FROM HOME OFFICE TO FACE-TO-FACE WORK: THE PERCEPTION OF WORKERS IN TECHNOLOGY COMPANIES

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Abstract

This article aims to understand the perception of workers who work in two technology companies, regarding working conditions for returning in person after three years of working from home. The study is characterized as observational and descriptive. Methodologically, it is considered an experiential report employing a qualitative paradigm. The study was conducted in two technology companies located in the metropolitan area and Greater Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul). A semi-structured interview was used as an instrument for data collection. The group of participants consisted of 63 workers. The results of the interviews constituted three categories classified into positive aspects: facilitation of exchanges, interaction and socialization; negative aspects: travel time, adjustment of personal and family routines; and suggestions for improvements: from home office work to in-person work. The results indicate that workers' perception of returning to work is directly related to the positive or negative experience lived while working from home. The workers' main suggestion points to hybrid work, in which workers can enjoy the benefits of both types of work. The experience gained from the period of remote work can provide adaptation to new work relationships, as long as the central point is the worker's health.

Keywords: Home ôffice, Return to in-person work, Participatory ergonomics.

1. INTRODUCTION

The area of information and communication technology has stood out in the Brazilian market, both for the generation of jobs and for its representation in the national economy. When assessing the relevance of this area, the Association of Information and Communication Technology and Digital Technologies Companies (BRASSCOM) highlights that it already represents 6.6% of the Brazilian GDP, and that an average of 150 thousand jobs are generated annually in Brazil in this area (BRASSCOM, 2024). With the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic,

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it was necessary for this sector, as well as many others, to adapt its work organization in order to comply with the health regulations in force.

After the critical period, the post-pandemic scenario brought several reflections on the transformations of work that were necessary, both nationally and internationally. Bridi et al. (2024) highlight that although there was a growth in *home office* work even before the pandemic, during it, almost 9 million workers transferred their professional activities to the home environment. Among these professionals, many are part of the area of information and communication technology.

Telecommuting or *home office* work uses technologies such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, for work that is carried out outside the company (International Labor Organization, 2020). According to Requena (2007), the expansion of a hybrid habitation, that is, living and working in the same environment, was made possible by technologies that connect all users. However, although work equipment and internet access are essential to allow the *home office* to be carried out, there are other elements necessary for the constitution of an adequate workplace, which are not always possible and/or reality for workers.

In this context, ergonomics becomes essential for understanding working conditions, and can provide the transformation of workers' experience regarding *home office* and/or face-to-face work. According to the International Labor Organization (2018), working conditions involve much more than the organization of the work layout, encompassing issues related to working time, remuneration, and physical and mental demands. Macroergonomics is the approach that considers the integration of cognitive and organizational elements and personal, technological, project, organizational process and internal and external interaction (Brazilian Association of Ergonomics and Human Factors, 2024).

When considering the macroergonomic view, Guimarães (2010) describes the systemic analysis of the company, which should prioritize the worker's opinion. For Petry et al. (2023), the worker should be understood as an active individual who helps maintain his or her own health, and for this, it is estimated that organizations allow the approximation of the safety culture, communication, and organizational rules. Carvalho & Gemma (2023) address that work should allow workers to recognize the elements that prevent the action or execution of a job well done, as well as allow workers to help solve problems, so that the transformation of work actually occurs.

When the present study was carried out, the opposite path to the pandemic period was occurring, that is, leaving home *office* work and returning to face-to-face work in companies. In general, companies followed the sanitary releases in accordance with government agencies to determine the return to work. However, in some corporations, the return was carried out following the company's own policy. Although face-to-face work was the reality of workers before the pandemic period, the return to face-to-face work had implications in terms of the readaptation of workers to working conditions, whether in relation to the physical arrangement of workstations and environment, or even in terms of the organization of work. In view of the above, the objective of this study was focused on understanding the perception of workers who work in two technology companies, about the working conditions for the face-to-face return after three years of *home office*.

2. MATERIALS AND METHOD

The study is characterized by being of an applied nature and as for the objective, it is configured as observational and descriptive. According to Prodanov & Freitas (2013), descriptive research happens when the researcher records and reports the observed events without, however, interfering in them. As for the technical procedures, field research was used, which consists of the search for information for the solution of a problem (Prodanov & Freitas, 2013).

The field of study was composed of two medium and large technology and communication companies, located in the metropolitan region and greater Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul - Brazil). For data collection, semi-structured interviews and observation of work activities were used as instruments. According to Braatz, Rocha and Gemma (2021), interviews, among other resources, become one of the forms of interaction with the subjects and are part of the data collection stage, allowing an analysis of the company and the working population. The interview script included questions about the characteristics of the workers' profile, such as gender, age group, length of work in the company, education, and three broader questions about the interviewees' perception of work, namely: "what do you think of your work?", "what is good and what could be improved?" and "do you have suggestions for improvement?".

