

Perceptions on Telework in Colombia

Cecilia Delgado Wiesner – Jairo Jiménez Villamizar

Faculty of Human and Social Sciences - Research Center on Social Dynamics CIDS,
University Externado of Colombia

ABSTRACT

Teleworking in Colombia is one recent form of work and still unknown to many of the members involved in the production process. For this reason, it was considered necessary an exploratory research about knowledge and perceptions held and its potential implementation. The study focuses on a socio-cultural perspective and refers only to the perception of corporate teleworking, when this is done from home. The findings show a positive perception towards this new mode of alternative work arrangement, though, no considered the feasibility of performing all the tasks using this modality, social interaction and sociability problems are some of the concerns raised by the survey group. The functional concept of teleworking is most often associated with values that technological and organizational skills and mobility is not considered as a determining factor for the adoption of telework.

Keywords: Labor flexibility, socio-cultural context, home teleworking, computing, teleworking, social perception, mobility, new work relationships

1. INTRODUCTION

Although this model has several decades of work performance in European, North America and some Latin American countries, it is rather unknown in Colombia. However, in recent years the national government, through various agencies and ministriesⁱ has expressed an interest in promoting this type of work, with the understanding that it is a job option for people with disabilities and / or to generate employment, specifically in Contact and Call Centers, which are associated with teleworkingⁱⁱ.

It was considered important, to explore the knowledge and perceptions held about this type of work organization and the possibility of its implementation and to be analyzed within the socio-cultural context of the country, undoubtedly the labor options and innovations to be taken are mediated by the environment in which participants both employees and employers came from, and it became a very important influence in the process of adoption or rejection of this practice.

It is important to mention that in our review of the literature, no studies dealing with perceptions about telework were found. The vast majority of studies analyses the experience of those already teleworking, and their impact at personal, familiar, and social levels, among others (Baruch, 2001) (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). In the present study, the interpretive emphasis focused towards existing perceptions about this innovative form of work, viewed as a permanently full-time practice to differentiate it from occasionally jobs (freelance, sporadic contracts), they have been appearing concomitantly with the technology boom, and the emergence of models of labor flexibility. As well as, perceptions are formed according to the culture of origin, social group embedded in society, as well as personal characteristics such as age, marital status, profession and components of psychological type and personalityⁱⁱⁱ.

This study was designed with the purpose of exploring the knowledge, perceptions and practices on telework and it is articulated to a broader research, "Current status and trends of telework in Colombia."

The lack of statistical information on companies and / or people teleworking, as well as of relevant literature that reflects the problematic of this phenomenon in Colombia, with the exception of a few studies, with specific populations as a target, such as the one developed by Cetelco (Teleworking and tele-information center of Colombia) on disabled people, several undergraduate thesis dealing with legal aspects and a study on the impact of teleworking in family life of employees of banks in Colombia (López Jiménez, Fondevila Gascon, & Saiz, 2010). The ambiguity of the concept itself has led to confusion and mostly of the time it is assimilated exclusively with independent consultancy work and other activities conducted from home, and even though, it becomes more complex when tries to identify companies and organizations which practice it.

The first phase of this study only takes into account the perceptions of one of the social actors (employees) and his opinions about another social actor (company)^{iv} However, we must be aware of the importance of other actors involved in the implementation and adoption process of telework, which would be analyzed within the main research.

2. METHODOLOGY

The absence of first hand information on companies using telework and teleworkers, has led to explore another sampling technique, by an indirectly way, whether through personal information, social networking, or as in this study where the decision was to survey students attending the Specialization in "Management on human development and corporative social welfare", of the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences of the University Externado of Colombia^v, in order to explore the knowledge, practices, and feasibility of implementation and adoption of telework at individual and corporative levels.

It was used a non-probability sampling, and the selected method was by convenience of the participants. This sample was chosen because, they are linked through their work in various organizations and companies, allowing them to know if there is any practice or any type of activities on teleworking and also if they perceive the possibility of its adoption in those places not using it. Furthermore, to know to what extent the participants are familiar with the subject matter, their perceptions and possible acceptance and adoption at personal level.

As it was unknown the existing degree of familiarity with the concept of telework, it was given the following definition: "Organizational work arrangement and / or job performance using telecommunications or computer based technology, as part of a contract or labor relationship, jobs which also may have been done at the site of the firm, but it is relocated away the conventional workplace". According to this definition, the interest of this study focuses on corporate telecommuters, whose workplace is home^{vi}.

