

## Leadership challenges in SMEs as a result of remote work due to COVID-19

Archontis Efstathiou<sup>1</sup>, Odysseas Kopsidas<sup>2\*</sup>, Laura Maska<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>School of Business Administration, Aegean College, Athens, Greece; contact@andyefstathiou.com (A.E.)

o.kopsidas@aegeancollege.gr (O.K.) lmaska@aegeancollege.gr (L.M.).

**Abstract:** Soon after the rapid spread of COVID-19, most of the organizations started to seriously consider the possibilities offered by remote working (teleworking/working from home). The leadership tries to get the best out of the employees through continuous support. The positive aspects of telecommuting have been (among others) the improvement of work productivity, the reduction of overhead costs and the reduction of commuting time and movement and the increase of the possibility of work/life balance. As the number of organizations and employees who have adopted telecommuting continues to grow, the benefits are beginning to show, both in organizations and in the personal lives of employees. This paper investigates employee satisfaction with telecommuting, in the Greek working context, through the collection of primary data and their statistical processing.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Employment, Labor, Leadership, Management, SME.

### 1. Introduction

As Dausend and Schieritz, (2020) state in their related publication entitled: Politics without touching, published in the newspaper DIE ZEIT regarding whether the pandemic crisis of COVID-19 affected the daily life of the members of the German Parliament, it is stated following: "my contact with citizens has been drastically reduced during the pandemic. But I need to know what the citizens think...." This finding is likely to apply even at the leadership level in small and medium-sized organizations.

Given that the so-called small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) constitute a competent part of private entrepreneurship in Greece and a key pillar of the development of the Greek economy, it would be particularly important to answer the following structural questions: What are the ways of explaining the potential problems / challenges of the employees who act remotely using the telecommuting measure? What are the ways to utilize the experience produced through telecommuting at the level of business administration? In the end, is the institution of telecommuting just covering a pandemic necessity or will it become a universally used work practice in the near future? Is teleworking able to contribute to the sustainability and development of small and medium enterprises in the Modern Greek business reality? The research questions are the following: What is the effect of personal / professional life balancing on job satisfaction, in the midst of a pandemic, in the context of Greek, small and medium-sized organizations in the hotel (broader) sector? What is the effect of employee personality (based on the Big-5 model) on job satisfaction, in the midst of a pandemic in the context of Greek, small and medium-sized organizations in the hotel (broader) sector? What is the effect of perceived organizational support (provision of adequate technological equipment, perceived digital support, existence of performance monitoring mechanisms, etc.), on job satisfaction, in the midst of a pandemic, in the context of Greek, small and medium-sized organizations in the hotel (Broader) industry.

### 2. Literature Review

The pandemic crisis of COVID-19 was both a very strong shock for the business world worldwide and also a justifying basis to implement it in a wide (almost universal if institutions such as the armed

forces, security forces and the health system etc. are excluded) scale the institution of remote work (teleworking). Despite the benefits of telecommuting, the flexible work system presents a unique set of challenges. The literature has identified challenges in telecommuting such as increased (hidden) working hours, gaps in employee digital literacy, leadership difficulties in management level, the organizational knowledge that can be threatened, the psychological effects, etc. (Lagarde, 2020).

Remote management without physical visibility is difficult, and performance measurement also remains difficult, as managers complain that they cannot observe employees. Under the term job satisfaction can be understood the pure set of positive emotions of employees regarding their work and their working environment in general (Bhattarai, 2020). Job satisfaction has been defined in a subjective way, although it has acquired a strong, empirical orientation (Zöllner and Sulíková, 2021). In fact, the prevalence of positive psychology (the study of the similarities of positive behaviors, as opposed to the differences that contribute to the appearance of "deviant" behaviors), as the basic tool for explaining/understanding organizational behavior, has dealt with the analysis of positive, organizational behavior to improve work outcomes, with satisfaction as a central variable.

