

## Telework - Between Obligation and Solution During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

*Modern society presents itself as a network of companies that appear, develop or disappear. Under these conditions, human resources are a common resource and, at the same time, a vital resource, today and tomorrow, of all companies, which ensures their survival, development and competitive success. The year 2020 came with a major challenge for companies, to meet the demands of the market and to adapt the way employees work, namely teleworking. The paper presents a brief foray into the emergence of telework and its intensification in a pandemic context, highlighting the challenges that companies must face. At the end of the research, five tips for the company's management are presented in order to ensure an efficient telework and to fulfil the organizational objectives.*

**Key words:** Telework, COVID-19, crisis, human resources

**J.E.L. classification:** O15

### 1. Introduction

Telework emerged in the mid-1970s, after the first oil crisis, strengthening the idea of saving energy by limiting travel. "Change in work has been encouraged rather than change in people" (Alix, 2001). This work practice experienced little development until the late 1990s. But since then, the continuous improvement of computer technologies, combined with their declining cost, has changed the rules. The so-called internet boom has greatly contributed to the development of teleworking practices. While work on the assembly line comes from industrial development (especially in the automotive industry), telework comes from the virtual economy (Alix, 2001).

In 1994, only a few million teleworkers could be identified in Europe (Korte and Wynne, 1996). Undoubtedly, this development has intensified, given that telework depends on innovations in computer technologies. Additionally, the idea to optimize the autonomy of the individuals in organisations corresponds to the current state of empowerment within organisations.

Telework represents remote operations supported by computer and internet (Gray et al., 1993). "The most obvious difference between domestic workers and traditional employees is the absence of any direct supervision and thus the emergence of another type of supervision" (Gauthier and Dorin, 1997).

Other definitions include other criteria for specifying telework. For example, Daniels et al. (2001) characterize telework with five variables. The first two are the usual variables (location and use of ICT) to which the authors add the following three variables:

- Knowledge intensity - the degree of knowledge required to perform the tasks, indicated by, for example, the ease of implementation and autonomy from work [...].

- Intra-organizational contact - the frequency and range of intra-organizational contact [...].
  - Extra-organizational contact - the frequency and range of extra-organizational contact [...]
- (Daniels et al., 2001).

## 2. Theoretical background

Telework reflects a work environment that is always volatile and unconventional, characteristic to this century (Lee, 2014). Many economic entities offer opportunities to work flexible in time, space and exceeding organizational boundaries; this is also possible if we consider the rapid transformation of widely applicable advanced ICTs (Eurofound, 2020). According to (Eurofound, 2020; Hardin et al., 2007) teleworking in economic entities attracts qualified human resources, that do not want to be linked or limited by a certain work location and this allows to reduce operational expenses. In past decades, ICT contributed to the improvement of organizational performance; this is evident not only in the business sector, but also in other domains, such as education, health care, cultural and arts activities, and entertainment industries. Working in the virtual environment is becoming more popular if we consider the potential reduction of costs. For an economic entity it is also a way to become more agile and cope with accelerating market changes and multiple crises (Bhat et. al., 2017). An example of extreme relevance is the global pandemic COVID-19 facing nowadays, which caused many employees to change their working place from their offices to their home, for self-isolation.

Many researches show that telework is increasing globally, the trend being accelerated, so that their number of teleworkers is expected to increase constantly (even double) every year (Ramage, 2017).

The explanation of telework also includes a geographical appreciation or identification and human resources dependence on technology when it does not refer to communication (Raišienė, 2013). Particularly, a virtual organisation can be associated with “a collection of geographically, functionally and / or culturally distributed entities, which are connected by electronic form of communication [...] and which use technological means to communicate and coordinate the realization of a certain final goal or task” (Stachova, 2018). A well-known or popular form of virtual work arrangements is teleworking; it supports employees so that they can strike a balance between personal and professional life, teleworking even reduces real estate costs and can be considered a tool used by companies to attract and retain highly qualified professionals.

Practitioners' interest in telework was also supported by the flexibility obtained but also by the benefits observed both for the business in general and also in terms of human resources. We can mention some of the reasons why virtual companies have become popular: the possibility or even the opportunity to attract and hire qualified staff living anywhere in the world, expanding the company's business to 24 hours a day, regardless of time zones and thus operationalizing objectives as well as increasing international competitiveness (Mogale, 2010).