We designed a questionnaire with 31 questions, which covers several areas of interest: A-Personal background, B-Employment Information, C-Identification of the company, D-Mobility, and E-Perceptions on telework.

It was considered important to include the category of mobility, understood as the movement from the place of residence to the work site, means of transport used, time and cost of such movements. In our literature review, mobility has been identified as one of the strongest reasons to adopt telework in several countries of Europe and the United States. It has also been a topic of study for measuring pollution levels in urban cities, and how telework may contribute to its reduction and improvement of the environment^{vii}.

Finally, questions about knowledge on telework, its application in various professions and specific tasks, perceptions about their benefits and disadvantages and finally whether participants would be willing to undertake

teleworking activities at home. Within this same approach, questions about the status of telework at the companies where they are enrolled, possibilities of implementing it, and the perception about possible advantages and disadvantages^{viii}. Open questions were used, in order to dig into the responses directly related to the perception on telework, and also to share the findings with the group to complement some of the answers. The participants were 65 students from a total of 76 (85.5%). An SPSS 18 program was used.

3. RESULTS

A characterization of the participants and the companies where they work were made, based upon the highest value in each question.

3.1. Profile of participant

Female 86% (Figure 1), 36% in the range 26 and 30 years old (Figure 2), 72% are single (Figure 3), and all of them have university education (Psychologists, Administrators, Social workers). Professional and middle range positions 56% (Figure 4), 86% full-time dedication, 32.8% had less than a year at the current work (Figure 5) and with a monthly salary from 1 to less than 2 million pesos 51.6% (Figure 6)^{ix}.

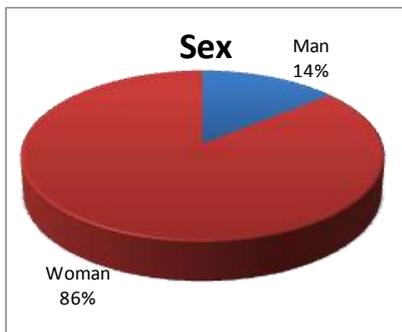


Figure 1. Gender of participants

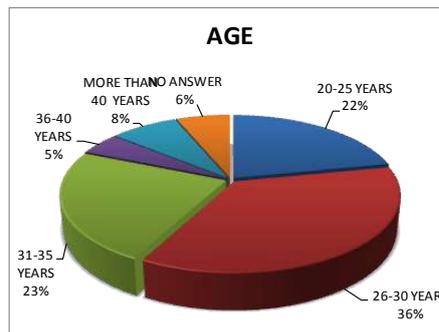


Figure 2. Edad de los encuestados

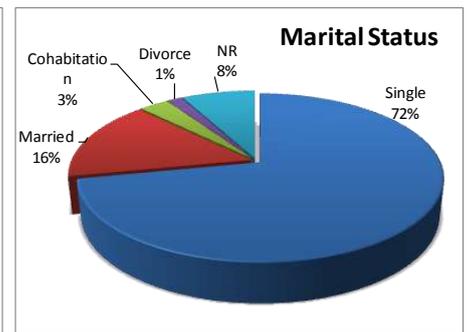


Figure 3. Estado civil de los encuestados

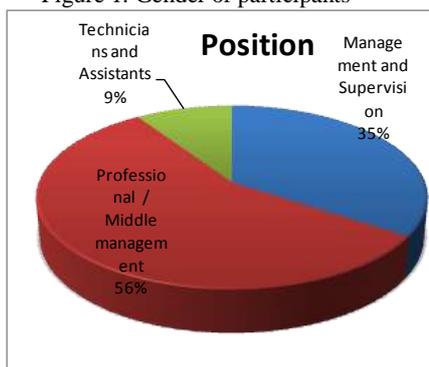


Figure 4. Job Position

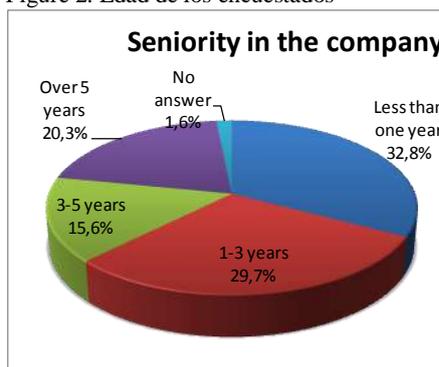


Figure 5. Age of the company



Figure 6. Monthly wages of participants

3.2. Company Profile:

It is important to mention the variety of economic sectors where the participants are enrolled which provide a representative picture of the companies in the country. They provide public and social services 19%, education 16%,

sales 14% and health 13%, 69% are classified as large companies, with more than 200 employees, 17% medium size, 11 % to small and microenterprise 3% (Figure 7)^x. 50% operates at national level, and 17% have international coverage, such as, multinational telecommunications, gas and fast food, to name a few - (Figure 8).

