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Article

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Article

For Telework, Please Dial 7—Qualitative Study on the Impacts of Telework on the Well-Being of Contact Center Employees during the COVID19 Pandemic in Portugal

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has made teleworking a widespread form of work for contact center workers in Portugal, who are already used to work processes supported by technological platforms and digital workflows, but with little adherence to remote work. Deepening knowledge about the impact of teleworking on well-being at work is a relevant issue in the context of organizational literature. We conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with contact center workers who work in a large Portuguese company that provides fixed and mobile communication services, as well as customer service platforms. The interviews took place in April and May 2022. All participants had already carried out their functions in person and telework, and they were able to assess how telework added or took away their well-being at work. With the application of thematic analysis, seven themes (the basis for the title “For Telework, Please Dial 7”) emerged that characterize teleworking as being capable of reinforcing well-being at work: performance, relationship, money, workplace, technology, time, and family. These results contribute to the reinforcement of the growing literature on what contributes to increasing well-being at work, and alert leadership and organizational management are needed to properly configure telework to generate a positive dynamic that fulfils employees’ expectations and reinforces the organization’s sustainability.



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Keywords: telework; well-being at work; human resources management; contact center; COVID-19

1. Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19), which originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan at the end of 2019 (Hu et al. 2021). Consequently, the authorities declared a State of Emergency, and several measures were adopted to protect the health of the population, including a general duty of home confinement and the mandatory implementation of teleworking whenever the duties performed allowed it (Howe et al. 2020; ILO 2021). In the pandemic context, telework has gained an importance never known before, and it has become the form of work provision for hundreds of thousands of Portuguese people (Tavares et al. 2021). The requirement of voluntary adherence to the teleworking regime was not ensured during the COVID-19 pandemic (Kitagawa et al. 2021).

Technological advances in recent decades have made telework a viable alternative to face-to-face work (Santana and Cobo 2020; Türkeş and Vuță 2022), but it was the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that made it widespread in different geographies and sectors of activity (Howe et al. 2020; ILO 2021) as a way of reconciling the reduction in the risk of contagion with the necessary continuity of work provision (Soubelet-Fagoaga et al. 2022). In Portugal, with the COVID-19 pandemic, telework became mandatory whenever the functions in question allowed it and the worker had the appropriate conditions to perform them from home (Sousa-Uva et al. 2021). Contact centers, which operate through technological platforms and digital workflows (Chicu et al. 2019; Holman 2003), quickly

reconfigured themselves, and their work teams moved from face-to-face work to telework. Even in contact centers, and likewise with other European Union countries, telework was a rare situation in the Portuguese reality before the COVID-19 pandemic (Adrjan et al. 2021), and the effects of its accelerated adoption deserve to be studied, namely its impact on well-being at work (Akroyd et al. 2006). Contact center work is associated with high emotional distress, stress, and burnout (Gonçalves-Candeias et al. 2021; O’Brady and Doellgast 2021).

The main objective of this study, which included a theoretical review of the concepts of “teleworking” and “well-being at work” and carried out semi-structured interviews with contact center operators, was to understand under what conditions teleworking can be a source of well-being for employees and positively change the aggressive reality associated with working in contact centers. If telework can positively influence well-being at work, it will positively contaminate other organizational variables, and it can also reinforce the efficiency and sustainability of organizations (Bakker et al. 2023; Santos and Lousã 2022). In the following sections, we discuss the concepts of well-being at work and telework, focusing on the Portuguese context and functions in contact centers. Regarding Materials and Methods, we focus on the research approach, participants, instrument and data collection procedures, as well as data analysis. The results are presented in a separate section, and they are subsequently discussed in relation to the theoretical framework. Finally, the practical implication for organizations and managers, limitations, and future research directions and conclusions of the study are presented.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Telework

Telework refers to professional activity carried out at a distance, in which the processes of communication and relationship between co-workers are carried out by means of information technologies (Bentley et al. 2016; Bergum 2009). Telework can be carried out at the employee’s home or at any place chosen by the employee. It can also take place in satellite offices or shared centers owned by the employer or companies contracted by the employer (Rosenfield and Alves 2011). This way of work provision appears in the literature with the sometimes undifferentiated designations of telecommuting, remote working, telework, as well as home office, homework, or working from home (Allen et al. 2015; Eurofound 2020), and it is characterized by the presence of three cumulative elements: 1. a physical location different from the company’s premises or usual place of work; 2. the use of technological requirements; 3. remote communication circuits (Figueiredo et al. 2021). Consequently, functions associated with handling, assembly, and industrial production are not considered teleworkable (Bamieh and Ziegler 2022), along with many other functions whose physical presence is fundamental and cannot be bridged with technological circuits. Telework can be carried out in full or through a hybrid regime, in which regular periods of travel and presence of the employee on the company’s premises are foreseen (Moglia et al. 2021). The reinforcement of telework also creates many challenges for organizations (Aderaldo et al. 2017), both in terms of how to efficiently design, manage, monitor, and evaluate work and in terms of the need to consolidate, transmit, and reinforce an organizational culture that establishes standards of action, a sense of belonging, and retention factors for members of the organization (Adamovic 2022; Lewis 2020; Muller and Niessen 2019; Windeler et al. 2017).

With telework, organizations are able to increase their ability to attract qualified professionals in more distant regions (Haubrich and Froehlich 2020), reducing costs with physical spaces and equipment (Bucater 2016; Barros and Silva 2010; Diab-Bahman and Al-Enzi 2020) and improving some organizational indicators, such as work flexibility, employee’s turnover, absenteeism, negative informal communication, motivation, higher work autonomy and morale, productivity, and competitiveness (Filardi et al. 2020; Harpaz 2002; Morgan 2020; Nakrošienė et al. 2019; Nogueira and Patini 2012; Pérez et al. 2002; Viégas et al. 2013; Ward and Shabha 2001). On the other hand, telework penalizes data and information security (Taschetto and Froehlich 2019), the monitoring of work, and the

creation of strong, cohesive, and high-performance teams (Barros and Silva 2010). Focusing on people, the literature shows that teleworking has a positive impact on well-being at work because it reduces travel, costs, and stress (Vilarinho et al. 2021; Rocha and Amador 2018; Almeida et al. 2021), strengthens the sense of autonomy and flexibility (Tremblay 2002; Bucater 2016), and promotes greater social inclusion by offering new opportunities to professionals with disabilities or in the early or late stages of their professional careers (Figueiredo et al. 2021; Rocha and Amador 2018). In the opposite direction, teleworking penalizes well-being at work when it requires more working time (Sørensen 2017; Vega et al. 2015), poses professional and technological challenges without ensuring proper training (Tavares et al. 2021), hinders professional progression (Hau and Todescat 2018), creates connectivity and physical inactivity problems (Kossek et al. 2015; Sharit et al. 2009), mood changes, and sleep disorders (Costa et al. 2022), as well as exacerbates work-family conflict (Andrade and Lousã 2021). From a social point of view, on the one hand, teleworking contributes to the reduction in the circulation of people and vehicles, with positive consequences for the protection of the environment and greater availability of employees for non-professional life activities (Eom et al. 2016; Figueiredo et al. 2021; Filardi et al. 2020); on other hand, it reduces quality social relationships associated with work (Athanasiadou and Theriou 2021), with potential negative consequences on people's health and organizations' efficiency (Beckel and Fisher 2022).

