

Psychosocial Risks and Telework – A Reflection about the Pandemic from the Point of View of an Occupational Physician

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Abstract

We have recently experienced the pandemic of the 21st century. It happened so fast that there was no time to plan the telework that, for many of us, was mandatory. This situation reminded us of the importance of health at work and the fight against psychosocial risks such as stress or burnout.

Keywords: Telework; Psychosocial risk; Pandemic; Stress; Burnout; Sars-Cov-2

Introduction

Work is a fundamental axis of the societies, through which the individual can experience situations that are sometimes rewarding, frustrating, determined by their social situation and their own reality. Etymologically, work comes from the Latin word *tripaliare*, which means to torture. It is curious to observe that this term comes from a tormenting concept – physical work was seen with contempt but work as we know it nowadays did not exist in the past. Nowadays, work can be considered a source of identity, a form of social relationship, an opportunity or need, a liberating or fulfilling factor, impacting on the development of personalities and a source of psychosocial risks.

Discussion

According to the ILO, psychosocial risks are “the set of factors that can affect the physical and mental integrity of people” at work and gives examples of overtime, mental and physical work overload, monotony, lack of empowerment, burnout, harassment morality and violence, job insecurity, stress, among others. Exposure to these risks can lead to accidents at work, absenteeism, illnesses such as anxiety or depression, deterioration of the social environment at work, decreased productivity and quality of work, etc. Among the psychosocial risks with the greatest impact on the physical and mental health of workers, those related to work tasks, work organization and the structure of the company stand out. All of them can occur in the context of telework.

Telecommuting is a work organization mode characterized by the distant position of the worker in relation to the company's headquarters, which requires the use of new information and communication technologies to carry out work tasks.

This opinion text focuses on the psychosocial consequences of

teleworking but it is important to mention that there are many advantages: we believe that we anticipated the history of teleworking in Portugal several years and the ability to trust workers who work from home, despite being imposed, it is now a reality in many companies.

Returning to the central theme, the limitations of teleworking in the context of a pandemic are real and many of them can lead to the development of pathologies so Physicians are fundamental. They must ask workers about dealing with telecommuting; also gives fundamental psychosocial, stress and mental health management advice, such as planning work with more or less fixed hours (including mealtimes, leisure and physical exercise in that plan); not having overly ambitious goals; avoid over information that often leads to feelings of fear and anxiety; maintain social contact, even using new technologies, to avoid isolation; ask for professional help if needed.

Work can give stability, satisfaction and personal and professional growth, however, when conditions are not adequate, it can become something that jeopardizes satisfaction and can cause discomfort or illness. We believe there are three key elements that influence a teleworker's level of psychosocial risk exposure:

- cognitive demand: new tasks, technologies or ways of working. If there is no transition or training phase, the worker may be exposed to greater cognitive effort, which in turn may increase the level of exposure to psychosocial risk;
- control over working hours, which can be something positive or negative. Some workers need more or less rigid schedules to feel oriented, but in the context of telework it can be an exhausting challenge for others. This aspect is related to the balance between personal and professional life, which for many was an obstacle;

- social relationships at work and teamwork that had to become non-face-to-face. Challenges? The difficulty in maintaining bonds and in a broader sense, the possibility of lack of interest in personal care, changes in eating habits, circadian cycles, increased consumption of tobacco or coffee, among others.

Finally, for some, the possibility of working from home made it possible to face work in a pleasant way and to have family moments that were previously impossible. For others, these were challenging times as they need direct contact and interpersonal interactions to feel fulfilled at work. An article, published in *The Economist* (April 3, 2021) states that unemployment harms mental health leading to depression, anxiety and reduced self-esteem and publishes a study by the Center for Business Research at Cambridge University that questions about how much we need to work to be happy. They studied the impact of the pandemic on reducing the hours worked in a week and came to the conclusion that mental health does not get worse and the most interesting thing was the conclusion they reached - the limit was only one day. It would be enough to work one day a week for mental health not to deteriorate. In contrast, they publish a survey that a financial analyst from Goldman Sachs made to his colleagues who work an average of 98 hours a week and sleep 5 hours a night. All mentioned a decrease in mental and physical health. Of course, economies don't prosper with a day's work, but we should take advantage of what the pandemic has given us to rethink the concept of (tele)work.

Conclusion

Telework can be experienced in a different way and if for some it represented a positive change in the concept of work, for many others it represented imbalance and labor discomfort. The psychosocial risk exists in telework given the special char-

acteristics of this type of work and must be evaluated by the Occupational Physician in the context of a health examination. The individual's socialization process is affected by the lack of direct contact and therefore it is practically impossible for the worker not to feel, at some point, isolation and loneliness. The balance between personal and work life is quite subjective and depends a lot on external and internal factors that vary from person to person and therefore it is wrong to think that telecommuting is, in all cases, synonymous with personal and professional balance. So, teleworking has its own risks that must be taken into account, as they can have consequences on the worker's health in aspects such as physical activity, eating habits, isolation and adaptation to new technologies.

Author Contributions

Maria José Costa de Almeida: Guarantor; selection of the theme, research and references review, writing

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