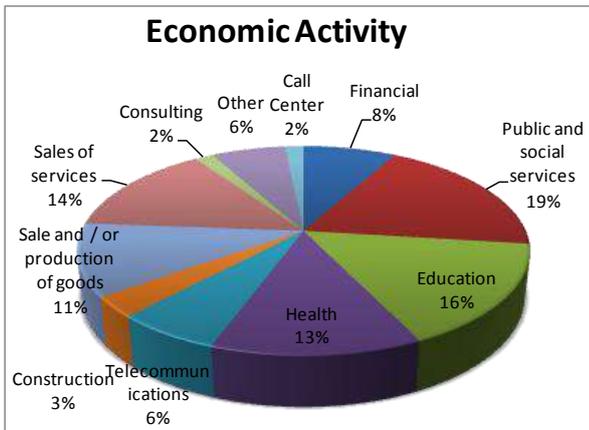


Figure 7. Economic Activity of the company

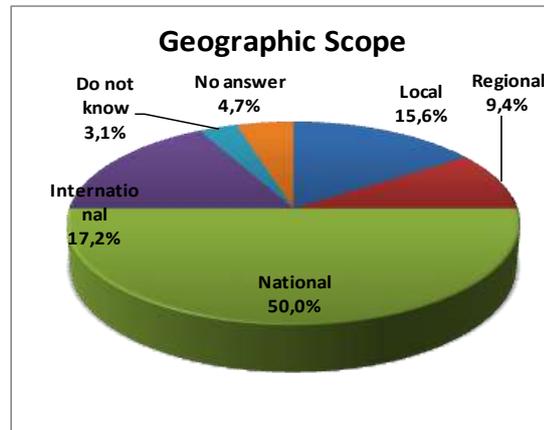


Figure 8 geographical scope of the company

3.3. Mobility

The displacements range from less than 15 minutes (17.2%) and more than 120 minutes (1.6%) for each trip. The highest concentration (45.3%) is among 31 and 60 minutes, which means expending between one and two hours a day from their homes to workplace and vice versa, it does not includes waiting time - at bus stops, parking sites etc. - (Figure 9)^{xi}, public transportation is mostly use 74%, 26.0% by private car. Monthly costs range from \$ 11,000 to \$20,000 26% , 17% between \$ 21,000 and \$ 30,000, and 14% over \$ 60.000. Mobility costs reported are not very high, although it is unclear whether car owners included in their answers, the costs related to vehicle-fuel, taxes, parking, insurance, etc. - (Figure 10).

