

Article

Telework in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Workers' Health: an integrative literature review

Teletrabalho no Contexto da Pandemia de COVID-19 e o Reflexo na Saúde do Trabalhador: uma revisão integrativa de literatura

Teletrabajo en el contexto de la pandemia COVID-19 y la reflexión sobre la salud de los trabajadores: una revisión integradora de la literatura

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Abstract

Objective: To present the main findings from published research on telework in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on worker health. **Methodology:** An integrative literature review was conducted, searching for articles in the SCIELO and BVS databases, covering studies published from 2020 to June 2024. The descriptors used were: Teleworking and COVID-19, and workers' health. **Results:** Ten articles were analyzed based on methodological quality, level of evidence, and relevance of results. Certain themes emerged, such as the identity concept of work and new forms of work relationships. From the analysis, it was decided to produce two thematic categories: (1) obstacles to the effective implementation of telework during the pandemic and (2) strategies to improve the physical and mental health of teleworking employees. **Conclusion:** Telework is one of the new work modalities that, in many cases, increases professionals' productivity and efficiency but penalizes workers' physical and mental health. Furthermore, during the pandemic, organizations implemented telework without the necessary planning, creating various labor-related issues, including extended working hours, inadequate ergonomic conditions, and pressure to meet productivity goals, which affected the personal and family lives of workers.

Keywords: Covid-19; Pandemic; Telework; Health.

Resumo

Objetivo: apresentar os principais achados de pesquisas publicadas sobre teletrabalho no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19 e seus reflexos sobre a saúde do trabalhador. **Metodologia:** realizou-se uma revisão integrativa da literatura, com busca dos artigos nas bases de dados SCIELO e BVS, abrangendo estudos publicados entre 2020 e junho de 2024. Os descritores utilizados foram: teletrabalho *and* covid-19 *and* saúde do trabalhador. **Resultados:** Foram analisados dez artigos, a partir da qualidade metodológica, do nível de evidência e da relevância dos resultados, nos quais emergiram algumas temáticas como o conceito identitário do trabalho e as novas formas de relações de trabalho. A partir

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da análise realizada, optou-se por produzir duas categorias temáticas (obstáculos para efetivação do teletrabalho na pandemia e estratégias para melhorar a saúde física e mental dos trabalhadores em regime de teletrabalho). **Conclusão:** o teletrabalho é uma das novas modalidades de trabalho que, em muitos casos, aumenta a produtividade e a eficiência dos profissionais, mas penaliza a saúde física e mental dos trabalhadores. Além do mais, na pandemia, as organizações instituíram o teletrabalho sem o planejamento necessário, criando diversos problemas de ordem laboral, dentre eles as jornadas ampliadas, as condições ergonômicas e a pressão por produtividade, os quais extrapolaram a vida pessoal e familiar dos trabalhadores e trabalhadoras.

Palavras-chave: Covid-19; Pandemia; Teletrabalho; Saúde.

Resumen

Objetivo: Presentar los principales hallazgos de las investigaciones publicadas sobre teletrabajo en el contexto de la pandemia de COVID-19 y sus efectos en la salud del trabajador. **Metodología:** Se realizó una revisión integrativa de la literatura, buscando artículos en las bases de datos SCIELO y BVS, abarcando estudios publicados entre 2020 y junio de 2024. Los descriptores utilizados fueron: teletrabajo, COVID-19 y salud del trabajador. **Resultados:** Se analizaron diez artículos, basados en la calidad metodológica, el nivel de evidencia y la relevancia de los resultados, en los cuales surgieron algunos temas como el concepto identitario del trabajo y las nuevas formas de relaciones laborales. A partir del análisis realizado, se optó por producir dos categorías temáticas: (1) obstáculos para la implementación efectiva del teletrabajo durante la pandemia y (2) estrategias para mejorar la salud física y mental de los trabajadores en régimen de teletrabajo. **Conclusión:** El teletrabajo es una de las nuevas modalidades de trabajo que, en muchos casos, aumenta la productividad y eficiencia de los profesionales, pero penaliza la salud física y mental de los trabajadores. Además, durante la pandemia, las organizaciones implementaron el teletrabajo sin la planificación necesaria, creando diversos problemas de orden laboral, entre ellos las jornadas extendidas, las condiciones ergonómicas inadecuadas y la presión por productividad, los cuales afectaron la vida personal y familiar de los trabajadores y trabajadoras.