Telework has advantages not only for the company, but also for its human resources: the flexibility of companies in terms of working time and workplace of human resources is very useful, because it helps motivate members of the company, allows companies to respond better human resources needs, helping them to balance work and private life, maintain health and productivity, plan flexible working hours, experience less communication stress, work without being constantly controlled by managers and save time traveling to and from work (Snellman, 2014).

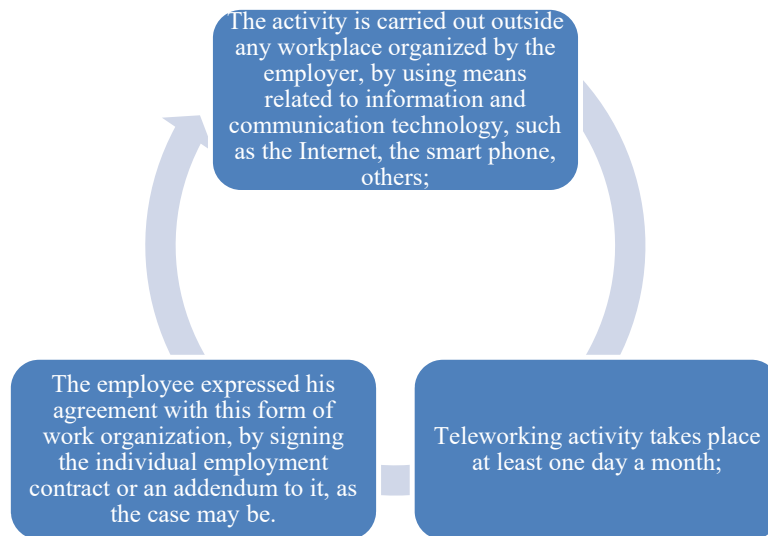
On the other hand, research has shown that teleworkers face some challenges such as the need for socialization, blurred boundaries between free time and work, lack of boundaries between work and personal life and even difficulties in maintaining cooperation and effective communication with colleagues and managers (Daim, 2012).

The percentage of people employed in the field of work, working from home, has increased slightly over the years from 7.7%, as it was in 2008, to 9.6%, in 2017. In general, the people who work most often from home are those who are self-employed (18.1%). Only 2.8% of employees sometimes work from home.

In Romania, work from home is regulated by Law no. 81/2018, which entered into force at the beginning of April 2018, and concerns the telework activity. Thus, the approach to telework reflects a form of work organization in which an activity, which could be carried out at the workplace

organized by the employer, is carried out by an employee, outside of the workplace, regularly and voluntarily, using information and communication technology, based on an individual full-time employment contract or an addendum to it, subject to certain conditions, as presented in Figure 1.

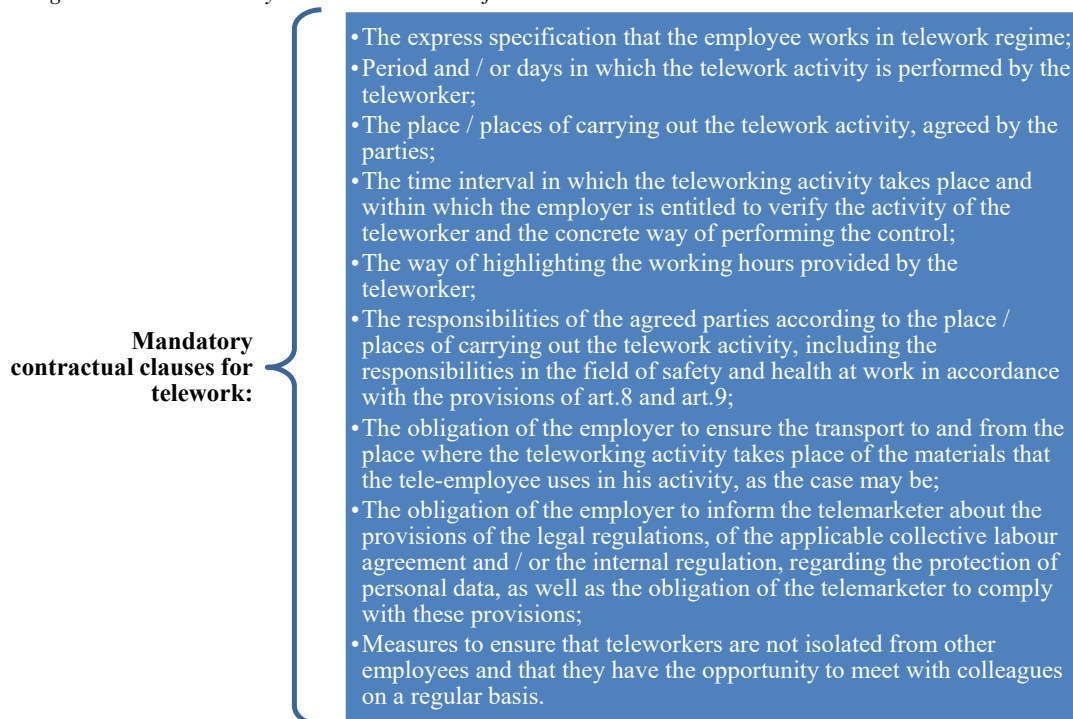
Figure no. 1. Conditions for teleworking in Romania