2.1.1. The Portuguese Context and the COVID-19 Pandemic

The first teleworking experiences in Portugal occurred in 1995 in the national telecommunications company—Portugal Telecom (Figueiredo et al. 2021). However, the legal framework for teleworking only emerged in 2003, establishing the obligation to conclude a written contract, which must include the conditions under which teleworking will be carried out and rewarded. It also establishes a legal framework regarding the ownership and use of information and communication technologies, equal opportunities, and privacy, as well as the right to participation and collective representation. Until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2020, teleworking in Portugal was restricted to very specific organizational and functional contexts with low implementation, and it was not a working modality in which Portuguese organizations and employees envisaged possibilities for strengthening, respectively, organizational efficiency or well-being at work (Andrade and Lousã 2021; Sousa-Uva et al. 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a serious socio-economic crisis across the planet that has affected the safety, health, and quality of life of populations with a strong impact on the organization and delivery of work (Queirós and Vale 2020). Although a growing trend of teleworking in the world was notorious in recent decades, the pandemic has produced an abrupt acceleration in this process (Lunde et al. 2022). In Portugal, at the end of April 2020, in the most critical phase of the restrictions to contain the pandemic, 8% of employees were teleworking, which corresponds to 26th place among European Union countries and is far from the figures presented by Denmark (38%) and Sweden (31%), and it only surpasses Italy (5%) and Greece (6%) (Eurofound 2020). Between 79.1% (INE 2020) and 91% (Barbosa 2020) of Portuguese teleworkers stated that the main reason for working from home was due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Telework during the pandemic has been an exception, as no written agreement was concluded between the parties, nor was there any prior verification of the existence of appropriate conditions, such as home workspace, employee training, or the redesign and optimization of work processes (Kitagawa et al. 2021). During long periods of the pandemic, the exercise of telework functions had to be articulated with the parental accompaniment of children in their daily tasks, including school tasks, as educational establishments also adopted remote working (Tavares et al. 2021). Telework in a pandemic context, while it has protected the health of employees from the risk of COVID-19 contamination, has shown inefficiencies in work-family reconciliation (Ipsen et al. 2021), ergonomic and comfortable workspaces at home (Stempel and Siestrup 2022), and the difficulty of separating profes-

sional and personal life, with the consequent psychological strain (Campbell and Gavett 2021). The excessive use of technology and digital tools is also a sign as a justification for lower well-being at work, making the adoption of the so-called “digital detox” (Syvertsen and Enli 2020), which refers to the partial and gradual replacement of “non-digital” tasks and with greater social interaction, a necessary action to reinforce well-being at work (Schmitt et al. 2021). Given the accelerated adoption of telework in Portugal during the pandemic period, several situations of conflict and doubt arose between employers and employees regarding the rights and duties associated with teleworking. As a result, in early 2022 a legislative package came into force that extends the right to telework to parents with minor children, obliges organizations to pay for telework-related expenses such as energy and internet, and prevents them from contacting their employees during rest periods, guaranteeing them the so-called “right to disconnect” (Ramos 2022).

2.1.2. Telework in Contact Centers

A call center or call center/attendant is defined as “a dedicated operation in which computer-utilizing employees receive inbound—or make outbound—telephone calls, with those calls processed and controlled either by an Automatic Call Distribution (ACD) or predictive dialing system” (Taylor and Bain 1999, p. 102). In addition to the ACD system that channels calls automatically to waiting operators, the call center uses IVR (Inter-active Voice Recognition) technology to route calls according to predefined workflows, ensuring more efficiency in customer service, more specialized services, and more customer satisfaction (Sá and Sá 2014). Call centers are referred to as contact centers when they integrate interactions with customers through telephone contacts and other types of communication, such as email, online chat, SMS, and social networks (Madrugá 2009). Contact centers are considered the successors of call centers (Andrade et al. 2020), and they have their strong dissemination associated with the development and use of the internet and social media in the last decades (Płaza and Pawlik 2021).

The contact center operator assumes himself as an intermediary in the relationship between the organization and the customer, and he can be called a teleconsultant or manager (Buscatto 2002), telephone agent (Del Bono and Bulloni 2008), contact staff (Sá and Sá 2014), or a telemarketing operator (Venco 2006) or just operators (Roque 2013). The contact center operator is positioned at the “front door” of the organization, ensuring the management of dissatisfactions, doubts, compliments, or suggestions from customers or potential customers, playing a primary and strategic role in customer loyalty (Andrade et al. 2020). Soft skills are very relevant in the profile of the contact center operator, so behavioral skills, such as verbal communication, empathy, resilience, and self-motivation, tend to be prioritized at the time of admission (Thompson et al. 2002). Operators are provided with an answering script, and all calls made and received are logged and recorded, as well as the time taken to deal with enquiries, assessment of the outcome of calls, and any time exceeded by the caller (Venco 2006). Contact center work is highly monitored (Sá and Sá 2014) through several KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) to assess attendance, performance, customer satisfaction, and continuous improvement (Andrade et al. 2020; Płaza and Pawlik 2021; Venco 2006). The perception that the organization monitors “everything and all the time” creates great pressure on the contact center operator, who, when he or she notices any indication of low performance, soon begins to experience the anxiety and emotional exhaustion associated with the possibility of being fired (Lima 2007). In some cases, the employee acts proactively and quits the job (Venco 2006). According to the Health of the Contact Centre 2021 Report (Calabrio 2021), 96% of contact center workers report being exposed to stressful situations on a weekly basis. Contact center work is also associated with a lack of ergonomics, loss or reduction in vision and hearing, as well as musculoskeletal injuries related to poor posture or repetitive efforts (Santos et al. 2018; Taylor and Bain 1999). On the other hand, greater investment in the improvement and quality of work in contact centers increases job satisfaction, affective commitment, and quality at work, and it contributes to the reduction in turnover rates (Van der Aa et al.

2012). Enhancing the quality of HRM practices is also shown to increase well-being at work and mitigate the negative impacts associated with working in contact centers (Gonçalves-Candeias et al. 2021; Holman 2004). Contact center work is considered neotayloristic (Chambel and Castanheira 2010; Grenier 2004) because it requires the use and fulfilment of predefined workflows, based on technological platforms that do not allow alternative ways of working. The “one best way” premise that characterizes Taylorism (Taylor 1911) finds, in contact center work, a faithful form of operationalization, with a reduction in employee autonomy and an increased focus on maximizing organizational efficiency. In addition, contact center work is characterized by relationships of a transactional nature, with the promise of eventual rewards in return for the quality and quantity of work performed, duly monitored by the immense KPIs that ensure the surveillance of all work (Peaucelle 2000; Santos and Marques 2006).

