Managing employees' needs and well-being in the post-COVID-19 era

Dario Natale Palmucci
Department of Management, University of Turin, Turin, Italy, and
Gabriele Santoro
*Department of Management, University of Turin, Turin, Italy and
School of Business, Gnosis: Mediterranean Institute for Management Science,
University of Nicosia, Nicosia, Cyprus*

Abstract

Purpose – In the wake of the COVID-19 public health crisis, organizations have increasingly adopted new technologies and new working modalities (e.g. teleworking, smart working and remote working). However, these important changes led to increased work-related stress for employees who are not always able to cope with the actual intrusive digital professional reality. This work identifies the negative effects of technology and new work modalities on employees' well-being. It suggests remedies based on real-life examples to meet employees' emerging needs in the post-COVID-19 era.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews with a variety of workers in different organizational contexts and positions were used as support for our recommendations. In particular, we had representation from managers, human resource (HR) officers, employees, psychologists, consultants and coaches.

Findings – The paper identifies eight specific negative effects of technology and new work modalities, such as inability to cope with stress, negative physical consequences, smart working fatigue, breaking down of the boundaries between private and professional life, decrease in work-life balance, hyper-connection, psychological and psychosomatic symptoms and burnout syndrome. Moreover, the paper proposes timely remedies, including enhancing leaders' awareness, the right to disconnect and rethinking HR policies.

Practical implications – It offers practical insights and encompasses views from various internal stakeholders (HR officers, senior managers, managers, subordinates and an organizational counselor) and external stakeholders (psychologists, consultants and coaches). The paper concludes with experience-based tips, highlighting the need for digital leadership to be able to both manage performance and guarantee people psychological safety at the same time. The remedies suggested are "ready-to-use" best practices to implement for safeguarding the health of employees.

Originality/value – This research is not only pertinent for managers grappling with these challenges in their everyday work but also valuable for scholars seeking to deepen their understanding of the topic through practice-based evidence. Furthermore, it significantly contributes to the literature as, while previous works have only analyzed findings singularly, this work is focused on the different perspectives of different internal and external stakeholders, offering a more comprehensive overview. Originality lies precisely in having taken into consideration the point of view of many actors with different roles and backgrounds.

Keywords Management, Organizational well-being, Work-related stress, Digital leadership, Teleworking, Digitalization

Paper type Research paper

Introduction and relevance of the present contribution

As for previous processes in historical evolution, 2020 will forever be remembered as an epochal moment in the history of work activities. In response to the global COVID-19 public health emergency, organizations were compelled to employ the only tools at their disposal to prevent a complete interruption of their operations: technology and teleworking (Mariani *et al.*, 2023; Prodanova and Kocarev, 2022). Interestingly, even after the emergency subsided, these new modes of working not only endured but also emerged as the central protagonists in contemporary work operations in this post-COVID-19 era (Allen *et al.*, 2024; Kokshagina and Schneider, 2023). Google, for example, was one of the first companies to announce during the

pandemic that it would adopt hybrid work models after the emergency. Nowadays, most companies allow employees to split their time between the workplace and remote work (Hopkins and Bardoel, 2023). Employees in many industries are increasingly asking better for working conditions and flexibility in terms of working hours and location, posing new challenges to human resource (HR) managers.

Nevertheless, while digitalization and new hybrid work models have positively impacted organizational and individual performance, there is a growing concern about the psychological well-being of employees (Shukla *et al.*, 2024). Many struggle to cope with stress resulting from information overload (Sen *et al.*, 2021) and incessant notifications (Parra *et al.*, 2022). Recent reports underscore this concern, revealing that 50% of knowledge workers believe their companies are not doing enough to enhance employees' well-being and happiness at work [1]. Additionally, over 40% of employees attribute poor well-being to heavy workloads, job-related stress and long working hours [2]. Hence, interest in understanding the complexity of organizations' ability to ensure employees' psychological safety is steadily increasing (Schmitt, 2024). On the one hand, research has demonstrated that employees who spend a certain percentage of their time working remotely tend to receive higher performance ratings from their managers (Choudhury *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, there is clear evidence of a significant deterioration in workers' health, especially their mental well-being (Weber *et al.*, 2023). Notably, the blurring of boundaries between home and work environments has made it increasingly challenging for employees to disconnect (Campbell and Gavett, 2021).

