Año 29 No. Especial 11, 2024 ENERO-JUNIO



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ENERO-JUNIO

Revista Venezolana de **Gerencia**

UNIVERSIDAD DEL ZULIA (LUZ) Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Sociales Centro de Estudios de la Empresa ISSN 1315-9984

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A deep view of dynamics of teleworking in Panama

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Abstract

Teleworking has accelerated in the last three years, although the advantages of this modality can be valuable, its application still requires legal and practical aspects in order to carry out the activities in an agile and appropriate manner. In this sense, its objective was to analyze of telework modality in Panama. To this end, a study was conducted using the positivist paradigm with quantitative, non-experimental, cross-sectional field methodology, with the instrument structured in four dimensions. The research design was descriptive-correlational, field-based, applied, using a stratified probability sample, using the economically active population of the country as an estimate. The sample was calculated using Bravo's (1994) formula, with a sampling error of 5%, resulting in a total number of 399 participants from different economic sectors where teleworking is possible, such as education, information and communication technology, banking and insurance. The overall conclusion of the study is that the introduction of teleworking in Panama has been effective. However, the impact of teleworking on employees' wellbeing can be considered negative and it is recommended to incorporate best practices to mitigate the impact in terms of labor legislation and workers' well-being in terms of mental health.

Keywords: labor wellbeing; telework legislation; good telework practices.

Recibido: 17.01.24 Aceptado: 17.04.24

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Una mirada profunda a la dinámica del teletrabajo en Panamá

Resumen

El teletrabajo es una modalidad que se ha acelerado en los últimos tres años, aunque las ventajas de esta modalidad pueden ser valiosas, su aplicación aún necesita de aspectos legales y prácticos para realizar actividades de forma ágil y adecuada. En este sentido, el objetivo del presente estudio fue analizar la modalidad del teletrabajo en Panamá. Para ello, se realizó un estudio bajo el paradigma positivista con metodología cuantitativa, no experimental, de campo transversal, el instrumento está estructurado en cuatro dimensiones. El diseño de la investigación fue descriptivo-correlacional, de campo, aplicado, utilizando un muestreo probabilístico estratificado, tomando como estimación la población económicamente activa del país, la muestra se calculó utilizando la fórmula de Bravo (1994), con un error muestral del 5%, dando como resultado un total de 399 participantes de diferentes sectores de la economía donde es posible aplicar el teletrabajo como la educación, Tecnologías de la Información y la Comunicación, Banca y Seguros. El estudio concluye en términos generales, que la implementación de la modalidad de teletrabajo en Panamá ha sido efectiva, sin embargo, el impacto del teletrabajo en el bienestar de los empleados podría considerarse negativo y recomendar la necesidad de incorporar mejores prácticas para en elementos relacionados con la legislación laboral y el bienestar de los empleados en cuanto a la salud mental.

Palabras clave: bienestar laboral; legislación en teletrabajo; buenas prácticas en teletrabajo.

1. Introduction

By Bridi (2022) with the growth of virtual services, the number of workers working on telework has increase from before the onset of the crisis of COVID-19 in 2020. However, working from home has been researched in the past, but what we know about the impact of teleworking on job quality may not apply to the particular crisis (Fana et al, 2020). Author Gustafson, (2012) expresses that most public and private organizations now rely on communication and interaction between people working in geographically dispersed locations. As a result, business travel has increased significantly. Bridi, Tropia & Vasquez (2024) also find a recurring causal relationship in their studies on teleworking and health in general: teleworkers tend to work longer hours than when on the company premises. Also, Arumdani (2024), although teleworkers need time to accept the change. Furthermore, as Huws (2014) notes, the boundaries between work and personal life are becoming confusingly intertwined.

Teleworking allows the employee to complete their tasks from home (Barbosa, 2013). Lung et al, (2020) express that the impact of COVID-19 for many workers depends heavily on one question: Can I work from home or am I tied to my job? As Lapierre et al (2015), employees working from home are less likely to have the support of their managers. According to Chinnaiah (2021), the success of employees working from home depends on the trust they build with their colleagues and supervisors.

