

# Working from home during COVID-19 Lockdown: Changing Competencies and work-home life Boundaries

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**Abstract:** Crisis situations often introduces drastic lifestyle changes. This study is focused on the COVID-19 pandemic and aims to shed light on an unprecedented context of forcing employees to work from home with a short notice of companies and the government. The goal is three-fold: i) to understand the extent to which employees were indeed prepared to work from home; ii) to uncover the most important competencies that enabled employees to deal better with a crisis situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and iii) to discuss the real impact that working from home had in the employees' lives during the pandemic situation and the quarantine period. Using narrative inquiry, this study explores the experiences of 18 young adult consultants working in different business areas, in Portugal. Semi-structure interviews were conducting during the third wave (12/2020 – 03/2021) and thematic analysis was used to analysis the transcripts. The analysis revealed three main themes: 'management competencies', 'work-life balance' and 'work flexibility'. Each theme consisted of several subthemes which illustrates how the participants perceived working from home and the factors that reflect their experiences and understanding. The research findings illustrate that interpersonal communication, anxiety and stress management, time management, and e-leadership are vital skills to cause a great impact on participants' productivity and well-being at work. Participants all appeared to notice that working from home provides a better work-life balance (e.g. saving time on daily commute) and more flexibility with regards to the work schedule and home commitments. Nonetheless, their experiences of home working depend on the personal situation, personality and the perceived management support offered during the COVID-19 lockdown. The research highlights a need to train employees on soft skills and prepare them to future crisis situations. Theoretical implications suggest that academics should expand research and interventions to include not only the work environment but also other external factors that affect employees. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are suggested.

**Keywords:** Working from home, competencies, consultants, COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management.

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of December 2019, COVID-19 was firstly detected in the city of Wuhan, China. On January 30th 2020, the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern. The pandemic suddenly dominated our daily lives and the definition is now familiar to all of us — an infectious disease where we see significant and ongoing person-to-person spread in multiple countries around the world at the same time (Savic, 2020). In the absence of any specific treatment at the time, one way to stop the spread of COVID-19 was self-quarantine and isolation (Dubey and Tripathi, 2020). Governments around the world instructed companies to close their offices and enable employees to work from home — to telecommute and to close stores, restaurants, coffee shops, hairdressers and so on.

This health crisis impacts everyone (Bavel et al, 2020) and may affect the health, safety, and well-being of individuals, causing them, for example, insecurity, confusion, emotional or community isolation (Pfefferbaum and North, 2020). It may lead to stress and anxiety, as we need to change our behaviours (staying more at home, using masks, working from home, isolation – quarantine). It may impact the family's economic situation due to lay-off or loss of a job. Social connections have also been shaken. On the one hand, to cope with stress and stay resilient, people may intensify the online interactions with friends and co-workers. On the other hand, being isolated at home with the nuclear family or tenants in a rented house could lead to anger or explosive behaviours.

This study aimed to shed light on an unprecedented context of forcing employees to work from home with a short notice of companies and the government. The goal is three-fold: i) to understand the extent to which employees were indeed prepared to work from home; ii) to uncover the most important competencies that enabled employees to deal better with a crisis situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic; and iii) to discuss the real impact that working from home had in the employees' lives during the pandemic situation and the quarantine period. Each profession has its own peculiarities and would be difficult to study all professions in a

transversal way. Hence, this research was focused on consultants. Based on our findings we will present theoretical and practical implications and future research.

### **1.1 Competencies of a consultant**

Competency is the ability learnt to perform a task, a duty or a role (Roe, 2002). It includes three main characteristics: i) the knowing – the explicit reference to the domain of the professional activity, ii) the articulation of the competence with the theoretical knowledge and iii) the capacity to use such knowledge. Competency is distinguished from qualification, because the former concept requires the correct use of know-how in a certain job function or task, while qualification does not guarantee it (Neves, Garrido and Simões, 2015). For instances, it is common to find self-taught individuals that are competent and graduates that are not competent in organizations.

Employees can develop new competencies or improve existing ones at work contexts. Some competencies can be developed with the experience (such as negotiation) and others are more stable and often related to the personality and natural abilities (such as relationship building, creativity and self-discipline).

