

Evaluation of Professional Burnout in Teleworking: Pandemic Period

Sanaa Malki, Omar El Amili, Saloua Lgachgach
Faculty of Legal, Economic and Social Sciences of Agadir, Morocco

Abstract: The Covid 19 crisis has forced all organizations to adopt new management and working methods, the most widespread being teleworking. The objective of this research is to assess the state of professional burnout of teleworkers during a pandemic. It therefore seems wise to define the two key concepts of our study: professional burnout and teleworking. The literature allowed us to define professional burnout and determine its factors according to reference theoretical models. These mainly include organizational factors like job demands, emotional demands, lack of autonomy and socio-economic insecurity. We then presented teleworking and its multiple forms. During the pandemic, the latter was permanent and imposed, generating negative effects which were none other than the factors leading to professional burnout.

Keywords: Professional burnout, teleworking, pandemic, issues.

1. Introduction

In 2020, the global economy and the world of work were disrupted to unprecedented proportions by the appearance of Covid19. There is no doubt that we are currently experiencing the most unexpected work paradigm of this generation. This abrupt change in the world as we know it has committed governments to making draconian decisions to save lives. How to protect the lives and health of individuals while preserving the economy from irreversible damage was their dilemma.

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the novel coronavirus outbreak a pandemic on March 11; it prompted governments around the world to adopt a number of drastic measures, to prepare for the first wave of health emergencies (WHO, 2020a). When lockdown restrictions came into force, many workers had to work from home, paving the way for the largest experiment in teleworking to date, an experience special in its mandatory aspect. Although teleworking is normally implemented occasionally, the current context has forced workers to adopt this full-time alternative in order to prevent the spread of the virus.

Teleworking is therefore one of the practices that has sparked a lot of discussion after the covid-19 health crisis. It undoubtedly brings benefits to employers and employees, but this new way of working brings with it some implementation challenges and difficulties. Teleworking, like any innovation in a work organization, brings opportunities, but also risks and abuses (Vendramin, 2005). Among these risks, we cite professional burnout which is also at the heart of the debate on psychological health at work in recent years. In fact, the restrictive implementation of teleworking during a period of confinement has caused overwhelming professional stress for workers.

This paper aims to analyze the challenges of the implementation of teleworking forced by the crisis due to covid 19 on the state of professional burnout of employees. For this, our objective is to provide elements of answers to the following problem:

What are the challenges of implementing teleworking on the state of professional burnout during a pandemic?

To answer this question and better understand this study, we first begin with a literature review on the phenomenon of professional burnout and these factors. Then, we present the conceptual framework of teleworking and finally detail these issues.

2. History and Definition of Burnout

There are several definitions of burnout in the literature. This plurality of definitions reflects not only the difficulty in defining this concept but also its importance in psychological health literature and its evolution over the years. However, some authors have developed definitions that have been cited several times, making them references.

The work of Perlman and Hartmann (1981) contains a list of 48 definitions of professional burnout. After a content analysis and a synthesis of all these different definitions, the two authors describe burnout as “a response to chronic emotional stress with three dimensions, emotional or physical exhaustion, reduced productivity, and over-depersonalization” (Perlman and Hartmann, 1981).

As for Freudenberger, having noticed burnout in himself, first interpreted this concept as the state of a candle which, after having lit for long hours, only offers an obsolete flame (Freudenberger, 1974). He subsequently defined it, with Richelson, as "a state of chronic fatigue, depression, and frustration brought on by devotion to a cause, way of life, or relationship, which fails to produce expected rewards and leads to ultimately reduce work engagement and accomplishment" (Freudenberger et al., 1980). In 1987, this author published a second, more precise and summarized definition of professional burnout presenting it as "the exhaustion of one's physical and mental resources as well as the exhaustion of one's vitality, energy and functioning capacities" (Freudenberger, 1987). Many authors have taken up this definition such as Barbeau (2001), Gervais (1991), Neboit and Vezina (2002).

From another perspective, Maslach & Jackson (1981) explored the underlying dimensions of burnout with a sample of 1,025 people and a measurement instrument of 25 items. Following their analysis, they define burnout as a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and low personal accomplishment. On the other hand, Pines and Aronson (1988) describe this phenomenon as the result of emotional tension caused by relationships with difficult situations leading to physical, emotional and mental exhaustion.