2.2. Well-Being at Work

Well-being at work translates the quality of the overall work experience (e.g., Guest 2017; Kazemi 2017; Kowalski and Loretto 2017; Taris and Schaufeli 2015; Wijngaards et al. 2021) and, as proposed by Grant et al. (2007), integrates psychological well-being, associated with the pleasure and fulfilment that the employee obtains at work (e.g., Brown et al. 2012; Daniels et al. 2017; Huta and Waterman 2014; Kets 2000; Ragins and Dutton 2007; Wright 2006; Wrzesniewski et al. 2003), physical well-being, associated with the level of risk of physical and psychosocial illnesses and injuries to which the employee is exposed (e.g., Baluch 2017; Danna and Griffin 1999; Faragher et al. 2005; Ilies et al. 2010; Imhof and Andresen 2018; Peccei et al. 2013; Schneider and Harknett 2019), and social well-being, associated with the quality of social relationships at work (e.g., Colbert et al. 2016; De Simone et al. 2018; Dimotakis et al. 2011; Khoreva and Wechtler 2018; Peccei et al. 2013; Ragins and Dutton 2007; Van De Voorde et al. 2012), both in terms of their regularity and intensity, as well as their consistency and ethical value (e.g., Edgar et al. 2017; Luu 2020; Santos and Lousã 2022). Well-being at work stems from “cold” cognitive and “hot” emotional appraisals (Fisher 2010; Wright and Huang 2012), and it is more than the absence of illness or physical or psychological pathologies (Antonovsky 1987; Bertrand and Stimec 2011; De Chatillon and Richard 2015); therefore, it is aligned with the notion of health advocated by the WHO (1948, p. 16): “Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” Well-being at work comes from the prevalence of positive emotions and affections over negative emotions and affections, the development of knowledge/skills, the achievement of life goals, physical and psychological safety, and a socially active and rich work environment. The promotion of well-being at work has been increasingly valued by organizations, which are moving from a paradigm of people management, based on retention to a new paradigm based on the promotion of well-being at work (Peccei and Van De Voorde 2019), reconciling economic advantages with the fulfilment of their ethical duty to provide a healthy and valuable work experience for all the people who are part of their work teams (Guest 2017).

Employees are the most valuable resources for the function of organizations (Luthans and Youssef 2004; Boxall and Purcell 2008), and the organization needs to obtain the maximum possible return by efficiently optimising existing resources (Kalleberg 2009), by resorting to work intensification, increased flexibility, and precariousness (Imhof and Andresen 2018; Kowalski and Loretto 2017; Baluch 2017) or, alternatively, enhancing well-being at work (Roehling et al. 2000). Evidence that well-being at work has positive impacts on a number of organizational outcomes, including increased motivation, commitment and engagement (Bakker and Demerouti 2007), organizational productivity (Akroyd et al. 2006), effort and performance of leaders and employees (Colbert et al. 2016; Fisher 2003; Wright and Cropanzano 2004), organizational change (Daniels et al. 2017), organizational citizenship behaviors (Xu et al. 2019), customer satisfaction and employee retention (Luthans et al. 2007; Wright and Bonett 2007), physical health and reduction in burnout, stress (Bakker and Demerouti 2007; Penninx et al. 2000), or occupational diseases and accidents (Colbert et al.

2016; Danna and Griffin 1999), have justified the increasing attention that the literature has devoted to the topic of well-being at work (Sonnentag et al. 2023).

According to social exchange theory (Emerson 1976; Blau 1964), social relationships involve a set of interactions that create obligations, interdependent and contingent, with the potential to generate a higher quality and return for the people involved (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Employees act according to their level of well-being at work, which stems from their general perception of the cognitive and affective quality of the work experience (Dimotakis et al. 2011). In addition, The Job Demands-Resources model (JDR-R model) warns us that the promotion of a positive behavioral outcome at work has the capacity to trigger a spiral of positive gains capable of positively contaminating other organizational variables (Bakker et al. 2023), in a logic so unstoppable that it can be difficult to identify the cause or effect of this positive relationship, based on reciprocity and mutual appreciation (Bakker and Demerouti 2007). Well-being at work is a product and producer of several positive outcomes, and it is assumed to be an essential factor in the organizational search for more quality, performance, and motivation. Consequently, promoting well-being at work is an ethical duty for organizations (Guest 2017), but it is also an efficient and sustainable strategy for promoting organizational success (Boreham et al. 2016; Santos and Lousã 2022).

2.3. Research Aim

This study aims to deepen the existing knowledge on the effective and sustainable framework of teleworking, based on the experiences reported by contact center teleworkers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was designed to answer two research questions:

- How have contact center workers in Portugal experienced teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What are the characteristics of teleworking that generate more well-being at work?

Additionally, and in relation to specific objectives, the investigation aims to evaluate how teleworking had an impact on the interpersonal relationships of employees and their leaders and how organizations adopted effective actions to reconcile well-being at work with the continuity of activities and responses to customers' needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a major impact on society (Hamouche 2021), and it has accelerated the adoption of flexible working mechanisms, with a strong emphasis on the abrupt and non-voluntary increase in teleworking (Cooke et al. 2021; Minbaeva 2020). It is relevant to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labor dynamics and the management of people at work and how the possibility of teleworking has contributed to enhancing well-being at work. The literature presents contradictory results (e.g., Campbell and Gavett 2021; Felstead and Reuschke 2020), and telework does not always translate into an opportunity to increase well-being (Messenger 2019; Piszczek 2017). Well-being at work, itself, is a very shallow concept (Daniels et al. 2017), and it is relevant to dedicate more studies to the densification of its main dimensions and mechanisms of influence with other organizational variables. Contact center work, characterized by technological and rigid processes (Chicu et al. 2019) and by a work environment with high pressure and impersonality (Gonçalves-Candeias et al. 2021; O'Brady and Doellgast 2021), has not received much attention in the literature, especially regarding the post-COVID-19 pandemic reality, the evaluation of teleworking experiences, and their impact on well-being at work. However, contact centers are increasingly widespread across different sectors and, in Portugal, they show a trend of great growth (Moreira and Miranda 2021). According to the Portuguese Association of Contact Centers, between 2019 and 2021, the sector grew by 53.1%, making it relevant to provide accurate information that can contribute to improving people management practices in these professional contexts. Contact centers have been of interest to organizational researchers and studies have been produced, particularly, on motivation (Luamba 2016), satisfaction (Sá and Sá 2014), burnout (Freitas et al. 2019), support from managers (Martins 2018), turnover (Connell and Harvey 2004; Van der Aa et al. 2012), leadership (Andrade et al. 2019), and career (Ramos and Afonso 2017).

