

## WP3 - Smart working and the organisation of labour: smart working and internal labour markets in **Spain**

### Case Study 1 – LARGE TELECOM COMPANY



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# Introduction

The employer is a large provider of telecommunications services - voice, messaging, and data across fixed and mobile networks, plus cloud, payment, cybersecurity and internet-of-things with global headquarters abroad. As of January 2023, the company operates networks in 21 countries, with partner networks in 47 further countries. The company is based in Madrid since 2000 and employs some 4000 workers all over the country.

The interview took place via Zoom with 4 employees of this company, all based in Madrid:

- 2 Forecast Specialists (early 40s, males) [FS1, FS2].

#### **Main job tasks**

- *Analyse current market trends and current product line performance*
- *Forecast future market opportunities and threats*
- *Coordinate with Sales & Marketing Team*

- Sales Specialist (mid 30s, males) [SS]

#### **Main job task**

- *Proposal development and customer demos*

- Customer Success Representative (youngest, female) [CSR]

#### **Main job task**

- *Handling customers satisfaction and retention*

## Management of out-of-office work

The company has had a **protocol** of out-of-office work since 2017, which consisted of maximum 1 day a week (not Mondays nor Fridays).

Three out of four interviewees (FS1, FS2, SS) started teleworking as soon as they could do so. The company facilitated the transition to OOOV by offering online courses to adapt the workspace at home and to avoid occupational hazards i.e., screen brightness, keyboard height, ergonomics, breaks.

The **motivations of the company** for the introduction of out-of-office work have been:

- To improve the company's image, to set an example for society;

- Providing incentives to employees and retain talent (e.g., no pressure in the negotiation of salaries);
- Cost reduction due to less infrastructure need such as canteen, offices (now there are plants not enabled with what is saved light, air conditioning, cleaning service ...).

Regarding the **advantages** of out-of-office work, the participants in the interview enumerate the following main advantages:

- Reconciliation of work and family life (ALL)
- Time and money savings because there is no commuting (ALL)

Regarding the **disadvantages** and **difficulties** of out-of-office work:

- Workspace at home – employees remark that they have no room for an office, and had to adapt living spaces such as the dining room to work (FS2, SS, CSR)
- Relationships among colleagues have been negatively affected, for example team synergies have decreased significantly (ALL)
- The company has not changed personnel management, and not all managers are suitable for the new reality. Some know how to manage office work very well but not remotely. All felt that the organizational structure must change and adapt to the reality of out-of-office work (ALL)

## Impact of COVID-19 on managing out-of-office work

After COVID, company offers out-of-office work up to 3 days a week maximum. And 4 weeks a year (not leave Spain). These weeks can be distributed throughout the year (together or separately).

## Working conditions in out-of-office work

The main peculiarity of out-of-office work is that it favours concentration as one can manage own time and is less prone to distractions.

Interviewees agree that there are differences in out-of-office work between occupations/tasks.

*“While back-office tasks can be teleworked, front-office tasks (e.g., sales workers need to be more in the office to organize events, attract customers, etc.), since are more creative tasks and they need teamwork, they cannot be undertaken with out-of-office work”.*

Table summarises how OOOW affected various dimensions of working conditions for THE COMPANY employees.

| Dimension                                  | Effect of out-of-office work                          | Remarks  |
|--|---|--|
| Earnings                                   | No changes (ALL)                                      |  |
| Working time, flexibility of working hours | No changes in Working Time but more flexibility (ALL) |  |
| Work-life balance                          | FS1, FS2, SS: better<br>CSR: no changes               | - FS1, FS2, SS “No commuting, more time and a better organization of family life”  |
| Stability and job security                 | No changes (ALL)                                      |  |
| Social protection                          | No changes (ALL)                                      | - ALL: “The company provides all the need equipment to work at home (chairs, headphones, etc...)”  |
| Employment status/form of contract         | No changes (ALL)                                      |  |
| Engagement and motivation to work          | FS1, SS, CSR: Negative effect<br>FS2: No changes      | - CSR felt less motivated because “she enjoyed the synergies in the office environment”;<br>- FS1 felt that “lack of communication did not facilitate executing work tasks”;<br>- SS suffered from “coordination issues with other employees”; |
| Productivity at work                       | FS1, SS, CSR: Negative effect<br>FS2: No changes      | - FS1, SS, CSR: “during OOOW the goal was to do the bare minimum, but nobody strived beyond that, nor did extra efforts”.  |
| Stress, intensity at work                  | Positive changes (ALL)                                | - FS1, FS2, CSR “no commuting, less traffic stress, less risk of being late”;<br>- FS1, FS2, SS “easier to balance family  |

|  |                                |   |
|--|--------------------------------|---|
|  |                                | <p>and work”;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ALL: “when an important/urgent task is assigned, it is better managed from home because the proximity of a senior may intimidate and/or generate more stress”</li> </ul> |
| <b>Work overload</b>   | No changes (ALL)               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “Overload issues (when they occur) are the same as in the office”</li> </ul>   |
| Occupational <b>health</b> and <b>safety</b>                                 | No changes (ALL)               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “The company is committed and provides training as well as frequent information updates”</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Integration</b> at the workplace  | Less integration in OOOW (ALL) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- FS1, FS2, CSR “Working remotely entails lower integration and detachment from decision making”;</li> <li>- SS, CSR “task sharing processes are more difficult in OOOW mode”;</li> </ul>    |
| <b>Right to disconnect</b>   | Positive feedback (ALL)        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- “The company respects the right to disconnect during periods of rest, evenings, weekends and no call policy outside of working hours”</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Costs</b> of out-of-office work   | Positive, cost savings (ALL)   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lower expenses due to commuting” (ALL)</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Commuting</b> and work-related travels                                    | Positive changes (ALL)         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Less stress due to traffic, which in Madrid is pretty heavy and a shared feeling of saving time and money.</li> </ul>  |
| Access to <b>trade unions</b> , collective bargaining                        | No changes (ALL)               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unions have kept the same pace of information sharing.</li> </ul>  |
| Access to <b>information, consultation</b> , and <b>participation rights</b> | No changes (ALL)               |   |