In the context of the COVID-19 lockdown, at home and isolated from their co-workers, consultants faced many new challenges. Specific competencies may play an important role in overcoming the adverse effects of stressful situations. For instances, solving problems and making decisions are very important as consultants face more decisions on their own. Staying resilient in situations that cause stress and change allows one to maintain and regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity. Engaging in proactive activities often implies going beyond routine behaviour by developing new strategies or even pursuing alternative goals (Fay & Sonnentag, 2012). In this study, one objective was to reveal the set of technical, business and consulting competencies (Nickols and Bergholz, 2013) that consultants may have used (and, perhaps, developed) to adapt and succeed in their work during the pandemic.

### **1.2 Working from home and the work-life balance**

Due to the pandemic, working from home became mandatory in several countries. It is estimated that four out of five people worldwide were being affected by full or partial workplace closures (Savic, 2020). Working from home is defined as employees working outside of their company's offices (Savic, 2020) and includes four basic characteristics: (1) a person who is an employee of a company or a staff member of an organization; (2) actual work engagement with a company or an organization on specific tasks; (3) work being performed outside the company's physical premises; and (4) telecommunication with the employer.

Working from home can increase the available time for other activities (Klopotek, 2017) as employees are able to reduce commute time and have fewer interruptions. However, this extra time is not always spent on rest or leisure activities. People often fill the extra time with household chores, other paid work, or even redirect it to more work as opposed to recuperation time (Grant, Wallace and Spurgeon, 2013). Working from home is also associated with difficulties to separate home affairs from professional ones (Klopotek, 2017). In this pandemic, people may experience disturbances at the household due to the restrictions imposed and the closed down of schools and kindergartens, for example (Ipsen et al, 2021). Furthermore, many employees have requested time off from work to look after their relatives who contracted the SARS-CoV-2. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly transformed the work-family balance with potential serious impact on interpersonal relationships and well-being.

Knowing that one of the goals of this research is to understand the impact that working from home had in the employees' life during a pandemic situation and the quarantine period, this research can bring us new insights on this issue, as the consultants began working from home with just one or two days' notice and had to be inventive and adaptative in their responses to a new way of work.

## **2. Methodology**

The qualitative approach was used to understand the experiences of consultants who were forced to work from home with a short notice of companies and government. This approach was chosen because of the descriptive, exploratory, nature of the research questions and our need to examine the ways in which factors, such as events, realities, meanings and experiences, affect the behaviours of participants.

## **2.1 Participants and procedure**

Participants were required to have, at least, 6 months of experience in the consulting area prior to the pandemic and have been working from home for, at least, 3 months since the first lockdown. For the data collection, the principal author used her professional network to contact informants who work in consulting companies in Portugal. 18 consultants accepted the invitation to participate in this study (72% female, 28% male;  $M_{age} = 28.11$ ,  $SD = 3.97$ ). The age of interviewees ranged from 23 to 41 years old (23-25: 17%, 26-30: 61%, 31-41: 22%). 6% were senior managers, 6% were senior consultant, 44% were consultant and 44% were analyst. After interviewing the 15th subject, no new insights were revealed. However, three new consultants were interviewed. The saturation was confirmed (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006), and the principal author stopped collecting new materials.

## **2.2 Data collection and analysis**

The interviews took place from December 2020 to March 2021 during the second severe lockdown measure. Participant interviews were conducted remotely by the principal author. Informants were first asked to focus on the current experiences of the job, then the interview moved to describe the challenges and changes imposed by the pandemic on work arrangement, work-life balance, motivation, stress, competencies, and performance. Finally, the interview was concluded by asking participants to reflect on what they could have done differently as they know that the pandemic was not a two-week or one-month situation and on their expectations about what will happen to them with regards to working from home and their companies in the future. The interviews were conducted in an informal, conversational, and story-telling perspective, so that the informants felt more comfortable about sharing their experiences and feelings about this phase of their professional lives. With durations of between 30 and 70 minutes, all interviews were audiotaped with the prior consent of the interviewees and were subsequently fully transcribed.

Data analysis relied on Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages of thematic analysis. Initial codes were generated from a deductive perspective and then, complemented inductively from single-case data. These codes formed the main repeated patterns (themes) and helped to organize data. Subthemes were created within themes. Themes and subthemes were organized to be presented in a meaningful and useful theme map. Table 1 presents the finalized themes, subthemes, and a descriptor.