More information on what characterizes telework as a “friendly” working environment that is beneficial to employees well-being, compared to well-being at work, has a high potential to help human resource management and team leaders to find a more efficient and sustainable balance between promoting the smooth functioning of the organization and meeting people’s expectations, through which well-being at work originates, is structured, and the physical and psychological health of people at work is protected.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly changed the way people relate to each other at work and in life. The increase in remote working is one of the most visible effects of the pandemic, and there is a lack of sufficient information to fully understand its impact on various organizational outcomes, including employees’ well-being. The present study has an exploratory purpose and aims to understand the impacts of teleworking on well-being at work, in employees who provide services in contact center functions. The qualitative approach allows studies to be conducted in a natural environment (Creswell 2013) and offers insights into the human experience that are completely different from those obtained through quantitative studies (Braun and Clarke 2006). Contextual information is more valued in the qualitative approach (Sanders et al. 2014), which allows us to understand the processes of social construction (Edmondson and McManus 2007; Gioia et al. 2013) that influence the ways people position themselves and act (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Willig 2013). The qualitative approach allows us to find out not only if something works but also how and why it works (Meyrick 2006). Considering the exploratory nature of the research on recent events, still with little associated scientific production, the use of qualitative methodology proved to be appropriate to reinforce the understanding of how the increase in teleworking influenced well-being at work and how it can be assumed as an efficient and sustainable form of work organization in the 21st century.

3.2. Participants

The study involved 14 participants who work as contact center operators in a large Portuguese company, providing fixed and mobile communication services and customer service platforms. The company has more than 1800 employees and annual invoicing is close to 150 million euros. Participants were selected according to availability and convenience criteria, and the mobilization of a contingent of participants with a diverse profile was ensured, namely in terms of gender, age, and family background. Participants belong to the “frontline” team, whose main activity is to answer inbound calls and deal with issues related to invoicing, payment arrangements, product and service improvement, fault registration and resolution, and parcel tracking. All interviewees were informed about the objectives of the study and that participation was voluntary, confidential, and anonymous. The Table 1 presents the characterization of each participant.

At the time of the interviews, the participants were working from home, even if in a hybrid capacity, combining periods of working from home with periods of work at the company’s offices. All participants had previous experience of working in contact center roles on a face-to-face basis. This previous face-to-face experience was fundamental to allow participants to carry out a comparative exercise between the experience of telework and when working at the employer’s offices. As for previous teleworking experiences, only interviewees Marisa and Rita declared that they had already worked in this regime before the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3. Instrument and Data Collection Procedures

In this research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to obtain their perception of the phenomenon under analysis, its antecedents, and influencing factors (Creswell 2013). The semi-structured interview allows for the reconciliation of a predefined structure with the freedom to explore new topics and lines of interest that arise during the

interview (Doody and Noonam 2013). The interviews were conducted online, during the months of April and May 2022, through the Zoom and WhatsApp applications, with sound and image recording. The date and time of the interviews were adjusted to the availability of the participants. At the time of the interviews, and due to the lifting of several restrictions imposed by the Portuguese authorities to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants were working in a hybrid regime, alternating 1 month in teleworking and another month in the premises of the company's facilities. In preparing and conducting the interviews, the principles associated with the interpretive paradigm (Fontana and James 1994) were observed, namely avoiding long presentations of the study, following an interview protocol, preventing interruptions from third parties, not verbalizing opinions or suggesting answers to the interviewee, being flexible and interested, but not improvising. The interviews followed a structured protocol with seven questions (Guest et al. 2006), although without too much rigidity, and the formulation of open questions was also favored (Strauss and Corbin 1998) to obtain the maximum information on each of the dimensions under analysis (Gauche et al. 2017). The interviews lasted an average of 30 min, which corresponded to the time needed to go through the parts of the interview protocol calmly and thoroughly with each participant (Bosmans et al. 2016; Khan 2014). The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants, transcribed, and then coded to facilitate the organization and meaning of the information collected.

Table 1. Characterization of participants.

Interviewee	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Children	Family Household	Academic Qualifications
Marisa	33	F	Single	1	3	Graduation
Rosario	38	F	Married	3	5	Graduation
Luis	46	M	divorced	1	1	Graduation
Cláudia	41	F	Married	1	3	Master's degree
Cristina	28	F	Single	0	2	Graduation
Filipa	60	F	Married	1	4	Graduation
Rita	37	F	Single	0	1	Graduation
Jorge	33	M	Single	0	1	Graduation
Sandra	44	F	Married	3	4	Graduation
Armando	25	M	Single	0	2	12th year
Antonio	43	M	Married	1	4	Graduation
Juliana	30	F	Single	0	2	Graduation
Susana	39	F	Married	1	3	Graduation
Maria João	35	F	Single	0	1	Graduation

3.4. Data Analysis

The content of the interviews was analyzed, according to the thematic analysis methodology (Braun and Clarke 2006), to identify the explicit and implicit meanings in the participants' discourse. Considering that the identification of themes and codes did not follow a matrix of pre-defined categories, the present research followed the inductive approach by considered the most frequent factors in the application of thematic analysis (Mills et al. 2010). Prior to coding the content, the researchers carried out an immersion and familiarization exercise in the data by repeatedly reading the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2006). The themes and codes identified illuminate the content that emerged with the greatest frequency or relevance in the participants' discourse and proved pertinent to answering the research question. Guest et al. (2006) indicated the foreseeable need to conduct 12 interviews for a qualitative study to reach a saturation point, and conducting an additional interview would not deliver additional relevant information. In the present study, which brought together 14 participants, the saturation point was reached, and the matrix of themes and codes was stabilized before the last interviews were analyzed.

4. Results

This research aims to identify how teleworking impacts well-being at work, based on the experience of contact center operators during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the application of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), seven themes emerged that aggregate the positive impacts associated with teleworking. The themes and codes are presented in the Table 2:

Table 2. Themes and codes.

Themes	Codes
Performance: refers to the quality of professional performance, reflected in the quality of the tasks performed and the results achieved.	Quality and results Hierarchical and social autonomy and control Circle of positive reciprocity
Relationship: refers to the frequency, quality and impacts of formal and informal moments of relationship that occur at work.	Proximity and team spirit Friendship and socialising outside work Loneliness and abandonment
Money: refers to the enhancement of income from work, through reduced expenditure or enhanced rewards.	Travel and transport Food and clothing Salary and bonuses
Workplace: refers to the meeting of adequate space, equipment, and environment conditions for carrying out the assigned activities.	Adequate space An atmosphere of tranquillity and concentration
Technology: refers to the quality and operability of technological equipment and digital platforms and processes.	IT support Digital platforms and processes
Time: refers to the increase in time available for non-work spheres of life.	Timetable and travelling Control and well-being
Family: refers to protecting and enhancing the quality of relationships with family members and family activities.	Relationships in the family Personal activities and leisure

Well-being at work is protected and valued when the employee perceives that the teleworking experience provides high value in the following dimensions: performance, family, relationship, money, workplace, technology, and time. Below, we will present, in detail, each of the indicated themes and associated codes with the presentation of excerpts from interviews that substantiated their identification.