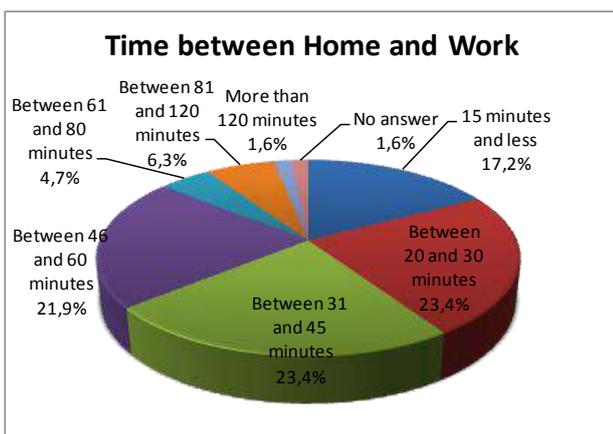


Figure 9. Time spent between home and workplace

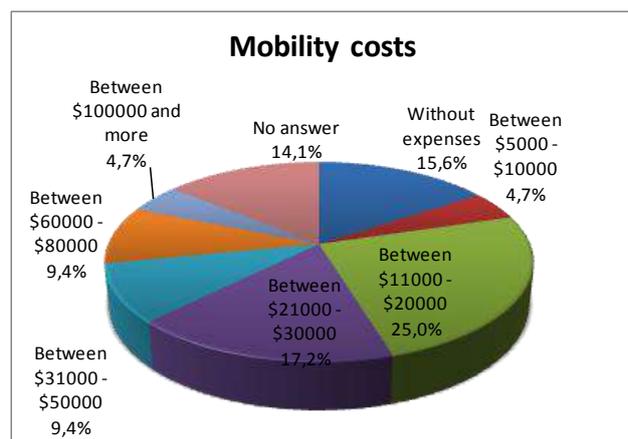


Figure 10. Mobility expenses

3.4. Telework Perception

When the question about the actual possibility of teleworking is raised, taking into account the present type of work, 51% believed that it could be fit only occasionally, and 1.8% on a permanent basis, which presents a favorable position of employees, to telework at least some of their activities. Taking into account current activities 52.7% of women and 44.4% of men answered they could do it occasionally, 1.8% of women could do it permanently and the rest do not consider it feasible (Figure 11). According to the job position, 16.7% technicians and assistants say they could permanently telecommuting and 50% occasionally, managers / supervisors and professionals / managers, occasionally a 54.5% and 50% respectively (Figure 12).

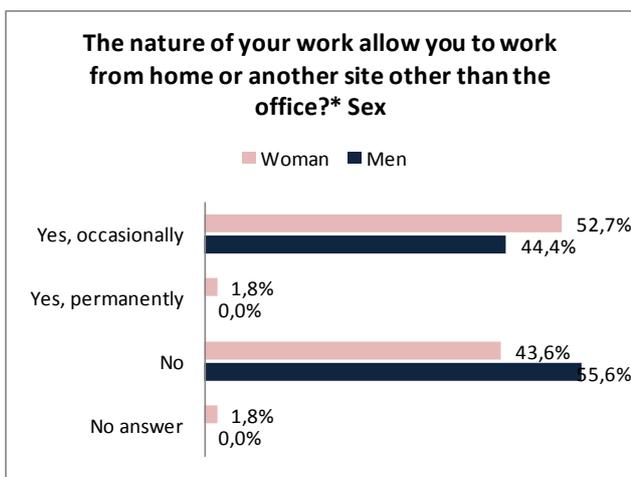


Figure 11. Possibility of teleworking according to the nature of labor by sex of participants

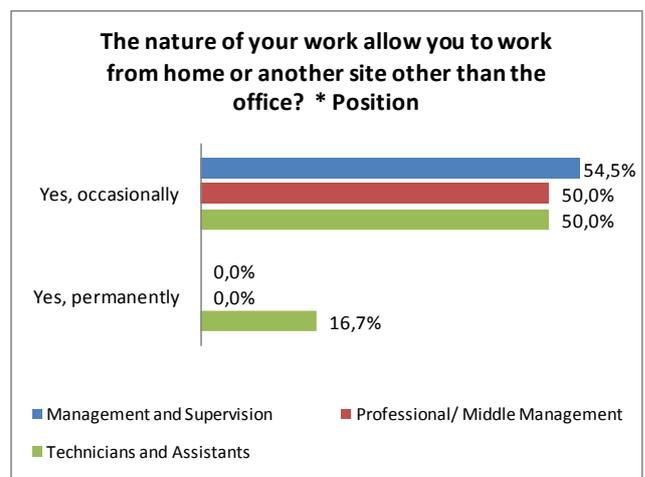


Figure 12. Possibility of teleworking according to the nature of labor by Job Position of participants

We may infer that there is not any position against telework, but rather an assessment of the inability to perform some daily tasks without being physically at the workplace. When the question does not refer to their current activities and it is formulated in a broader sense, a more positive attitude is shown in the sense, “if I have the chance, I would do it” (73%). The perceived potential personal benefits: the more attractive advantage is flexibility schedule, in the sense of a better distribution of activities in order to attend family, social and personal needs, a better quality of life (26.6%), money saving (16.9%), more time to spend with the family (13.6%), avoid time of traveling (10.4%), strengthening autonomy, responsibility and discipline (7.8%), and better organization of work (5.8%) (Figure 13). On the other hand, perceived disadvantages: problems of psycho-social nature (46.5%) as a result of losses of relationships and social contacts, and some difficulties to perform some tasks (17.9%), some administrative problems and implementation of work (13.4%) (Figure 14).