## **3. Results analysis**

### **3.1 Management competencies**

When people went home, they lost the physical contact with colleagues and had to rely on technology. Conducting videocalls began to be an essential element on their daily working routine. However, soon, informants understood that colleagues' availability was not the same as it was at the office. The interpersonal relationships also changed. Some interviewees noted improvements in the relationships and acquired new insights about workmates. This experience helped them to learn about each other's difficulties and develop feelings of solidarity. However, communication via videocalls was not exempt from errors and misunderstandings. Messages were often unclear and diffuse with opposite effects on work and people's motivation. In those circumstances, people referred to problems of coordination and cooperation, misalignment of schedules, and poor leadership.

During the COVID lockdown, informants also admitted having experienced many moments of anxiety and stress due to uncertainty associated with the COVID outbreak and the difficulties to rearrange daily life (i.e., work and non-work routines). To reduce psychological stress, some of them tried to do yoga or meditation. Others tried to rely on colleagues' help to handle work issues. However, the co-workers' support was not immediate since they had been detached from social contact.

The abrupt emergent changes in work practices (e.g. working from home) demanded something consultants were not accustomed to do: setting daily and weekly goals, with fixed schedules, in order to get back to "normal", regain motivation, and be able to manage the work tasks, the family duties, and other tasks from home. Interviewee P told:

*"I only work now, my cell phone is available 24 hours a day, my computer isn't just there because I hang up when I go to sleep. People who work with me are not concerned with whether I'm busy or not, whether I'm doing something related to work. I'm constantly being bombed with calls and messages on teams. When it's not on teams, it's on the phone. Customers also call and text anytime, if needed. I think that*

*was, and is, the big challenge ... know how to turn off the computer, turn off the phone, make this separation."*

In addition, informants recalled that being successful in achieving goals also depends on the ability to be resilient despite experiencing adversity, the ability to be proactive and to have an open mind to accept the uncertainty and adjust to this unprecedented health crisis.

Surprisingly, few respondents recognised that remote work means being more disciplined and using time in a proper way. As participant A noted:

*"If I want to make this transition successfully, time management and discipline will allow me to reduce distractions, make work life more purposeful, productive, and boost satisfaction."*

**Table 1:** Themes overview

Themes	Description
Management competencies	Competencies developed by the employee when he or she is working from home during COVID lockdown.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change orientation</li> <li>• Proactivity</li> <li>• Establishing goals</li> <li>• Resilience</li> <li>• Anxiety and Stress management</li> <li>• Work inside virtual teams</li> <li>• Interpersonal communication</li> <li>• E-Leadership</li> <li>• Time management</li> </ul>	<p>The degree to which an individual is or is not satisfied and the magnitude of the change that is needed to develop his personal and professional success.</p> <p>Going beyond routine behaviour by developing new strategies or even pursuing alternative goals.</p> <p>The act of stating clearly what one wants to achieve and how he or she will achieve it.</p> <p>Positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity.</p> <p>Choosing or exercising healthy self-control and self-management in response to stressful event.</p> <p>Work only supported on communication through informational technology and possibly remote.</p> <p>The ability to communicate and to be perceived as well as to listen and respond to the message communicated.</p> <p>Leaders who mainly communicate via information technology, and whose interaction with followers is facilitated by it.</p> <p>The ability to manage their own tasks and organize then according to the time available and the deadline imposed.</p>
Work-life balance	Personal vs professional life - quarantine + family + hobbies + work + home tasks, all together in the same environment.
Work flexibility	Flexible work arrangement that helps employees to align organisational goals with their own goals.

Data show that there are no important differences on perceptions about many of the management competencies, which enable employees to deal better with a crisis situation, based on gender, age and seniority. However, it seems that anxiety and stress management was experienced differently depending on whether informants live alone or with others. Those who live alone often referred that working from home decreased their stress or, at least, it did not get worse, while other participants experienced higher anxiety and stress, in part due to family responsibilities. Furthermore, personality traits also played a key role in workplace adjustment during the COVID-19 shutdowns. For example, the impact of social distancing and working from home seem to vary for those who are higher (vs. lower) on aspects of extroversion and openness-to-experience. For example, participants Q and R appear to have different dispositions to experience challenges:

*"I consider my work to be stressful, by nature and in a normal environment. I think that working from home can get even worse ... First, because we are a little bit more alone and it is difficult to share our pains with our colleagues."* (interviewee Q).