The selection of participants was carried out in a non-probabilistic manner, for convenience, so that it covered the different sectors of the company. The sectors that participated in the two companies were: sales, development, technical support, finance and *marketing*. Initially, the objective of the study was clarified to the workers, where the

confidentiality of the answers was emphasized. In total, interviews were conducted with 63 workers from the two companies, 28 from Company 1 and 35 from Company 2. According to Minayo (2017, p. 10), in qualitative research there is no way to define the saturation point in advance, which is reached when the researcher "found the internal logic of his object of study – which is also a subject – in all its connections and interconnections". Thus, the number of workers interviewed is related to the diversity of activities performed in the two companies and the importance and need to obtain representation of all hierarchies and work activities.

Data collection lasted one month. In Company 1, the participants had been working in person for a month. In Company 2, participants were returning in the same month in which the survey was conducted. The interviews were carried out in person, individually, in a reserved environment, during the working day on the premises of the companies, each worker expressed his opinion freely. The duration of each interview was related to the length of the interviewees' speech, and each one lasted an average of 20 minutes. The answers were transcribed into an electronic form, and later analyzed.

The analysis and discussion of the data took place under the qualitative paradigm, through the categorization and triangulation of data. According to Minayo (2017), qualitative research is attentive to sociocultural issues, where values, opinions, representations, forms of relationship, behaviors, practices, and others are observed, and highlights the relevance of the interviewer in finding the connection with the subject and object of the study. The author observes that when interviewing someone from a group, it is considered a personal and collective statement, thus, the workers who participated in the data collection come to represent the reality experienced by the group and the work reality in which they are inserted.

As for categorization, Minayo (2001) states that this occurs from the exhaustive reading of the collected material, enabling the association of narratives that present similarities to each other, which makes it possible to establish discussion categories. Thus, after exhaustive reading of the answers, considering the number of interviews conducted, the answers obtained were divided into three categories, which will be discussed in the results and discussion section. After categorization, data triangulation was performed. According to Marcondes & Brisola (2014), it happens during the presentation and discussion of the data, based on the presentation of the data collected, the dialogue with the authors who are a reference in the theme and the author's position on the reality addressed.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews, initially, some characteristics of the profile of the interviewees of the two companies that participated in this study will be presented: 49% are male and 51% are female. Most of the interviewees were between 20 and 29 years old, with complete higher education, and had been in the companies for more than 5 years. Regarding the characteristics of the work activities, the human/computer interface stands out, where 100% of the interviewees used workstations with a video terminal (monitor and/or *notebook*). Chart 1 shows the data regarding the profile of the workers of the two companies that participated in the interviews.

Table 1: Profile of the workers interviewed

Sex				
Female			Male	
33			30	
Age				
Under 20 years old	20 to 29 years old	30 to 39 years old	40 to 49 years old	More than 50 years
1	32	24	6	0
Time in the Company					
Less than 1 year	1-2 years	2-3 years	3-4 years	4-5 years	More than 5 years
8	13	8	4	9	21
Schooling			
Complete High School	Incomplete Higher Education	Complete Higher Education	Postgraduate studies
2	20	30	11

Source: Authors (2024)

The answers obtained during the interviews were classified into 3 categories, which are: positive aspects: facilitation of exchanges, interaction and socialization; negative aspects: commuting time, adequacy of personal and family routines; and suggestions for improvements: from *home office* to face-to-face work.

3.1. Positive aspects: facilitation of exchanges, interaction and socialization

The positive aspects reflect the opinion of workers who identified satisfactory conditions in relation to the return to face-to-face work. In this context, the workers mention that face-to-face work is important because it provides the opportunity to contact with colleagues, optimizing the good progress of the work and socialization with the group, which was highlighted in the following narrative: "I like to come to the company to socialize". In consonance, Andrade & Tonin (2024) highlight social isolation and the loss of integration and

bond with the organization as disadvantages of working from home. In the companies evaluated, socialization as an integration factor was observed during the evaluation of work organization. This was exemplified by the workers when they mentioned the moments of collective snacks organized by the work groups, informal conversations that took place during the breaks during the working day and that provided a light and relaxed work atmosphere.

Another positive aspect related to face-to-face work emerged from narratives that highlight the importance of the work done in the company, in addition to the positive emphasis on work as a source of learning. According to Brunoro et al. (2021), one of the fundamental aspects related to mental health is the possibility of identifying the individual with what he or she does, providing opportunities for professional growth, the construction of health, and self-fulfillment. For Másculo & Vidal (2011), the search for knowledge becomes one of the new aspirations of workers. The authors point out that when knowledge management permeates work relations and workers are seen as associates, knowledge is valued and workers are more satisfied and committed to their activities in the professional and personal spheres (Másculo & Vidal, 2011).