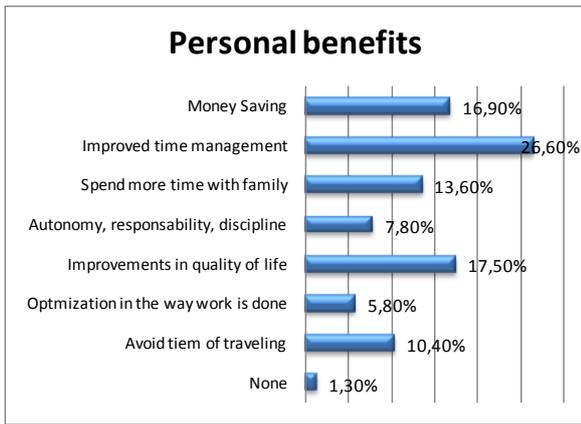


Figure 13. Personal benefits in front of the possibility of teleworking perceived by participants

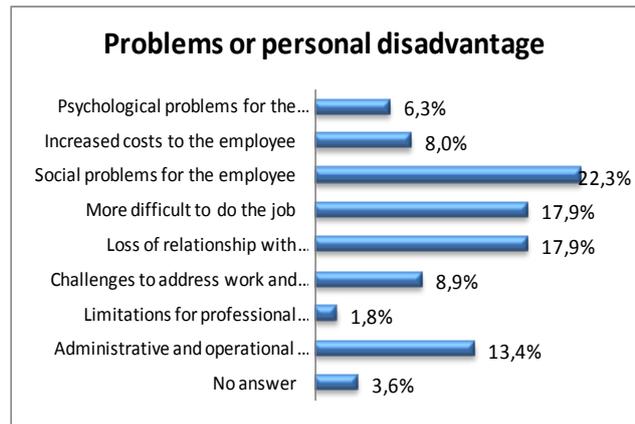


Figure 14. Personal disadvantages in front of the possibility of teleworking perceived by participants

In the same way, participants expressed their opinions about their respective companies. Perceived benefits: cost reduction and / or space (31.1%), greater efficiency and productivity (20.8%), improvement on capacity of expansion (21.7 %), improvement on working conditions (8.5%) and, (6.6%) did not perceive any benefit at all (Figure 15). As for disadvantages: problems in tasks performances, such as decrease in efficiency and productivity (38.6%), problems with supervision of employees (30.1%), problems related with confidential information and corporate resources (7.2%) and (3.6%)did not perceive any disadvantage (Figure 16).

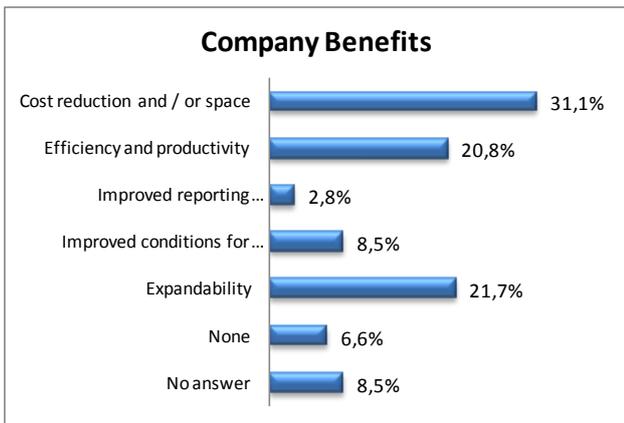


Figure 15. Company perceived benefits in front of the possibility of teleworking by participants

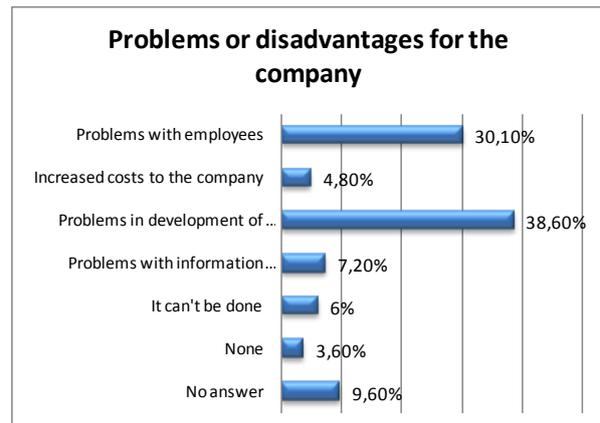


Figure 16. Perceived disadvantages of the company in front of the possibility of teleworking by participants

The general opinion is that this mode of work is not suitable for all persons; it requires certain qualities or personal attributes such as commitment and responsibility (32.3%), discipline (11.8%), maturity, capability of time organization and entrepreneurial spirit to face new challenges and changes. Only 10% considered essential to have specific technological skills. Values are highlighted, rather than technological skills, probably because for younger generations this knowledge is inherent in their daily way of life. This population could be considered as socialized in a technological culture, and topics dealing with technological resources and its costs are not seen as a disadvantage, either for the employee and / or firm.