Source: Own projection of the authors according to Law no. 81/2018 regarding the telework activity

In the case of the telework activity, the individual employment contract contains, in addition to the elements provided in art. 17 par. (3) of the Labour Code, a series of additional information, as shown in Figure 2.

Figure no. 2. Mandatory contractual clauses for telework



Source: Own projection of the authors according to Law no. 53/2003 regarding the Labour Code

The law stipulates that the employee's refusal to carry out the telework activity cannot constitute a reason for his disciplinary sanction.

When the employment contract provides for a probationary period, it must be mentioned that teleworking activity cannot be carried out during that probationary period.

The law stipulates that overtime is prohibited for teleworkers.

### **3. Research methodology**

This article represents a basic research of the specialized literature and of the statistics published in the field of telework. The phenomenon of telework increased exponentially in 2020, when companies suffered a major crisis in terms of human resources, supply, sales, production process, etc. The paper comes in support of companies with practical solutions for organizing and streamlining the activity of employees in telework, as a solution to an immediate and future crisis.

### **4. Findings on the telework times of crisis**

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has led to a relocation of jobs to the places of employees, with many economic entities around the world being forced to implement telework. (Riso, 2020).

A new report published in May 2020 presents, once again, Romania's major handicap compared to the rest of the European Union. This time, we were last at home working in the pandemic. Compared to the other member countries of the European Union, Romania had the lowest share of human resources that allowed themselves to work from home. This information was confirmed by a report by Eurofund which sought to provide an overview of the EU labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Out of the total number of Romanian employees, less than 20% allowed themselves to work from home through the concept of telework. This statistic is all the sadder as Romania is constantly in the top of the countries with the fastest internet connection.

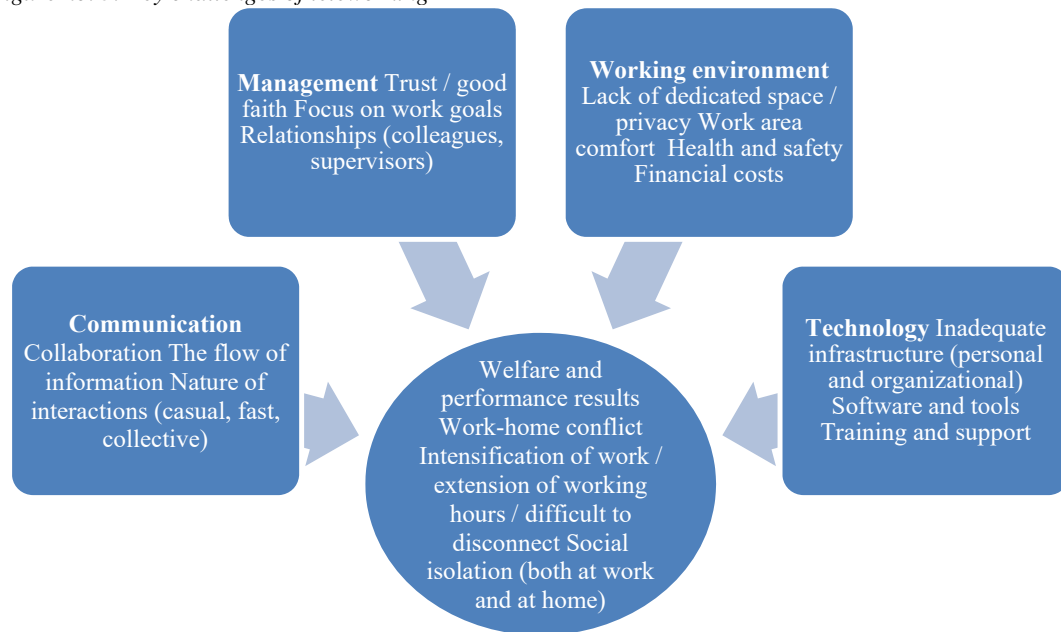
Bulgaria, which in theory is a significantly poorer country than Romania, had about 10% more workers who worked from the comfort of home during the pandemic. We are talking about the country with the lowest percentage of population that has used the Internet at least once in the last year (68%, compared to 74% in Romania, which is on the penultimate place in the EU). In addition, Bulgaria is the EU country with the lowest share of households with internet (only 75%, compared to 84% in Romania in 2019).

