
How people view telework depends on factors beyond the organisation

*Employees' interpretations of telework can be contradictory, with some observing it as an incentive and a sign of organisational support and others seeing it as a threat to their jobs and career prospects. Managers' decision to keep telework as a standard practice or to drop it sends different signals for employees to interpret depending on their particular context. **Almudena Cañibano** and **Argyro Avgoustaki** write that factors beyond the organisation, such as labour market conditions, play a key role in employees' interpretation of telework as a potential threat.*

Telework is generally seen as a perk for employees because it can, for example, enable [more autonomy](#), allow people to better [balance work and family life](#) and reduce commuting time. However, not all employees agree on this rosy understanding, which often [depends on the type of work](#) they perform. In [our recent publication](#), we show that employees' interpretations of telework can be contradictory, with some observing telework as an incentive and a sign of organisational support and others seeing it as a threat to their jobs and career prospects.

To telework or not to telework

Does the macro context matter?



Illustration by

This may come as a shock for many organisations who often implement telework to show support to their employees and satisfy their demands. Indeed, after the Covid-19 pandemic, this type of work arrangement seems to have become a “must have” to attract young talent in high demand. So, why may certain employees interpret the practice as a risk rather than a perk? Our research suggests that, to answer this question, we need to look beyond the organisation, understand the context in which the practice is implemented and look for the existence of what we call *external fit*: there needs to be alignment between the signals that organisations send to employees through their HR practices and their external environment.

Analysing interviews about telework that took place during the financial crisis of 2008, we found that the macro-level environment plays a key role in employees interpreting telework as a potential threat. The crisis was a repeated and unprompted discussion topic, with workers describing telework as embedded in “*these times*”, “*this environment*”, or “*this awful context*”. Because of the uncertain context, instead of seeing telework as a sign of their firm’s support, many described it as an unnecessary risk which would make them less visible to their managers and colleagues, potentially endangering their careers and jobs. In general, those employees who saw telework as a perk asked to participate in the programme and were teleworking. On the contrary, those who saw telework as a threat either rejected the practice – they did not telework at all – or did so only occasionally to ensure they were visible in the office.

This is an important finding for HR practitioners because it underlines that the meaning of HR practices, such as telework, is not predetermined, but continually configured socially, considering events that go beyond the firm’s boundaries. The same HR practice may be interpreted very differently in different contexts. For example, in a highly dynamic labour market, in which companies rival for talent, providing learning opportunities or attractive reward packages is likely to be interpreted less as a sign of organisational support than it would in a slow market in which employees have less chances of finding an alternative job. Offering private healthcare to workers in contexts with strong institutionalised and protective welfare systems may be seen as more supportive than providing healthcare where workers would not be covered otherwise. Regulations or labour market conditions are all important contextual elements that may shift people’s understandings of HR practices. Yet such macro-level factors are rarely analysed in depth by HR management teams when designing new policies.

Going back to telework, workers’ understanding of the practice before the pandemic, in April 2020, and nowadays are likely very different. While prior to Covid-19, telework may have been seen by many as a sign of support for employee well-being, at the beginning of the pandemic that understanding generally faded. The restrictions imposed by governments made it so that, in many places, there was no other option for work to continue. Teleworking became a practice of survival rather than an incentive for employees. Nowadays, as restrictions disappear, organisations can make the choice to keep telework as a standard practice or to drop it. This decision will send different signals for employees to interpret depending on their particular context (including their country’s legal framework and historic background, the strength of unions and labour institutions, their industry’s competitive dynamics, etc.).

So what can managers do? Our work suggests the need to strive for *external fit*, which we define as the ‘alignment between the signals that organisations send to employees through their HR practices and their external environment’. Good external fit means that the messages that HR practices send are in line and consistent with the messages embedded in the organisation’s environment.

While HR practitioners and managers can manage the signals they send, they are not in control of the environment. Therefore, they are not able to determine how such signals are interpreted. To achieve *external fit*, in designing their practices, firms need to thoroughly analyse their environment over time because an interpretation emerging under conditions of economic growth or stability may be distinct to one emerging in times of crisis. Given the current context of rapid change and recurrent turbulence, a practice that takes months or even years to be designed, implemented, and disseminated, may unfold in a context that is substantially different to the one in which it was conceived. In this sense, HR must be attentive enough to observe emerging understandings and react to them accordingly. Our ongoing research on how organisations are “[reinventing work](#)” and how evolving practices affect workers’ experiences, strives to provide further guidance for managers and HR practitioners on these challenging issues.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [To telework or not to telework: Does the macro context matter? A signalling theory analysis of employee interpretations of telework in times of turbulence](#), *Human Resource Management Journal*.

- *The post represents the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.*
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