4.1. Performance

Participants value teleworking when they perceive better conditions to carry out their tasks and achieve the expected results than when they work at the company's premises. If teleworking is positive for performance, then it is also positive for well-being at work. Well-being at work is influenced by performance, and it is measured in quality and results achieved, as the following statements show:

I think that when the person is satisfied they have better results, they have better availability for work and for the contact center this makes a difference because the way you answer the call implies in the way the customer will speak and then in your results, to have a good call time, to be able to dispatch quickly, without conflicting with the customer, without having a problem. (Marisa)

I deliver more results for the company working from home. I think that in the center there are other things that end up distracting me and I also think that there is a greater face-to-face charge. And that, in my particular case, does not influence me to have good results. At home, there is less pressure from my manager and I feel more at ease, I feel more comfortable to maximize my results. (Cláudia)

Telework avoids social evaluation and allows the employee to engage in performance-enhancing behaviors that, in a shared environment with social scrutiny from co-workers or supervisors, can lead to avoidance-based behaviors. The following statements are illuminating and, interestingly, all include the expression "I feel more at comfortable" to

characterize teleworking, mainly due to reduced face-to-face observation or guidance from colleagues or supervisors:

In terms of results, I feel more comfortable at home, to do what is proposed. I have less difficulty, I don't know if it's because I'm alone. I'm not ashamed, for example, to offer a product, to insist. Being alone in my environment I think has positively influenced my results. (Rosário)

I feel much more at comfortable alone than being in an environment with many people (. . .) In contact with other people, peers, co-workers are there beside you. You must have more formality. You must be more careful with the words you use, with the tone of voice. Anyway, it's a behavioural issue. Behaviour in my environment alone is completely different when you are with thirty people. That's why, in this call center job, I liked to work only at home. (Jorge)

However, younger participants with less accumulated experience, for example, Cristina and Armando, consider that the remoteness of colleagues and supervisors in a teleworking context penalizes performance, as it removes sources of motivation and monitoring of work compliance.

As time went on as I was teleworking, my results went down. I didn't have the boss standing over me saying, 'Look, you should have done this. Have you submitted or haven't you?' There was less face-to-face pressure. There are more messages and emails and that ends up scattering our attention. We had to reply to the email, we had to prove that we were presenting, but it was all electronically. For me, the results went down because of that. (Cristina)

If you are always, permanently, teleworking, the results are worse, because there you are more relaxed, with less pressure from supervision and in the long run the relaxation becomes exaggerated and then the results go down. (Armando)

The autonomous performance associated with teleworking is valued only when the employee feels able, technically and emotionally, to ensure the desired quality and results without the face-to-face support of colleagues and supervisors. Younger employees with less professional experience tend not to fulfil these requirements and, as a consequence, don't feel more "comfortable" in a teleworking situation.

Valuing performance also emerged as a consequence of well-being at work. Participants report that they feel their well-being increased in teleworking, and they respond in reciprocity in favor of the organization through the reinforcement of the quality of work and the results achieved:

During teleworking, I don't know if because I was at home, I felt more comfortable, and my results improved. (Marisa)

Improved performance and customer satisfaction feed into organizational results, making the promotion of teleworking an action capable of generating positive effects for both the organization and its workers, and to that extent, it is capable of lasting over time and becoming a sustainable form of work organization.

4.2. Relationship

Teleworking reduces face-to-face moments between co-workers, which can become a risk for employees' well-being and for the cohesion and functioning of work teams. Participants report that the sense of belonging and the dynamics of team functioning is fueled by moments of relationships, which are sometimes oriented towards work tasks and sometimes arise from informal socializing among peers. These moments of relationships, in addition to creating a sense of belonging and social integration for team members, create a network of empathy and trust which facilitates the proper execution of the work and gives credibility to people's contributions and difficulties. The distancing leads to the need to adopt formal communication channels, with the reinforcement of written communication, which the participants consider colder, impersonal, and liable to misinterpretation. The

following statement shows us the importance of teleworking not penalizing the frequency and quality of the moments of relationship between team members:

For a team to work, we need to socialize, not only professionally, but personally, to share results objectively, sincerely. It takes all the body language, understanding more than writing. Writing can sometimes be interpreted in different ways and sometimes a sincere team conversation, a briefing, was very much needed by the team in terms of motivation boost, to understand in concrete terms why each one was behaving in a certain way and the results they were getting. (Cristina)

Although the company organizes meetings regularly to ensure a necessary level of involvement and effectiveness of work teams, participants point out that they still lack the informal, occasional, and spontaneous relationship that emerges when several people share the same space. This informal reality remains an exclusive feature of face-to-face work, and it is a risk for the increased adoption of teleworking, as it hinders the consolidation and development of work teams that are limited to relationships and roles based on professional identity. Without an emotional connection between team members, as Marisa points out, “the team’s goal doesn’t stick with people”:

In the building, we get distracted by our colleagues, we have much more contact with the team. We end up identifying more with the people in the team when the work is face-to-face. I think that in teleworking you don’t identify so much with the team. So you don’t have that issue of collectivity, of the group, of wanting to do well, of being productive. The team’s goal doesn’t stick with people. It’s very distant. (Marisa)

I would like to work face-to-face because I find the relationship between co-workers, clients and administrative staff, the daily interaction, the exchange of ideas, the experiences transmitted in conversations, in the breaks we take, to be healthy. It is healthy for the life of an employee, both physically and mentally. (Luís)

I think the challenge is also to be able to integrate the team. It is very difficult when you are only online, I believe. I felt it a lot now when I went back to the face-to-face, not knowing who the people are, just listening to the voice. (. . .) It’s different to touch, to hug, to see the person there talking. (Rosário)

The desire to have moments of relationships that create quality interpersonal relationships at work is not limited to the work team itself. Participants report that face-to-face work offers diverse opportunities for relationships with other people inside and outside work. Face-to-face work is fertile ground for building friendships because of regular moments of interaction between people who share time, create a mutual knowledge and sense of appreciation, and as a result, share more and more moments at work and outside work. As the following statement points out, teleworking has disrupted the association of the workplace as a space for creating friendships:

Before I had that social contact. Afterwards we would go for a drink, have dinner with the team or the people from work. I’d go out and do something and nowadays I don’t. So, it’s very distant, people don’t have that empathy anymore, they don’t meet anymore, there’s no longer that core at work and that’s the social disadvantage. I think there is no social advantage, teleworking ends up getting in the way. (Marisa)

The reduction in opportunities and quality of social interactions with co-workers in a teleworking context is very penalizing for employees’ well-being. The risk of loneliness, as well as the perception of abandonment and lack of support in difficult situations or emotional distress, was shared by several participants. It is as important to have someone to help you complete a task as it is to have someone to vent to, have a coffee with, or laugh with:

The difficulty is more being alone. As it’s a very psychological job and you’re dealing with people, you don’t have anyone to support you. You have Skype, that’s it, but it’s not the same as being in a building where you have thirty people around you who are in the same situation as me and therefore easier to support. (Armando)