However, overcoming the disadvantaged situation of Romanians, at the level of the entire European Union, over a third of employees (37%) started working from home in a pandemic. The Nordic countries were in the first places. In Finland, about 60% of employees went to work, followed closely by Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark, with over 50%.

During the quarantine, a large number of articles appeared in the press about the challenges of teleworking, starting from the advice and recommendations of business consultants on work organization and collaboration (Kawashima et al., 2020), continuing with the recommendations of human resources consultants on maintaining the productivity of human resources (Bouziri, 2020) and up to comments or opinions of psychologists on the balance between life and well-being while employees work from home. (Culo, 2016; Verburg et al., 2013). However, the advice and recommendations during the pandemic shared by experts and consultants are based on the knowledge gained before the pandemic and, although the number of scientific studies on telework during quarantine increases (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020), the relevance of the problem loses importance. It is important to study telework and gather substantiated evidence, independent of the culture and / or laws of the country that governs labour relations, to capture specific changes in human resources attitudes toward telework, which may be important in addressing human resource management challenges. This raises the legitimate question whether the experience of those who joined the teleworkers, after working so far only at the job offered by the company, is particular and has specific characteristics.

The transition to a new way of working, either in business as usual or in response to interruptions, changes both the employment contract and the psychological contract between companies and employees (Jaakson and Kallaste, 2010). If companies do not recognize the change in these dynamics, the potential effectiveness of teleworking may be limited (Eckhardt et al., 2019). In a brief review of the literature we have extracted the key challenges of telework, which are reflected in possible technological challenges in the work environment, communication and management, which are interconnected and, without paying attention to these areas, telework can have negative effects, such as social isolation, work from home conflict, and work intensity (Bentley et al., 2016; Eddleston and Mulki, 2017). These, in turn, can have a negative effect on well-being (physical and mental health) and work performance (Eurofound and ILO, 2017; Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). The main challenge areas for teleworking are illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure no. 3. Key challenges of teleworking



Source: (Green, Tappin & Bentley, 2020)

In a growing market, companies could afford to ignore the inefficiency of certain categories of human resources. In a crisis, when it is necessary to survive, we often reduce fixed costs - reduce staff, increase the efficiency of remaining human resources and optimize business processes become vital. The rapid spread of COVID-19 infection left neither managers nor human resources a choice - an urgent need to restructure the business so as to ensure efficient remote management of the company, efficient human resources work from distance and the achievement of key business indicators.

Often, the transfer of full-time human resources in telework reduces their productivity, reveals errors in the management system, which were previously hidden by personal relationships, "manual" control and pressure from managers. Management "suddenly discovers" that within the company

- There is no clear division of responsibility;
- Business processes are not regulated, many orders are made by human resources, at will;
- There are no mechanisms for establishing and managing regular orders and tasks, there are no regular reports;
- Control over the implementation of tasks and responsibilities takes place spontaneously.

Different categories of employees have different levels of responsibility within the company. In their work, quantitative, qualitative indicators and unique tasks are combined in different ways.

Therefore, their performance matrices will differ from each other. When constructing a human resource performance matrix, each indicator has a weight, planned and actual values and a plan fulfilment factor.