Palabras clave: Covid-19; Pandemia; Teletrabajo; Salud.

Introduction

Since ancient times, have been studied the subjective aspects related to labor relations, especially with regard to the identity process of each human being. In this context, work is a significant example of the choices made by each individual, taking into account the references experienced throughout life⁽¹⁾.

For Barros and Nogueira⁽²⁾, work represents the core of people's social and personal lives, capable of defining them socially, providing both recognition and the construction of their identities. It not only provides sustenance, but also determines people's social *status*, purpose and identity.

In this respect, Losekann⁽³⁾ addresses that throughout history the meaning of work has evolved considerably. Working conditions, forms of work such as teleworking and economic and social crises alter both the perception and the practice of work. Initially, it was seen as a punishment, reflected in terms that evoked suffering. Then, it began to be understood as an activity that dignifies the human being and leads to well-being and freedom⁽⁴⁾.

Subsequently, work came to be recognized as a virtue, as observed by thinkers such as Bertrand Russell⁽⁵⁾. In his work "In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays", this view is opposed to leisure, which is often considered a source of misery rather than happiness.

Russell⁽⁵⁾ argues that the idea of duty has historically been a device used by the power holders to persuade the masses to dedicate their lives to the interests of the powerful, to the detriment of their own aspirations.

This panorama reveals how the perception of work is intrinsically linked to social and economic dynamics, highlighting the role of work in shaping identity and power relations at different times.

These changes are influenced by external factors, especially in a context such as the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing the need to flexibilize labor relations. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new perceptions to labor relations, especially with the forced adoption of teleworking.

The *home office*, once an exception, has become the rule, allowing many to keep their jobs and reducing social contact. However, this change has also created difficulties, such as the need to adapt quickly to new technologies and the mixing of professional and personal life.

Decreed on January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the coronavirus epidemic a Public Health Emergency of International Concern⁽⁶⁾, characterizing it as a global risk event due to the rapid spread of the disease between countries.

The high transmissibility of SARS-CoV-2, along with the absence of vaccines and effective antiviral medications to prevent and treat COVID-19, made the implementation of control measures urgent. In this context, non-pharmacological interventions have gained prominence as the main strategies to mitigate and control the spread of the virus^(7,8). These interventions include case isolation, quarantine of exposed individuals, social distancing and community containment measures⁽⁹⁾.

In this context, there were also abrupt changes in the format and working relationships. Moreover, people's lives have been affected as work has been performed from home⁽¹⁰⁾.

The telework widely adopted by companies was a discretionary measure, without regulation, in view of the health emergency experienced around the world⁽¹¹⁾. In this context, it is worth highlighting that governments also implemented administrative measures to stimulate the local economy, including encouraging, among other actions, remote working as an alternative for preserving jobs and mitigating economic impacts⁽¹²⁾.

This measure was based on Provisional Measure 927/2020⁽¹³⁾, which authorized teleworking, the anticipation of vacations, the suspension of employment contracts, flexibilizing the relations between employees and employers, without any negotiations with the workers' representative bodies.

It is worth highlighting, in this sense, that the concept of teleworking is defined as the provision of services predominantly outside the employer's premises, using information and communication technologies which, by their nature, do not constitute external work⁽¹⁴⁾. Teleworking generally causes workers to dedicate more hours to work than they would in the company's premises, because the time previously spent commuting is used for professional activities.

