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BEYOND THE STORM: AN EXPLORATORY SURVEY ON HR MANAGERS' REPRESENTATIONS OF EPIDEMIC-INDUCED TELEWORK

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Abstract

This paper sets out to provide insights into how HR managers experienced epidemic-induced telework, understood as an unprecedented form of telework due to its scale and effects on organizations and individuals. So far, scholars have mostly studied epidemic-induced telework through surveys and interviews conducted with teleworkers themselves. By contrast, the present paper investigates HR managers' representations of epidemic-induced telework. It is argued that the question is both timely and significant, since HR managers usually play important decision-making roles in the design of teleworking policies. Following an exploratory survey addressed to HR managers of Belgian firms conducted between April and May 2021, four ideal types of managerial reactions to epidemic-induced telework are developed: entrepreneurs, preservers, adapters, and questioners. These ideal types make it possible to better characterize the wide heterogeneity of HR managers' experiences of the pandemic and attitudes towards epidemic-induced telework.

Keywords: telework, epidemic-induced telework, managerial representations, constrained telework, human resource managers, remote working, homeworking, exploratory survey.

Introduction

Throughout the world, the COVID-19 crisis has thrown many countries into an extended lockdown period and has forced several firms into adopting measures of compulsory telework for a large, or even a total share of their staff (Carillo et al., 2021). Following recent works reporting on remote working in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis (e.g. Belnuzegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020; Dolce et al., 2020), the paper assumes that the sanitary situation has given rise to an unprecedented form of telework. In contrast to traditional, carefully thought-out implementations of remote working practices, epidemic-induced telework has been hastily deployed, without prior training of the management and the staff, and has been made mandatory as well as, in many cases, total. It is likely that this real-size experiment of massive telework has produced unsuspected effects on organizations, which research has just begun to explore (e.g. Manroop and Petrovski, 2021).

Extant literature has so far investigated such effects through wide-scale surveys addressed to workers coming from all organizational horizons. However, how organizations and their deciders experienced the crisis and reacted to epidemic-induced telework remains largely under-researched. Yet, the decisions pertaining to the reorganization of work and the adoption of new work practices are first and foremost driven by organizational deciders, and particularly HR managers, who play an important role in supporting telework policies (Pérez et al., 2003). This is why this paper investigates the managerial representations of epidemic-induced telework through an exploratory survey conducted among HR managers representing a total of 126 Belgian firms. More specifically, the paper sets out to assess HR managers' perceptions of the crisis' impacts on their organizational contexts, as well as their attitudes towards constrained telework. Based on these two dimensions (impacts/attitudes), four ideal types of HR managers' positionings towards constrained telework are developed. The results suggest a large span of differentiated responses by HR managers and highlight a wide heterogeneity in the managerial experiences and perceptions of constrained telework.

The managerial implications of epidemic-induced telework

Among the implications of the COVID-19 crisis, one of the most significant for many organizations is likely to be the full-scale experiment of compulsory telework that they have experienced for almost two years. Starting in March 2020, several governments issued more or less constraining injunctions to work remotely in many economic sectors, with the hope of slowing down the spread of the pandemic while preserving employment levels (Morilla-Luchena et al., 2021; Waizenegger et al., 2020). What was initially perceived as a temporary

and exceptional measure gradually became the norm for many managers and employees as the pandemic dragged on for months. Consequently, many workers were instructed to work remotely for an extended period of time, and many organizations had to cope with compulsory telework (Ipsen et al., 2021). Studies have begun to flourish to provide analyses of this unprecedented situation where remote working was massively deployed (e.g. Carillo et al., 2021; Manroop and Petrovski, 2021; Tavares et al., 2020).

There are reasons to believe that epidemic-induced telework should be distinguished from more traditional telework policies and had unparalleled implications for organizations. During the pandemic, telework was enforced by constraining governmental measures applied indiscriminately to all firms, regardless of their managers' opinions and preferences. Telework, then, ceased to be a managerial policy to become a key governmental measure in the fight against the pandemic. While traditional telework policies were often elaborated carefully, progressively deployed through pilot projects allowing firms' managers to make necessary adjustments, and developed in line with the company culture and values (Illegems and Verbeke, 2004), epidemic-induced telework happened all at once, taking both managers and workers by surprise (Baert et al., 2020). As such, many companies and workers had to face a wide range of organizational, technological, and managerial challenges that they were not necessarily willing to confront nor prepared for (Waizenegger et al., 2020). Telework also ceased to be a matter of personal choice – as traditional telework would typically be organized on a voluntary basis (e.g. Larsen and Andersen, 2007) – and indiscriminately applied to everyone, regardless of workers' consent. Moreover, epidemic-induced telework was repeatedly enforced in full-scale, with limited or even no possibility to go back to organizations' premises, which further stands in stark contrast with the usual company policies limiting telework to two days a week. It follows that traditional telework, which results from a managerial plan, builds on workers' individual agreement, is reversible and often limited in its application, is fundamentally different from epidemic-induced telework, which is compulsory and cannot be reversed or cancelled neither at the employer's nor the worker's will (Belnuzegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020).