Being there, day after day, always with that routine, with that loneliness, so to speak. We talked, but it was at a distance and at a distance you miss what words can't say, don't you? Visually, seeing the person, the way they are behaving, having support there, sometimes a cup of coffee, a lunch, letting off steam, saying 'look, that happened to me, what would you do in my place?' 'Look, can you believe that happened to me? You'd already have another motivation to attend in the afternoon or after lunch. (Cristina)

Something that made my stress worse was mainly the lack of socializing with colleagues. Although I sometimes like to be alone, in this particular type of work it is stressful not to have someone to share with. When it was in the building we would talk and even in difficulties we would laugh, we would support each other. (Susana)

However, the abrupt reduction in social interaction in teleworking is not felt negatively by all participants. Some report preferring this more solitary work environment and do not miss more opportunities to socialize with co-workers or create and nurture friendships at work. This satisfaction does not only include participants with a spouse and children for whom it could be claimed that the family context responds in a capable and sufficient way to their needs for social interaction. For example, Rita, single, without children, “prefers teleworking a thousand times” and does not feel “like seeing people again” at work:

People ask, 'but don't you feel like seeing people again?' I'll be very honest. No, I don't. I'd rather be teleworking a thousand times, even though I'm alone, I don't have contact. There are few people I interact with there, who I would be friends with. (Rita)

Teleworking is lonely for those who like to socialize with colleagues. It is very bad for those who like the social part. As it makes no difference to me to have that part, it's fine. (Filipa)

4.3. Money

Teleworking avoids daily commuting, and with less travelling, participants report less monetary expenditure on fuel, parking, and other associated expenses. By reducing or canceling out the expenses associated with commuting, teleworking allows a real increase in income for individuals. The following statements demonstrate, very clearly, the satisfaction of the participants with the profitable effect generated by teleworking:

You don't spend money on transport. And transport is very expensive at the moment. You won't spend money because you don't have to leave your house. You don't have to spend fuel, you don't have to pay for parking. No, nothing. Basically, it's all profit. (Filipa)

You don't have that travelling time and that financial cost. (Marisa)

You don't spend money on transport. (Armando)

Working from home also reduces food and clothing costs. The reduction in food costs is reinforced by increased satisfaction with the nutritional quality of meals. Regarding clothing, satisfaction with cost savings is accompanied by additional satisfaction with the increased comfort of work clothes. Without the need to enter the “public sphere” during working hours, participants report that they have reduced their purchase of formal clothing and have started working in comfortable clothes. Interestingly, as the following statements demonstrate, “pajamas” emerge as a work uniform suited to teleworking in contact center roles:

I believe it revolves a lot around comfort, being the way, I want to be. You don't have to buy more formal clothes, be more careful. You can work in your pajamas. Anyway, it doesn't have to be socially representative for the other, but only for me. (Jorge)

You end up neglecting your appearance a little, because you're closed at home, teleworking, you don't care. So I'm very practical and, if it's winter, I like to wear pajamas all day. (Filipa)

Being at home, it's more difficult to take off your pajamas and comfortable clothes. (Cristina)

The positive monetary effect associated with teleworking does not only come from reduced expenses. Participants also assimilated that, because of the valorization of per-

formance, they access better monetary rewards through salary increases and bonuses. Monetary appreciation also appears as a recognition of individual and collective merit and as a demonstration that teleworking meets very favorable conditions for reconciling individual well-being with the satisfaction of organizational needs for productivity, efficiency, and sustainability:

I had a very big improvement in teleworking. Not only in terms of productivity, sales and bonuses, which have increased. (Rita)

I performed better, which reflected in my awards and even in the team results, because I was more relaxed and more at ease at home. At home I had other motivations. I always felt comfortable. (Sandra)

4.4. Workplace

Participants emphasize the need to have a workplace at home that is properly prepared for carrying out professional tasks, and the employer should provide adequate resources. They consider it desirable that this workplace preferably does not occupy the spaces dedicated to the family context. Separating the family space from the workspace at home is important to create a “psychological barrier” to prevent teleworking from destroying the idea that the home is a private space reserved for family life and not for work. The absence of adequate space for working from home, both in terms of separation of spaces and in terms of ensuring conditions for concentration, is likely to penalize the quality of service and cause major disruptions to employees’ psychological health:

Maybe if I had a proper environment, it would be different. I would close the door to the office there and that would be it. But no, I work in my room. I think I lack this psychological separation, since our work is really very tiring psychologically and causes me great inconvenience in relation to this. I think that’s what weighed the most. Because I don’t have a suitable environment for teleworking. (Rosário)

The fact that I didn’t have my own space to work indoors made it a bit difficult for me. I worked in the living room. We also had the issue of the pandemic. Everyone was indoors, locked up at the same time. Everything was happening and it made it difficult for me to concentrate. At times it was difficult, and I tried to get the client out of the way straight away. (Susana)

Regarding the best place to work, the participants present divergent statements. For some, teleworking is excellent because it allows activities to be carried out in a more peaceful and quiet environment at home, and it avoids the more confusing and stressful office working environment shared by many people:

I think it stresses me out more if I’m in the call center with a lot of people than being alone teleworking. It stresses me out less. But each case is different. I’m more stressed being in the call centre, with lots of people, lots of confusion. If I’m at home, I’m calm, I’m not stressed at all. (Filipa)

I don’t like it because I have problems socializing with other people. (...) It’s a very stressful job and being there, in the middle of many people, you hear voices, voices and voices. At home I am quiet. Then I can really concentrate on what I’m doing. (Juliana)

However, other participants did not characterize their homes as quiet spaces suitable for activities requiring concentration or silence. The main reservations about considering the home as a peaceful place to work came from participants who were married with children, although the reason for restlessness may not be directly associated with children. Sandra, married with three children, presents her home as a less peaceful place to work than the company office. António, married with one son, shares the same opinion:

There are external noises, especially because we are on call, right? It’s complicated to have an animal barking or meowing, the doorbell ringing. (Sandra)

The challenge is to keep the atmosphere calm at home, because there was always that one person ringing at the door or making some call to the house. (Antonio)

4.5. Technology

Working from home requires space, a quiet environment, and technological infrastructure that enables remote working. Participants placed great emphasis on the technological issue for the success of teleworking. One of the most critical issues pointed out is the perceived reduction in IT support, in quality and readiness, when the activity is carried out at home, away from the company's premises, where the IT helpdesk team is located:

Other times it could be a technical problem with our computer, with the internet. There it was solved on the spot. At home, there is always that doubt, but was there really an error or is it your internet or computer? Or did you make the error yourself? Reporting errors is much more difficult at home. (Cristina)

But if I talk about the difficulties, it is more in the technical field. For example, sometimes I'm without internet due to some constraint of my internet, of the wireless, and I must solve it myself. If I were in the centre, there would be a team that would deal with these issues. (Cláudia)

The loss of quality IT support may penalize other advantages associated with teleworking, as restoring equipment and systems to working order may require the employee to travel to the company's premises, losing time, money, and peace of mind:

