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The practice of remote work

some factors to take into account

Joan Roma i Vergés

Innova Institute

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For the last several weeks, we have been dispersed in our homes, striving to adapt to remote work – also referred to as telework, although I prefer the term distance work. In fact, this phenomenon has always existed. It was an absolute necessity in empires spread across several parts of the world, involving messengers who would take days or months to fulfil their communication tasks. Communications nowadays are instantaneous, thanks to telematic technology. Nevertheless, the critical points are similar in any group, however big or small, that aims to maintain a joint action for the specific purpose of producing a result, exercising control over a territory, disseminating a political, moral or religious message, or, as often occurs, in order to achieve a combination of all these purposes.

Just as empires in the past knew that distance from the metropolis entailed all sorts of dangers and difficulties, multinational corporations today know full well that distance from the corporate environment entails the same risks.

Over the centuries, institutions have discovered that when a governor, regional CEO or missionary is posted somewhere, it is necessary to ensure that they have fully taken on board the purpose of the institution to which they belong, and the criteria implicit in the decision-making process, along with the style of relations that their institution deems culturally appropriate, both within and without the organisation.

Furthermore, great importance is also attached to **loyalty**, not only as a moral concept but also as a political one. In the time of the British Empire, the training of governors and other civil servants was based on a long socialisation process, which ensured that once their training was completed they would act in a way expected of them by their colleagues and superiors, both in the metropolis and in their respective postings thousands of miles away.

Generally speaking, less time is available nowadays for such exhaustive preparation, although multinational companies and churches continue to implement it.

In our habitual situations, which in all likelihood tend to be of much more limited scope, the same dynamics and problems come into play, although on a smaller scale.

It is convenient to start by identifying the nature of the work to be carried out at distance. A useful approach would be to **define the degree of structuring of the task to be carried out**; that is, to pose the following question:

✓ *Can it be segmented beforehand into well-defined parts with easily objectifiable outputs*?

Or, conversely:

✓ *Is it subject to the interpretation and criteria of the person(s) who must carry it out in respect of its purpose and the way of going about it*?

In the first *scenario* we are likely to be looking at a **task apt for structuring**. Administrative, bureaucratic, operative or mass-production-related tasks would fit in this category. Their execution is facilitated in the vast majority of cases by computer programmes that indicate the steps to follow and that prevent errors. These are the tasks or jobs that we can envisage being carried out by robots when we predict what the future of work will look like. In such cases, this type of distance work is fundamentally Taylorian.

Moving on to the *second scenario*, the tasks in this category involve a **lesser degree of structuring**. Their execution purposes and criteria are more open and require more interpretation by those who carry them out. They also require other elements of the environment in order to contextualise them better, especially when they are performed at distance.

Work in the workplace environment makes it possible, without the members of a work team being aware of it, to create a context of expectations that gradually limit and shape behaviours and the way of envisaging the organisation, the troubleshooting style, etc. All of this takes place not only in formal meeting and reporting settings but also in informal ones, such as coffee breaks, lunches, social events, etc.

A manager's intentions in a specific assignment, or a cooperation agreement with a colleague, can be adjusted through **regular feedback** in day-to-day work, on the basis of voice tone, body language, etc., which are missing in distance work.

This absence can generate many misunderstandings with few possibilities of immediate correction. The times between interactions may lead to all sorts of interpretations, from distrusting the capacity of one's interlocutor to loaded attributions of idleness.

Written communications may not carry such a heavy load of meaning as verbal and face-to-face ones.

In this case, it is advisable for the person in charge to contribute by specifying the **purpose of the project, its wider context, the stakeholders who will give their opinions, the criteria that will be used and the requirements that must be fulfilled**. This should be accompanied by regular and opportune feedback, as close as possible to the completion of the task.

When the task is independent of those performed by colleagues, whether in the workplace or at distance, work meetings are essential in order to grasp the meaning of the task, its purpose, the distribution of activities and the identification of the necessary interfaces, as well as to agree which virtual resources can be used during the project.

In addition to addressing the activity to be carried out, these work meetings also enable the team to visualise itself. Participation in such meetings facilitates the creation of an **image of the group, both consciously and unconsciously.**

Our previous early experience in groups of coexistence, such as the family or school settings, unconsciously shapes our minds in terms of attraction and rejection, not only regarding types of people but also organisational forms. This shaping is based on images associated with sensations, affections and emotions, accompanied by behaviours that adapted to the circumstances that initially arose.