Given these considerations, there is a heightened focus on this topic, with both academics and practitioners dedicating attention to the opportunities, challenges, risks and consequences of poorly managed hybrid work environments. Nevertheless, as is often the case, a gap persists between scientific understanding and practical application in addressing such issues (Randolph-Seng and Norris, 2015; Rynes, 2012).

This work aims to "bridge this gap" (Chen and Randolph-Seng, 2021) by identifying the potential negative effects of technology and new work modalities on employees' well-being and suggesting possible remedies – based on real-life examples – to meet employees' emerging needs in the post-COVID-19 era. More specifically, the paper seeks to provide real-life examples and practical solutions that emerging leaders need to be aware of, thus contributing to a holistic understanding of the subject. To accomplish this, we draw from the relevant literature on digital-work-related stress, amalgamating findings from previous studies with the results stemming from a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews conducted with employees of various organizations and assuming different managerial roles. The next section provides more information about the adopted methodology.

Methodology

In order to provide "ready-to-use" recommendations for managing employees' needs and well-being, a qualitative approach involving semi-structured interviews with workers was chosen. To gain a deeper understanding of these phenomena, our work focuses on a highly diverse sample. This approach was chosen to maximize exploratory impact (Gustafsson, 2017) and considering similar previous studies that adopted the same method (Todisco *et al.*, 2023). Data were collected from different international stakeholders, including HR offices, senior managers, managers, subordinates and an organizational counselor, as well as external stokeholds such as psychologists, consultants and coaches. These individuals operate in various international organizational contexts of different sizes [3]. Furthermore, the sampled organizational environments span a wide range of industries and services,

encompassing both for-profit and non-profit sectors, among others. Table 1 helps to better understand the heterogeneity and stratification of the sample.

The interviews were structured into two distinct parts. In the first part, participants were prompted to share instances from their own experiences related to the utilization of technology and teleworking methods within their specific contexts. They were encouraged to elaborate on how these technologies impacted performance and work-related stress, along with other negative feelings and perspectives. In the second part of the interview, participants were invited to put forward potential solutions. These solutions aimed to harness the opportunities presented by the integration of digital platforms and novel working practices, all while mitigating the adverse effects of work-related stress arising from the improper use of teleworking.

We identified the potential negative effects of technology and new work modalities by transcribing iteratively and analyzing data using a constant comparative method (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). During the interviews, we identify codes and themes to list the negative effects. More than eight effects have been identified, but some of them have been merged as respondents used other words to express the same concept (see Table 2).

Findings
Technology and new work modalities: negative effects on employees' well-being
During the interviews, participants highlighted various advantages associated with the adoption of technology and new work modalities. These benefits were observed both for the employees, including cost savings related to commuting, the opportunity for increased quality time with their families, enhanced job performance resulting from the ability to focus on tasks that demand greater concentration away from distractions, and heightened motivation stemming from the increased sense of autonomy and responsibility in achieving

Company	Sector/Business	Size (for n° employees)	Interviewee's position
1	No-profit	Large	Internal: Organizational counselor
2	Information technology	Large	Internal: Senior manager
3	Industrial	Large	External: Consultant
4	Energy	Small	Internal: Manager
5	Information technology	Large	Internal: Subordinate
6	No-profit	Small	Internal: Manager
7	Consultancy	Medium	External: Consultant
8	Business services	Medium	Internal: Manager
9	Self-employed	Small	External: Coach
10	Self-employed	Small	External: Coach
11	Pharmaceutical	Large	Internal: Manager
12	Automotive	Large	Internal: Subordinate
13	Health sector	Large	Internal: Subordinate
14	Industrial	Medium	Internal: Subordinate
15	Self-employed	Small	External: Psychologist
16	Self-employed	Small	External: Psychologist
17	Banking	Large	Internal: Senior manager
18	Information technology	Large	Internal: Senior manager
19	No profit	Medium	Internal: Psychologist
20	Industrial	Large	Internal: HR officer
21	Energy	Large	Internal: HR officer
22	Food	Large	Internal: Subordinate
23	No profit	Large	Internal: Manager