The characteristics of telework (Work From Home or WFH) refer to the nature of work during the work from home period (Wang et al., 2021). According to the job demands-resources (JD-R) theory, characteristics can be categorized as either job demands or resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014). Demands are elements that can cause stress, including workload (De Croon et al., 2005), working hours (Garrote Sanchez et al., 2021) and working conditions, such as noise, temperature, etc. (Carillo et al., 2021). Resources can be physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of work that can support workers and help them maintain their well-being. These include the suitability of the home workplace (Nakrošiene et al., 2019; Cuervo-Vilches, Navas-Martín and Oteiza, 2021), the availability of digital resources and the Internet (Cuervo-Vilches, Navas-Martín and Oteiza, 2021), the work autonomy, social support (Demerouti et al., 2001) appropriate supervisor guidance, performance feedback (Bakker, Demerouti and Schaufeli, 2003), promotion opportunities (Bakker, Demerouti and Euwema, 2005) etc.

According to JD-R theory, job demands interact with job resources to predict satisfaction. Demands can reduce satisfaction if excessive job demands and pressure undermine workers' health and well-being. However, if job resources are sufficient to balance these demands, employees are likely to be satisfied with their jobs (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). In this regard, during the pandemic the evolutionary nature of WFH when imposed by the crisis is reflected (Carillo et al., 2021). Job characteristics can interact with each other (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). For example, long-term WFH is likely to exacerbate occupational isolation and limit workers' access to social support (Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008), as well as create strain and an "autonomy paradox" (excessive autonomy) (Michel, 2011).

Suitability of home working conditions includes "physical" elements (special workplace, basic IT tools) and "mental" conditions (freedom from distractions and noise) (Carillo et al., 2021) that significantly influence employee satisfaction (De Croon et al., 2005). According to self-determination theory, IT tools allow employees to share information and help meet the psychological need for interpersonal interaction, thus helping to improve job satisfaction (Brunelle and Fortin, 2021). Furthermore, a separate work space at home ensures the existence of clear structural boundaries between work and life and maintains job satisfaction (Carillo et al., 2021).

Job autonomy is the allowed degree of independence and discretion in performing work tasks (Hackman and Oldham, 1975), including time and scheduling, and may be a key influencing factor of job satisfaction (Wu and Zhou, 2020). The majority of existing studies explain the relationship between employees and organizations, based on the JD-R theory and the resource-based view (RBV). Autonomy is an important resource because it allows employees to (1) coordinate their work time, satisfying their preferences and schedule their work to ensure their personal productivity and (2) self-organize their work tasks to cope with stressful job demands more effectively (Allen et al., 2013), ensuring greater job satisfaction (Bakker and Demerouti, 2014).

In relation to the question of whether telecommuting is ultimately preferable to working in physical presence and whether or not this condition contributes to the organizational effectiveness of small and medium-sized enterprises, a four-month study by Evans et al. (2021). It found that workers who scored high on extroversion performed worse over time. They had worse performance, less job satisfaction, and greater feelings of burnout. On the other hand introverted workers improved at the same rate. This finding can be extremely important at the level of organizational leadership and the purpose is to investigate this case, in the Greek reference context. Although extroverted workers often experience positive outcomes at work (Wilmot et al., 2019), they understandably struggle with the social isolation of remote work.

In the same context, is there consistent and ongoing evidence in scientific psychology that human personality can be explained by utilizing five factors? the well-known personality model called the "Big Five" (Goldberg, 1990); The five dimensions of personality are "extroversion", the "receptivity/agreeableness", "conscientiousness", "neuroticism" and "receptivity/openness to experience". Based on Barrick et al. (2001), personality dimensions can be defined as follows; Extraversion consists of sociability, dominance and ambition, positive emotionality, and constant excitement seeking.