Among the activities or tasks considered likely to be telework, they mentioned: offer of services, data analysis and information, announcements, personal recruitment processes, legal aspects and tax collection, scheduled therapy sessions, coordination, typing reports, lawyer responses, general information, selection processes, supervision, inventory, virtual conferences.

By other hand, rural production activities, patient attention in psychological support and crisis, field work at community level; they considered as impossible to be performed in a different location outside the company or community itself.

In face of a potential opportunity for teleworking, the majority (73.4%) is willing to do so, the more likely are those with ages between 20 and 25 years old (Figure 17), age is a relevant variable for possible adoption of telework, in the sense that young people has been socialized by and with the presence of technology, also they are more inclined to take risks and to innovate, they do not feel as a threat neither social isolation from the job site and the lost of some benefits or /and employment, or the new challenges inherent to this mode of work, through the use of telecommunications which are already familiar. Regarding the job position, technicians and assistants are more likely to telework (83.3%), professionals (77.1%) and managers (71.4%) (Figure 18).

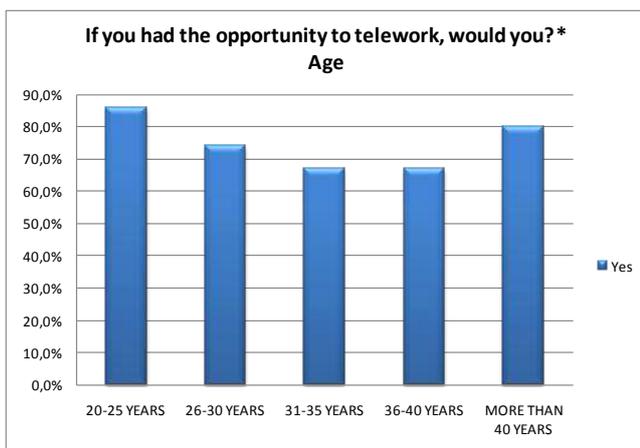


Figure 17. Intent of the respondents to telework if they have the opportunity to do so, by age

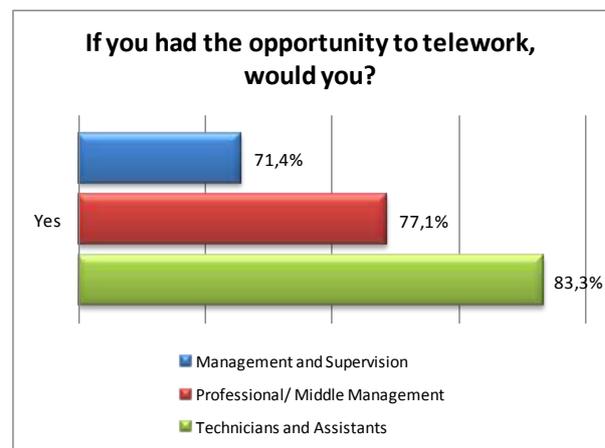


Figure 18. Intent of the respondents to telework if they have the opportunity to do so, by Job position

The direction posts have been characterized by personal contact, the immediacy of work orders which do not always correspond to organizational planning in the long or medium terms. In our cultural context, the status involving^{xii} management positions, it is something no one is willing to resign.

4. CONCLUSIONS

There is a great receptivity towards telework when it is referred to a potential situation, but at the current labor condition it is only considered as feasible for some specific activities. However, in a prospective look the majority 73.4% would be willing to adopted it, due to existing perceptions about its possible advantages, where time

administration or schedule flexibility is the most frequently mentioned and their impact on quality of life (44.1%). It is noteworthy that time saving in commuting is only mentioned by 10%, in contrast to the findings of research in urban areas of several countries in Europe and USA, which emerges as a major benefit. We look beyond and asked the respondents, why mobility was not seen as a problem for them, and the answer was: it is a problem, "but we cannot do anything to avoid it, we have to live with ", it is a very conformist attitude, which changes the character of the problem as such, to become internalized in daily life.

The major perceived advantage of home teleworking for women is to improve time distribution and therefore quality of life, meanwhile, men besides sharing the same opinion consider money saving as the second factor in importance. The answers given by job position of the participant, time distribution remains as the main perceived advantage of teleworking, followed by improvements in quality of life as the second perceived benefit for managers and supervisors, while for the technicians and assistants, saving money occupy that position. When it is analyzed by age, the youngest maintain the trend under which the time flexibility is the main benefit to be obtained, which is shared by the older group, and in equal proportion appears the perception of improvements in their quality of life.

