

ARE HR MANAGERS READY FOR REMOTE WORKERS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract

The EURECA project, funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, aims to develop new guidelines for HRM in developing strategies for remote workers. The project uses both qualitative and quantitative data collection to understand both the perception of remote workers after the Covid-19 pandemic, and the way HR managers are tailoring HRD strategies to match the different expectations of a new category of employees. Through a semi-structured interview, the research team collected testimonies of HR managers in Spain, Portugal and Italy to understand how HRD policies moved in new directions after the pandemic confined many to remote-working. Companies were selected in order to assess both the public and private sectors, in both the manufacturing and service sectors. Data collection has been accompanied by classical content analysis and quantitative text analysis. The poster that accompanies the present study will show the principal results obtained through data collection, particularly highlighting the main differences and similarities between countries and company sectors.

Keywords: HRD, remote workers, professional development, cross-cultural analysis, qualitative study.

1. Introduction- EURECA project

EURECA is a scientific project funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (Portugal). The partnership involves two research centers in Portugal, one in Spain and one in Italy. The project aims to understand the interaction between career management strategies and the new remote careers that have emerged in response to the pandemic and to develop new strategies and interventions catered to the cultural diversity of remote workers in Europe, aimed at helping them manage their career goals with the added distractions, stressors and isolation of remote work. It consists of three different sets of data collection and analysis: a systematic review of the literature on remote workers before and during the pandemic; a quantitative data collection from a sample of over 700 remote workers across 17 European countries through a questionnaire conducted in English, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, French and German; and a qualitative analysis through a semi-structured interview with Human Resource (HR) managers, presented in the poster that accompanies the present study.

2. Aim and objectives

The aim of the qualitative analysis on HR managers consists in understanding what strategies companies have developed to deal with a new type of worker: the remote worker.

In an earlier phase of the EURECA project, “remote worker” was defined as an employee who works both within an organization space and works (fully or partially) from a different location. That could be from home, from a shared office, from an outdoor space (e.g. garden), or from a vacation spot. The time dedicated to remote work can vary from a few hours per day to several days per week, up to full-time work outside the company’s physical location. Although this new way of managing employees exploded during the Covid-19 pandemic period, it was predominantly born from the development of new technologies and is now moving towards a new post-pandemic balance.

Smart working consists in the presence of the three elements: time flexibility, space flexibility, and ICT tools. As stated by Blackwell (2008), “it embraces the entirety of new ways of working

opportunities in an integrated manner – be that spatial and temporal autonomy, the required cultural and trust transitions, technological advances, wider intellectual connections and stimuli, social, ethical and environmental sensitivities – all harmonized to suit the individual working style”. Before the shock of the pandemic, smart working was intended as an innovative way of working, where the flexibility of time and space to work was managed through clear and shared aims between employee and organization. It was meant to improve work-life balance and job satisfaction, not to ensure physical isolation of people. It requires a flexible organization structure, tailored management of internal processes, and a new organizational culture. In this way, this smart-working mode was a choice, both for the company and for the employees.

The Covid-19 pandemic had dramatic consequences for both our lives and our work processes. Within a short time, organizations had to decide how to protect employees from infection, while trying to maintain their business. Most of them considered smart-working as a possible option, even if in many cases what they were able to implement was far from the principle of smart-working. For this reason, the label of “remote working” was suggested to more appropriately define the situation.

In 2022, the pandemic period seemed to be coming an end, social distancing and restrictions were less and less present and there was a will to return to normal. However, remote working did not disappear, thus it is important to know how Human Resources Management (HRM) is facing this new situation.

3. Methodology

To find out how HRM is coping with remote work after the pandemic, we have identified the semi-structured interview as the most effective tool for gathering qualitative data. The reason also lies in the need to contact a very qualified sample – HR managers – who would probably not be available to fill out a questionnaire without being contacted personally and given an effective presentation of the project (Ripamonti et al., 2021). Therefore, given the intention to contact them personally, collecting in-depth qualitative data was the most effective choice, especially in consideration of ethical issues (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). The semi-structured interview schema was developed in English and translated to Portuguese, Italian and Spanish. It contains a brief explanation of the EURECA project, the aim of this phase, and five sections of questions:

1. 12 questions dedicated to the features of the organization, mainly asking for quantitative data about the organization;
2. 7 questions dedicated to the application of remote work;
3. 8 questions exploring career management policies;
4. 7 questions designed to explore HRM policies and practices for regular and remote workers, and
5. 2 open-ended questions about the strategic value of remote working.

The sampling procedure has been designed to cover different types of organizations, considering the sustainability of resources devoted to interviews with HR managers. The variables included to define the sample were: size (big/SME), product (manufacturing/service), mission (public/private) and country (Italy/Spain and Portugal). The researcher from each country contacted the HR manager of a convenience sample, given the strategic importance of directly interviewing the main person responsible for HR strategies and policies. Interviews were conducted online in the interviewee’s native language, were recorded, and lasted 30-50 minutes each. The collected data was processed by country, highlighting the key points of each section, then compared to find similarities and differences.

4. Results

The main results of the qualitative analysis is reported in the poster, underlining the main similarities and differences between each category, and, above all, highlighting the status of the policies and practices towards remote workers. Of all the results, we focus on two main pieces of evidence: first, “*there is no going back*” was one of the most-used expressions to indicate that it is not possible to return to the past, where remote-working was excluded; second, almost all organizations – especially public ones, where remote working has been used due to the pandemic – are not prepared with specific professional development strategies tailored to remote workers. These two pieces of evidence point to the awareness organizations have that they do not feel ready for the future.

Another important result is that “trust” is the main feature required to be developed in managers to make remote work an effective tool. Some organizations are developing this through training and coaching programmes.

Finally, and especially in Italian sample, the definition of a specific professional development strategy for remote workers has been understood with a negative focus. The HR managers interviewed explained that no differential strategies have been considered, as a way to maintain equal prospective for both regular and remote workers. Creating differential paths has been seen as a way to penalize remote workers, which was far from the research aim. A possible interpretation of this reaction lies, in the author's opinion, in a cultural bias where HR managers are worried about being considered unfair and to be privileging a specific category of employee (the regular one, in the present case). This evidently contrasts with diversity management policies, still not widespread in the Italian context (Yang & Konrad, 2011).

5. Discussion and limitation

The greatest strengths of qualitative analysis are in providing the opportunity to collect in-depth data, being flexible and giving both actors the opportunity to reflect on the proposed topic (DiCicco-Bloom, & Crabtree, 2006). All these aspects have allowed the present research to understand aspects otherwise not detectable with traditional quantitative investigation tools. However, it is evident that the number of participants interviewed is limited and cannot be considered representative. In any case, the present authors believe that the role of the HR manager as the respondent was crucial to gaining reliable data.

The cross-cultural dimension is affected by the translation from the mother tongue to English in the data comparison. This is the main reason why the present authors decided to first reflect on national data and to defer the comparison between countries to a second step.

Finally, the results of this part of the research highlights the opportunity for scientific research to provide strategies for companies to consider the specific needs and characteristic of remote workers. All the managers interviewed asked to receive feedback from the research, expressing a strong interest in better understanding the situation.

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