Scholars have already begun to investigate epidemic-induced telework and its consequences, usually by focusing on how remote workers themselves were experiencing this unprecedented form of telework (e.g. Baert et al., 2021; Dolce et al., 2020; Tokarchuk et al., 2021). These studies uncovered various risks and challenges of constrained telework that can be classified into three interrelated categories. A first set of challenges pertains to the evolutions and/or degradations of employees' working conditions. Many workers were forced to manage the

transition to constrained telework urgently, and workplace ergonomics were usually neglected, as not all companies did offer financial support to their staff to adapt their workspace at home (Belnuzegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés, 2020). Limited contacts with people and extended periods of time spent in front of a computer were seen as major drawbacks of constrained telework (Ipsen et al., 2021). Challenges to maintaining a healthy work-life balance were also addressed, insofar as many remote workers faced work-family conflict, distractions, and role overload (Andrade and Lousa, 2021; Manroop and Petrovski, 2021). Many teleworkers further reported feelings of isolation, and studies notably drew attention to the weakening of working relations between teleworkers themselves (Baert et al., 2021; Manroop and Petrovski, 2021; Morilla-Luchena et al., 2021).

A second line of inquiry has tackled the technological challenges of epidemic-induced telework. The availability of adequate technological resources was seen as an important factor in the success of telework during the pandemic (Tokarchuk et al., 2021). Technology-related issues, such as the lack of appropriate hardware and software or improperly configured accesses to internal databases, were found to negatively impact remote workers' experience during the pandemic (Ipsen et al., 2021). Some technologies were shown to result in increased cognitive overload for teleworkers (Schmitt et al., 2021). While the proliferation of remote meetings through various communication platforms enabled new patterns of team collaboration (Waizenegger et al., 2020), it also led to the rise of videoconferencing fatigue (Bennett et al., 2021). Insofar as telework requires modern information and communication technologies to function properly (Wöhrmann and Ebner, 2021), the pandemic caused many organizations to adopt new innovative tools and practices.

A third stream of research has rather focused on the evolution of middle managers' roles and practices. Increases in cognitive requests, pressing uses of technology, and abusive control and surveillance have been identified as mismanagement practices likely to harm the smooth functioning of telework (Dolce et al., 2020). Epidemic-induced telework put considerable pressure on middle managers' shoulders, who all of a sudden were asked to manage remote workers and adapt their supervising and coordinating practices. A successful transition towards compulsory telework was notably described as relying on "*mutual trust*" between managers and employees as well as on "*management by objectives and performance*" (Tokarchuk et al., 2021, p. 3). Middle managers were pressed to actively commit to developing new communication mechanisms and to maintain organizational performance while keeping an eye on their staff's well-being (Tokarchuk et al., 2021). In this view, middle managers' adaptability was often

viewed as the backbone of a successful transition towards constrained telework (Mercedes and Burrell, 2021). Consequently, it was also suggested that they might have experienced more difficulties in transitioning to constrained telework than their employees (Carillo et al., 2021).

It should be noted, however, that early studies of epidemic-induced telework are not all about its challenges and drawbacks. Scholars also underlined a nascent craze for telework, as many surveyed employees considered that they managed to adapt swiftly to working remotely (Tavares et al., 2020) and declared themselves favorable to continuing telework in the future (Baert et al., 2021; Tokarchuk et al., 2021). From the workers' point of view, it seems that constrained telework during the pandemic was largely seen as positive (Ipsen et al., 2021; Tokarchuk et al., 2021). In the same vein, it was argued that, after having experienced telework, workers and managers alike became more inclined to recognize its benefits and to support future developments of teleworking policies (Morilla-Luchena et al., 2021). Research, therefore, seems to indicate that telework is here to stay.

When considering the aforementioned studies, however, and without denying their valuable contributions to our understanding of epidemic-induced telework and its implications, it is striking to note that they almost exclusively draw from surveys conducted among teleworkers themselves. The methodological designs of these studies usually consisted of questionnaires open to any respondent having experienced telework, regardless of their function or organizational context (Andrade and Lousa, 2021; Baert et al., 2021; Carillo et al., 2021; Dolce et al., 2020; Ipsen et al., 2021; Tavares et al., 2020). The particular context of the pandemic, which required quick insights into the rising phenomena of constrained telework, was notably invoked to legitimate designs built on convenience sampling (e.g. Baert et al., 2021). Additionally, qualitative methods based on semi-structured interviews (e.g. Waizenegger et al., 2020) and written narratives (Manroop and Petrovski, 2021) with teleworkers were also deployed. However, in all cases, emphasis is set on teleworkers' work experiences during the pandemic.

By contrast, organizational deciders' intents have remained largely understudied. While research has called for capitalizing on the lessons learned from the crisis in order to develop "*efficient, effective and humane telework practices*" (Carillo et al., 2021, p. 70), it has paid little attention to the actual plans of organizational deciders: how did they experiment the crisis – not as individuals working remotely, but as managers with decisional power? While existing studies have hinted at a series of managerial issues related to constrained telework, such as its impact on organizational performance (Tokarchuk et al., 2021) and the dangers of destructive

leadership in remote working contexts (Dolce et al., 2020), top managers themselves have rarely been the target of researchers' data collection processes. As a consequence, managers' perceptions of constrained telework as well as their intentions for the future have remained quite opaque. Yet, the present paper argues that understanding managers' positionings towards constrained telework is essential to gain a comprehensive overview of constrained telework implications and to grasp companies' projects to capitalize on the crisis, as these managers usually hold decisional power over the adoption of new innovations (Jemine & Guillaume, 2022).

