Well-being as a key for sustainable and long-term oriented management

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Abstract

While digitalization and hybrid work models have undoubtedly brought positive impacts to organizations and individuals' performance, they have also posed challenges to psychological safety. In fact many employees, particularly knowledge workers, struggle to navigate the intrusive digital professional reality, leading to increased work-related stress. Although the attention on the consequences of this new form of work-related stress has increased, prior research has primarily concentrated on examining these facets through the perspectives of stakeholders taken singularly (such as psychologists solely, HR practitioners only or employees alone). In contrast, this work delves into a range of viewpoints from various stakeholders together, providing a more comprehensive understanding. As such, the insights garnered from this study were derived from a blend of literature review and interviews conducted by the researchers with various stakeholders together (HR practitioners, employees and psychologists). From a theoretical point of view, the study adds to the literature shedding light on consequences of uncontrolled hybrid work models and technology advancements (in particular negative effects on employees' psychological wellbeing). In addition, this work also offers practical examples, insights and actionable tips derived from practitioner experience, emphasizing the importance of leaders' awareness in managing performance and ensuring psychological safety. For all these reasons this piece of work can function as a roadmap for creating and putting into effect institutional regulations, organizational policies, and procedures that promote telework practices beneficial to the health and wellness of workers.

Key words: *Management; organizational wellbeing; teleworking; digitalization; work-related stress; digital wellbeing*

Framing of the research. *This works is focused on organizational wellbeing practices in the actual post-covid-digitalized era and it is anchored to the general stream of wellbeing, which conceptualization varies in meaning between and within disciplines (Ronen and Kerret, 2020). In particular, regardless its definition, wellbeing (and wellbeing at work) is considered always more relevant and both the scientific community and institutional bodies are looking at wellbeing as a key for sustainable development (Frey, 2018). In other words, occupational health means to ensure safe conditions for people's well-being in the workplace (Battaglia et al, 2020) and the necessity of an in-depth analysis on this topic springs from the transformative shift we have witnessed during the pandemic when organizations resorted to technology and telecommuting to sustain their operations (Mariani et al., 2023; Andrulli and Gerards, 2023). Remarkably, these novel work modes not only persisted beyond the crisis but have become central to contemporary work dynamics in the post-Covid landscape (Kokshagina and Schneider, 2023). However, despite the positive impact of digitalization and hybrid work models on organizational and individual performance, concerns are mounting regarding employee and people well-being (Shukla et al., 2024) which must remain the ultimate goal of sustainable development (Helne and Hirvilammi, 2015). In fact, if from one hand relevant contributions indicate that employees who dedicate part of their time to remote work often receive more positive performance evaluations from their supervisors (Choudhury et al., 2022), conversely there is compelling evidence indicating a notable decline in workers' health, particularly in their mental well-being (Marino and Capone, 2021), along with the increasing challenge of maintaining clear boundaries between home and work environments. This blurring of boundaries has significantly hindered employees' ability to disconnect (Campbell and Gavett, 2021).Here the framing of this research comes into play: if according with previous studies organizational wellbeing is defined as "the whole of cultural, processes and organizational practices that light up co-working life, promoting, maintaining and improving the physical, psychological and social wellbeing of work communities" (Sancassiani et al., 2015), then wellbeing is in danger and recent literature sustains that after pandemic more and more workers struggle with stress stemming from information overload and constant notifications (Parra et al., 2022; Mariani et al., 2023). Considering what said, attention on this area has grown, with researchers and professionals always more focused at exploring all sides of the hybrid work models: both opportunities and risks. However, there is still a gap and in particular it refers to the fact that despite the increased attention on the consequences of this new form of work-related stress, actual studies are unable to provide a comprehensive perspective as they are primarily focused on examining these aspects from the standpoint of individual stakeholders, such as psychologists only, or HR practitioners*

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solely, or employees exclusively. In contrast, this exploratory work explores a range of perspectives from various stakeholders together (including HR professionals, employees and psychologists), leading to a more comprehensive understanding.

Purpose of the paper. This work in progress is a part of a wider project that aims to shed light on the matter of organizational wellbeing in light of the revolutionary changes on remote work modalities brought from the *global Covid-19 crisis. In fact, following the public health emergency, organizations have increasingly embraced novel technologies and alternative work arrangements such remote working (Capo et al., 2022). This transition has impacted employee performance and organizational objectives from one side, from the other side these significant shifts have also resulted in heightened work-related stress for employees who struggle to manage the pervasive digital work environment effectively. For this research endeavors to thoroughly investigate organizational well-being in the post-COVID era by gathering perspectives from various stakeholders. The objective is to present tangible examples and actionable solutions that emerging leaders can utilize, thereby fostering a comprehensive grasp of the topic. To summarize, if as previously mentioned organizational wellbeing is defined in terms of practices promoting, maintaining and improving physical, psychological and social wellbeing (Sancassiani et al., 2015), then these three relevant aspects must be carefully investigated and thus represent the main objective of the study. This research also aims to provide managerial implications that actual leaders should consider, contributing to a better understanding of the topic.*