Other aspects stem from the demands of the home. Teleworkers often don't have adequate physical space to carry out their activities, such as a desk, chairs, computers and so on. In addition, they are faced with a bigger scenario, which is the possible interruptions caused by various reasons, whether it's a child who needs something or the preparation of food, and therefore the time required to perform a work activity will need to be extended.

In the same vein, teleworking can increase the pressure for targets and make it more difficult to separate work time and space from rest time and space, which makes the worker feel always connected to work. This "non-disconnection" is one of the biggest risks, as it can lead to mental exhaustion and affect health and the balance between personal and professional life⁽¹¹⁾.

In this context of the pandemic and the modification and/or readjustment of work environments and processes, the question arises: what were/are the effects observed on the health of teleworkers as a result of the health crisis caused by SARS-CoV-2?

This study aims to present the main findings of published research on teleworking in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on workers' health.

Methodology

This study involves a bibliographic research of the integrative review type with a qualitative approach, which consists of the exploration of data collected and published in the literature on telework in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on worker health, investigating how the new working conditions influence mental and physical health and quality of life during the period from March 2020 to June 2024.

This review was conducted based on six proposals by Souza, Silva and Carvalho: 1) identification of the topic and elaboration of the research question; 2) establishment of criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies; 3) definition of the information to be extracted from the selected studies; 4) critical analysis of the included studies based on the levels of evidence; 5) discussion of the results; and 6) presentation of the integrative review⁽¹⁵⁾.

As a guide, the following guiding question was formulated: what effects have been observed on the health of teleworkers as a result of the health crisis caused by SARS-CoV-2?

For the development of this integrative review, the inclusion criteria used the method of reading the abstract and introduction of scientific articles that address the topic in publications in the Scielo and BVS databases. The descriptors used were: teleworking, Covid-19 and workers' health, indexed in Portuguese, English and Spanish, with original data that met the methodological quality criteria.

Initially, 64 articles were found in the SCIELO database, with the descriptor entitled: teleworking *and* covid-19, of which five were duplicates.

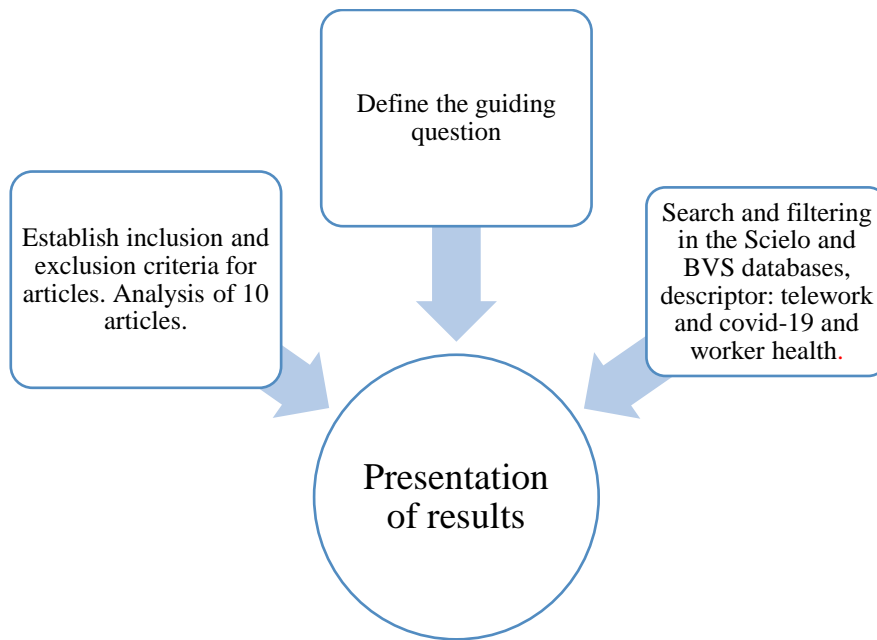
In the BVS database, 25 articles were found with the descriptor: "teleworking *and* covid-19 and workers' health", but no article was duplicated.