To this end, the paper builds on an exploratory survey conducted among HR managers of Belgian firms between May and June 2021. The focus was set on HR managers since the literature acknowledges that they usually play a major role in the design and implementation of telework policies (e.g. Maruyama and Tietze, 2012; Pérez et al., 2003). The paper pursues three joint objectives. First, it seeks to complement existing studies on epidemic-induced telework, which mostly draw on surveys conducted among workers, with insights coming from HR managers' perspectives. Second, the paper sets out to better seize, respectively, the actual *impacts* of epidemic-induced telework on work contexts and work practices, as well as the *attitudes* of the respondents towards constrained telework. As the literature has repeatedly claimed that managerial reluctance to implement telework policies was one of the major obstacles to its generalization (e.g. Kaplan et al., 2017), we question the extent to which epidemic-induced telework could have led to changes in HR directors' attitudes towards remote working practices. Finally, the paper develops a conceptual framework based on four ideal types that depict the wide range of positionings that HR directors can adopt towards remote working. It is argued that the findings of the present study, which advance our understanding of the implications of epidemic-induced telework for organizations, can be of interest to researchers and practitioners alike.

Methods

Data collection

The paper reports on the results of an exploratory survey conducted between May and June 2021 and exclusively addressed to French-speaking HR managers of Belgian firms. Exploratory surveys typically build on relatively small sample sizes to gain quick insights into new or emerging issues and phenomena (Babbie, 2007). This method makes it possible to develop conceptual frameworks on innovative research problems that have received scant attention in the past, and are therefore useful to provide guidance for further research (Sekaran, 2000). The

survey was built using Qualtrics, a specialized platform in the design and management of quantitative surveys. Following two weeks of pre-test to assess the validity of the survey and the consistency of the items, the survey was distributed through carefully selected professional channels such as HR professional communities, HR directors networks, and company federations. Data was collected at a time where respondents could reflect on constrained telework in retrospect, while still being, at that time and in Belgium, subject to a governmental injunction to work remotely whenever possible. Participation in the survey was anonymous. While HR directors were the primary target of the study, company directors were also invited to take part in case no HR director was present (notably in smaller firms). Contrary to other surveys recently conducted on telework (e.g. Carillo et al., 2021), respondents were not asked to reflect on their personal experiences or feelings as teleworkers, but rather to take a position on a series of items related to their managerial function.

The survey was built around four main parts. The first, *framing*, aimed at acquiring general information about respondents and their organization. Respondents were invited to specify the business sector (Q1), the size (Q2) and economic sector (i.e. public/private/non-profit) (Q3) of their firm. They also had to indicate whether the firm had a formally identified HR department (Q4) and were asked to specify their position within the firm – either head of HR, company director (in contexts where HR responsibilities are taken over by the company director, e.g. smaller firms with no HR department), or other HR manager (Q5) as well as their seniority in that position (Q6). Finally, they were asked to assess the proportion of the types of staff (employees, industrial workers, senior executives, etc.) employed by their company (Q7). In a second part, several items related to the *organization of work* prior to and during the crisis were presented to the respondents. They were notably invited to specify the nature of their telework policy before the crisis (Q8), the technological equipment that they already possessed at that time (Q9), and the actual situation of their firm regarding telework (Q10). The third part of the survey aimed at assessing the actual *impacts* of the crisis on respondents' organizations. A unique question (Q11), structured around a four-level Likert scale, contained a total of sixteen potential impacts of the crisis on organizations issued from the literature on epidemic-induced telework. The aggregation of these items made it possible to build an overview of the extent to which surveyed firms were affected by constrained telework. Finally, in the same vein, a last question (Q12) pertaining to the *attitudes* of the respondents regarding constrained telework was structured around a total of ten items.

The final sample consisted of a hundred and forty-nine recorded samples, which was further narrowed down to a hundred and twenty-six valid entries (n=126). An entry was assessed as invalid when 1) respondents omitted more than two items in the questionnaire (n=18); 2) respondents declared that they did not occupy a managerial/HR position (n=2); 3) two respondents or more belonged to the same organization (n=3). In that last scenario, the entry of the respondent who appeared to occupy the lowest position in the organization was not kept in the sample. Three responses from HR managers were left aside since their head of HR also participated in the survey, in order to avoid overinflating the presence of specific organizations in the sample. While being far from exhaustive, the sample covers the viewpoint of more than a hundred HR managers who represent more than a hundred organizational contexts. Therefore, we argue that the dataset is particularly rich for advancing our understanding of the impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on organizations.

Data analysis

Analyses of the data were conducted using SPSS Statistics. Results were first presented in percentages (descriptive statistics are available in Appendix 1). In a second stage, the dataset was used to build two key indicators. The first, relative to the *impact* of the sanitary crisis on respondents' work contexts, consisted in the aggregation of the sixteen items of Q11. These items covered various impacts of the crisis on employment, organizational, managerial, and individual factors, of which respondents were asked to assess the relevance in their own work context. A final score expressed on a scale of twenty was built by aggregating respondents' answers to these sixteen items. For example, respondents indicating that the sixteen impacts were strongly applicable in their case would receive the maximum score (20) while, conversely, respondents reporting none of the suggested impacts would obtain the minimum score (0). A second indicator dealing with respondents' *attitudes* towards telework was established following the same process and combining targeted items of Q12 (i.e. Q12b, Q12c, Q12d, Q12f, Q12g, Q12j). Two items (Q12c, Q12j) were given more weight in the aggregation process since they were more directly related to respondents' attitudes towards telework. Just as explained above, an attitude indicator was produced for each respondent, ranging from a theoretical maximum score for respondents displaying strongly favourable attitudes towards epidemic-induced telework (of 20) and a lower limit for respondents hostile to telework (of 0). It should be noted that both impact and attitudes indicators remain fragile constructions, bound by respondents' subjectivity and the methodological choices operated in their construction, and should not be viewed as absolute or objective measures. Rather, they constitute an original way

to articulate the data and generate further knowledge on telework as it has been experienced by HR managers. These indicators were then used to build four ideal types of managerial reactions towards telework.

