some countries, including the United States, have begun to actively track travelers from Wuhan as the new coronavirus continued to spread rapidly (World Health Organization, 2019).

With the cases overcame 900,000 at the end of March 2020 the message from WHO was loud and clear for all the governments worldwide. Quarantine and lockdown measures had to be taken in order to control the spread of the disease and protect people of getting sick of the new coronavirus (Alvarez, Argente and Lippi, 2020). But from Spain to UK and US politicians have waited far too long before taking the dramatic steps needed to protect their citizens. In contrast, Greece has been one noticeable exception to this trend. The government imposed severe social distancing measures at a much earlier stage of the epidemic than other southern European countries, which helped the country to avoid the tragic healthcare crisis that other states were called to face. Nevertheless, these actions had severe implications on the social isolation feeling of the Greek population as more than three out of ten felt at least socially isolated (Anastasiou and Duquenne, 2020). The employment situation of the Greek people during the confinement period had a determining role in that negative sentiment (Anastasiou and Duquenne, 2020b). The measures that have been taken by the Greek Government in order to reduce contamination included the suspension of operation of educational institutions of all levels, suspension of operation of several businesses and a curfew that were in effect from March 23rd until April 6th (European Commission, 2020).

As for businesses, in the light of coronavirus outbreak, employers adopted measures for the purpose of preventing COVID-19 and ensure business continuity. Telecommuting was one of the most appropriate continuity solutions for businesses and an important option to implement for better business longevity protection (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garces, 2020). In the context of the new coronavirus, working from distance gave to employers and employees the ability to stay connected and continue the operations of the business. In Greece, the outbreak of the pandemic led hundreds of companies to exploit the most of telework, which until recently was forgotten and probably not so desirable in the Greek labour market. Thus, working from home in Greece is now an important asset for the continuation of the economic activities of businesses and the economy in times of pandemic (Ioannou, Sidiropoulos and Agnantopoulos, 2020). Since the beginning of the pandemic, almost most of the biggest companies have set their employees, mainly those of their administrative and financial services, in teleworking without interrupting their activities for a moment. Almost all the banks, industry, shipping companies, technology and communication companies, health and logistics showed their readiness and utilized the work from a distance in percentages of even more than 80%, while quickly followed by public sector (Pouliakas, 2020).

In contrast, Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SME's) presented more weaknesses in the adoption of telework. The lack of investments in digitization in the previous years and the limited familiarity of the employees with the new technologies operated as a deterrent factor for most of them

DEFINE TELECOMMUTING

Telework can help economies to cope with the threat to public health and the continuity of economic activity. It is an easy and practically inexpensive process that requires simple and widespread technological means. In Greece, telecommuting has been recognized since 2010 as a form of a labour organization by national law (Bakirtzi, 2020). Telework creates multiple benefits. However, its proper implementation presupposes: (i) a change of cast of mind, both for businesses and employees, as well as (ii) a smooth transition "from the usual environment of control to an environment of mutual trust" (International Labour Office, 2016).

Telecommuting or telework constitutes a form of organizing and/or performing work by the use of information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis (European Commission, 2008). Telework can be provided remotely, and in particular from teleworkers' home (home-based telework) or by temporary workplaces during the commute of teleworkers (mobile teleworking), or even by specially organized office spaces for employees of different companies (telecentre) (Eurofound, 2017). The present research focuses on the first form of teleworking that is home-based telework, which concentrates the highest interest among the rest and is the one that is mostly applied in Greece.

Working from home can bring about significant benefits to both businesses and employees. In other words, it is yet another case where the evolution of technology and new communication needs can be served with a common and mutual benefit (Morgan, 2004). As for businesses, one of the main advantages is the increase of the productivity of employees due to the extension of the usable working time and the higher concentration that they achieve while working (Gibson, et al., 2002). The reduction of operating costs, the retention of human resources, as well as the decrease of absences from work are included in the benefits for businesses (Baruch, 2000; Bernardino, 2016; Clear and Dickson, 2005). But in a turbulent period, like this of the pandemic, telecommuting can lead to the business continuity. A business continuity plan enables an organization to keep operating to the best of its capability even in the case of a major disruption. A central part of that plan is the ability for the employees to work remotely wherever and whenever possible if they are unable to get into work or their work has been disrupted by something such as the pandemic of the new coronavirus. Telecommuting has plenty of benefits for employees too. Firstly, employees working remotely can reduce their daily expenses by saving money on gas and public transportation when they are not commuting to an office and on lunches, work attire and childcare. Plus, the flexibility of the time which is provided by teleworking to employees contributes to the harmonization between their work and personal life and thus increases the satisfaction that the employees obtain from their work (Chung, 2018).