The selection of the articles was conducted in stages, beginning with the reading of the titles and abstracts as a first form of selection, followed by a full reading of the texts. For the extraction of the key information from the selected articles, a data collection instrument developed by the authors was used, which includes identification of the article, research type, data collection and analysis methods, key findings, discussion, and conclusion.

The data collected was analyzed from the methodological quality, level of evidence and the relevance of the results, in an attempt to find significant communication strategies that were repeated among the articles.

The results were presented in a descriptive manner, depicting the conclusions of the selected articles, as shown below:

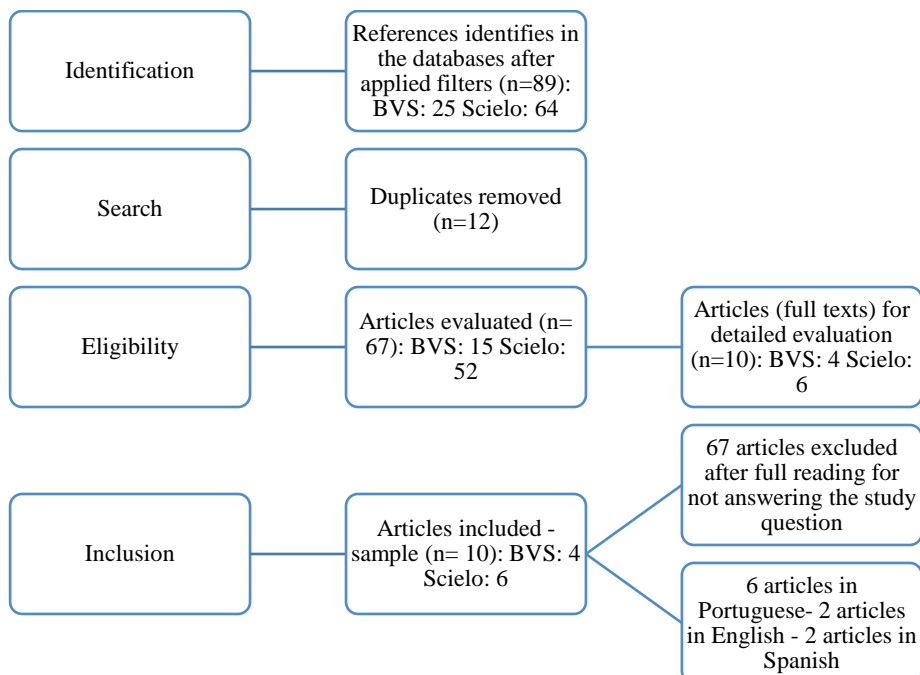
Figure 1. Presentation of results



Source: prepared by the authors.

Thus, an exploratory reading of the abstracts was conducted, and after analysis, the selection for research was made, based on the articles that complied with the inclusion criteria of this review.

Figure 2. Flowchart for identifying and selecting studies



Source: prepared by the authors

Results and discussions

Ten articles were selected, as shown in Table 1. Of the total, six were published in 2024, two in 2023 and two in 2022.

Table 1. Selected articles, indicating authorship, title and conclusion. Developed by the authors.

Author	Title	Conclusion	Year
1. Antunes ED, Ribeiro BC, Santos M, Fischer FM ⁽¹⁶⁾ .	The tip of the iceberg: teleworking during the pandemic	Gains and savings for companies due to the transfer of part of the costs to workers, with major consequences for workers' health and living conditions. Among the negative impacts are the psychosocial and physical risks associated with remote working, including ergonomic problems and difficulties in separating work and rest time. The lack of official data makes it difficult to analyze the long-term effects on the health of teleworkers, but the text warns of the need for specific regulations to prevent telework from evolving into an increasingly precarious form of work, which weakens labor rights and deepens social inequalities.	2023
2. Salinas, Denia Benítez ⁽¹⁷⁾ .	Impact of teleworking on the work stress of university teachers by covid-19	University teachers with a mild level of work-related stress and a medium level of work-related burnout, manifested mainly by gastrointestinal problems and headaches, with female teachers showing higher levels of stress.	2024
3. Binotto E, Mendonça JCA, Araujo JAA, Fountoura RR ⁽¹⁸⁾ .	Universities professors: What are the challenges and perspectives of pandemic?	Low incidence of infection among workers, however, the data collected highlights the need for the institution to improve its technological service to its employees, both by improving existing virtual platforms and by offering training.	2024