The main findings are structured as follows. First, respondents' descriptions of the impacts of the crisis on their organizational contexts are exposed. Then, a second part accounts for the attitudes of the respondents towards epidemic-induced telework, which is designed around assertions with which respondents can agree or disagree. The third part of the findings builds on the first two to elaborate a typology of the managerial reactions towards epidemic-induced telework. Finally, some statistically significant relations and correlations are briefly discussed, as we argue that they could be of interest for further research on epidemic-induced telework and its implications for organizations.

Main findings

Impacts of the crisis on the organization of work

Out of the sixteen items on which respondents were asked to take a position, the most salient implication of the pandemic lies in the necessity of bringing substantial changes to the organization of work (Q11a), an effect reported by 79% of the respondents. Contenders include individual impacts on workers, such as the intensification of stress and burnout (Q11m, 74%), the challenges of sustaining their motivation (Q11k, 73%), and the increase in autonomy (Q11l, 70%). To a large extent, impacts on employment appear to be the less frequent ones, as reported job losses (Q11i, 10,4%) and working time reduction measures (Q11j, 18,6%) are the two lowest items among the list (see Table 1). It is interesting to note, however, that respondents are primarily acknowledging the impacts of the crisis on individual factors (e.g. stress, motivation, autonomy, workload, etc.) while being more mitigated regarding management factors (e.g. vertical communication, trust climate, management training).

	Following the crisis...	Not applicable	Rather not applicable	Applicable	Strongly applicable
Organizational impacts					
Q11a	... it became necessary to bring substantial changes to the organization of work.	3,2%	17,5%	31,7%	47,6%
Q11b	... it became necessary to rethink the company's culture and values.	24%	45,6%	24,8%	5,6%
Q11c	... it became necessary to invest in new technological equipment or IT developments.	12,7%	24,6%	39,7%	23%
Managerial impacts					

Q11d	... it became necessary to design specific training and provide support for middle managers.	16,8%	34,4%	39,2%	9,6%
Q11e	... it became more difficult to control the quantity and/or the quality of the work performed by the workers.	20,8%	41,6%	26,4%	11,2%
Q11f	... communication problems between workers and their managers become more frequent.	6,3%	38,1%	41,3%	14,3%
Q11g	... a climate of trust has been emerging between managers and workers.	12%	32,8%	47,2%	8%
Q11h	... control and monitoring of the work by managers has intensified.	28%	51,2%	19,2%	1,6%
Employment impacts					
Q11i	... our company has experienced job losses.	82,4%	7,2%	5,6%	4,8%
Q11j	... our company had to reduce the working time of some workers.	62,9%	18,5%	10,5%	8,1%
Individual impacts					
Q11k	... it became necessary to find new ways of sustaining workers' morale and motivation.	7,2%	19,8%	52,4%	20,6%
Q11l	... workers have learned to work more autonomously.	7,2%	23%	57,1%	12,7%
Q11m	... cases of work stress and burnout have intensified.	7,2%	19%	46,8%	27%
Q11n	... the workload of workers has significantly increased.	15,8%	27%	42,9%	14,3%
Q11o	... the productivity of workers has significantly increased.	15,3%	40,3%	38,7%	5,7%
Q11p	... cases of workers working despite adverse medical conditions (presenteeism) were more frequent.	20,6%	31%	40,5%	7,9%

Table 1 – Impacts of the sanitary crisis on organizations

Surprisingly, only 55% of the respondents indicate that trust has been strengthened in their organization (Q11g). In both the professional and scientific literature, there is a tendency to view trust as the new, key skill that managers should acquire at all costs in order to be able to properly manage their teams in remote work contexts (e.g. Kim et al., 2021; Tokarchuk et al., 2021). However, the survey indicates that the role of trust might be overexaggerated. It might be the case that HR managers did not effectively succeed in creating a climate of trust yet are willing to do so; maybe they do not think that such a thing is possible; they might also believe that it would still be possible to make further progress to that regard. However, what the numbers indicate is that 45% of the respondents seemingly deny that trust has effectively settled in the managerial relations within their organization. In the same vein, it is quite striking to note that only one respondent out of five believes that the monitoring of work by managers has intensified (Q11h). In surveys among workers, questions of monitoring and surveillance in remote work contexts are issues that are frequently emphasized by the workers themselves (e.g.

Andrade and Lousa, 2021). However, in that case, controlling the work performed by remote workers appears to be a challenge for a minority of respondents only (38%, Q11e). In sum, several organizational impacts of constrained telework – on trust, monitoring, and control – seem to be more salient in surveys conducted among remote workers than among their HR managers.