Furthermore, the personality traits associated with career success and well-being may vary by cultural background and work environment. For example, Zhai et al., (2013) analyzing characteristics of Chinese society, including high power distance and high collectivism, found that extroversion is positively correlated with job satisfaction in China. Lee and Ohtake (2018) concluded that in Japan, unlike the United States, agreeableness is associated with higher wages for men. Was it actually supported as follows? This trait leads to professional success because Japan has a team work environment that requires teamwork. Templer (2012) also reported that in the context of collectivistic Asian society, conformity/conformity tendency is positively related to job satisfaction.

According to a 2019 survey, nearly half of people who work abroad say their work-life balance has improved—with an impressive 61% of expats reporting a better balance than they had back home (Clarkson, 2022). Due to the measures taken during the pandemic, almost all workers had to rely on online platforms in terms of social support theory, both inside and outside of work (Collins, Hislop, & Cartwright, 2016; Anderson, Kaplan, & Vega, 2015). According to social support theory, digital social support during work provides the necessary emotional and organizational resources to mitigate work-family conflicts, promoting job satisfaction (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011).

Likewise, digital, social support outside of work can improve job satisfaction by compensating employees for the lack of interpersonal interaction during work hours by providing a perceived release from work pressure (Anderson, Kaplan, & Vega, 2015). However, other researchers have argued that low-quality communication promoted by digital technologies can undermine job satisfaction, through the enhancement of informational uncertainty information uncertainty (Kuruzovich et al., 2021). Organizations typically use these two control methods to guide and manage work communication. By helping to alleviate work stress and improve employee adaptability, these methods can contribute to increased job satisfaction (Van Dierendonck, le Blanc and van Breukelen, 2002). Conversely, social exchange theory supports control that seeks to promote appropriate behaviors by binding employees and managers to shared beliefs and values (Chua et al., 2012).

### 3. Methodology

In this work, the quantitative method was chosen, which has been linked to the positivist, philosophical tradition. Based on the latter and its central assumptions, social reality is measurable, unitary (it is one and not multiple), and modelable. The qualitative method has been linked to hermeneutic philosophy, where quite different assumptions exist (Lallas, 2020). In this work, a truly exploratory, research direction was adopted. In order to study job satisfaction during the period of covid-19 and forced telecommuting, a number of factors were taken into account. The organizational ones were about personal/work life balance, digital, social support, career support, personal support and

psychological support.

Therefore the concepts that have to do with organizations were five: The measurement of the concept of personal/professional life balance was based on the research of Lagarde, (2020) and had 11 items/questions (indicatively "My work prevents me from doing the best for myself and my people (family, friends, partner etc.', 'Because of my work, I feel like I'm letting my people down', 'My work prevents me from spending as much time as I'd like with my people', 'I can't do everything to my work and still have time for myself."

The concept of personality was approached by the well-known Big-5 model, where the dimensions are extroversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness. The scale came from Costa and McCrae, (1992). The assessment of the concept of perceived organizational support was based on the researches of Aban et al., (2019) and Yu and Wu, (2021). The concept includes the dimensions of supervision mechanisms (e.g., "my company required employees to work standard hours (regular hours)," "supervisors communicated with employees frequently every day"), digital, social support (indicative of "When I needed help, the people in digital platform offered help and suggestions when I faced a problem, people on the digital platform provided information to help me overcome it"), career support (indicative of 'My company cares about my overall job satisfaction, tries to make my job as interesting as possible), personal support (e.g. "If given the chance, my company would take advantage of me"), psychological support ("my company would not understand a long absence due to illness"), and satisfaction ("most days I'm enthusiastic about my work from home, I feel quite satisfied with my current work from home").

Regarding the statistical techniques applied, the following can be highlighted: (a) initially a descriptive analysis was performed (description of the percentages per level of the demographic variables and listing of the mean/standard deviation of the questionnaire variables), (b) then a factorial analysis was applied analysis (discussed below) and after the necessary adjustments, (c) the basic Multiple Regression model of the present paper was carried out.

#### 4. Results

The following tables will show the percentages of the levels resulting from the demographic variables. The first demographic variable is the gender of the participants. Therefore, men make up the majority of the sample (44 men), compared to women (19 women).