Source(s): Authors' personal elaboration

Technology and new work modalities: Negative effects on employees' well-being	Proposed remedies
Inability to cope with stress	Right to disconnect and digital detox culture
Negative physical consequences	Rethink annual and sick leave policies
Smart working fatigue	Training programs
Breaking down the boundaries between private and professional lives	Create a proper home workspace
Decrease in work-life balance	Onboarding for new young hires
Hyper-connection	Annual retreats and outdoor activities
Psychological and psychosomatic symptoms	Invest in soft skills and communication
Burnout syndrome	New leadership and leaders' awareness are needed
Source(s): Authors' personal elaboration	

Table 2.
Findings

results. Furthermore, the advantages extended to the organizations themselves, with reduced costs attributed to the establishment and maintenance of physical offices. Additionally, these changes had positive environmental implications, leading to a decrease in carbon dioxide emissions, particularly from private transportation, as employees increasingly opted for remote work arrangements. However, despite these advantages, most participants reported encountering significant challenges and expressed a shared concern about the compromised psychological safety of their respective work environments. Below is a compilation of practical examples illustrating the issues they are currently facing.

(1) Inability to cope with stress: The persistent need for flexibility and the adoption of remote work have exacerbated stress levels and intensified the pressure on workers. Consequently, the psychological well-being of employees is at risk due to the resulting imbalance between their personal lives and work responsibilities. This is an increasingly prevalent concern affecting a growing number of workers in the post-COVID-19 era. A psychologist interviewed remarked, *"[. . .] patients I daily help say they simply don't know what to do [. . .] they ask me what they can do in practice because they have no clue of strategies to cope with stress."*

(2) Negative physical consequences: In addition to the psychological effects, there are physical repercussions stemming from the increased screen time associated with remote working. These include eye strain, joint pain, a sedentary lifestyle and an increased risk of obesity.

(3) Smart working fatigue: this continuous work overload and resulting work-related stress have led workers to experience psychosomatic symptoms. For instance, one participant told, *"[. . .] on Monday mornings, I already feel tired, with a headache, and absolutely no energy."*

(4) Breaking down of the boundaries between private and professional lives: Working from home can blur the crucial boundaries between personal and work life. Going to the office help shift focus away from family and emotional issues. It offers a chance to be acknowledged and valued as a colleague and an individual. On the other hand, working from home, alongside family members, can lead to a constant overlap between these two spheres. This situation poses the risk of no longer distinguishing when the workday ends and quality family time begins.

(5) Decrease in work-life balance: Working from home, especially in areas where one cooks or relaxes, can lead to a constant intrusion of the professional domain into the personal space. Sharing these spaces with family members and pets can add to the stress experienced by those who work from home.

(6) Hyper-connection: In many cases, individuals working from home feel an implicit obligation to be constantly available online to prove their active participation. This results in another negative consequence: an increase in actual working hours, with people extending their work activities well beyond the originally set hours. One participant expressed this concern, saying, *"I work remotely for two days a week, but honestly, I prefer being in the office because when I work from home, I'm afraid they won't see me online. I feel guilty. Therefore, I end up spending twice as much time in front of the screen, and I don't disconnect during lunchtime."*

(7) Psychological and psychosomatic symptoms: Both psychologists and other practitioners interviewed have observed an exponential increase in various psychological problems, including anxiety and depression, sleep disorders, cases of addiction, loneliness and social isolation, emotional instability, difficulty concentrating and cases of aggression.