Managerial attitudes towards epidemic-induced telework

Respondents were instructed to indicate their level of agreement with ten statements related to constrained telework (see Table 2). Interestingly, there are two items that generated an overall strong disagreement among respondents. First, only 29% of them believed that some of their colleagues could not work properly at a distance because of the characteristics of their position (Q12a). Indeed, for a long time, the argument that some positions were fundamentally not adapted for telework was seen as a major obstacle in the implementation of remote working policies (e.g. Elldér, 2019). The survey seems to hint that many HR managers have moved away from thinking of remote working as being “appropriate” or “inappropriate” for specific functions and positions. Besides, no more than one respondent out of four (25%, Q12b), believes that work performance is directly related to workers’ presence on-site. These two items may indicate shifts in the way HR managers perceive telework and its limits.

		Strongly disagree	Rather disagree	Rather agree	Strongly agree
Q12a	Many individuals in my company are actually working remotely even though telework is not appropriate for their position.	43,7%	27%	24,6%	4,7%
Q12b	Workers’ performance is directly related to their on-site presence.	42,9%	32,5%	19,8%	4,8%
Q12c	The sanitary crisis has caused my perceptions of remote working to evolve positively.	12%	16,8%	48%	23,2%
Q12d	As soon as the sanitary conditions will allow it, I will prioritize the return to the office.	20%	28,8%	32%	19,2%
Q12e	The effective functioning of telework depends primarily upon the individual characteristics and skills of workers themselves.	3,2%	13,5%	56,3%	27%
Q12f	It is likely that we will reduce our working spaces in the upcoming years.	29,4%	30,2%	27,8%	12,7%
Q12g	I believe that remote working should be better supervised by line managers.	8,7%	24,6%	51,6%	15,1%
Q12h	Organizing training for workers and managers is essential to overcome the challenges of constrained telework.	9,5%	29,4%	48,4%	12,7%

Q12i	My company has designed business continuity plans to face potential future crises.	20,6%	33,3%	27,8%	18,3%
Q12j	Constrained telework has brought many benefits to the organization and the workers alike, and should be pursued beyond the sanitary crisis.	14,4%	27,2%	44%	14,4%

Table 2 – Attitudes of the respondents towards remote working

The most striking result when it comes to managerial attitudes may be related to HR managers' perception of telework effectiveness (Q12e). There is a strong degree of agreement across the sample (83,3%) that the individual characteristics of remote workers are the most important factor for making it work properly. In a way, that figure might be indicative of respondents' more or less conscious attempts to off-load their managerial responsibilities on staff. Assuming individual factors to be the primary lever of action to improve telework situations implies that other factors, such as managerial (e.g. control, surveillance, trust, etc.) and organizational ones (e.g. work content, work processes, work culture, etc.) are of secondary importance. It is, therefore, quite telling that a large proportion of respondents seemingly adhere to an individualized view of what makes telework successful.

Looking ahead, we can note that 61% of the surveyed HR managers reported a positive evolution of their perceptions towards telework (Q12c) and that 58% of them planned to proceed with telework beyond the crisis (Q12j). While this number is quite high with respect to estimates of teleworkers in the world according to wide-scale studies of telework prior to the crisis – which approximates 10% (e.g. Carillo et al., 2021, p. 69), it still indicates that a large part of the respondents are still reluctant or not inclined to support the development of remote working policies in their organization. Another interesting result is that approximately half of the respondents seem to have worked on continuity plans to face further similar crises (46%, Q12i). Finally, it is striking to note that two respondents out of five (40%, Q12f) declared clear intentions to reduce their working space in the near future. This could potentially indicate that projects of space optimization and rationalization (through open spaces, hot-desking, activity-based working, etc.), a trend already initiated before the crisis (e.g. Jemine et al., 2020), might intensify in the upcoming years.

Four ideal types of managerial reactions

As explained in the data analysis, the responses to the items above were further aggregated into two indicators – one pertaining to the *impact* of the sanitary crisis on the respondent's organization, and the other to the *attitude* of the respondent towards constrained telework.

Statistical analysis shows that the values for the first indicator (impact) range between 1.67 and 15.42 on a scale of twenty (mean: 9.39, SD: 2.73) and that the values for the second indicator (attitude) lie between 2.78 and 17.78 (mean: 11.03, SD: 3.52). Crossing both indicators yielded a statistically significant yet weak correlation ($p = .034$, $r = 0.19$), which tend to indicate that the more respondents have been impacted by the crisis, the more likely they tend to be favorable towards telework. By crossing these indicators, it becomes possible to distinguish between four ideal types of managerial reactions towards constrained telework and to categorize respondents in these ideal types based on their impact and attitude scores (see Figure 1).