Working from home may be an appealing and ideal solution for most of the employees around the world, especially in the context of the coronavirus disease spread. However, it should be noted that teleworking offers a wide range of challenges (Gerdeman, 2020). Some of the most frequent are related to: (i) the battle of a new set of "distractions", (ii) the lack of commitment as meetings, workshops or laboratories become virtual, (iii) technical issues that may prevent some employees from getting their work done and (iv) team members cannot engage directly with their colleagues and leaders (Choudhury, Koo and Li, 2020; Donnelly and Proctor-Thomson, 2015). The current study is focused on the analysis of the most common disruptive factors according to the surveyed telecommuters which mainly concern: (i) kids, (ii) interruptions from family members, (iii) social media, (iv) online shopping and (v) lack of office equipment. Responses to fight these challenges will be proposed for both businesses and employees.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach is focused on the implementation of a national level survey (raw data collection) by using self-administrated questionnaires as the main research tool. The methodological process was initially based on a systematic literature review on telecommuting and its contribution on both employees and businesses. Emphasis was given on scientific studies based on surveys, to select the most appropriate components and variables relative to the main research question.

A pilot study was included in order to: (i) exam the reliability of the selected variables, (ii) provide useful insights to the researchers with ideas that may not had foreseen, (iii) check for all the statistical and analytical procedures, (iv) reduce the number of unanticipated problems and (v) try out a number of alternative measures and then select those that produce the clearest results for the study. The pilot study included ten questionnaires. The design of the representative sample at national level was one of the most critical steps of the methodological approach.

The reference population of the survey represents telecommuters (eighteen years old and more) in Greece by gender, age groups, marital and employment status.

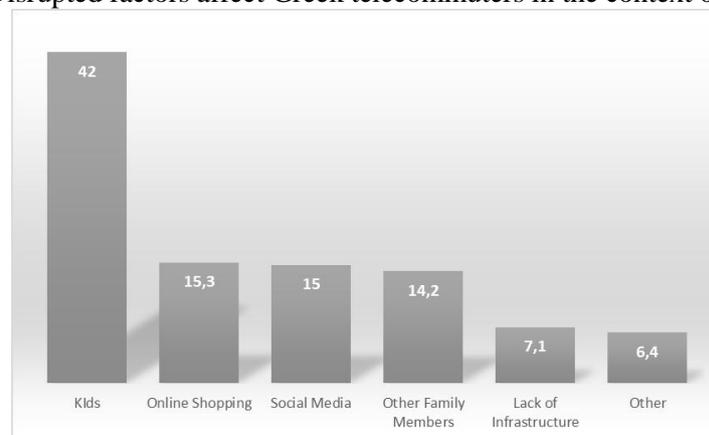
The implementation of the survey was based only on online questionnaires. The online survey was held from the 8th of April till the 8th of May and were collected 1,814 questionnaires. Although the online survey can lead to problems related to sampling, thus providing the ability to access to groups and individuals that would be difficult, if not impossible, to reach them face – to – face. Moreover, as the present survey was held in national level, the distribution of questionnaires by using the Internet gives the ability to approach a large number of workers from all regions of the country who use telecommuting during the specific period of time. As the main objective of the paper is to highlight the disruptive factors that affect telecommuters that working from home, a Cross Tabulation analysis was finally applied in order to determine the relationship between gender and the main disruptive factors. Additionally, Relative Risk Ratio (RR) was used to compare the frequency of disruptive factors of telecommuters occurring between males and females.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained indicate a non – significant trending between the gender of telecommuters and the case to be disrupted while working from home ($p=0.219>0.05$). Over half of teleworkers surveyed, both males and females, were interrupted during their working day, confirming that the COVID-19 context has undoubtedly changed the workplace in recent weeks. Most employees tried to adapt to a new concept in which they have to maintain a regular working routine and juggling various personal priorities.

Interruptions and distractions are some of the biggest obstacles of telework, as also confirmed by the relevant literature (O’Conaill and Frohlich, 1995; Van der Meulen, Van Baalen and Van Heck, 2012). Employees try to adjust their life during the COVID – 19 pandemic, but they have to deal with different disruptive factors. Almost 42% of the Greek telecommuters surveyed referred that kids disrupted them more during telework (Figure 1). Lockdowns and closure of all educational institutions in all levels for several weeks were the main reasons putting more pressure on families. With children straying at home, parents had to find the time to be devoted both on childcare and their work (International Organization of Employers, 2019).

Figure 1: Disrupted factors affect Greek telecommuters in the context of COVID-19



Source: Own creation

But the impact of kids is differentiated between males and females. In particular, the results of the study present that mothers who work remotely in Greece are 1.6 times more likely to be disrupted by kids comparatively to fathers (Table 1). This is due to the existing distribution of childcare duties in most families. Besides, across OECD countries, women spend on average slightly over 35 minutes each day on childcare activities, that is more than double the amount of time spent on childcare activities by men (OECD, 2020). Coronavirus has aggravated the difficulties of daily life of working mothers, as schools remained closed for more than two months and childcare provided by grandparents was discouraged due to the higher mortality rate of COVID – 19 for the elderly. As a result, families and mostly mothers have no choice but to take care their children by themselves. Moreover, female teleworkers have not only to look after their children, but have the responsibility for the housework, with most men expressing unwillingness to participate in them.