**Table 1.**  
Percentages of professional categories, in the sample.

<b>Profession</b>	<b>Rate (%)</b>
Private employee	79.4%
State employee	9.5%
Self-employed professional	11.1%

Therefore, 79.4% of respondents are private employees, 9.5% public and 11.1% are self-employed/entrepreneurs.

**Table 2.**  
Percentages of age categories, in the sample.

<b>Age</b>	<b>Rate (%)</b>
20-30	9.5%
31-40	28.6%
41-50	34.9%
51-60	27%

Therefore 9.5% of the participants were between 20–30 years old, 28.6% between 31 and 40, 34.9% between 41–50 and 27% between 51 and 60 years old (a relatively balanced sample). Personal/professional life balance-factor analysis: The scores are quite low, while there does not seem to be a balance between personal/professional lives. The variables, with a slightly higher score, are "My work prevents me from spending as much time as I would like with my people", "There are too many things to do and I don't have enough time". The ratings are relatively high. The variables, with a slightly higher score, are "I can rarely be rude, I am kind and/or friendly to almost everyone and I like to work with others." The ratings are relatively high. The variables, with the highest score, are as follows "Supervisors placed significant emphasis on timely completion of projects, employees were encouraged to adopt behaviors that match values and company rules, employees could communicate and negotiate with other members of the organization when necessary."

The ratings are relatively high. The variables, with the highest score, are as follows "When I needed help, people in the digital platform offered help and suggestions, when I faced a problem, people in the digital platform provided me with information to help me overcome it, when I faced difficulties, the people on the digital platform, were helping me discover the cause and providing me with solutions and suggestions." The ratings are relatively high. The variables, with the highest score, are as follows "My superiors are proud that I am part of the organization, my company is willing to help me when I have a special need and my company would forgive an honest mistake on my part." Ratings are relatively low. The variables, with the highest score, are "If given the chance, my company would take advantage of myself; my company is not interested in paying me based on what I am worth."

Ratings are relatively average to high. The sample appeared to be relevant from telecommuting during the pandemic period. As in quantitative analysis, it is necessary to ensure validity and reliability, reliability is shown statistically, but validity is assumed based on the utilization of a valid research instrument. The validity is based on the use of the questionnaire, in various reference contexts (even in Greece). By using factor analysis there is no such assumption. Validity is studied in relation to real data and can even lead to a series of "different" conclusions. For example (as will be shown below), many concepts can be found to be influenced (in context) by different, unseen factors).

The KMO got a value of 0.884, while the two dimensions observed are as follows - the first includes the items - "because of my work, I feel that I am letting my people down, problems at work make it difficult for me to relax at home, it is difficult for me to have fun with my own people because I worry about problems at work various problems at home make it difficult for me to work various problems at home make it difficult for me to concentrate on work I miss important social events because I have to work' which was called loss of social efficiency (Cronbachs alpha- 0.862). The second dimension consists of the items "my work prevents me from doing the best for myself and my people (family, friends, partner, etc., my work prevents me from spending as much time as I would like with my people, I can't do everything in my job and still have time for myself, there are too many things to do and I don't have enough time, I don't have time to engage in new activities', which can called growth loss (Cronbachs alpha-0.834). The total percentage of internal variability within the scale explained by the identification of the two factors (62.226%) the 2 dimensions were found which are presented.

The KMO got a value of 0.681, while the two dimensions observed are as follows - the first includes the items - "I am sociable, outgoing, I have a strong, dynamic personality, I am full of energy, I can be very enthusiastic, I am not reserved, closed' called capacity (Cronbach's alpha-0.772). The second dimension consists of the items "Almost never, I'm not embarrassed, shy, I generally tend not to be quiet", named non-shyness (Cronbachs alpha-0.662).