According to Queiroz et al, (2022), many factories, offices and stores were forced to close during the pandemic and was severely impacted. By Irwin (2004), teleworking allows people to connect by phone, video or over the Internet instead of commuting or traveling on business. At the same time, Panama has a service-oriented economy and is a center of global and regional business activity, it is the most competitive country in the region in the telecommunications sector, as 7 of the most important fiber optic cables in the Americas run through the isthmus. With the government (2019) making internet access a priority, this expansion will improve the coverage of our global telecommunications network by providing access to Central America from Panama. In view of what has been said so far, there is a need to regulate this form of work and create specific legislation on the subject in order to protect teleworkers and avoid practices that violate their fundamental rights.

In this sense. on February 18. 2020, in the face of the health. economic and social crisis resulting from COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019). the Government approved Law No. 126 regulating telework in the Republic of Panama; favoring the creation of jobs; protecting teleworkers in terms of benefits, overtime and health at work and, of course, is used as a mechanism to address the coronavirus

crisis. The use of smart technologies in organizational processes would be the decisive prerequisite for increasing the production efficiency. The World Health Organization (WHO 2020) also saw this as an opportunity to introduce innovations in mental health care that can help improve the performance of future mental illnesses. Now that Panama has a legal framework for teleworking that establishes rights and obligations and other regulations on the subject, companies must develop programs and strategies for training, education and promotion, as well as tools to measure the performance of their employees in terms of productivity and effectiveness in this form of work, taking into account that teleworking contracts will be the constant in the new normal after COVID-19 and that their products and services must be integrated into electronic commerce and information and communication technologies (ICT).

Tatay (2022) expresses that emplover need to determine the applicable working conditions and social security law with the teleworker. In Panama, although many companies had a type of remote work called "home office" for short periods of one or two davs a week, teleworking was not legally defined until February 2020, when the health, economic and social crisis resulting from COVID-19 highlighted the urgency of regulating this work system, as Panamanian companies had to implement the teleworking modality as the only way to maintain their active operations. This article aims to examine the impact of teleworking on workers in Panama. It examines teleworking in different sectors of the Panamanian economy, such as education, information and communication technology. banking and insurance, to determine the application of current legislation, management styles, the resources used to implement this modality and the well-being of workers through this modality. The main problem was ¿Which is the impact of the telework modality in Panama?

What has been said up to this point, leads us to ask which is the impact of teleworking in Panama and review deep of this modality.

2. Literature review of Teleworking

According Urrutia (2000). to teleworking means that the person does not perform the function that has been entrusted to him in an office but does it from his home, hotel, or teleworking center. Teleworking, also called telecommuting or work from home (WFH), is a flexible work arrangement (FWA) through the use of internet facilities (Chan & Tan, 2020). According to Buira (2012, p.21), one of the characteristics of the concept of telework is that both research doctrine and the legislator find it difficult to define the phenomenon precisely. It also means that employees can work at the time and place that is most convenient for them, and this often means that work and personal tasks are intertwined (Anderson, 2013). Authors Vilhelmson and Thulin (2016) have repeatedly raised high expectations for the expansion of teleworking, supported by policies that have sought to facilitate growth. According to Malakyan (2020), the power dynamic between managers and employees is also changing through remote interaction, and the practice of shared leadership is spreading. The characteristics of teleworking applied in companies may include resources required for teleworking, use of bring your own devices (BYOD), leadership, participation and communication.

With regard to telework. the International Labour Organization (2020) states that it is a form of work performed at a location away from central offices or production facilities through the use of new communication technologies. In addition, Raišienė, et al, (2020), women particularly appreciated the opportunity to work from home to ensure a healthier lifestyle. Men did not particularly emphasize this aspect of teleworking. Authors Parker, Morgeson and Johns (2017) express that task design has evolved. In addition to work characteristics such as autonomy, these models emphasized aspects such as leadership, group composition, group processes and the wider context as drivers of team effectiveness.

Anderson (2013) also states that the concept of "Bring Your Own Device" (BYOD) has become one of the trends that has and will influence IT organizations the most. Teleworkers examined in previous studies usually had their own home office, suitable digital devices and an internet connection and did not have to share digital devices with other family members. (Kohont & Miroljub 2022). It is also a way to find a balance between work and family life, increase flexibility in terms of time and space and not require the employee's constant presence with the family (Selma, 2015). The authors had reason to believe that if the workers involved in our study were forced to work more from home, they would find it easier to transition the demands of their work to their family activities than vice versa (Lapierre, et al, 2015).