(8) Burnout syndrome: Cases of burnout have increased during and after the pandemic, especially among those engaged in remote work. This increase can be attributed to a greater difficulty in disconnecting from work and establishing clear working hours. Additionally, the constant influx of work-related messages and emails on various devices throughout the day erodes the already fragile boundaries between personal and work life. Emotional and affective factors further contribute to risk of experiencing burnout. Psychologist interview stated, *"I believe the number of burnout cases I've encountered has doubled since the pandemic."* An organizational counselor also noted, "*I spend 60% of my time assisting individuals with burnout syndrome and the remaining 30% helping others prevent it."*

Practical applications: how to manage people in the post-COVID-19 era
Stakeholders interviewed widely concur that top management must recognize and be aware of the benefits of new working methods for their employees and not underestimate the profound negative and positive impact of these changes on the essential digital transformation of the workplace. Hence, they also acknowledge that employees' health is significantly deteriorating, primarily due to the blurred boundaries between professional and personal life (Lyzwinski, 2024) resulting from inadequately managed remote working practices. In light of these issues, the following list of practical solutions is suggested. These are proposed by the authors considering interviewees' insights and represent a valid toolkit to equip managers with rapid interventions to preserve people's well-being:

(1) Right to disconnect and digital detox culture: Given that remote working blurs the lines between personal and professional life, organizational leaders should establish precise working hours to ensure workers have the "right to disconnect." In this sense, acknowledging the consequences of an always-connected routine is the first step in embracing a digital detox culture. Disconnecting from devices for short periods can help, but it's crucial for top management and supervisors to support this need.

(2) Rethink annual and sick leave policies: Traditional leave balances and sick leave definitions no longer suffice in the current environment. This criteria for granting leave days needs a comprehensive overhaul. With remote work, it's less clear when to declare a sick day or request annual leave, leading to imbalanced leave days, unclear

sick leave certifications, and increased stress. Reevaluating these categories is essential in the digitalized post-COVID-19 era. As one interviewed manager aptly put it, *"Current rules simply do not suffice anymore. We must redefine leave balances, sick leave policies, and remote working arrangements because the existing categories are causing confusion in this post-Covid digitalized era."*

(3) <u>Training programs</u>: investing in training courses focused on digital well-being is critical (Büchi, 2024). Mental health measures should be integrated into workers' daily routines. These measures may include maintaining a daily schedule, limiting exposure to notifications, and dispelling the misconception that multitasking equals productivity. One organizational counselor emphasized, *"We acknowledge the imperative for increased training in digital well-being; our employees require it."*

(4) <u>Create a proper home workspace</u>: Ensuring that workers have a dedicated, comfortable workspace within their homes is essential. Participants with insufficient home workspace reported more issues; therefore, understanding possible effects of environmental factors at home is crucial to provide insights and inform the design of safe and efficient home workspaces (Srivastava *et al.*, 2024)

(5) <u>Onboarding for new young hires</u>: Training and onboarding for new young employees may require adjustments due to remote work (Ford and Bauer, 2024). Hybrid work arrangements that allow newcomers to interact directly with colleagues, build relationships and learn from them can help foster the learning curve (Sani *et al.*, 2022).

(6) <u>Annual retreats and outdoor activities</u>: Organizing retreats and outdoor activities can foster a sense of belonging, encourage collaboration and strengthen networks among workers. This helps align micro objectives with the broader vision of the organization.

(7) <u>Invest in soft skills and communication</u>: Management practices and soft skills, particularly communication skills, play a crucial role in remote work relationships. Supervisors must acquire new communication skills to effectively manage remote teams and maintain motivation among their subordinates (Coughlan *et al.*, 2024). One coach stated, *"The demand for fresh communication skills is evident in managing remote subordinates. We are extensively collaborating with managers to cultivate these essential abilities needed in this post-COVID-19 digitalized era. We recognize that they struggle with maintaining their subordinates' motivation in the context of continuous remote work."*

(8) <u>New leadership and leaders' awareness are needed</u>: The role of the contemporary corporate manager must be reimagined as that of an innovative and people-oriented digital leader. Modern leaders in the post-COVID-19 era should exhibit a high degree of adaptability and openness to embrace essential paradigm shifts, actively promoting digital transitions while safeguarding the psychological well-being of their team members. This multifaceted role entails not only driving goal achievement but also spearheading strategies to foster the personal well-being of employees (McPhail *et al.*, 2024). On this perspective, the leader's role in serving others defined also in the literature as *servant leadership* (Williams *et al.*, 2017), implies to prioritize the needs of the other people. To excel in this role, new leaders must proactively anticipate and address the negative consequences outlined in this contribution. Proactivity involves raising awareness among employees and not disregarding the challenges they may be facing. One consultant interviewed said: *"I tried to say to my*

supervisor that I could not manage that situation anymore with notifications arriving at any time on any device [. . .] I did not feel well."