4. Kadri Filho FE, Lucca SR de ⁽¹⁹⁾ .	Psychosocial Factors and Common Mental Disorders in the Telework of the Labor Judiciary in the Covid-19 Pandemic	Prevalence of psychological distress among magistrates and civil servants in the labor judiciary, with depressive-anxiety symptoms associated with highly demanding work. Prevention was suggested with social support and a return to the hybrid work mode.	2024
5. Candido ACF, Alencar M do CB de. ⁽²⁰⁾	Perception of the risks of RSI/WMSD in teleworking by civil servants at a public university	Difficulties with teleworking equipment because it is not ergonomic, causing pain. However, the study is inconclusive as to the risks of RSI/WMSD, raising only questions as to future prevention.	2024
6. Bridi MA, Tropia PV, Vazquez BV ⁽¹¹⁾ .	Teleworking and health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic	The pandemic has brought new challenges for the working class, in particular environmental and ergonomic working conditions. In addition to ensuring that working hours are limited, and that working time and rest time are limited.	2024
7. Artar M, Erdil O ⁽²¹⁾ .	How has interpersonal communication satisfaction impacted teleworkers' job satisfaction? The role of information technology awareness and creative performance.	Emphasis on the importance of interpersonal communication and IT awareness, with a view to creating a more creative and productive environment and workforce.	2024

8. Silva LMM da, Takeshita LMA ⁽²²⁾ .	Teleworking and the right to disconnect in the home office in times of pandemic.	Respect for the right to disconnect from work - because it contributes to preserving workers' health, which can lead to greater productivity - must guarantee a decent working environment, providing workers with mental and physical health, in this case already weakened by the stress inherent in the pandemic	2022
9. Urrejola-Contreras GP ⁽²³⁾ .	Relationship between mental fatigue and Burnout Syndrome in remote workers during the COVID-19 pandemic: an integrative review.	Organizational working conditions have deteriorated and there is real exposure to stressors that damage the mental, productive and physical dimensions of individuals. It is therefore necessary to review the maturity and critical awareness of workers' exposure to immediacy and examine suggestive surveillance tools such as telepressure through control devices in contexts of overload.	2023
10. Antunes, Evelise Dias ⁽²⁴⁾ .	Teleworking: the new post-pandemic workplace: a transnational policy perspective and the case of implementation in the Brazilian Federal Court before and during the covid-19 pandemic?	In Brazil, despite a small advance in public policy during the pandemic, it is still insufficient to protect the health and safety of teleworkers, impacting women more than men.	2022

Source: prepared by the authors.

Among the ten articles selected, six are in Portuguese, two in Spanish and two in English. From the elements mentioned, the articles were organized into two thematic categories: i - obstacles to the implementation of teleworking in the pandemic; ii - strategies to improve the physical and mental health of teleworkers.

Of these, nine address thematic categories "i" and "ii", while one emphasizes the importance of interpersonal communication and information technology awareness to promote a more creative and productive work environment.

Telework, during the pandemic, emerged extraordinarily in Brazil, revolutionizing labor practices and imposing new dynamics on labor relations⁽²¹⁾. Companies had ample freedom to establish the guidelines and conditions for remote work, which began to function as a large-scale experiment. Considered a special type of remote work, teleworking is characterized by the decentralization of the workplace, carried out at the worker's home or in satellite centers outside the employer's establishment, but maintaining contact with it or being carried out in places of public use. This practice is prevalent among workers with medium or high qualifications, who use computers or telecommunication to perform their activities⁽²⁵⁾.