According to Aguiléra, et al, (2016), the factors that favor or, on the contrary, hinder the adoption (and formalization) of teleworking from home relate primarily to three categories concerning (1) the work performed (type of tasks and organization), (2) the perception of the advantages (or disadvantages) of teleworking and, finally, (3) compatibility with the work culture at the national level or within the organization. Other research shows the link between lockdown equality and increased stress and depression (Xiao et al, 2020). According to the United Nations (2020), access to remote support for all mental health needs must be expanded. Naden (2020) also points out that the International Standard for Occupational Safety and Health (ISO 45001) is a guide to occupational safety and health management systems that includes best practice from around the world. Bayazitova (2023) expresses that labor of telework are not regulated in detail in relation to remote workers.

Finally, with regard to the legal definition and specifically in the case of Panama, Law No. 126 of February 18, 2020, and Executive Decree No. 133. telework is defined as follows: it consists of the provision of subordinate services without physical presence at the workplace or in a public facility through computers, telecommunications and similar means, through which the work is in turn controlled and supervised. On the contrary, each piece of legislation adopts the type or types of telework as they arise in practice, taking into account that it is a phenomenon in which reality moves faster than the regulations on the subiect.

In a study by Eurofound and the International Labour Office (2017) on the positive effects of teleworking, workers report a reduction in commuting time, greater working time autonomy, which leads to more flexibility in the organization of working hours, a better work–life balance and higher productivity. With respect to this in Panama, the law No. 126 of February 18, (2020), defines telework as a subordinate activity with fixed salary and establishes the concept of on-call work. In turn, the Executive Decree No. 133 of September 16, 2020, classifies telework under criteria of location and working hours, being able to be mobile or supplementary and full or partial, respectively. When analyzing teleworking from its conception, it is evident that it avoids commuting and that it is definitely done away from the company.

This means greater comfort when performina work, which represents wellbeing and therefore has a positive impact on productivity (García-Camino 2001). On the other hand, Rubbini (2012), points out that the risks to which the teleworker is exposed, with respect to their mental health are: tension and stress, psychic alterations, sensation of fear and/or boredom, feeling of isolation. By Moglie et al, (2021), the disadvantages of teleworking it can lead to more overtime and domestic conflict, which would undermine the environmental benefits. Also. Irwin (2004) considered that the business accounts for nearly a quarter of all trips people make to a place at least 100 miles away in the United States.

The teleworking is a modality that allow to balance work-life, in Panama the dynamics was increased by the crisis of Covid-19 in 2020, nowadays, have a legal frame about it, in addition the leader must learn how to manage the employes in this kind of modality of work, define goals in the team and increase the trust in the employes. Other important aspect is related to the digital services and equipment, usually the employees can use your own device, however, the company must guarantee an internet connection and the design of the workplace out of office.

3. Research method

The research desian was descriptive-correlational, field, applied, as part of the research, we focused on in four dimensions of the study. first the resources available to make teleworkina. second the styles of leadership, third the legislation and the last explore the well-being of the workers by the modality of teleworking. The study responds to the quantitative methodology, the main objective was to analyze of telework modality in Panama, the following questions were raised: Have good telework practices been applied in correspondence with the regulatory legal framework established in the country? Has the modality of teleworking affected the well-being of employees in companies? The sample was stratified probability sampling, taking the economically active population of the country as an estimate, according to the data of the Office of the General Comptroller of the Republic of Panama for the year 2023.

The sample was calculated using Bravo's formula (1994), with a sampling error of 5%, resulting in a total of 399 participants from different sectors of the economy belonging to the economically active population of Panama, such as education, information and communication technology, banks, and insurance. Two inclusion criteria were used for the sample, the first related to the current work modality: those participants who were currently in teleworking or who were in this work modality in the last six (6) months applied to the research, as well as those who were in mixed modality. The second inclusion criterion referred to geographic location; in this sense, only participants who were in Panama were included.