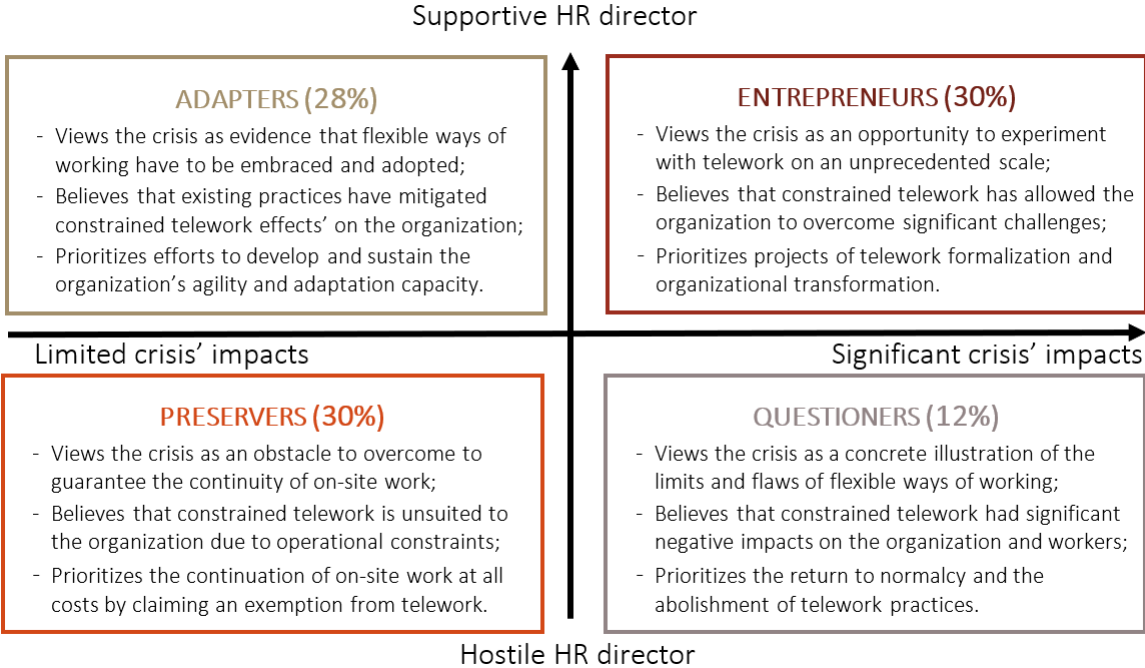


Figure 1 – Four ideal types of managerial reactions to constrained telework

The four identified profiles can be described as follows. **Entrepreneurs** represent HR managers who were strongly challenged by the sanitary crisis and the compulsory transition towards telework, yet do reflect optimistically on the benefits that such changes brought to the organization. They typically work within organizational structures where telework was used to be prohibited, weakly developed or strictly regulated, and where managerial perceptions of remote working were rather adverse. The compulsory transition to telework, however, largely contributed to lifting these perceptions in contexts where constrained telework actually led to equal or higher levels of productivity or organizational efficiency. Entrepreneurs, therefore, intend to capitalize on the lessons learned from the crisis and to perpetuate some of the practices that arose during the crisis. As evidenced by the survey, they firmly believe that telework should

not merely be a temporary measure to face the pandemic, but ought to become part of their organization's policies and practices.

Similarly, **questioners** were also struck by the pandemic with full force and had to resort to telework for their staff. However, by contrast with entrepreneurs, they experienced constrained telework more negatively and emphasized its limits and drawbacks more heavily. In this view, constrained telework was viewed as an unpleasant experience causing harmful consequences to the organization and workers alike. The survey shows that questioners would be more prompt to report issues in internal communication, workers' motivation and health, and productivity drops. As a result, questioners aspired to return to more traditional ways of working as soon as possible, and viewed constrained telework as a confirmation of the doubts that they might have sustained towards telework all along. Hence, questioners stress the benefits of working on-site and prioritize a return to the workplace that is as immediate as possible.

For their part, **preservers** also adopted a conservative approach towards telework, albeit for different reasons. In their case, telework remained only marginally deployed throughout the crisis. It is important to remind that not all workers were subject to constrained telework: in Belgium, some economic activities and functions for which on-site presence was assessed as "essential" were not compelled to work remotely. However, what made a function "essential" remained a grey area throughout the pandemic. Preservers took advantage of this to maintain on-site work whenever possible, hence limiting the share of workers who had to telework. In these organizations, on-site work remained the norm throughout the crisis. Preservers were prompt to summon specific particularities of their work contexts to justify that constrained telework could only apply marginally – or not at all – to some workers. Contrary to questioners – who experienced telework and wished they could go back – preservers barely tried telework and did not declare any strategic intent of doing so in the near future.

Finally, the group of **adapters** encompasses HR managers who reported that constrained telework unfolded relatively unproblematically within their organizational contexts due to the prompt adaptation of their staff to their new working conditions. Telework or other flexible work practices were already common in adapters' organizations, which means that transitioning towards constrained telework occurred without major issues. These respondents usually indicate greater levels of autonomy and trust as well as lesser impacts of the crisis on managers and workers. Some sort of self-reinforcement effect can be observed whereby adapters view in their resilience to the pandemic a confirmation that flexible and agile ways of working should be continuously strengthened. Adapters thus seek to foster new work practices with the

perspective of sustaining flexibility and minimizing the effects of potential disruptions – such as the pandemic – on their organization.