Faced with this scenario, companies and managers, many of whom had restrictions on the remote working model, were forced to adapt quickly to the demands of social distancing. The transition to teleworking has not only generated savings by transferring part of the costs to the workers - such as energy, internet and home infrastructure costs - but it has also highlighted significant challenges for the working class. One of the main obstacles has been ensuring adequate ergonomic and environmental conditions in the home space, which is often improvised and lacks the support that would normally be offered by the employer in a corporate environment.

In addition, teleworking has exposed the need to secure the rights that have been won over the years, especially the limit on working hours and the clear separation between time spent working and resting.

In the domestic environment, the boundary between these two spheres has become blurred, leading to an increase in working hours and an intensification of demands^(11,22). This scenario highlights the importance of regulations that guarantee the well-being of workers and policies that ensure a clear demarcation between work and rest periods for the teleworking becomes a sustainable and fair practice for all parties involved.

Although most studies have focused on the structural and social challenges of teleworking, Artar and Erdi⁽²¹⁾ bring a different perspective, highlighting the relationship between interpersonal communication, information technology and creative performance. For the authors, these factors are determinants of teleworker satisfaction, and it is up to organizations to implement policies that promote a more productive and satisfying remote environment. On the other hand, the other studies present the obstacles to its implementation. Among the main issues identified are:

1. Lack of adequate infrastructure: many workers did not have an appropriate home structure for remote work, such as adequate physical space, quality internet, equipment (computer, ergonomic chair, etc.), which negatively affected productivity and health^(16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24).

2. Difficulty adapting to technology: some people were not familiar with the digital tools and platforms needed for teleworking, which led to a learning curve and, in some cases, resistance to using new technologies^(16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24).

3. Separation between personal and professional life: in the domestic environment, there was a difficulty in maintaining a clear division between working and resting hours. This lack of boundaries contributed to an increase in working hours and made it difficult to disconnect at the end of the working day^(16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24).

4. Physical and mental health issues: the lack of ergonomics in the home environment has increased physical problems such as back pain, while the lack of social interaction and increased pressure for productivity have intensified mental health problems such as anxiety and stress^(16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24).

5. Inequalities of access: the adoption of teleworking also highlighted socio-economic inequalities. Workers from different social classes faced specific challenges, such as lack of access to high-speed internet and inadequate housing conditions for remote working^(16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24).

6. Lack of specific regulations: The labor legislation at the time of the pandemic, did not have clear and up-to-date regulations on teleworking, which led to uncertainty about the rights and duties of workers and employers, such as the delimitation of working hours, payment of additional expenses and the ergonomics of the environment^(16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24).

7. Difficulty in ensuring supervision and engagement: for managers, supervising tasks remotely and engaging employees also proved challenging, requiring the adaptation of management and communication styles^(16,17,18,19,20,22,23,24).

Kadri Filho and Lucca⁽¹⁹⁾ identified a high prevalence of common mental disorders (CMD) among magistrates and civil servants in the judiciary, associating it with high work demands and low social support. Meanwhile Salinas⁽¹⁷⁾ points out that university professors had mild levels of work stress and medium levels of emotional exhaustion, with the most significant impact among women.

These obstacles have been decisive for companies and workers to realize the complexity of teleworking, highlighting the need for investments, regulations and adaptations to make it a sustainable practice in the long term. Kadri Filho and Lucca⁽¹⁹⁾ point to the implementation of a hybrid model as a solution to the impacts of teleworking on mental health and Antunes et al⁽²⁴⁾ advocate stricter regulations.

From a legal point of view, the 1988 Constitution⁽²⁶⁾, as well as the Consolidation of Labor Laws⁽²⁷⁾, ensure one of the most important rights won by the working class, which is characterized by the limit on working hours, with the delimitation of working time and rest time defined in the intra-day breaks, avoiding the physical and mental exhaustion of workers and promoting a more balanced and productive working environment. However, during the pandemic, these limits have often been disregarded.