Next, we propose some solutions for the efficient organization of employees in telework, so that the company's objectives are pursued and fulfilled.

### *I. Organizing virtual teams*

With the proliferation of teleworking, many companies have begun to form virtual teams of telework employees to carry out specific projects. There are several types of virtual teams. These can be teams with a different number of participants, whose members join the activity as needed, special purpose teams working in parallel with regular teams or teams for quick problem solving. The type of virtual team chosen must correspond to its tasks.

When managing the work of a virtual team, which is made up of people from different parts of the globe, it is necessary to take into account the differences between national cultures - then collective work will be coordinated and more efficient. It is recommended to organize general meetings / team meetings establishing mandatory rules for their conduct. It is proposed to use visual aids to facilitate communication between team members. Collective success is made up of factors such as the competence of team members, the coherence of their virtual interaction, the presence of trusting relationships between them, the effectiveness of staff training, the quality of management decisions and the smooth running of production processes.

### *II. Implementation of the telework control program*

Before implementing a telework human resources management program, it is recommended that financial calculations be made to decide whether this form of work is generally appropriate for the business entity. One of the main advantages of telecommuting is the reduction of costs - for example, the cost of renting workspaces. In addition, the ability to switch to remote mode strengthens the motivation of human resources. The company has the chance to find employees all over the world, including in countries with cheap labour. The main disadvantage of remote work is that it is difficult to control such employees. In the absence of personal communication between the employer and employees, misunderstandings may arise regarding some issues. In addition, the transfer of staff to a form of remote work does not always lead to cost savings. It may be necessary to purchase and install special technical means for communication with remote human resources or to pay extra for their training.

Support for this program needs to be identified in the early stages of its implementation, such as the appointment of employees to organize teleworkers and assign them tasks. The responsibilities of other employees will include choosing the appropriate model for managing remote work (there are four such models in total: at the corporate level, applicable to only one unit, individual and used for a specific project) and participants in the training program. You need an employee (leader or supervisor) responsible for arranging jobs remotely and searching for resources.

### *III. The environment where the human resources activity in telework takes place*

There are several types of distance jobs, such as:

- Home Office. Human resources that do not need sophisticated equipment or large quantities of consumables to work can do their job without leaving home.
- Remote workspaces. This is a reduced version of a typical office space, not far from where human resources live, often with a less strict work environment.
- Shared workspace. The human resources of different companies work in the same office, but at different times - for example, in shifts or according to a pre-agreed schedule.
- Virtual office. Human resources can work wherever they can connect to the Internet: in a cafe, library or even in their private car.
- Temporarily rented office space. Human resources in telework rent a job for a while in a hotel, office centre or any other location.

The equipment of a remote job is determined by the tasks faced by human resources, as well as the company's specialization. A remote employee may need a desktop computer, laptop, digital organizer, fax machine, closet, and a printer and copier. In some cases, human resources will need to

have access to the corporate network and special computer programs. There are a number of Internet applications available to help telemarketers organize their work and keep in touch with each other, and there are currently many options and possibilities to ensure the success of their work and communication.

If a person is employed, the company may reimburse the cost of purchasing the necessary equipment. In this case, the company should require proof of purchase and payment from the employee, as well as a commitment that the equipment will be used only in connection with telework.

When setting up a remote job, occupational safety issues must be taken into account. In 1999, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration issued an ordinance holding employers responsible for the safety of human resources working from home, but due to numerous complaints, it was cancelled a year later. However, the prevention of accidents for telecommuting staff should be a high priority. From the point of view of modern insurance legislation, working in a home office is no different from working in a regular office. Therefore, if the economic entity's human resources are injured while working from home, that economic entity will pay for the insurance. At the same time, however, teleworkers must independently insure themselves against accidents that may occur at home, but outside of work.

#### *IV. Employee or independent contractor*

Managers of the company must make a clear distinction between independent contractors or full-time employees working remotely. The way in which teleworkers are contracted affects the amount of taxes that the economic entity pays, and the misreporting of information about staff can lead to penalties and other problems. In the United States, an employee is considered a full-time employee if the employer controls the working methods and the timing of its implementation. Unlike full-time employees, independent contractors choose the means and methods to do the work themselves. The degree of control over human resource actions is the first thing the US tax authorities pay attention to when determining the tax status of staff. According to US tax law, the degree of this control is of three types.