For exploratory purposes, a distribution of the survey participants among the four categories was undertaken. Measuring participants' scores on the two dimensions mentioned above (impacts and attitude) made it possible to position them in Figure 1. Since both dimensions are expressed on a scale of twenty (0-20), the score of 10 was used as the delineation between low and high values for impact and attitude alike. The results of that distribution are indicated in Figure 1. They indicate a surprising balance between the entrepreneurs (30%), the preservers (30%), and the adapters (28%), with a lower sample of questioners (12%). This observation suggests a wide-ranging diversity of contrasting experiences of HR managers with constrained telework. Numbers indicate that the respondents report varying degrees of impact, with 42% of them acknowledging consequential effects on the crisis on their organization. Conversely, it is important to note that 58% of the participants rather seem to indicate low or moderate effects of the crisis on the surveyed factors (autonomy, workload, internal communication, trust, etc.) As studies of telework are timely, it is essential to avoid overlooking all these organizations which were only marginally impacted by the crisis – either by being already accustomed to such practices (adapters) or by being not affected by telework at all (conservers). Managerial attitudes can be read in the same vein: 58% of the respondents seem to favor telework, while 42% of the surveyed HR managers report some degree of reluctance towards its generalization. Overall, these results plead for considering the heterogeneity of the organizational contexts and avoiding hasty generalizations pertaining to the impacts of the crisis or to the positioning of HR managers.

Discussion and Conclusions

To complement extant research on the implications of epidemic-induced telework, the present paper reports on an exploratory survey of which the aim was to grasp HR managers' representations of the crisis and attitudes towards constrained telework. HR managers' viewpoints on epidemic-induced telework have not yet received significant attention, which might seem surprising since they often play a major role in introducing and sustaining telework policies (Pérez et al., 2003). Therefore, developing a broader understanding of their reactions towards epidemic-induced telework seemed essential to identify the organizational challenges of the crisis as well as companies' plans for the future. So far, it has been assumed that the crisis would, somewhat logically, result in the adoption of new teleworking regimes by companies (e.g. Tavares et al., 2020). Yet, the extent to which HR managers actually plan to support further

teleworking policies or, on the contrary, to prevent their expansion remains largely unknown. In the absence of scientific data, research has relied on second-hand figures issued from professional surveys conducted by consultancies, in which, for instance, the “*long-term development of teleworking practices*” was seen as a “*top priority*” for 85% of HR directors (Carillo et al., 2021, p. 82). By identifying four ideal types of managerial reactions to epidemic-induced telework, the present study delivers a more complex picture that emphasizes the heterogeneity of the impacts of the crisis on organizations as well as of HR managers’ attitudes towards constrained telework.

First, the study acknowledges that organizations have experienced governmental injunctions to telework in very different ways. Scholars have usually postulated significant impacts of the pandemic on organizations, arguing that the “*business world*” was undergoing major “*paradigm shifts*” (Howe et al., 2020, p. 1). While this might be partly true, 58% of the HR managers questioned in this study reported limited impacts of the crisis on their organizational contexts. Several challenges pertaining to epidemic-induced telework that one could expect to be significant, such as surveillance and monitoring practices (Kim et al., 2021), trust-based management (e.g. Andrade and Lousa, 2021), and presenteeism (e.g. Forte et al., 2021), were far from being unanimously reported as problematic by all respondents. This observation recalls that research on epidemic-induced telework has mostly produced conclusions on the basis of data obtained from teleworkers, and that managerial perceptions of constrained telework have remained relatively opaque. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that many organizations managed to maintain on-site operations throughout the crisis and to mitigate the effects of governmental measures; nor should it be forgotten that many firms were already familiar with telework practices prior to the crisis (Biron and Casper, 2022). Finally, organizations also display various levels of financial resources and technical expertise, which has been shown to influence their readiness to transition towards more digital systems (Waheed et al., 2020). As a consequence, while some firms indeed underwent significant changes and had to produce considerable efforts to adapt to the pandemic (Carillo et al., 2021), the present study shows that actual experiences of HR managers with epidemic-induced telework are far more wide-ranging than what the literature actually suggests.

Second, the paper also underlines the contrasting attitudes that HR managers adopted towards epidemic-induced telework. Recommendations addressed to management teams are currently flourishing: it would become essential, for instance, to adapt leadership styles (Biron and Casper, 2021), to implement innovative communication mechanisms (Tavares et al., 2020), and

to find new ways to measure teleworkers' performance (Kim et al., 2021). However, while the literature has already set a fairly heavy agenda on management teams' shoulders, little insight has been provided regarding what managers actually thought, did, and plan to do next. This study suggests that, while several HR managers are looking enthusiastically at new telework regimes, others experimented epidemic-induced telework as a negative episode, and that still others were rather investing in strategies to avoid or minimize the use of telework. There is, therefore, high heterogeneity in actual experiences of epidemic-induced telework by HR managers that should be better acknowledged in the literature on telework.

The four ideal types developed in this paper offer a tentative attempt to theorize this heterogeneity. They inform further research and practitioners alike that experiences of – and managerial attitudes towards – epidemic-induced telework can greatly vary. To the extent that these ideal types reflect individual positionings towards telework, they could be further expanded to encompass other organizational actors, which could help in better understanding managerial resistance to telework at different levels – for instance in management boards or among middle managers (e.g. Kaplan et al., 2017). It should be noted that it is not the intention of the authors to pretend that one type of managerial reaction should be viewed as better or more desirable than the others. The four of them merely denote different ideal types of rational managerial responses to the crisis. Consequently, they should primarily be viewed as a conceptual tool for making sense of the diversity of managerial responses to epidemic-induced telework.