Furthermore, it's noteworthy that few discernible differences were observed between internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders, especially those experiencing more pronounced negative consequences, perceive little effort from their organizational context to alleviate their stress. Conversely, external stakeholders (e.g. psychologists) view leaders as more interested in the work-life balance topic.

Additionally, internal stakeholders express reservations about reevaluating sick and annual leave balances, possibly rooted in concerns about losing established benefits. This aspect merits deeper exploration in future studies. If this trend persists, organizations may need to allocate more resources to change management and communication efforts to raise awareness about the imperative for radical change.

To conclude, managers need to fully grasp the advantages of new work methods and the digital transformation of workplaces, as these changes can ultimately lead to improved employee and organizational performance. Effective leadership is pivotal in successfully navigating this transition, especially considering the fact that workforces are increasingly diverse in terms of needs (Randolph-Seng *et al.*, 2016).

Conclusions

As we have seen in the previous sections, considering the essential digital transition that leaders must navigate and the shift from traditional in-person work models to hybrid ones (Fayard *et al.*, 2021), the leaders of the post-COVID-19 era must exhibit complete openness and adaptability to embrace these necessary paradigm shifts. A central aspect, therefore, is the cultivation of awareness within organizations about the significance of not underestimating the dynamics described. This entails promoting training programs and instilling digital consciousness within companies, particularly concerning the topic of digital well-being.

It is imperative to take heed of measures aimed at preserving the psychological health of workers and inculcating habits that seamlessly integrate into their daily routines. Simple yet effective measures must be promptly incorporated into well-being programs, specifically designed to enhance employee well-being while concurrently maintaining optimal levels of company performance, thereby ensuring a competitive advantage.

In essence, leaders should adopt a proactive stance in continuously monitoring employees' well-being, technostress and their need for recovery, especially considering that many organizations are increasingly transitioning their employees to virtual work settings (Andrulli and Gerards, 2023).

In summary, research contributes to both theory and practice by identifying and discussing the negative effects of employee technology adoption and novel working conditions. The foundation of this work lies in real-life examples shared by practitioners, effectively bridging the gap between academic and organizational perspectives. These examples drawn from various stakeholders including managers, employees, psychologists, consultants, coaches and HR officers offered a comprehensive view of real-world cases. Furthermore, the diverse array of practitioners interviewed represents virus organizations across different industries and sectors and compassion in both the private and public sectors, thus announcing the generalizability of the findings to managers in diverse domains.

This work is not without limitations. The primary limitation pertains to the approach utilized. While evidence-based practices provide practical solutions for practitioners, they should be complemented by quantitative data to avoid further isolating managerial knowledge. Hence, the findings of the studies can be considered ready to use for practitioners

seeking guidance in addressing challenges within their context, but they should be regarded as exploratory for researchers. Researchers should integrate these results with studies employing different methodologies to advance knowledge in this field. Secondly, most of the interviews pertain to clerical work, often involving noncreative and routine tasks. Future research should explore the efforts of the digital transition in a broader range of contexts, particularly those less affected by changes in new work modalities, to anticipate future challenges in different areas. Lastly, we are aware that some of the psychological negative effects mentioned may be induced by the pandemic itself rather than by the new work modalities. Therefore, this represents a further limitation of this contribution and, thus, a relevant future line of research.

In conclusion, this work can serve as a guide for the development and implementation of institutional regulations, organizational policies, and procedures to support telework practices conducive to workers' health and well-being.

Notes

1. https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/workplace-wellbeing

2. https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/environmental-social-governance/employee-workplace-wellbeing-metrics.html

3. We followed the EU SME definition. The category of micro, small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is made up of enterprises, which employ fewer than 250 persons and which have an annual turnover not exceeding 50 million euros and/or an annual balance sheet total not exceeding 43 million euros.

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Corresponding author
Dario Natale Palmucci can be contacted at: darionatale.palmucci@unito.it