The equipment I was using from the company unfortunately broke down. A few days ago, it was the computer mouse. That causes a headache. Having to go to the company to sort it out wasted hours. And since I was working on these issues during my working hours, I had to make up the work schedule on a shift that was not mine. (Susana)

Given that face-to-face contact center work was already supported by digital platforms and processes designed for autonomous individual performance, participants did not report the experience of having to redesign processes or use new platforms to meet the challenge of distance. However, they emphasized the importance of systems remaining operational; otherwise, they would be unable to work at all and would experience a much slower level of service restoration than would be the case when working face-to-face:

The system failed. I had a lot of difficulty at the beginning. (Luis)

There are a lot of people who have problems with internet and updating equipment. I think that's the biggest difficulty. (Marisa)

4.6. Time

To carry out face-to-face work at the employer's premises, employees consume several hours far beyond the strict daily working hours, because they spend time on travelling and associated tasks. The following statement lists many of these time consuming activities:

I consider working hours as the time I must give to be available for the company. When I leave the house to go to the company, I already consider it my working hours, although I am not paid for it. But I already consider it working hours because I am at their disposal, and I can't do anything in that time. And at home, on the contrary, I have already gained a couple of hours that I am not at their disposal. Although I don't earn for those hours, I'm not doing anything for them, I'm not available to them. I can do something else. (Jorge)

Teleworking avoids having to commute to and back from work, generating savings for the employee in terms of fuel costs, tolls, wear and tear on the car, parking, and other associated charges. It also generates the transfer of time usually consumed in the sphere of face-to-face work to the non-professional domains of employees' lives. Face-to-face work, which requires time-consuming travel to and from work, is characterized as "rushing", "wasteful", and a source of "psychological pressure":

I can wake up a little bit later and I don't have the rush of having to commute to work. I don't have that psychological pressure. I can manage my time better too, in terms of

organization, studies, personal life, because we don't have that waste of time commuting to work. (Rita)

Employees associate teleworking with a sense of greater control over their lives, as they find that they have more time available that can be applied in the non-work spheres of their lives. The sense of greater autonomy and control over how to use the hours of the day is well reflected in the statement of Maria João, who considers that teleworking allows her to “be free” until the beginning of her working hours and to “be free” again immediately after they end:

For me, actually, what makes it easier is that it's at home, because I start at noon and by 9 pm I've finished. So it's like that. Until then I'm free. I don't need to count on that travelling time, any of that. (...) For me to 'stay at home', it would be because of the timetable because going to the company makes me lose the whole day. I can't do anything else. Going there, taking up my whole day and not being able to do anything is something that weighs heavily on me. (Maria João)

Having more time and perceiving greater control over its daily use makes participants consider that teleworking gives them a “feeling of happiness” and a higher “quality of life”:

Not wasting time getting ready, getting things ready, catching buses, leaving after hours. Not being stressed because the call should have ended, to still go home. It gives us a sense of happiness and well-being and we end up being nicer to the customer. I'm in a better mood and I listen better to complaints (...) I have a little more quality of life because I'm at home. (Cristina)

4.7. Family

Participants shared that teleworking had a positive impact on the work–family dynamic. With the possibility of working from home, participants had more availability to dedicate themselves to the family context, with a positive impact on the frequency and quality of relationships with family members, as well as for carrying out household chores or leisure activities. The following statements demonstrate how teleworking offers more opportunities to engage with family members, including pets, more readily and with higher quality:

For those who have children, I think teleworking is very worthwhile to have the opportunity to better manage life with children and with your work. I think this is the biggest opportunity that teleworking has brought me, to manage my home, my personal life, my husband and my family with my work. I waste a lot of time in transport. Not at home, it's easier, I'm already at home, I switch off the computer and I'm already with my children. (Rosário)

The fact of being at home, being close to the family, the pets, the cats, the dogs, that made it much easier. It's very advantageous to be close to the children, to have the husband there, to have the dog, the cat, to be there more time with them. (Sandra)

Satisfaction with teleworking is amplified by the recent situation of parenthood and the conscious desire to have more time to socialize with family and friends. This positive effect on the family is, curiously, also mentioned by single participants without children, for example Cristina, who considers that teleworking will be a natural and obvious preference for those who have a spouse and children. The final “honestly” is enlightening:

I just had a daughter. In my case, it's the advantage of being able to be at home with my baby. (Marisa)

Teleworking for me only brings advantages. At least for me, I want to spend more time with my family and friends. (Antonio)

On the personal side, I sincerely believe that those who have children are positive. Arriving at the end of the day, whether it's that time, after the pandemic you can go with your children or your husband for a drink after work, because that hour you had travelling is

no longer needed. You spend a few hours with your husband, with your children, you are enjoying their time more. Honestly. (Cristina)

With more time, income, and well-being, participants are more willing to do household chores and add sports and leisure activities. Sleeping more and resting more also emerged as very satisfying ways to take advantage of the positive consequences of teleworking:

The time you spend to go to the building is also important because I used to spend 40 min to go and another 40 min to come back. That's a lot of time that is lost and in teleworking I used that time to solve issues inside my own home like washing and drying clothes or even going to the market at mealtimes. Sometimes I would take half an hour to sunbathe or even exercise. (Susana)

I'm a very dedicated sports person. I could always have those days of playing football with friends, and teleworking was much easier because I wouldn't have to waste an hour in traffic, in transport, to be able to come home and then must go to the football field, to the gym, wherever. (António)

You don't have that worry of having to leave the house on time. You can even sleep a bit longer. (Armando)

5. Discussion

Our study allowed us to characterize the key dimensions for the success of telework, based on the reality shared by contact center operators in Portugal, regarding telework experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results obtained showed, firstly, that telework, as a human resource management practice, does not acquire a value in itself, becoming effective when employees perceive it as a source of appreciation for important dimensions in their lives (Van De Voorde et al. 2012), such as performance, time, income, or family. This result reinforces human resource management as a manager of effects in the organizational context, more than executing a set of successful procedures and practices, with guaranteed results. In current human resource management, best fit becomes more important than best practice (Redman and Wilkinson 2009).

Secondly, the results show that telework is associated with seven dimensions of success, although some generate expectations of improvement compared to face-to-face work and others generate expectations of no significant reduction. With telework, employees want to obtain more income, more time, and more availability for their family, and additionally, they want to avoid losing quality in the workplace, in the technological equipment available, and in the interpersonal relationships they establish at work. Performance, depending on the participants, can be an opportunity for improvement or a threat to the results obtained in face-to-face work. This duality in the key dimensions of telework is similar to the typology of hygienic and motivational factors (Herzberg et al. 1959), insofar as, in certain dimensions, well-being arises when the result associated with face-to-face work is maintained, and in others, the well-being is dependent on a significant improvement in the context of telework.