	%*	RR**	95% RR		p - value
Kids	50.9	1.61	1.431	1.807	0.000
Other family members	15.3	1.08	0.858	1.358	0.258
Lack of infrastructure	6.1	0.86	0.614	1.197	0.183
Social media	11.9	0.79	0.634	0.989	0.020
Online shopping	11.5	0.75	0.600	0.934	0.005
Other	4.3	0.67	0.466	0.970	0.017

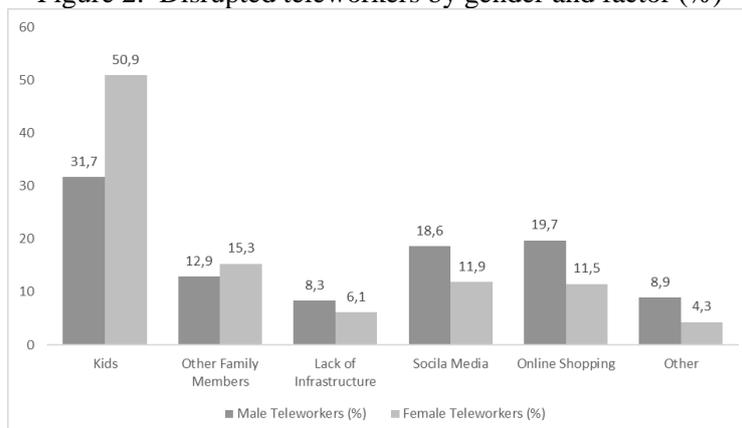
Source: Own creation

*Percentage of women who report discomfort during teleworking

**RR: Risk Ratio

While female teleworkers disrupted more by their kids, men are more likely to be distracted by online shopping during telecommuting. More precisely, 19.7% of men, compared to 11.5% of women, reported they spent most of their time while working from home on online shopping (Figure 2). This can be due to the fact that in a household men often take the responsibility of buying the daily products, as they are focused on the purchase without being affected of any emotions or someone's else opinion and they are more resistant to special offers, discounts and sales than women (Sarkar and Das, 2019).

Figure 2: Disrupted teleworkers by gender and factor (%)



Source: Own creation

Moreover, social networks have become a very useful tool for online shopping and, according to the participants of the present survey men tend to use more social media platforms than women during telecommuting (18.6% and 11.9%, respectively). Also, the fact that men are not involved in the same way as women do in the daily care of home and family members, they have more time to spend on social networks. Especially, in the period of quarantine where people were difficult to meet each other, the use of social networks increased. But becoming overly focused on constantly checking and refreshing can hinder someone's efforts to get actual work done from home. No matter the circumstances and despite the social isolation that teleworkers feel, too much time spent on social media can hurt mood and productivity.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has come as a profound shock to modern societies and has affected daily life worldwide. Especially in Greece, the spread of the coronavirus disease has severely affected both the economy and business activity. The measures that had been taken by the Greek Government to limit the spread of the new coronavirus included mainly curfew and suspension of both educational institutions of all levels and the majority of businesses.

As the implementation of the measures lasted for several weeks, telecommuting in both public and private sector was one of the most appropriate tools to cope with the severe economic and social consequences in the context of coronavirus. In Greece, until shortly before the pandemic only a minority performed their work duties from home. During the COVID-19 spread, the majority of workers in Greece had to transform their homes into remote workstations.

Telecommuting entails multiple benefits for teleworkers but working from home is not as flexible as it may seem. There are many factors that can lead to the distraction of employees work from home. Disruptive factors differ per gender. Women that use telecommuting reported that they are more likely to be distracted by kids than men, as mothers involved more in childcare. The decision of Greek authorities to close schools and day-care facilities for several weeks made telecommuting for mothers a great challenge as they have to balance between family life and career. As the new coronavirus become widespread many working mothers are faced with limited or no childcare options. Governments and employers should cooperate on this issue and support those mothers in a numerous way including though childcare referral systems, subsidies, and flexible work arrangements. Especially, different types of flexible work arrangements will give working parents the ability to care their children and family members without feeling stressed.

From the other side, men declared that online shopping and the use of social media are responsible for their distraction while working from home. For them, the coronavirus pandemic seems to have created a higher need for emotional support between family members, friends, as well as colleagues than women. Combined with the focus on the use of social media platforms, men spent a lot of time on online shopping while working remotely too. In that case, employers can use pioneer ways to engage employees in using social media for the purpose of their work. Examples of social media tools that can be used from businesses are the following: (i) a wiki to allow employees to collaborate, (ii) blogs to give employees an opportunity to share their knowledge and perspectives and allow others to comment and participate, (iii) microblogging (as in Twitter) to duplicate the “water cooler” experience of employees engaged in casual conversation about what they’re working on and (iv) social networking (as Facebook) to build relationships.

Telework does not eliminate the benefits of face-to-face work and social interaction. But at the time that social distancing is required, telework can become a valuable tool for the continuity of business and economic activity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank my supervisor Prof. Marie – Noelle Duquenne for guiding this work with interest. I am grateful to her for setting high standards and giving me the freedom to explore.

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