Still with the aim of defining professional burnout, Farber (2000b) distinguishes several forms of professional burnout, and believes that the oldest form of influence on individuals is the contradiction between the need to achieve certain objectives and an environment unfavorable work experience. Today, this form is obsolete because individuals are immersed in an environment which offers a diversity of references. As a result, he identified three forms of burnout. The first is to consider burnout as "exhaustion". In this form, despite much effort, individuals are still treated unfairly at work. The second so-called "classic" form shows that the individual is exhausted following the great efforts he makes to achieve self-realization hoping to reduce the pain caused by stress. The last form seems to be the opposite of the first two, burnout is rather generated by monotony and lack of stimulation and motivation at work.

Like Freudenberger, certain authors have constructed their own definition of burnout based on their professional experience. We can cite Edelwich and Brodsky (1980) who describe professional burnout as a progressive decline in energy and idealism. Also, Garneau and Larivey speak of a psychological crisis in professional life, while Languirand (2002) defines it as "a form of unease which arises in part from interaction with a physical and psychosocial environment that is too demanding in terms of adaptation, which can lead to a relative disintegration of the individual" (p.54).

More recently, Truchot (2004) addresses this concept with the term "professional depression". He believes that burnout is a manifestation of work stress caused by quantitative and qualitative overload.

These different definitions are classified according to whether they consider burnout as a state or a process. The first approach, burnout is a state, refers to the sick individual while the second refers to the gradual establishment of this phenomenon.

The progression of research on professional burnout is also marked by the appearance of several theoretical models. These models highlight the different factors of burnout. Among them, we cite Karasek's demands-resources model which has had great success in the field of psychological health at work (Truchot, 2004). It is a two-dimensional model that integrates two aspects of occupational stress: psychological demands and decision latitude. The first aspect refers to physical and psychological demands at work such as workload, time pressures and role conflicts while the second refers to the need for control and autonomy (Karasek, 1979).

According to this model, psychological demands are considered a source of psychological tension. However, the autonomy and control that an individual can have over their work helps to alleviate this tension. In other words, a work situation characterized by high psychological demand and low decision-making latitude exposes the individual to a risk of stress which generates mental health problems in the long term.

The demands-control model is subsequently incremented by another social dimension to become the demands-control-support model (Johnson & Hall, 1988). It refers to emotional support and social interaction from colleagues or superiors. This model also distinguishes two hypotheses: insulation-voltage and buffer. The first postulates that high work demands, low control and low support can weaken the worker's health. While the second assumes that control and support are moderating factors in the effects of work demands on workers' mental health.

More recently, Siegrist (1996) conceptualized a model that adapts to the transformations experienced by the world of work. It assumes that the imbalance between efforts and rewards is responsible for stressful situations at work. Indeed, a high level of effort combined with a low level of reward is likely to cause stress at work and negatively impact the health of workers. This postulate agrees with that of Richelson and Freudenberger (1980) cited above.

Hobfoll's (1993) theory of conservation of resources also captured our attention. This motivational approach focuses on the resources available to individuals in order to achieve their goals. According to Hobfoll (1993), job demands and demands generally lead to resource depletion (Hobfoll & Shirom, 1993). Thus, the

progressive devaluation of these resources leads to burnout. The individual also suffers from burnout when his resources are threatened (job insecurity, lack of reward, job loss, etc.).

Thus, several factors of burnout arise from these theories and definitions. They are summarized as increased physical and psychological demands at work, low social support, low autonomy and use of skills, low rewards, in security at work.

3. Teleworking during a Pandemic: What is Teleworking?

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted working methods for more than a year. Containment measures put in place to fight the pandemic have forced millions of people to stay at home and forced company officials to react quickly in such unprecedented circumstances. Organizations then resigned themselves to the only means at their disposal to maintain their activities: teleworking.