In this context, the fundamental right to a balanced working environment, set out in Article 225 of the Federal Constitution of 1988⁽²⁶⁾, reinforces this protection by ensuring an ecologically balanced environment for all. In addition, Article 7, item XXII, establishes the need to reduce the risks inherent in work through health, hygiene and safety standards. For teleworkers adequate labor-environmental and ergonomic conditions should be provided, considering that the lack of ergonomics in the home environment has increased physical problems, such as lower back pain. This may be due to the lack of suitable tables and chairs in the workers' homes, and static postural overload has been linked to pain and muscle tension in the body.

In this vein, S. Resedá⁽²⁸⁾ defends the right to rest, leisure and complete disconnection from work as necessary requirements for maintaining an employee's healthy life. The telework reveals itself as a

likely threat to these rights, since the employee can be connected to the company from any location they are. Therefore, the measures to ensure disconnection and overtime must be reviewed by companies that subject their workers to this type of work.

Along the same lines, Silva and Takeshita⁽²²⁾ point out that the right to disconnect from work can also be inferred at international level, mentioning the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948⁽²⁹⁾ and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of 1966⁽³⁰⁾. In Articles 24 and 7, respectively, both documents allude to the right to rest and leisure, as well as the reasonable limitation of working hours, in addition to the document drawn up by the International Labor Organization (ILO)⁽³¹⁾ in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, which demonstrated the importance of balancing professional and personal life.

The integrative review realized demonstrated that there was an increasing intensification of control over work and its consequences for workers' mental health, especially in a teleworking scenario, since the COVID-19 pandemic. Constant monitoring and pressure for results in teleworking relationships have led to stress and work overload, highlighting the urgent need for strategies to promote employee well-being. Moreover, the social stratification accentuated by teleworking highlights the inequality between qualified workers and those in roles that require physical presence, which demands special attention from managers.

Given this scenario, there is a clear need to develop actions aimed at reducing work demands and promoting social support for workers, with a view to preserving mental health in teleworking. Many spend hours in front of a computer, isolated at home, without any social contact, and suffer from constant work demands, excessive working hours to meet targets and end up in a scenario of burnout⁽²³⁾.

Preventing psychological distress by reducing work overload, strengthening interpersonal relationships between colleagues and adequate support from management are essential measures to ensure the mental health of teleworkers⁽²³⁾.

Final considerations

The research, upon analyzing teleworking in the context of the pandemic, revealed that the intensification of work control, through constant monitoring and pressure for results, has led to greater stress and overload for workers. Teleworking can also accentuate social stratification, benefiting skilled workers who can work remotely, while others, such as general service assistants, remain restricted to face-to-face work.

In conclusion, it highlights the importance of taking care of workers' mental health during this period of transition and setting realistic goals to avoid burnout. The article suggests that the lessons learned during the pandemic will shape the future of remote working, emphasizing the need for management to be more adaptive and attentive to employee well-being.

Finally, the managers should prioritize the development of their employees' technology skills, since it was observed in the remote work environment, there is a direct relationship between information technology skills, the results achieved, and job satisfaction.

The article also emphasizes that the lessons learned during the pandemic should be incorporated into the future management of remote work, promoting a more adaptive approach centered on the needs of employees. In this context, the development of IT skills is fundamental, as it is directly related to job satisfaction and the results achieved. By prioritizing these skills and setting realistic goals,

organizations not only mitigate the risk of burnout, but also create a more productive and satisfying work environment.

Therefore, the implementation of strategic measures aimed at caring for mental health and strengthening workers' technological skills is essential to ensure a fairer and more balanced future of work, in which everyone can thrive regardless of their position or type of work.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Authors' contribution

Vieira DL contributed to the conception/design of the article, data analysis and interpretation, writing of the article. De Barros FPC contributed to the conception/design of the article, data analysis and interpretation, critical review of its content and approval of the final version.

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