1. Full control over activities. If the employer has full control over the activities of the human resource, such an employee is considered a full-time employee.

2. Financial control. If the employer regularly pays employees' salaries and reimburses them for work-related expenses, such an employee (with rare exceptions) is also considered a full-time employee.

3. Control based on the type of employment relationship. If the economic entity employs an employee for an indefinite period, such an employee is considered a full-time employee. If the economic entity hires a person for a predetermined period or to participate in a certain project, such an employee is considered an independent contractor.

It is recommended to choose the payment method for teleworkers which is the most suitable for the company. Business consultants and creative professionals (journalists, programmers) are the best paid for each completed project. Hourly wages are adequate when the results of the work are easy to quantify (for example, typing). The timing of the project and the return on investment must be taken into account when setting the salaries of human resources in telework.

#### *V. Increasing the productivity of teleworkers*

The major challenge for employees is to develop the habit of working in a home office, as if they were working in a regular office. They must strictly follow the work schedule. Sometimes, in order to get better at work, such employees should adhere to a business dress code. In addition, they should learn to maintain a work-life balance, take regular breaks and exercise. Teleworkers need to be good at prioritizing tasks. Depending on the degree of importance, all tasks should be divided into three groups. Tasks in group # 1 should be completed immediately, tasks in group # 2 if time allows, and in group # 3 only if tasks in the first two groups are completed.

Leaders need to learn to identify the early signs that telecommuting is doing worse. It is recommended to continuously monitor the performance of telework staff. The company must be interested in the results and not in the progress of the work, which it cannot yet control. The productivity of employees must be weighed against that of their regular counterparts. It is recommended to set production targets for teleworkers. It must be explained in detail what, why,

how and by what date a task must be performed, but also describe the criteria according to which the task will be considered completed.

When assessing the effectiveness of telework, special attention must be paid to quality, volume, timeliness and economic impact. It is recommended to ask employees to make as few mistakes as possible, to maintain high productivity, to deliver on time and not to spend extra money. Clear workloads must be set for them, with a certain level of difficulty. It sets and discusses how often and when employees should contact the company, and, very importantly, provide regular feedback on the quality of their work.

It is also recommended to implement a system for peer review of human resources in telework. The proposed methodology makes it possible to assess how effectively human resources interact with each other in a remote format, what problems and "hotspots" exist in work teams, where there are areas of non-productivity, working "for two" and solving problems and which mimics only violent activity.

## 5. Conclusions

COVID-19 has affected most countries in the world, regardless of nation, race, social status, financial strength, wealth or poverty. Fear and hysteria maximized the effects of the economic and social crisis, and the population, governments and economic entities reacted in the most unexpected ways, some through exaggerated, even extreme measures, and others ignoring the situation by continuing life and activities as if the virus had or does not exist (Morosan-Danila & Bordeianu, 2020). The question is: who reacted correctly and took the right measures? The reality is reflected in the number of patients and deaths, the unemployment rate, the number of companies in bankruptcy or which have ceased their activity. Regardless of the situation, time cannot be restored.

While focusing on a company's survival during a crisis, management strives to sustain relationships with key constituencies. Specifically, companies are adapting their strategies at an unprecedented pace in response to the developing COVID-19 crisis. Strategies involve significant changes caused by restructuring and downsizing (Hao et al., 2020); cost reduction and cash saving (Hotel Business, 2020); drastic changes in operations, including changes in service delivery methods (Alonso et al., 2020); adoption of new technologies (Baum et al., 2020); and compliance with new hygiene and safety standards (Sigala, 2020). Although these strategies could be seen as positive actions that improve the adaptability and survival of the economic entity during the crisis, they create tension among key stakeholders, as actions involve layoffs, cost reductions and loss of profit for shareholders (Erkama and Vaara, 2010).

Thus, companies must not forget that the most important resource they have at their disposal and that can always adapt (with the right impulses) is the human resource. Organizing employees in telework was a necessity in 2020, but it has become a long-term solution to the company's cost-cutting needs and efficiency. In this context, companies must always look for solutions and methods for organizing employee work, supervision, motivation and evaluation of telework.

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