Also with regard to the psychological impact of returning to face-to-face work, Ribeiro et al. (2021) presented results of national and international research on the negative effects on mental health of telework, highlighting the following aspects: difficulty in managing the beginning and end of the workday, emotional and social dissatisfaction also generated by isolation, conflicts in personal relationships, increased workload, lack of qualification, and difficulty in growing in the company. The authors also state that the impacts of telework on workers' health depend, among other aspects, on the management of these processes (Ribeiro et al., 2021). In consonance, teamwork was also mentioned as a positive aspect of returning to face-to-face work, and some workers highlight this as a benefit, due to the ease of solving problems from direct contact with colleagues and managers. This aspect was compared with some communication barriers, which occur in remote work. For example, the need to reconcile agendas to hold meetings in order to solve simple and low-complexity issues, which are easily solved in person.

For Costa (2013), the physical distance that teleworkers face, when working in a sphere culturally different from the organizational sphere, generates distancing from the social and professional interaction that work in the office represents. It is a fact that a face-to-face dialogue allows a quick response, when compared to the return generated by an electronic means, considering that the recipient may interpret the message as not being a priority among his

attributions or interpret it wrongly. Costa (2013) adds that telework is a reflection of the organization's resources and discourses, and a review of organizational issues is relevant to establish good management.

Thus, based on the results of the interviews, the positive aspects emphasized by the workers are related to living in a group, through integration and exchange of ideas, as well as to the facilitation of direct and objective communication for problem solving. The highlighted aspects have a positive impact on the well-being of the group and the efficiency of the work routine.

3.2. Negative aspects: commuting time, readjustment of personal and family routines

The main negative aspect in the return to work, highlighted by the workers, is related to the commute to the company, especially for workers who live in other cities. The loss of time in traffic during rush hours was highlighted during the interviews as a factor of emotional exhaustion. Some workers highlight the need for more than 3 hours a day to commute from home to work and vice versa and express themselves as follows: "commuting is the most tiring". According to Iida & Guimarães (2016), the health and safety of workers will be preserved if capacities and limitations are considered, respecting certain physiological and cognitive limits, preventing situations of stress, fatigue, risks of accidents and occupational diseases. In this context, "travel" time would be one of the factors for choosing *home office* work and reducing stress with commuting. In view of the provisions, the need for public policies that promote more effective means of public transport, safer highways and more prepared drivers is highlighted. Another interesting measure would be the organization of working hours in order to reduce the number of people commuting at the same time.

The workers are aware that the work structure offered by the company is better than the structure used at home, as highlighted in the following statement: "the company has a better structure, when compared to working at home". However, the stress generated by traffic is higher when compared to the discomfort generated by the unorganized environment or workplace, the workers report: "daily traffic is exhausting, and that's why I prefer to work from home". Castañon et al. (2016), in a superficial analysis, states that *home office* work has more advantages than disadvantages, however, when observing the practice, the problems identified are the same as in the company's work environment, if they do not have adequate intervention. Thus, one of the measures to alleviate the constraints of *home office* work for the health of

workers is to provide guidance on the importance of working conditions regardless of where it is carried out. The following must be observed: the work environment, furniture, noise and lighting. In this context, the challenge for companies is centered on offering remote workers a work environment that provides comfort and well-being.

Another aspect mentioned in the interviews was the difficulty in adapting the family/personal routine in returning to face-to-face work. According to the participants, working from *home* made it easier to reconcile work activities with the family routine, mentioned as an example: taking and picking up children from school, shopping and going to the gym. In this aspect, Iida & Guimarães (2016) highlight that worker satisfaction results from the relationship between the needs and expectations of each individual, which ends up generating a feeling of well-being and comfort. For Castañon et al. (2016), *working from home* allowed the individual to be more integrated with the family, flexible schedules, and freedom to meet work demands. Andrade & Tonin (2024) highlight that although telecommuting has a disadvantage in relation to an increase in demand for results and difficulty in professional advancement, the quality of life promoted by flexibility is a determining factor for choosing *home office* work. In line with the other authors, other studies carried out in Brazil point out that *home office* work allows for greater flexibility in schedules, reduced costs with transportation, food and clothing, improved quality of life by expanding family life and also increased productivity (Almeida, 2018; Melo, 2011; Gomes, 2002; Hau & Todescat, 2018). It is understood that, considering that the workers experienced *home office* work for a period of 3 years, there was the opportunity to understand some aspects that before this period were not even questioned. From this, the difficulties of reorganizing the work routine back to the company with family and social activities became more evident.

In general, the negative aspects of returning to face-to-face work are centered on the issue of commuting time to the company. All opinions that point to the negative aspects of returning to work highlight traffic as a factor that favors the choice for remote work. Corporations, through a strategic vision and integrated approach, will be able to minimize the effects of commuting and optimize work.