Methodology. *For this study, a qualitative methodology involving interviews with diverse stakeholders is employed. This approach is chosen based on prior research affirming the effectiveness of qualitative methods in exploring wellbeing (Dawes et al.,2021). In addition to delve deeper into these phenomena and in order to offer a more holistic understanding of the factors affecting employees' wellbeing, our study adopts a diverse sample to explores diverse viewpoints from both internal and external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders refer to two categories of organizational actors daily dealing with the constraints of remote working modalities (thus first HR professionals allowing/defining rules of these teleworking modalities in their organizational contexts, second employees who direct experience the effects of the hybrid working solutions). External stakeholders instead refer to those professionals not directly integrated in the organizations but that assist knowledge workers and support them externally in the actual digital overstressed reality (thus psychologists). This approach, drawing from similar methodologies used in previous studies (Todisco et al., 2023), aims to maximize exploratory impact (Gustafsson, 2017) of the work. In other words, the findings have been identified by mixing literature findings with qualitative date obtained by the researcher conducting interviews with different stakeholders mentioned above. With regard to the methodology then it is also important to remark that the paper is based on a theory synthesis perspective (Jaakkola, 2020) supported by qualitative evidence following Saunders and Townsend (2016) and Palmucci (2023). In particular, 16 participants from different organizational contexts have been interviewed as previously done in other exploratory studies (Bresciani et al., 2016). Thus the sample represent different industries and services and the interviews comprised two distinct parts. In the initial part, participants were asked to share in general their personal experiences with telecommuting methods and the adoption of technology within their specific settings. More in the details, according with organizational wellbeing definition of Sancassiani et al., (2015), that clearly refers to three aspects of wellbeing (i.e. physical, psychological and social), they were encouraged to express their concerns on their daily practices and if they are experiencing work-related stress. Subsequently, in the second part, participants were asked to propose potential remedies to avoid negative consequences. Concluded the data gathering, the information obtained were later arrayed following the Gioia's technique (Gioia et al., 2013) which builds upon the grounded theory and ensures methodological accuracy when using qualitative approach. By using this method, data are analyzed in first-order concepts, then grouped into second-order themes considering similarities, and then finally refined into aggregate theoretical dimensions.*

Results. *As mentioned, this study is a work in progress and part of a wider project. This means that the ones obtained are ongoing findings and other interviews will be conducted in the coming period. However, throughout the interviews carried out till now, participants underscored several benefits linked to remote working and technology but, as expected, the majority of the participants are facing significant challenges and expressed concerns about their psychological safety. The main results of the analysis performed with Gioia method and considering definition of wellbeing (Sancassiani et al., 2015) are summarized in the 3 aggregate dimensions discussed below:*

- *Physical wellbeing= On a physical level, participants reports several negative effects as eyes problems (because of the increased time spent in front of screen), sleep disorders (one participant said: "I read e-mails till the very last minutes before going to sleep and consequently during the night I am not able to stop thinking on tasks"), obesity and sedentary lifestyle (because of the decrease in movement even just moving from one's desk to that of a colleague for a meeting) joint pain at neck and back (because of un-appropriate work station used at home);*

- *Psychological wellbeing= On a psychological level, participants reported several psychosomatic symptoms caused by continuous workloads. In particular, interviews with psychologists reveal a significant increase in psychological issues within their patients (e.g., anxiety, addictions, loneliness, burnout cases, etc.). Furthermore, one psychologist interviewed noted a doubling in burnout cases since the pandemic began affirming that workers find difficult disconnecting from work, they are becoming addicted to constant digital communication.*

- *Social wellbeing= at a social level, participants are reporting the "blurring of personal and professional boundaries". In particular, working from home blurs the lines between personal and work life. In fact, while going to the office can provide a break from family and emotional issues, remote work alongside family members can lead to constant overlap between these spheres. This ambiguity makes it difficult to differentiate between work and family time. As a result and paradoxically then, despite the initial intention in introducing remote working practices was to increase work-life*

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balance for employees (Kokshagina and Schneider, 2023), we are now assisting to a decline in work-life Balance among employees remote workers because working in shared spaces with family members (like kitchens or relaxation areas) is disrupting the necessary boundary between work and personal life and is increasing stress experience instead. In addition, many many remote workers feel pressured to be constantly available online, leading to extended working hours beyond the designated schedule. Fear of not being seen as active online can exacerbate this tendency, as expressed by one participant who felt "guilty for disconnecting during lunch breaks".