*"I dealt with the help of colleagues, sharing information, sharing the problem, looking for solutions, not keeping the topics to myself. Having a joint decision making."* (Interviewee R).

### **3.2 Work-life balance during the health crisis**

The circumstance of asking people to work from home had tremendous impact on the work-life balance. Overall, informants recognised the positive aspects of remote work, such as saving commuting time, being lazy regarding the appearance and dressing, being more relax regarding the surface emotional labour and having more

flexibility to change the work schedule. They also pointed out that the COVID pandemic was a lifetime opportunity to get extra time with the family, to practice a hobby, or simply rest.

However, people often identified the loss of daily routines. As everything was happening on the same place, it was hard to separate the personal from the professional life. Participants frequently mentioned longer working hours. Furthermore, being at home also required other duties, such as meals preparation and more cleaning tasks.

*"I notice that I end up working longer. I feel I have more time, because I also don't waste time on transport to come home, but I also see that there are days that I work more... more hours."* (Interviewee J)

Finally, individual family status (e.g. living alone, with others, or with young children) appears likely to disparately affect the work-life balance during the COVID-19 lockdown. For example, those who live with others faced a larger set of challenges than those who live alone. Consultants who have children also highlighted the negative effects of working from home when children were also doing remote schooling in the house, because they needed to monitor them. Regarding other demographic characteristics or individual differences, data do not reveal important differences.

### **3.3 Work flexibility**

The interviews were conducted in the second severe lockdown and participants had a long experience of working from home. Overall, informants appreciated the advantages of more flexibility in where and when they work. Further, the time saved on long commutes could be channelled to leisure activities or spent with their family.

Nevertheless, they also recognised that working from home was also social isolation and loneliness. As people prize face-to-face interactions, one idea about making remote work effective seem to be a hybrid work arrangement where people can spend few days a week at home and few days at the office.

*"I spend less time on transport, it can be good or bad. You can wake up at 8am and do your stuff or wake up at 8:50am and turn on your laptop. It requires some discipline. But, there is no physical separation between work and home, it is not very positive. If it was once or twice a week, now every day, no."* (Interviewee F)

In a hybrid model, interviewees believe that at home they could do work that does not require interaction with others, and collaborative work at the office. In addition, this new kind of work arrangement would also allow informants to better deal with poor space in one's home to attend work and family responsibilities.

## **4. Discussion**

One of our aims was to understand the extent to which employees were indeed prepared to work from home. At the beginning of the pandemic, consultants had a 360-degree change from working at the office to remote work. Knowing that the social connections are essential for human beings to regulate emotions, cope with stress and stay resilient (Bavel et al, 2020), public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic may bring insecurity, confusion or emotional isolation to individuals, with consequences for their health and well-being (Pfefferbaum and North, 2020). Our findings support this view. During early stages of the pandemic, almost all interviewees felt fear, anxiety and stress due to the situation, as they were not able to predict what the future would be. Over time, participants went through an adaptation process, developed strategies to relax and tried to achieve the inner balance.

Being at home allowed informants to save time on commuting. However, soon, the extra free time was occupied with more work, making the workday longer. It indeed introduced extra anxiety and stress, demotivation, and loss of productivity. These findings correspond with the views of Wang et al (2021), who argue that people, who did remote work, were expected to work outside their regular hours and often suffered fatigue, stress and burnout.

This article also aimed to identify important competencies that enable consultants and analysts to deliver the work in ways which were different from work at the office. Our study suggests two personal competencies (i.e., resilience and proactivity) and two instrumental competencies (i.e., establishment of goals and time management). Generally, our findings are consistent with prior research that support the argument that being committed with important tasks and having individual resources can make work life more purposeful and

productive (O'Driscoll and Eubanks, 1993). In addition, the mandatory work from home required the creation of new mechanisms for coordinating work (Lilian, 2014) as people had to work inside virtual teams. It urges to develop e-leadership competencies – an ability that seemed not to be well tackled in the consultant's experiences with their superiors.