The instrument designed by the authors consisted of 33 items divided into two sections: the first with nine items related to the inclusion criteria and general data of the participants and the sector in which they work. The second section consists of 24 questions measuring the four dimensions related to resources necessary to telework, leadership, legislation applied to telework and wellbeing, and a Likert-type response scale.

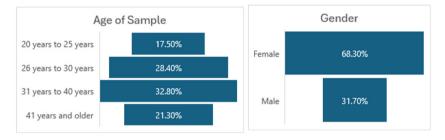
The pilot test was conducted in May 2023, with a total of 126 participants, obtaining a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient calculated using the free PSPP. software program reaching an α of 0.77, which is considered acceptable. The research instrument was applied in an electronic format and disseminated through a link to social networks, professional networks, and public and private companies during June and December 2023 to obtain research results. When performing the analysis of the data collected in the study, we proceeded to establish a scale of interpretation of data to measure the impact of the modality of teleworking in Panama, once established, we proceeded to perform the analysis using the PSPP tool that shows in the results of the research.

4. Dimensions of teleworking in Panama: a teleworkers perspective

After the mandatory quarantines and self-isolations have pushed companies around the world to work from home in 2020, Panama has not escaped this reality, however, was forced to submit to this form of work, without having sufficient legal instruments that could regulate in a transparent manner the minimum requirements for working from home. Prior to the pandemic, different organizations, especially multinationals, had already been executing the teleworking modality without problems.

The study was structured in general questions and four dimensions, the results of the general data show that the age range of most of the respondents is 31 to 40 years in 32.8% and 68.3% belong to the female gender (Graph 1).

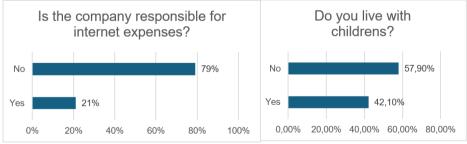
Graph 1 General data of the study about age and gender



With respect of general data 42. 1% live with children and 79% express

that the internet service is not covered by the organization (Graph 2).

Graph 2 General data of the study about live with children and internet expenses



The analysis of the results is presented by the dimensions studied resources. Regarding the characteristics of teleworking (Table 1), it is highlighted that the use of bring your own devices (BYOD) is not one of the predominant characteristics in this modality of work, indicating that companies make efforts to provide their employees with the necessary resources to perform their work outside the offices, as expressed by 59.01% of the employees surveyed. Revista Venezolana de Gerencia, Año 29 No. especial 11. enero-junio, 2024

In this sense, ergonomics, the necessary tools and equipment are an essential part and correspond to the minimum requirements to properly perform the functions outside the organization's facilities.

Table 1
Characteristics of teleworking applied in companies in Panama

Indicators	Ν	Media	Dev. Deviation	Relative Frequen- cy (Strongly Agree and Agree)
Resources required for teleworking	399	3.28	.78	83.06%
Uso of bring your own devices (BYOD)	399	2.42	1.17	59.01%
Leadership	399	3.04	.97	75.96%
Participation	399	2.64	1.01	56.29%
Communication	399	3.33	.79	82.52%
	399	3.15	.86	75.95%
Valid N (per list)	399			

With respect to leadership and participation, 75.96% of the employees consider that the leaders have coordinated the activities well, although only a little more than half, 56.29% of the employees, express having received specific training on the teleworking modality. In turn, communication has proved to be an important element for employees, who report 82.52% that there has been constant communication between leaders and

followers and 75.95%, expressed that they are given timely and useful information about their functions in the teleworking modality (Table 1).

In reference to the dimension of methods applicable to teleworking (Table 2), the presence of different distractions that constantly interrupt the working day stands out with the highest incidence, including frequent meetings requested by the leaders of the organizations.