An interesting avenue for future research pertains to further developing our understanding of the factors underlying managers' reactions to constrained telework. It can be assumed that some business sectors or activities are more teleworking-friendly than others (Elldér, 2019), which could dictate both the effects of telework on firms and the attitudes of managers towards it. For instance, additional analyses performed on our dataset revealed a statistically significant relationship between business sectors (Q1) and the impact of telework as reported by respondents ($F(6,125) = [2,63]$, $p = .019$), indicating that sectors such as public administration and education were more likely to be impacted than others. By contrast, statistical analyses revealed a non-significant relationship between the sectors and the attitude of respondents towards telework ($F(6,125) = [2,11]$, $p = .058$). We also tested for the relationship between the kind of personnel employed by the organization and the impact of telework and the attitudes of respondents towards telework. ANOVA tests revealed a statistically significant difference between the personnel employed and our measure of telework impact ($F(3,125) = [3,98]$, $p =$

.009). Somewhat logically, companies operating with a majority of employees appeared to be significantly more impacted by constrained telework than companies employing a majority of industrial workers. Yet, once again, the relationship between types of workers and respondents' attitudes towards telework was not statistically significant ($F(3,125) = [2,24]$, $p = .086$). Our analyses suggest, therefore, that the impact of constrained telework on firms is influenced by factors such as the business sector and the type of workers employed, but that the reasons that make HR managers open or hostile towards telework are to be found elsewhere than in such contextual factors. Further research could thus look more precisely into the contextual factors that make HR managers fall into one of the four ideal types.

Due to the exploratory scope of the present study, there are some limitations that need to be acknowledged. Most notably, the distribution of the respondents within the ideal types remains a necessarily imperfect exercise for two reasons. First, the score of ten was chosen as a mathematical limit to categorize respondents. However, the imperfections inherent to quantitative methodologies make it difficult to assert with certainty that a score of nine, for example, rigorously represents a "hostile" attitude of the respondent towards telework (the same respondent could, if questioned, deny such an interpretation of the survey results). Moreover, respondents obtaining mixed scores on a given dimension (e.g. 10) could only fall in an ideal type ever so slightly, hence not being a very convincing representative of that ideal type. Consequently, the values provided in Figure 1 should be seen as informative and should not be taken as absolutes. Despite these limitations, the value of the paper lies in its attempt to better theorize contrasted experiences of the epidemic-induced telework on the basis of HR managers' perceptions of their organizational contexts.

Another key suggestion for future research arising from the present paper would be to conduct more fine-grained analyses of epidemic-induced telework experiences. Currently, research on constrained telework has been dominated by open surveys addressed to teleworkers of all sorts (e.g. Andrade and Lousa, 2021; Carillo et al., 2021; Dolce et al., 2020; Ipsen et al., 2021) while paying little attention to peculiarities of work contexts and managers' decisions. These surveys should ideally be complemented with in-depth case studies conducted within organizations, which would allow gaining more insight into managerial, HR, team-level, and individual implications of epidemic-induced telework. In that respect, the four ideal types identified in this paper may be used as a conceptual basis to select and investigate contrasted cases to investigate. Indeed, the positioning of HR managers towards telework is likely to have a strong impact on how the organization reacted to the crisis and designed plans for future policies of telework.

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Appendix 1 – Survey results (n=126)

Q1 – In what business sector is your organization currently operating?		
Public administration, education and public health	31,5%	
Industry, energy and water, construction	21%	
Corporate services, consultancy	18,6%	
Transport, trade and tourism	8,9%	
Finance, banking and insurance	7,3%	
IT and media	6,4%	
Culture and other services	6,4%	
Q2 – How many workers are employed by your organization?		
Less than 5 workers	9,5%	
Between 5 and 19 workers	9,5%	
Between 20 and 49 workers	9,5%	
Between 50 and 249 workers	33,3%	
Between 250 and 999 workers	16,7%	
1000 workers or more	21,5%	
Q3 – What economic sector is characterizing your organization?		
Private sector	61,3%	
Public sector	31,5%	
Non-profit sector	7,2%	
Q4 – Does your organization has a formally identified HR department?		
Yes	76,8%	
No	23,2%	
Q5 – What is your position within the organization?		
HR manager (head of HR)	32,5%	
Company director	39,7%	
Other HR manager	27,8%	
Q6 – Since when have you held your position?		
Less than a year	7,9%	
One to five years	41,3%	
Six to ten years	19,8%	
More than ten years	31%	
Q7 – What kind of workers is your organization currently using?		
Mostly employees (min. 60%)	65%	
Mostly industrial workers (min. 60%)	13%	
Mix of employees and ind. workers (20 to 59%)	10,6%	
Other (<i>note: mostly very small firms</i>)	11,4%	
Q8 – Among these proposals, which one describes the best your organization's policy towards telework prior to the pandemic (i.e. before March 2020)?		
Not tolerated and not practiced	17,6%	
Just being tested through a pilot project	6,4%	
Informally tolerated, but mostly for managers	16,8%	
Informally tolerated for the staff	13,6%	
Formalized in a policy, but on-site work remained the norm	39,2%	
Formalized in a policy and was the norm	6,4%	
Q9 – What is, according to you, the proportion of workers within your organization properly equipped to work remotely prior to the pandemic?		
None or very few	11,1%	
Only specific categories of workers	38,9%	
All or almost all workers	50%	
Q10 – At present time (May-June 2021), which of these proposals best describe how work is taking place within your organization?		
My company mostly or entirely operates on-site	24%	
There is a "50-50" balance between on-site and remote	21,6%	
My company mostly operates remotely	45,6%	

My company entirely operates remotely	8,8%	
Q11 (see Table 1 in text)		
Q12 (see Table 2 in text)		