The KMO got a value of 0.652, while the two dimensions observed are as follows - the first includes the items - "I am kind and/or friendly to almost everyone, I like to cooperate with others, I do not behave selfishly and I like to I help others, I can rarely be rude' which was called friendliness (Cronbachs alpha-0.772). The second dimension consists of the items "I tend to do not find fault with others, I tend not to start fights/tensions with others', named non-aggression (Cronbachs alpha-0.652).

The thoroughness dimension resulted in a KMO of 0.539 and it was decided not to take the average

(the data were all used together, in the subsequent statistical analyses). The KMO got a value of 0.601 while the 3 dimensions observed are as follows - the first includes the items - "I get stressed easily, It is difficult to stay calm in intense situations, I am not calm, I cannot manage stress well" which it was called anxiety (Cronbach's alpha-0.822). The second dimension consists of the items "I am often sad, I can be moody" which was named sadness (Cronbach's alpha-0.755) and the third of the questions "I worry a lot in general, I can have a lot of tension", which was named intensity (Cronbach's alpha-0.629).

The KMO got a value of 0.657 while the 3 dimensions identified are as follows - the first includes the elements - "I appreciate artistic, aesthetic experiences, I am sophisticated when it comes to Art, music or literature, I have many artistic interests" which it was called artistry (Cronbach's alpha- 0.823). The second dimension consists of the items "I am inventive/inventive/or, I am original, I create new ideas" called authenticity (Cronbach's alpha-0.871) and the third of the questions "I am curious about many different things, I prefer jobs that do not they have a routine', where it was called curiosity (Cronbach's alpha-0.756).

The KMO got the value 0.646, while the two dimensions found are as follows - the first includes the elements - "Employees were evaluated through the supervisor's observation of their results, supervisors placed significant emphasis on timely completion of projects, supervisors used predetermined goals as benchmarks to evaluate employee performance' called evaluation (Cronbach's alpha-0.804). The second dimension consists of the items "Employees actively participated in meetings (digital) to understand the goals of each project, and the values and norms governing it, employees were encouraged to adopt behaviors that match the values and norms of the company, they could communicate and negotiate with other members of the organization when necessary", which was called participation (Cronbach's alpha-0.625).

The KMO got a value of 0.832, while the two dimensions found are as follows - the first includes the items - "When I needed help, the people on the digital platform offered help and suggestions, when I faced a problem, the people on the digital platform, they provided information to help me overcome it, when I faced difficulties, the people on the digital platform, helped me to discover the cause and provided me with solutions and suggestions, when I faced difficulties, the people on the digital platform paid attention to me and we got through it together" called help/support (Cronbach's alpha-0.929). The second dimension consists of the items "When I faced difficulties, the people on the digital platform comforted and encouraged myself, when I faced difficulties, the people on the digital platform with they listened carefully when I talked about my personal feelings', which was called encouragement (Cronbach's alpha-0.692).

The KMO got a value of 0.806, while the two dimensions found are as follows - the first includes the items - "My company cares about my overall job satisfaction, my company tries to make my job as interesting as possible, my company takes my goals and my values seriously, my company wants to give me the best possible job for which I am qualified." called work interest (Cronbach's alpha- 0.900). The second dimension consists of the items "My superiors are proud that I am part of the organization, my company would understand if I could not complete a project on time, my company is proud of my work achievements", which was called respect (Cronbach's alpha-0.896). So, there is a conceptual direction, where the reliability coefficient took the value 0.887 and the KMO the value 0.886 (very high degree of validity).

## 5. Multiple Regression Model (Dependent variable satisfaction with telecommuting)

In the Multiple Regression model presented below, the dependent variable is telecommuting satisfaction and the independent variables are: all the factors that emerged from performing the factor analysis - loss of social efficiency, loss of growth, vitality, non-shyness, friendliness, non-aggression, stress, sadness, tension, artistry, authenticity, curiosity, evaluation, participation, digital, social support, help/support, encouragement, work interest, respect, personal support, psychological support, as well as the variables that were individually tapped from the conscientiousness dimension "In my work I am diligent, I am efficient in my work, I make plans and follow them, I am a reliable worker, I persevere

until I finish my work, I am not easily distracted, I am rarely careless, I tend not to be lazy, I tend to be organized."