Importantly, we also identified some unique findings to succeed in a crisis situation like the COVID-19 quarantines. Our research shows that remote workers suffered isolation and loneliness when working from home. In addition, a 360-degree change, from office-based to home-based work, demanded a social learning process to go through. Some consultants did not have space in their homes to attend work, others required time to accommodate with the videocall communication. Therefore, interpersonal communication and openness to change are also crucial competencies for learning and development, as well as to improve the network.

Regarding the impact that working from home had in the work-life balance, our study corroborates the literature. Working from home was experienced predominantly as positive for the majority of the respondents, with fewer respondents were having a hard time making it work. This confirms Klopotek's (2017) results, which suggest that the biggest disadvantage of working from home is the difficulty in separating home affairs from the professional ones. To mitigate this aspect, the findings suggest a hybrid arrangement as the best model to make remote work effective. At the office employees could recover the face-to-face interaction and collaborate with their teammates. At home they could focus mainly on the work.

## **5. Theoretical contribution and practical implications**

COVID-19 has been considered one of the recent outbreaks with the greatest impact on workers and workplaces worldwide. The unprecedented and urgent overnight shutdowns of offices and mandatory work- from home for employees has precipitated shifts in how we work. Covid-19 has contributed to impose a new agenda for the diffusion of virtual working practices. Organizationally, the transition from an office-centric culture to more flexible ways of working will be facilitated by the rise of connectivity technology and digitalisation. At the individual level, home-based workers are likely to appreciate the advantages of their new flexibility, as they would find extra time with their families, time for leisure or other non-work activities.

However, from a work-life perspective, it is important to acknowledge and address important issues. As people will not have to come to an office, virtual working could be lonely. There are concerns that, as people become isolated, their capacity to work collaboratively and innovate decrease. In addition to damaging performance, individuals are likely to experience misunderstandings on online communication, with serious consequences for interpersonal relationships and loneliness. Workplace loneliness may have additional detrimental effects on new hires working remotely. In other words, if new hires did not have the opportunity to spend time at the office, they would not get to live the culture of the organization.

This research could also be valuable to companies that have the intention to prepare their employees to a future situation of crisis, to still deal with the current one, or to implement new work arrangements. For example, our findings support the results of recent studies that propose a hybrid work arrangement (Gratton, 2021) if a new quarantine is needed. Many competencies for consultants working at the office would remain in a working-from-home context. Nonetheless, new competences seem to be crucial to make remote work effective. One is interpersonal communication, which suffered a massive change within this new framework of working from home (Lal, Dwivedi and Haag, 2021). Therefore, managers should invest on communication training with a focus on technology and the ways that technology allow employees to communicate and cooperate.

Other important competencies are anxiety and stress management, time management and e-leadership. To avoid future issues of anxiety and stress among employees (Shi et al, 2022), leaders and managers can implement weekly yoga classes, provide counselling to the consultants who may need it, or just manage to have a coffee (informal) break at the end of the week with their teams to speak about non-work matters and relief a little from the week. Promoting a culture with individual human concerns (Spicer, 2020), such as respecting the working hours, the work-life balance and, consequently, the personal life, can have benefits for the employee and the company.

E-leadership is a competency that is related to technology, leadership, and interpersonal communication (Contreras, Baykal and Abid, 2020). Managers should scrutinise their employees to better understand their

teams' personal preferences, work contexts, and key tasks. Adopting technologies of virtual work, such as cloud-based services, may provide managers with tools to improve cooperation, coordination, and focus among employees.

## **6. Limitations and future research**

The present study has a number of significant limitations. Consultants often gave straight answers or did not elaborate on their answers even when asked to do so. They also had difficulty to explain their perspectives, thoughts or feelings. Further research should be developed to understand whether informants experienced changes in their work life due to the evolution of the pandemic. Further studies may also include experimental and observational designs to identify the right arrangements for their workflows and projects.

Furthermore, the sample includes only 18 consultants aged between 23 and 41 years old. Future research should include more informants. In addition, future research should extend the study to other activity sectors and to a wider age group with the aim to analyse possible differences across industries and sub-groups.

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