As such, when it comes to dealing with a geographically dispersed work team, one will act in a certain way and with an image that is more familiar than what is occurring at this time or that may be in the realm of fantasy. Whatever the case, one will interact with others in a way associated with the said images.

The absence of a direct relationship may lead to assumptions, dysfunctional behaviours and conflictive relationships that are difficult to get back on track once certain lines have been crossed through certain communication channels, in particular exclusively written ones such as the WhatsApp messaging service or email, etc.

As such, regular direct communication, whether in a one-to-one or group setting, and even more frequent communication in the case of a new group or new member of staff, is a good **antidote for any dystopic fantasies that team members may have formed** on the basis of their own previous experiences.

Addressing these issues early on may prevent desperate efforts from being necessary later on, when accusations – mostly covert in nature – harm relations and the task.

Using written channels to deal with conflicts, to indicate deficient work, to express suspicions and to reprimand people unquestionably tends to make the situation worse.

Choosing the right medium for the purpose of the communication is essential, and making the purpose clear to the group prevents many misunderstandings. It frequently occurs that an unfortunate choice of words to express disagreement is interpreted as a criticism of one's interlocutor rather than of the task, causing the incident to snowball.

Although each employee will have their preferred choice of communication channel, whether written or spoken, whether visual or not, it is advisable to set out the limits of what content can be addressed through the aforementioned media, what is appropriate and what is unacceptable.

These rules may be pre-established or, depending on the level of trust that the person leading the group has in its members, established by the members themselves through an agreement on which behaviours are inappropriate and which ones facilitate the task.

The less aware that members of a work group are of the influence of the images that they have formed in their minds of their own unit, of other groups and of the organisation as a whole, the more powerful this influence will be. In this latent state, this influence will have an even greater bearing on the relational dynamics between group members, as well as on the relationship with the person leading the group and on the execution of the task.

Our experience shows us that **sharing these images within the group**, by means of associative metaphors, enables its members to become aware of them and of their impact on the performance of the group.

An additional reason for exploring and sharing these images is the fact that remote work often entails working in a shared environment, usually the family system. The immediacy of these tangible and affective family-related stimuli may end up competing with the worker's bond with their work system. Therefore, awareness of these images would help to diagnose and establish with the group the state of this organisational bond.

Although it is not always the case, **it is worth bearing in mind the weight that these other affective groups – family, friends, etc. – may have in the formation and transformation of the employee's unconscious image of their work group**. These groups may create and/or strengthen attractions that compete with organisational demands, complicating the management of the boundaries between the two systems (see the article *Gestió de Límits [Managing Boundaries]*[1]).

We have also observed that the bond with the work group when it comes to distance work is not formed in the same way as in the workplace setting. The workplace setting offers many more opportunities for the exchange of confidences and the unplanned sharing of issues that are not apparently related to the task.

Accordingly, it is necessary to **intentionally foster a feeling of belonging**. Finding out about personal interests, family, philias and phobias, etc. can help to establish a certain degree of familiarity that may also facilitate the exchanges necessary for the task and for the handling of the friction that will inevitably

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[1] http://innovaccio.net/es/publicacions/gestio-de-limits/

arise. That is why some teams schedule informal virtual meetings to share social activities.

The feeling of belonging is beneficial for the cohesion of the team and for the wellbeing of its members. Research has highlighted the relationship that exists between a strong sense of belonging and stress reduction, employee satisfaction and team performance. Publicly acknowledging the tasks of team members is also a contributing factor, but distance work offers fewer opportunities to do so.

Relationships that focus strictly on the task are less likely or not at all likely to recognise excellent contributions.

On a practical level, recognition also strengthens standards of excellence in the work team.

One issue constantly arises in teams that work at distance: **trust**. A professional will generally take longer to complete a qualified task than a structured bureaucratic one. The scope of discretion in order to carry it out will also be wider, especially if there are new people in the team, whether members and/or the leader.

If we understand trust as a relationship created between people, it will be altered when one of them fails to meet expectations, whether explicit or implicit, with their actions. For example, if the team leader, unsure of the situation and of the capacity or commitment of the members of their team, begins to incorporate frequent progress controls beyond the hitherto accepted level, it is likely that they will begin to generate feelings of wariness or even defensiveness among team members.