3.3. Suggestions for improvements: from *home office* to face-to-face work

The suggestions pointed out by the workers indicate a way to minimize complaints. It is noteworthy that the testimonies were collected in 2023, in the period of return to face-to-face work, which represents a moment of readjustment. During the interviews, comments emerged,

which represent the desire to help the company in the search for solutions. This premise is one of the tools of macroergonomics, which invites the worker to think and assist in the implementation of improvements.

When asked about suggestions for improvements, the workers suggested making work more flexible, through the hybrid format, and expressed themselves as follows: "I would like to return to the hybrid system", as a measure to mitigate the obstacles generated by the commute to the company. The hybrid format, which is characterized by a few days of remote work and a few days of work at the company's headquarters, was a strategy suggested by the workers. Costa (2013) points out that the virtualization of organizations constitutes a form of work organization with qualitatively different characteristics from the traditional ones, by reducing the distance and space and time between work and home, and transforming work that is no longer a place to go, to something that can be done at any time and place. On the other hand, Bridi et al. (2024) point out that *working from home* has replaced the stress of traffic with other sources of tension, caused by the adaptation to changes in work activities and goals, associated with difficulties in dealing with some technological tools and procedures that were previously unknown. The authors also point to the issues of adjustments with the domestic environment as a source of physical and psychological exhaustion. Ferreira (2022) observes that, with the end of social isolation, labor relations should undergo a process of reformulation. To this end, the balance between productivity issues and goals must be evaluated, associated with the convenience of temporal and geographic mobility. The most relevant aspect for the author is related to new management practices based on a greater degree of trust and consequently greater autonomy, which generate a feeling of appreciation on the part of workers.

Considering the factors exposed, it was observed during the interviews that there is a duality of feelings of the workers regarding the return to face-to-face work, it was observed that the justifications for being satisfied or not with the return to face-to-face work are directly related to the individual experiences of each worker. The narratives that value *home office work* are imbued with positive feelings and perceptions experienced during the period of remote work. Workers who report satisfaction with the return to face-to-face work, on the other hand, comment on negative situations of the *home office*.

The workers pointed out two situations that justify the benefits of *working from home*: first, the issues of commuting, and second, greater possibility of concentration and focus, especially in strictly administrative and financial activities. According to Castañon et al. (2016), working from home requires a lot of motivation, discipline and concentration to avoid

distractions that can lead to loss of productivity. Regarding this aspect, it was observed during the interviews that the family reality directly interferes in this concentration to perform work activities. The reality of a worker who lives alone or manages to be in a restricted environment in his own home, points out that *home office* work allows greater concentration. For workers who have a different family structure, that is, sharing a house with other people and not having their own space to work, they tend to feel harmed in relation to the results of their work.

Another aspect that emerged from the narratives as a positive characteristic was the added value to quality of life, especially for workers who move from other cities, in addition to greater family life and longer time to take care of their health, when they perform remote work. Dal Forno & Finger (2015), describe that quality of life at work reflects not only on how individuals perform the task better, but how corporations can allow workers' participation in decision-making. In this aspect, the results of the interviews were part of an ergonomics report, and the results were presented to the companies in specific meetings with the management, managers and workers, making the results known. However, it is the responsibility of each corporation to evaluate the appropriate measures and the management of the problems from a participatory and integrated management, according to the reality of work in which they are inserted.

In this way, the suggestions point out that hybrid work can be an alternative to ensure more free time and consequently increase the quality of life. However, in the hybrid modality, workers would still have the advantages of face-to-face work, which indicates a balance between the positive and negative aspects pointed out during the interviews.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study aimed to understand the perception of workers who work in two companies in the technology area, about the working conditions for the face-to-face return after three years of *home office*. Based on the results obtained, it is observed that although the companies were organized to return to face-to-face work, by ensuring an adequate work environment, some workers showed dissatisfaction in returning to face-to-face work, especially due to the conveniences of *home office* work, especially in issues related to commuting. For other workers, the return to face-to-face work was seen with satisfaction, as it allowed for a more organized structure when compared to the home environment. This can be one of the highlights for companies that seek *to work from home continuously* or hybridly, that is, to ensure that working

conditions are adequate to the requirements of the tasks performed and to find ways to assess and mitigate ergonomic risks in accordance with the legislation.

In short, both the *home office* and face-to-face work have positive aspects, which can be used to ensure the satisfaction and well-being of workers, associated with productivity and quality of the services provided. It is believed that further research can be carried out to verify whether the initial perception of returning to work persists after a period of acclimatization in the company. In terms of the limitation of the study carried out, the non-monitoring of the resolutions of the problems highlighted by the workers in the two companies is mentioned. The most effective and efficient result for workers and companies must be evaluated by each institution, based on participatory and integrated management, according to the reality in which they find themselves, with the health of workers being the central axis.

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