As disadvantages, 46.5% mentioned detachment from social interactions, which could lead to professional and social isolation and 18% believe they could be some problems in job performance because the lack of personal contact, which seems necessary in some cases.

Teleworking besides professional knowledge requires a profile characterized by a set of qualities and principles, such as, discipline, responsibility and autonomy; since technology skills are assumed to be inherent and therefore are not taken as a requirement to telework.

For companies or firms, there are more advantages than disadvantages perceived, in such crucial aspects as productivity, efficiency and global expansion, however, issues such as personal supervision, which involves mutual trust, work performance and data protection are relevant for both employees and employers. However, in terms of being immersed in a culture that favors personal contact, and where confidence levels are given more in terms of monitoring, controls and sanctions, it is relevant for both actors. We conclude that there is a positive perception of the participants about the dynamics of teleworking, the majority would be ready to change their way of working, although there are some concerns about the process of change and the possible difficulties that may emerge carrying out the functions from a presentational way to make them work at distance. Similarly, social interactions and relationships which takes place at offices and other workplaces within the Colombian context is of vital importance for the majority of employees, and concerns arisen from the lost of social relations is included as the main objection to this new mode of work arrangement.

Moreover, telework is still unknown for the majority of workers, so the perceptions which arises from the possibility of teleworking, must be analyzed from the actual labor context, which is characterized by traditional management practices, where the fact of not being physically at the work place, its assumed as not working and where the control and supervision is almost unthinkable at a virtual level. The fact, that improvements in time management and quality of life are the main perceived personal benefits of telework, it is shown by the perceptions of the employees in the sense that their work could be better done under their own autonomy to control time in order to include more time for other activities considered important for them.

Although, employees are aware that some of the main possible problems of the company are related with them, that is to say those associated with employee's management, performing of tasks, levels of efficiency and productivity. The opinion of the participant changes when it refers to their workplace, in this hypothetical vision on the implementation of telework, neither the economic nor adaptation processes are as relevant, the main problem becomes the management, supervision and evaluation of employees, and it turns again toward these traditional management practices, where control and monitoring become a major concern.

We may add, for a future successfully implementation of telework and its spread in Colombia, it should be based on the knowledge of the socio-cultural context, due to the several changes may possible occur in social relationships dynamics both for employees and employers.

We conclude this study may be relevant for future research as a starting point on existing perceptions on telework in Colombia, and some others important aspects that should be studied of all actors involved in the dynamics of inclusion or adaptation of this modality of work in the country.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

[1] Bailey, D., & Kurland, N. [1] Bailey, D., & Kurland, N. (2002). (2002). A review of telework research: findings, new directions, and lessons for the study of modern work. *Journal of Organizational behavior*, 383-400. A review of telework research: Findings, new directions, and lessons for the study of modern work. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 383-400.

[2] Baruch, Y. [2] Baruch, Y. (2001). (2001). The status of research on teleworking and an agenda for future research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 3 (2), 113-129. The status of research on teleworking and an agenda for future research. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 3 (2), 113-129.

[3] Blanco, A. [3] Blanco, A. (2007). (2007). El teletrabajo: oportunidad o amenaza? *Ponencia presentada en la V jornada de sociología del trabajo*. Uruguay. Telework: opportunity or threat? *Paper presented at the V day of sociology of work*. Uruguay.

[4] Cámara Arilla, C. [4] Arilla Camera, C. (2000). El teletrabajo: un indicador de cambio en el mercado de trabajo. *Cuadernos de relaciones laborales*, 17, 227-256. (2000). Telework: An indicator of change in the labor market. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17, 227-256.

[5] Di Martino, V. [5] Di Martino, V. (2004). *El teletrabajo en América Latina y el Caribe*. Ginebra. (2004). *Telework in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Geneva.