Thirdly, relationships at work, as a structural dimension of social well-being, are strongly threatened by the adoption of telework, insofar as they cause a reduction in the frequency and quality of interactions between co-workers and with leaders and subordinates. This risk to people's well-being is already well identified in the literature (e.g., Greer and Payne 2014; Kniffin et al. 2021; Morganson et al. 2010), but our results show that it can be assumed, as the determining dimension in the scrutiny, that the employee makes the experience of telework, nullifying the positive effects that it obtains in the other dimensions. Insufficient responses to telework relationship expectations can lead to situations of loneliness, stress, and mental illness, seriously penalizing performance and well-being. The protection of mental health is currently one of the major challenges in human resource management (Hastuti and Timming 2021), and the abrupt adoption of teleworking has made this challenge even more of a priority for organizations (Hamouche 2021).

Fourthly, telework confirms that face-to-face work is an eminently bureaucratic sociological space, marked by formalism, rules, and authorities (Weber 1982), and employees

found working from home to be an opportunity to be “freer”, as there is less attention and external scrutiny on what they wear, say, or do while at work. When employees say they enjoy working in their pajamas and with no one watching them, they are protesting the strong levels of formalism and surveillance that “oppresses” them in the workplace. Working at home is a mechanism of resistance and escape to spaces where the perceived level of self-control and freedom is greater. The growing demand to create more positive, informal work environments with fewer status barriers (e.g., [Despenic et al. 2017](#); [Guest 2017](#); [Petelczyc et al. 2018](#); [Pfeffer 1998](#)) emerges as an alternative to this flight home in search of a space where they can work more comfortably.

Fifth, it is the employer’s responsibility to provide a workplace that is well equipped in terms of furniture and technological systems. Well-being at work attaches great importance to the work itself (e.g., [Ryan and Deci 2000](#); [Frost et al. 2010](#)), and our results show that having the means to work autonomously and competently is fundamental. As for the means of work, the expectation is, fundamentally, not to lose quality in the face of the existing reality in face-to-face work.

Sixthly, the satisfaction associated with the perception that telework delivers more performance, income, time, and family demonstrates that people seek more autonomy and self-control over their lives. The desire for autonomy over work has already been identified in the literature (e.g., [Walton 1974](#); [Bakker et al. 2005](#); [Ryan et al. 2008](#)), and our results show that this desire is also marking work–life balance to create conditions for teleworking to be increasingly sought after. As [Ryan and Deci \(2000\)](#) referred, autonomy is an innate, essential, and universal psychological need.

Finally, in the sphere of work, several behaviors were already visible that have been showing a growing appreciation of the non-professional dimensions of employees’ lives ([Chudzikowski 2012](#); [Hall et al. 2018](#); [Schneider and Harknett 2019](#)), such as longer duration of maternity leave and greater male involvement in parenting activities ([Blum et al. 2018](#); [Petts et al. 2020](#)), as well as mechanisms to make working hours more flexible. Teleworking assumes itself as another instrument capable of meeting the expectations of work–life balance, which are increasingly demanding. As it turns out that a good work–life balance reinforces people’s well-being and feeds a positive circle that generates more performance and many other positive organizational results ([Lamane-Harim et al. 2023](#); [Ortiz-Bonnin et al. 2023](#)), the creation of good living conditions outside of work has become a relevant topic for human resource management. As our results show, the adoption of telework cannot be evaluated solely in terms of its direct impact on performance. A more global assessment of the impact of teleworking on well-being at work is required in an assessment that must bring together the seven key dimensions identified in our results and based on the perception of employees and not management. As [Paauwe \(2009\)](#) points out, the effectiveness of human resource management is not in what organizations intend and implement, but in how employees perceive the actions developed and act positively for their success.

6. Conclusions

The pandemic forced a profound change in the dynamics of life in society, with a strong impact on work as well. Telework has become a modality of providing work that, as it is carried out at a distance and, mostly, at the worker’s home, has allowed for the reconciliation of the continuity of work provision with the guarantees of social distancing necessary to minimize the risk of contagion ([Tavares et al. 2021](#); [Sousa-Uva et al. 2021](#)). The same happened in the contact center in Portugal. The transition to teleworking was quick and efficient, as tasks were already based on electronic platforms and digital workflows, and performance and successful KPIs were defined in individual terms. Our research project includes conducting 14 semi-structured interviews with contact center operators in Portugal. The content of the interviews was analyzed and coded according to thematic analysis ([Braun and Clarke 2006](#)). Sharing the discourse used in contact center service systems, organizations that wish to reinforce the well-being of their employees must

“dial 7” themes that our study considered fundamental. The results obtained show that the adoption of telework can trigger a positive circle of reinforcement of well-being and performance at work when the employee perceives that this new modality of work allows him to reinforce seven dimensions relevant to his work and life:

1. Performance: the employee perceives that he can deliver more quality and better results when working remotely;
2. Relationship: the employee perceives that the quality of their social interactions at work and in life in general is not being penalized by working from home;
3. Money: the employee perceives that he is increasing his income, either by reducing travel, food, or clothing costs, or by increasing rewards due to improved performance;
4. Workplace: the employee perceives that he has an adequate space at home, namely in terms of furniture and work environment, to competently respond to the challenges of his function;
5. Technology: the employee perceives that he has the equipment, platforms, and technological processes, as well as IT support, in adequate conditions to work remotely;
6. Time: the employee perceives that the day is getting longer and with the reduction in the time spent traveling and various inefficiencies in face-to-face work, he has more free time to value his personal life and, when applicable, to increase his performance in the work;
7. Family: the employee perceives that he has more favorable conditions to spend more quality time with the people who make up his family.

Our results provide a more comprehensive picture of telework as an opportunity or threat to performance and well-being at work. Social interaction, appreciation of rewards, which include money, time, and work–family balance, as well as the desire for autonomy are employees’ expectations that condition the acceptance and effectiveness of teleworking. The adoption of telework must be evaluated considering the organizational reality and expectations of the people involved ([Redman and Wilkinson 2009](#)). Mandatory telework can be very problematic for employees ([Andrade and Lousã 2021](#)).

6.1. Practical Implication for Organizations and Managers

Our study has several implications for managing people at work. Firstly, it shows how teleworking is not a consensual human resources practice with guaranteed positive effects on performance and productivity. Secondly, it reinforces the understanding that human resource management should focus on assessing its effectiveness on the impact it generates on key organizational results, such as performance, productivity, and well-being at work, and less on the transversal application of alleged good practices of human resources. Thirdly, our results show how the social dimension assumes a central weight for people’s well-being, which is why relocating from the workplace to the employees’ homes requires the adoption of various involvement and proximity actions so that the employee, although he is far from co-workers, does not feel isolated or excluded.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions

The characterization of the critical dimensions of telework is strongly marked by the period associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, during which telework took on unrepeatable and overly challenging contours, bringing together, in an unplanned and simultaneous way, adults and children to carry out professional and school activities from home. It will be relevant to re-evaluate teleworking, again, from a reality resulting from organizational consideration and planning, as well as the combination of expectations of the various stakeholders. It will also be important to replicate the study in other sectors of activity and geographies to stabilize a common model or detect idiosyncrasies relevant to the theory and practice of human resource management. Telework and its relationship with well-being and performance at work presents itself as a wide avenue for future organizational research.

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