Table 2Evaluation methods applicable to teleworking in companies in
Panama

Indicators	Ν	Media	Dev. Deviation	Relative Frequency (Strongly Agree and Agree)
Task organi-	399	3.27	.81	83.60%
zation	399	3.16	.80	79.78%
Distractors	399	2.89	1.00	63.39%
Distractors	399	2.74	.92	84.15%
Droductivity	399	3.17	.74	93.44%
Productivity	399	3.47	.64	59.34%
Valid N (per list)	399			

Table 3 shows the scope of the dimension about legislation applicable to telework: only 40.98% of the employees

know these risks, as well as the legal implications in terms of social security and occupational accidents. The most

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relevant data in this dimension refer to overtime, 69.38% of the employees have felt forced to work more and the vast majority expressed that the overtime performed in the teleworking modality, have not been paid in the manner established by the Labor Code, only 38.80% of the employees surveyed, said to have received overtime pay during teleworking functions.

Scope of the legislation applicable to teleworking in Fahama						
Indicators	Ν	Media	Dev. Deviation	Relative Frequency (Strong- ly Agree and Agree)		
Occupational health and	399	2.69	1.01	61.75%		
safety protection	399	2.34	1.05	40.98%		
General and family socializa-	399	2.47	1.04	47%		
tion practices	399	2.63	.98	55.74%		
	399	3.07	.87	69.38%		
Overtime work –	399	2.32	1.06	38.80%		
Valid N (per list)	399					

Table 3Scope of the legislation applicable to teleworking in Panama

The last dimension it is about the wellbeing and health of employees, is one of the most significant dimensions of the study (Table 4). 77.05 % of the

employees have experienced a higher level of stress than usual as a result of their work, even showing difficulties in falling asleep.

Indicators	Ν	Media	Dev. Desviation	Relative Frequency (Strong- ly Agree and Agree)
Tension and stress	399	3.21	.87	77.05%
Tension and stress	399	399 2.92 .97	.97	65.57%
Psychic disturbances	399	3.03	.89	72.68%
	399	2.75	.90	59.57%
Isolation feelings	399	2.28	.89	30.60%
-	399	2.61	.92	53.01%
Valid N (per list)	399			

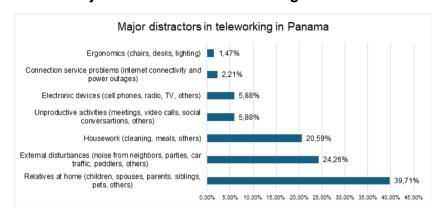
Table 4 Impact of telework on the health of employees

The results of the research show that the impact of teleworking and the wellbeing of employees in Panama, are significant, the scale of interpretation of data and the results of the study applied to the population, reflect the need to put into action best practices for employees with respect to this new mode of work that does not seem transitory according to the evolution of the current context.

At the same time, the implementation of wellbeing and integration activities among the members of the organization should be explored in order to reduce the most affected indicators in terms of wellbeing, such as tension, stress and anxiety. In Graph 3, it is shown that family members at home (39.71%) represent the biggest distractor for the employees when performing

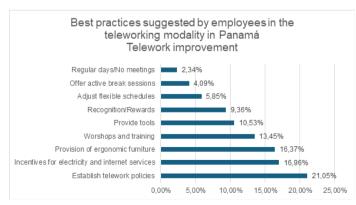
their work functions in the teleworking modality.

Graph 3 Major distractions in teleworking in Panama



In reference to the good practices suggested by the employees to improve the conditions of teleworking (Graph 4), the greatest weight is oriented to the legislation on the subject, considering that 21.05% of respondents, expressed the need to establish clear policies on the operation of work under this modality. It should be recalled that Panama has a law that regulates teleworking and its respective regulations, instruments that allow to guide decisions on the subject.

Graph 4 Best practices suggested by employees in the teleworking modality in Panama



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When performing the analysis of the data collected in the study, we proceeded to establish a scale of interpretation of data, to measure the impact of the modality of teleworking and the wellbeing of employees in Panama, once established, we proceeded to perform the analysis using the PSPP tool, resulting in an average of 68.88, considering that the impact is significant with respect to teleworking (table 5).