**Table 1:** How have several aspects of working outside the office been affected?

## Impact of COVID-19 on working conditions

All interviewees agree that the COVID-19 pandemic has consolidated OOOW but not affected working conditions as regards aspects that are under the direct responsibility of the company such as continuity, disconnection, income level, compensation for accidents, computer

breakage, etc. On the other hand, they concur that unfit domestic working conditions – i.e., not having a space at home that is suitable for work tasks or enough silence – are major issues. Likewise, interviewees point out that some aspects of **working conditions** have worsened for some occupations. For example:

*“Shopfloor workers could not work during the pandemic and were adversely affected, in turn affecting their well-being and the productivity of workers in other departments”.*

There is wide agreement that employers might want to consider a more flexible approach so that, for example, workers can choose the days of OOO. In addition, there is a concern that as OOO entails greater or more frequent disengagement with the physical workplace, this may affect **career development**. Lack of synergies and opportunities to interact directly with management is perceived as a possible barrier to prove one’s worth and be aware of options for professional advancement.

## Skills in out-of-office work

The interview participants identify several criticalities about the **skills challenges** that are associated to the consolidation of out-of-office work. Participants remark

*“The employer often offers a variety of useful in-person training opportunities such as tech talks by other employees, or external training to keep up with professional aspects, not least career development”.*

**Time management** is deemed as the most important skill for efficient remote work in this company, as many work tasks entail developing routine, protocols or analysis, all of which require time and various iterations among colleagues.

*“At individual level this entails being able to allocate tasks to the weekly schedule in such a way that allows sufficient time for individual tasks but also being on time when working with other colleagues”.*

The more senior interviewees point out that time management of job activities inevitably affects personal or family time, especially when working remotely.

Likewise, **communication skills** are paramount, for example how and when to communicate with colleagues to exchange information, to identify criticalities, to negotiate task assignment,

ensure high standards of quality and to choose the most appropriate medium for communication. All interviewees agree that they are still learning which medium is most appropriate, and while they all feel proficient on the technical side, interpersonal communication skills oftentimes prove to be tricky.

*“Depending on job task circumstances and on how familiar one is with other colleagues, you have to decide whether to use chat, e-mail, phone call, virtual meeting or face-to-face. And, also, how to follow up initial contact when repeated iterations are necessary, or whether problems arise”.*

One of the key concerns is that working from home stifles or slows down personal **career development**. Especially interviewees in intermediate or junior position confess that although there are no formal impediments, out-of-office work is rarely conducive to fast-track promotion. In fact, less senior interviewees confess that they often seek support with other colleagues.

*“The problem is that a successful professional career requires also creating and leveraging circles of trust, establish long-term relationships with fellow junior and with senior staff in the company. Although the basic information you ideally need to develop a career plan is public, the tacit know-how that HR personnel possess is not equally accessible”.*

## Role of social partners in ensuring workers’ rights and decent working conditions in out-of-office work

Interviewees did not notice significant changes in union participation throughout the Covid emergency.

*“Unions have traditionally maintained a steady level of communication and keep us up to date about ongoing negotiations or consultations with either the employee or with national institutions. Obviously, under strict lockdown they provided plenty of useful guidelines regarding practical aspects of working from home, such as ergonomics, taking breaks and family-work balance.”*



According to participants, this is not due to lack of participation on the part of the unions but rather because the company has taken plenty of initiatives to facilitate the transition to OOOW. At the same time, they feel that the role of the unions would be most needed during the negotiation of new agreements to regulate OOOW, which has undoubtedly become a more consolidated routine in the post-Covid scenario. In this sense, interviewees remark:

*“We expect unions to be more proactive in encouraging the debate on career development and stimulate the identification of best practices for performance assessment that would be widely shared and equally relevant to all workers.”*

## Conclusions

The transition in and out of OOOW during and after the pandemic has been overall positive for the interviewees. Considering the implementation happened in a rush and in a state of emergency, the transition has not been as disruptive as they initially feared. This is partly due to the nature of their main occupational requirements which consist predominantly of technical tasks and rely heavily on a mature digital infrastructure. Of course, a series of logistical and personal challenges have emerged in the process but employees felt that, at least in the short-term, their performance and professional goals have not suffered.

That said, taking a longer-term perspective, if indeed OOOW is here to stay, participants express concerns about the future as regards flexibility, career progression and coordination in blend of in-the-office/out-of-office mode. First, they hope that new legislation and sectoral agreements will allow enough flexibility regarding access to remote work options, especially for what concerns the day and working hours. Second, they expect clearer guidelines about career development and performance assessment criteria that are compatible with increasing resort to OOOW. Last but not least, they would like to see an open and broad debate regarding the adaptations that are necessary at both high- and mid-level of management to facilitate the smooth consolidation of mixed working modalities.



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