Research limitations. *This study is not without limitations. First the limits refer to the approach adopted. It is to say that to prevent further segregation of managerial knowledge and to increase the validity of the results obtained, it remains essential to gather more data and perhaps by adopting diverse additional modalities of data gathering (e.g. quantitative data, etc.). Considering what said, researchers ought to integrate these findings should utilize different methodologies to advance knowledge in this topic. Also as already mentioned, this study is a work in progress and part of a big and wider project, therefore more data gathering would help in the next phase to better understand the phenomena both at theoretical and a managerial level. Furthermore, it's essential to address discrepancies between internal (HR professional and employees) and external (psychologists) stakeholders' perceptions of organizational efforts towards stress alleviation. Internal stakeholders may feel unsupported in comparison to external perceptions. On this regard, more categories can be added to the sample (as internal organizational counsellors or external consultants and coach) in order to have a clearer picture of the subject investigated and consequently increase the generalizability of the findings.*

Managerial implications. *In essence, the research contributes to both theory and practice by analyzing the risks for employees associated with the abuse of technology and new working modalities. The information gathered from various stakeholders as HR professionals, employees and psychologists, provide a comprehensive view of real-world scenarios. From a managerial point of view, given the imperative digital transition that decision makers must lead, alongside the shift from in-person work models to remote modalities (Fayard et al., 2021), seems to be clear that future leaders should demonstrate fully openness and adaptability to welcome these necessary epochal changes. A crucial aspect, therefore, concerns in spreading awareness within organizational contexts and departments regarding how much important is not to ignore the dynamics described. This implies promoting training programs focused on digital well-being courses able to encourage the implementation of work routines and best practices for preserving the psychological safety of workers. Considering what said, remedies and solutions proposed are the following:*

- *Re-defining Policy and Rules = First of all, as expressed from some of the interviewees,"it is not possible looking at the future with the "lenses of the past". In other words, it is primary important to be aware of the epochal change and wear new lenses when disorientation dominates (Baccarani and Golinelli, 2011). Therefore, policy makers should solicit for example a "right to disconnect" in order to preserve the essential boundaries between personal and professional life. As we are assisting, employees fell they have no freedom to disconnect from work responsibilities, then organizational leaders need to intervene and establish clear working rhythms. Another good example of tentative to look at the future with new lenses is to completely rethink the annual and sick leave policies. In fact, traditional leave policies no longer suffice in the current digitalized era. Remote work complicates the process of requesting sick or annual leave (one participant said: "often, if people are sick, they do not ask for sick leave but they keep working from home", leading to imbalances and increased stress. Reevaluating these policies is crucial to adapt to the post-Covid digital landscape. Another important aspect which must be re-defined is relative to the shaping of organizational cultures and communities which is jeopardized from remote working modalities. On this regard, HR departments should invest in organizing more retreats and outdoor activities to foster team building, collaboration and workers' alignment with organizational goals. This is particularly important for the onboarding of new hires who are finding difficult interacting with colleagues and build relationships effectively with remote working;*

- *Learning and development training programs= considering the constrained highlighted and in order to proactively deal with these issues, organizations (and in particular HR departments) should work in implementing revised safety training programs. This new digital well-being training could be essential for employees and could help them in integrating mental health measures into daily routines, such as managing notifications and also promoting a digital detox Culture (encouraging for example periods of disconnection from digital devices). Also, learning and development training programs should focus on the development of new leadership models. This is important for both top management (whose sponsor is fundamental to support these initiatives) and first line supervisors to actively lead the digital transition. In other words, leadership awareness is crucial for taking a proactive approach, monitoring employees' well-being and use effective communication skills for managing remote teams. This last aspect is also fundamental: providing training to supervisors (and thus enhancing their leadership soft and communication skills) is essential to help in maintaining motivation and productivity among remote workers. This means embracing a new concept of leader who needs to adopt an innovative and people-oriented approach, prioritize the well-being of employees while driving digital transitions. Proactive leadership involves anticipating/addressing challenges and ensuring a supportive work environment for all team members.*

Originality of the paper. *This research holds relevance not just for supervisors contending with these challenges in their daily work, but also for the scientific community aiming to enhance their understanding of the matter of wellbeing. In fact, while the focus on the ramifications of this emerging type of work-induced stress has grown, previous research has largely focused on analysing these aspects from isolated stakeholder's points of view and perspectives (e.g. solely psychologists, or employees only, etc.) whereas this study explores diverse viewpoints from different organizational actors*

offering a more holistic understanding. Thus, aligning with the exploratory essence of the study and in order to have a more comprehensive perspective, the insights obtained with this study were gleaned through a combination of literature review and interviews conducted by the researcher on a diverse sample composed of HR managers, senior managers, subordinates, organizational counselors, psychologists, consultants, and coaches. In addition, as also done in previous studies (Bresciani et al., 2016), the diverse sample of participants interviewed represents different work environments across different sectors (increasing the generalizability of the findings) in diverse domains. As said, the insights derived from this study result from a combination of literature review and interviews conducted as also done in previous studies (Ravazzani et al., 2021) that focused on qualitative data and documentary analysis for analyzing practice developments. To conclude, like significant evolutionary processes in history, 2020 will be etched in memory as a pivotal juncture in the evolution of organizational wellbeing and it is primary fundamental to increase the knowledge on these paradigmatical changes and the risks associated.

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