This concept appeared in 1950 in America by Norbert Wiener. This mathematician describes the experience of an architect supervising the construction of a building remotely using data transmissions. However, it was only in the 1970s that teleworking made its appearance in the business world but it did not have the expected success (Valenduc and Vendramin, 1997). This is due firstly to the high cost of information and communication technologies, then to the need to change management practices and still ensure information security.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the Institute of Audiovisual and Telecommunications in Europe (IDATE) proposed a broad definition of teleworking: “work carried out by a delocalized entity (person or group), that is to say separated from its establishment, and whose activity requires the intensive use of telecommunications means” (Alexandre Largier, 2001, p. 201). In other words, teleworking refers to activities carried out totally or partially outside the company's premises using ICT.

Furthermore, the French Labor Code defines teleworking by law in article 1222-9 “any form of work organization in which work which could also have been carried out on the employer's premises is carried out by an employee outside these premises, voluntarily, using information and communication technologies” (French Labor Code, 2017). These definitions highlight two main characteristics of teleworking: distance and the use of ICT.

There are several forms of teleworking reflecting the polymorphous nature of this concept. ANACT distinguishes four main forms:

- Regular telecommuting refers to working from home full-time.
- Occasional teleworking involves working at home and on company premises alternately
- Mobile teleworking concerns work outside the company premises and home exceeding 10 hours per week and including business travel.
- Teleworking in infrastructures specific to teleworking such as telecenters, temporary offices and coworking spaces.

That said, teleworking differs from one company to another depending on the type of activity, implementation methods, etc. Only in times of pandemic, this work alternative is rather permanent and imposed on workers. It then emerges from this professional experience that this practice can bring as many advantages as disadvantages. Indeed, teleworking can be a source of several risks impacting the mental health of employees.

4. Issues of Teleworking on the State of Professional Burnout during the Health Crisis

The specific objective of our study is to analyze the deployment of teleworking in a context of the covid 19 health crisis which emerges from the normal context. Indeed, teleworking has long been portrayed as a source of several advantages for workers: restricting travel and therefore reducing fatigue, saving time, being able to concentrate, etc. Unlike this current context where teleworking is “a way of fighting illness, by limiting physical contact between workers in the same organization” (Quoistiaux, 2020).

As for the negative effects of teleworking, they are certainly similar to those identified in the literature but these issues are accentuated by confinement, which has forced all families, including children, to be confined to their homes due to the closure of schools. and nurseries. This circumstance had a significant impact on the implementation and execution of work from home.

Several studies show that teleworking seems to be linked to workers' exposure to PSR (DARES, March 2016). Employers are more likely to use teleworking in the event of unpredictable schedules, excessive workload, conflicts with colleagues or management. On the other hand, physical distancing and the detachment of the employee from their professional environment which normally allows formal and informal exchanges lead to a loss of team spirit and also to social isolation (Thomsin and Tremblay, 2008). Thus, this lack of social support and exchanges leads to the feeling of being less involved in the organization. This isolation also risks deteriorating communication with colleagues and supervisors (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007).

Another major issue with teleworking is despatialization (Taskin , 2006). Moreover, exhaustion represents a main danger of this issue. Indeed, teleworkers tend to overinvest in their work, which increases the workload and causes time lag. The time saving, cited above as an advantage, is in reality converted into work and can lead to excess work.

Seen from another angle, Vayre explains that the teleworker can face “internalized guilt”. This feeling generates pressure forcing the employee to work without limits in order to demonstrate that they are truly invested in their work, even if they are outside the company premises. This guilt finds its origin in the notion of presenteeism and the lack of confidence generating excessive control which can increase the mental load and stress of the teleworker (Vendramin&Valenduc , 2002).

We can now summarize the different challenges of teleworking during a pandemic:

- Source of stress and fatigue
- Overload at work
- Asynchronous remote communication, less rich, more ambiguous
- Decrease in the quality of social interactions
- Isolation of the worker and lack of social support
- Deterioration of working conditions
- Dangers of presenteeism
- Fear of job loss

These issues are none other than factors of professional burnout raised by several theoretical models. It goes without saying that teleworking is a factor which has accentuated the state of professional burnout during this period of health crisis.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this work is to assess the state of professional burnout in teleworking during the pandemic period and to identify the different issues of this work practice.