In such cases, constant requests for information by the team leader can be perceived as a lack of trust. It often occurs that minor incidents such as not answering an email, considered important by the person who has sent it, trigger an overblown reaction before the cause of the incident has been examined. Taking the time to find out the facts and refraining from reaching negative conclusions or formulating the worst hypothesis, requires **knowing the unconscious role tendencies of the team members**.

Distance often contributes to intensifying the fantasies that we already tend to conjure up. The **feeling of loss of control** by team leaders can make them overact, creating among team members a habit of dependency on the members whose sense of autonomy weighs more heavily, or creating resentment and rebellion among those who are used to being granted a broad scope of discretion in their work and/or proposals, even leading them to leave the organisation.

When it comes to remote work, both managers and team members have to learn to operate in conditions that are different from those of the workplace setting. There must be shared willingness in order to successfully explore new conditions and take initiatives to clarify the task and decide how best to carry it out jointly, more efficiently and with the highest possible level of satisfaction.

Unless the task can be carried out independently, distance work is not a form of refuge for the self-sufficient, for those who prefer to avoid relations with others, or for those who require the constant support of workplace relations.

From the perspective of the task and its requirements, it is advisable for those who are leading the distance work to distinguish between the part of the task or project suitable for distance work and the part that is better suited to the workplace. **Each medium has its own characteristics, which condition the type of work and its result**. The medium may even transform the nature of the tasks and its associated process.

Distance work has its own characteristics. Accordingly, it requires greater awareness on the part of team leaders, through mental representations of the work system and its components. For this purpose, they can use various means and tools to keep active the image of the work group, its members and interactions.

As in all systems in which the mental/imaginative component carries greater weight than the material/physical component, the recognition of the psychic tendencies (Imago-affective representations) of the components and inclinations of distance work may be even more necessary than it is for work carried out in the workplace.

This consideration is especially valid for those who manage or lead teams operating at distance.

A mistake that is frequently made when shifting from workplace to distance work is to assume that the organisational structure, understood as a set of tasks and relations, will continue unchanged. **The conditions intrinsic to distance work, such as the separation of team members and those described in the foregoing sections, will transform interfaces, both in respect of the task itself and in terms of hierarchy or influence**.

Unless joint reflection through experience is intentionally factored in, the new way of functioning may lead either to fragmentation and a lack of coordination or to centralisation accompanied by vertical hierarchisation. This often occurs as an attempt to strike a balance or to avoid one of these scenarios.

The anxiety of managers and team members as a response to the uncertainty of a threatening environment or of an as-yet-unknown medium, may lead to the adoption of solutions which, a priori, afford a feeling of security, even if this entails simplifying complexity to the detriment of the demands of the task.

For example, it may occur that one wishes to design a more "horizontal" organisation, taking advantage of the shift to a type of distance work. The consequence of this may be the dissolution of intermediate hierarchies, and one may discover, too late, that the removal of a certain contribution has fragmented the organisation and created a great deal of confusion.

Likewise, some areas or departments may become predominant, due to having a greater capacity for interrelation, thus breaking the existing dynamics of interdepartmental relations, dragging the organisation in the direction marked by the perspective of the ensuing conflicts.

The confinement measures due to the Coronavirus pandemic have brought about another paradigmatic situation. Luuk von Middelnar describes some of the situations triggered by confinement in respect of European political leaders. One of the most important aspects has been the difficulty that European prime ministers have had in reaching agreements in the current conditions of separation. The distance factor has eroded both the trust generated by physical presence and time constraints. It has no longer been possible for them to be shut

together in a room, with nobody else, until reaching an agreement. In the current situation, separated from each other by thousands of kilometres, and with their advisers present, they have been sticking to their initial positions and have not felt such a pressing need to reach agreements.

Notwithstanding the current situation brought about by the pandemic, organisations have increasingly been incorporating distance work as a habitual setting in recent times. Many factors have contributed to this trend: technology and its accessibility, work-life balance, environmental considerations, etc.

Whatever the reasons, organisations would be well advised to prepare their members for this sort of work, especially those responsible for coordinating tasks and teams, in order for them to understand the special characteristics involved in this work system and the required capacities.

In fact, those who are responsible for predicting the future of organisation will be well aware that this medium – distance work – is very likely to end up transforming organisations, not only in terms of their structure but also in respect of the possibilities that may open up for their purposes and identity.

Note: If you wish to develop your capacities and those of your team, please click on this link:
[GESTIONAR TRABAJO A DISTANCIA (equipos y sus referentes)](#)