- [6] Di Martino, V. [6] Di Martino, V. (2001). *The high road to teleworking*. Geneva: International Labour Organization. (2001). *The high road to teleworking*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.
- [7] Gasco, M. [7] Gasco, M. (2001). (2001). América latina ante la nueva economía. *Instituciones y desarrollo* (8 y 9), 411-440. Latin America to the new economy. *Institutions and Development* (8 and 9), 411-440.
- [8] Gutiérrez Palacios, RA (2006). *Estado, transición y tendencias del teletrabajo en América latina y el Caribe*. Montevideo. [8] Gutierrez Palacios, RA (2006). *State, transition and telework trends in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Montevideo.
- [9] López Jiménez, D., Fondevila Gascon, J., & Saiz, J. [9] Lopez-Jimenez, D., Fondevila Gascon, J., & Saiz, J. (enero de 2010). *El estado del teletrabajo en la banca colombiana y sus efectos en la vida familiar*. Obtenido de www.razonypalabra.org.mx (January 2010). *The status of telework in the Colombian banking and its impact on family life*. Retrieved from www.razonypalabra.org.mx
- [10] Martínez Sánchez, A. (2006). [10] Martínez Sánchez, A. (2006). Teletrabajo y flexibilidad: efecto moderador sobre los resultados de la empresa. *Cuadernos de Economía y dirección de empresas* (29). Telecommuting and flexible: moderating effect on the results of the company. *Journal of Economics and Business Management* (29).
- [11] Pérez, M., Martínez, A., De Luis, P., Avella, S., & María José, V. [11] Perez, M., Martinez, A., De Luis, P., Avella, S., & María José, V. (2007). (2007). Impacto del teletrabajo en las relaciones laborales y familiares. *Segundo Congreso Iberoamericano de Teletrabajo*. Buenos Aires. Impact of telework on work and family relationships. *Second Latin American Congress of Telecommuting*. Buenos Aires.
- [12] Safirova, E., & Walls, M. [12] Safirova, E., & Walls, M. (2004). *What have we learned from a recent survey of teleworkers? Evaluating the 2002 SCAG Survey*. USA: Etis-Lac. (2004). *What have we Learned from a Recent Survey of teleworkers? Evaluating the 2002 SCAG Survey*. USA: Etis-Lac.
- [13] Stanley, D., & Clark, I. [13] Stanley, D., & Clark, I. (1998). (1998). The Decision to Telework: A Synthesized Model. *Thirty-First Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 1, pág. The Decision to Telework: A Synthesized Model. *Thirty-First Annual Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, 1, pp. 393. 393. Hawaii. Hawaii.
- [14] Thibault Aranda, J. [14] Thibault Aranda, J. (2000). *El teletrabajo*. Madrid: Ed. Consejo económico y social (Ces). (2000). *Telework*. Madrid: Ed Economic and Social Council (CES).
- [15] Vargas Melgarejo, LM (1994). [15] Vargas Melgarejo, LM (1994). Sobre el concepto de percepción. *Alteridades*, 8 (4), 47-53. The concept of *perception*. *Altering*, 8 (4), 47-53.
- [16] Vitterso, J., Akselsen, S., Evjemo, B., Julsrud, T., Yttri, B., & Bergvik, S. [16] Vitter, J., Akselsen, S., Evjemo, B., Julsrud, T., Yttri, B., & Bergvik, S. (2003). (2003). Impacts of Home-Based Telework on Quality of Life for Employees and Their Partners. Quantitative and Qualitative Results From a European Survey. *Journal of happiness studies*, 4 (2), 201-233. Impacts of Home-Based Telework on Quality of Life for Employees and Their Partners. Quantitative and Qualitative Results From a European Survey. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 4 (2), 201-233.

NOTES

ⁱ Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Tourism, and Economic Development Secretary of Bogotá

ⁱⁱ This is a conceptual discussion which is still raised by researchers

ⁱⁱⁱ The component of personality is not subject matter of this study.

^{iv} The second phase is ongoing; the preliminary results are expected by the end of June, 2010

^v Enrolled in the second term of 2009

^{vi} There are other modalities: call centers, telecenters, satellite offices, mobile work, freelance.

^{vii} In an attempt to measure pollution in Bogotá, "day without particular cars" was set on the first Thursday of February each year and also everyday restrictions of public and private vehicles according to the number of license or plate.

^{viii} In the second phase of this study, the inquiry will cover employers, to make an overall analysis of the perceptions of both employees and employers.

^{ix} A U.S. dollar is equivalent to \$ 2,000 Colombian pesos

^x Classification according to Colombian law, Act 905 of 2004 - Definition: Microenterprise up to 10 employees, small business size 11-50 employees, medium size enterprise, 51-200 employees and large enterprise with more than 200 employees.

^{xi} It is worth mentioning that perhaps the responses, refers only to the time spent in mobility, and not invested from door to door

^{xii} Status is given not only in terms of infrastructure (offices, carpets, communications equipment, technological resources, etc.) but also in availability of human resources: receptionist, secretary, messengers, cleaners, janitors, and drivers.