Firstly, the literature review made it possible to define professional burnout. Historical writings on this concept reveal a wide variety of definitions and a broad conceptual framework. Moreover, the work of Perlman and Hartmann (1981) contains a list of 48 definitions of professional burnout. After a content analysis and a synthesis of all these different definitions, the two authors describe burnout as “a response to chronic emotional stress with three dimensions, emotional or physical exhaustion, reduced productivity, and depersonalization” (Perlman & Hartmann, 1981). Furthermore, we have raised a plurality of factors according to different theories. These are high psychological demands and low autonomy at work and low social support, the combination of high effort and low rewards and then a progressive loss of resources.

The second key concept of our study is teleworking, a practice little used before the appearance of the Coronavirus. Teleworking is in fact a new mode of operation, very important for organizations, especially in the era of pandemic which imposes a particular form and working conditions. This involves carrying out activities completely outside the company's premises using ICT in order to avoid the spread of the virus. This obligatory and brutal aspect has brought into play new challenges and risks impacting the psychological health of workers. We can then cite as negative effects of teleworking work overload, physical distancing, lack of social support, isolation and presenteeism. These issues actually represent the organizational factors of burnout.

However, the practice of teleworking can bring certain advantages for the employee and the company. In order to preserve these advantages and limit the risks of teleworking, this new method requires appropriate preparation and support. By having identified the challenges of teleworking, this work opens the way to other perspectives to propose recommendations with the aim of reducing and preventing risks during the deployment of teleworking.

References

- [1] EDELWICH J., BRODSKY A. (1980). *Burn-out: Stages of Disillusionment in the Helping Profession*, New York, Human Sciences Press, 255p.
- [2] Freudenberger, H. J. (1974). *Staff burnout*. Journal of Social Issues, 30(1), 159-165.
- [3] Freudenberger, H. J., & Richelson, G. (1980). *Burnout: The High Cost of High Achievement*. New York: Double Day Garden City.
- [4] Freudenberger, H. J. (1987). *Professional burnout: the internal burn*. Boucherville : Gaétan Morin.
- [5] Gajendran RS, Harrison DA (2007), The good, the bad, and the unknown about telecommuting: Meta-analysis of psychological mediators and individual consequences, Journal of Applied Psychology, Vol. 92.

- [6] Hobfoll, S.E., & Freedy, J. (1993). Conservation of resources: A general stress theory applied to burnout. In WB, Schaufeli, C., Maslach, & T., Marek (Eds), Professional burnout: Recent developments in theory and research. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.
- [7] Hobfoll, SE, & Lilly, RS (1993). Resource conservation as a strategy for community psychology. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 21, 128-148.
- [8] Johnson JV and Hall EM (1988). Job strain, work place social support, and cardiovascular disease: A cross-sectional study of a random sample of the Swedish working population. *American journal of public health*, 78(10), 1336-1342.
- [9] Maslach. C., & Jackson. SE (1981a). The measurement of experienced bumout . *Journal of Occupational Behavior*, 2, 99-113.
- [10] MALKI, S. and EL AMILI, O. 2021. Exploratory study on professional burnout among teleoperators. *International Journal of Management Sciences*. 4, 2 (May 2021).
- [11] PERLMAN B., HARTMAN E., (1981). "Burnout, Summary and future research", National Inst. of Mental Health (DHEW), Rockville, Md.: Wisconsin Univ, Oshkosh. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (51st, Denver, CO, April 29-May 2, 1981), 45p.
- [12] Quoistiaux, G. (2020). Teleworking, the miracle solution? Retrieved from Trends trend: <https://Trends.levif.be/economy>
- [13] SIEGRIST J. (1996). "Adverse health effects of high-effort/low-reward conditions", *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 1, 27-41.
- [14] TRUCHOT D. (2004) Professional exhaustion and Burnout: Concepts, models, interventions , Dunod , 265p.
- [15] Thomsin , L., Trembley, DG., (2008), "Exploring the diversity of mobile working: a detailed examination on the sequences of workplaces and job satisfaction." *Journal of eWorking* 2
- [16] Taskin , L. (2006), Teleworking in lack of regulation, Regards Économiques IRESUCL, Number 37
- [17] Vendramin , P. and Valenduc , G. (2002) Technologies and flexibility, Paris, Liaisons, coll.