The R Square ( $R^2$ ) is very satisfactory, as 52.2% of the total variability of the dependent variable was explained, based on the survey model (given the limitation of convenience sampling). Adjusted R Square, shows the ability to generalize to the population (should not be much lower than R-Square).

## 6. Conclusion

The statistical analysis led to some interesting and useful findings, as highlighted. Initially, personal/professional life balance did not seem to play an important role in the satisfaction of the employees of the sample with telecommuting. In the same context, it appeared that more "deep" concepts concerning elements of the employees' personality, as well as parameters related to the way employees perceive (and empathize with) the organizations, tend to significantly influence telework satisfaction. From the beginning, this work was led to some assumptions: as it primarily concerns the problems of leadership, in the midst of forced telecommuting during the pandemic, it was decided to adopt an indirect approach.

The issues of leadership, it was decided (for reasons of relative simplification and reduction of the research problem), to be explained in the light of the catalytic concept of job satisfaction. Therefore, through the investigation of this concept (which can be measured more easily), the purpose is to show proposals to the leadership of Greek organizations, in terms of dealing with the problems arising from telework.

Furthermore, employees who stated that their company cares about them tend to be more satisfied with their telecommuting experience, while the opposite was seen for employees who do not trust their organization (they believe that if given the opportunity, they would be taken advantage of, that shows little interest in them, that he does not notice them, that he ignores their interest, etc.). It is of great interest that the softer (or "soft") variables emerged as important. Employees seem to expect from the organizations they work for, elements that are difficult to measure.

In essence, what has been demonstrated is that overall employees do not want to be invisible, in relation to their organization. But they didn't seem to have "offensive sensibilities", but rather defensive sensibilities. In other words, it did not appear from the research that they are concerned so much about their future advancement ("aggressive sensitivity"), as about not being ignored, decisions not being made without them. It also became clear that employees want to feel that leadership/management is making efforts to make everyone's work interesting and meaningful.

Employees may have become acutely aware of their need for emotional support and recognition. All of these can be valuable lessons for the leadership of Greek organizations. There are people with artistic tendencies who seemed to be satisfied with telecommuting, as they would obviously have many opportunities to mix work with some artistic interest. Others seemed to develop their sensitivities, in relation to their relationship with the organization. This distance seems to have made them more sensitive to emotional support from the organization. What is proposed to the organizations are the following: Significant shift of the leadership, towards the emotional coverage of the employees.

Personality is a concept that has not been exploited by scientific management. The reason is rather that it leads to divisions, while the issue is to find a common ground. Although personality cannot (probably) be harnessed organizationally, it can be harnessed at the team level. A supervisor who will deal with the personality of the people in the department can have a significant advantage.

Leading groups based on general ideas may not be the optimal solution. Flexibility and flexibility at the interpersonal level can be extremely important for the success of a modern manager. Obviously, there will be general rules to be followed, but the mobilization/management of each employee cannot but take into account their personality traits. And to the argument, of causing "chaos" if there is a personalized approach, the answer is very specific. The role of modern leadership and every manager is obviously extremely demanding and difficult. There are no easy solutions anymore, and everyone has to do the best they can. In the case of Greek organizations, the above can be extremely important. It is

alleged that there is a huge deficit of perceived support and interest. Satisfying this need can lead to spectacular results.

Research limitations were many in this research. First, the convenience sampling technique can reduce the reliability of the findings, as can the relatively small number of the sample. There were also some low validity measures (MVA) observed, while in one case (in the thoroughness dimension), the low validity led to the variables not being averaged. Nevertheless, significant efforts were made to establish reliability/validity in the quantitative analysis, and some very interesting findings were revealed. In relation to future research, the qualitative study of telework and the quantitative analysis, in other reference contexts (for example abroad) and the adoption of random sampling (something very difficult and costly) are suggested.

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