Table 5Data interpretation scale, impact of telework on employees in
Panama and impact of teleworking on employees in Panama

01 a 32	No significant impact
33 a 65	Moderate impact
66 a 96	Significant impact
Ν	∑Media
399	68.88 Telework impact
Valid N (per list)	399

As for the correlation of the study, a positive correlation between variables above .50 was taken as a point of analysis, and that are significant, in that sense, the most significant indicators of the study suggest that as there is greater coordination between the leader and the team activities, employees feel more comfortable with the monitoring and progress of their tasks. Other correlations related to the coordination of the leader (Table 6 Var003), are those related to the scope of labor legislation, the leader has an important role in transmitting information about policies on wellbeing and the manual of good practices of socialization in teleworking. The data suggest that as specific training is received to perform in teleworking (Table 6 Var004), employees know more precisely the scope of legislation on policies and good practices in the teleworking modality. With reference to the information (Table 6 Var006), as it is received in a timely and useful manner, policies on personal wellbeing are put into practice.

Table 6 Positive correlations of the study: Impact of the telework modality and the wellbeing of employees in Panama

		-	-			
Variables	Var0008	Var0012	Var0014	Var0015	Var0018	Correlation
/ar0003	.50 000 399	.52 000 399	.44 000 399	.55 000 399	26 000 399	Pearson Correlación Sig. (1-tailed) N 399
Var0004	.36 000 399	.54 000 399	.55 000 399	.49 000 399	20 000 399	
Var0006	.40 000 399	.52 000 399	.41 000 399	.43 000 399	12 000 399	
Var0016	15 000 399	23 000 399	13 000 399	24 000 399	.59 000 399	

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This studv shows that. in Panama, leadership is an important factor in reviewing employees and chiefs. Communication proved to be an important element for employees in this study. According to Nakrošiene et al, (2019), the possibility of working from home has traditionally been considered a means of increasing an individual's work-life balance. The results also show that BYOD is not considered a trend; most employees stated that the resources are provided by the company, which is a positive aspect. According to Trziszka (2018), a trend emerges in companies, regardless of their size or type of business; in this sense, the results of the study show that employees in Panama certainly feel comfortable having their time.

It should be noted that when analyzing the characteristics present in teleworking, Tavares (2015) suggests that this work modality allows employees to organize and plan time more efficiently. Considering the results of the research on the framework of the law, the most relevant data in this dimension refer to overtime. Thulin. Vilhelmson. and Johansson (2019) indicate that the spread of telework to new groups and practices is associated with divergences in the basic drivers of teleworking, particularly with regard to teleworking outside regular working hours. The results in relation to the implementation of legislation on teleworking capture attention, since they show that efforts are still required to put into action best practices in this modality of work in Panama. It becomes evident that companies lack information to apply regulatory mechanisms in an efficient way, emphasizing the protection of the health and professional safety of teleworkers. The last dimension, the well-being and health of employees, is one of the most significant dimensions of the study, where employees have experienced a higher level of stress than usual as a result of their work, even showing difficulties in falling asleep.

In turn, with respect to indicators such as anxietv and difficulty concentrating, the results show that the employees have felt more anxious than usual, compared to when they work in their offices, by Agba et al, (2020) occupational health and safety are paramount during and after COVID-19, employers should provide safety guides and regulations that would keep workers safe and healthy. Maruyama and Tietze (2012) state that implementing and maintaining successful telework schemes requires managers to take heed of the emotional aspects that accompany the use of such flexible work arrangements.

In reference to the impact of teleworking on the health of employees. the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020), as well as the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO, 2020), have advocated the development of strategies at the workplace that promote health in the workplace and within these strategies, are self-care initiatives. This shows the need to implement wellbeing programs to mitigate the effects on mental health, anxiety, and stress that can lead to higher operating costs for the company as a result of incapacity due to occupational hazards and greater attention to the social security of employees.

5. Conclusions

In general terms, the implementation of teleworking modality in Panama has been effective; however, the impact of teleworking on the well-being of

employees could be considered negative because there are evidenced affectations in the mental and psychological health of teleworkers, who have alterations in their biological rhythms, sleep disorders, high levels of stress and anxiety, among other problems that in the future could trigger multiple diseases, reduce the wellbeing of employees, and consequently, decrease their performance and productivity.

Despite the circumstances surrounding its implementation. employees managed to maintain their productivity levels. The efficient management of leadership and the provision of necessary resources by the companies allowed employees to achieve the objectives set with good results. Employees under the modality of telework in Panama focus on the results and fulfillment of objectives and prefer to perform tasks with freedom of organization and without constant supervision; in fact, they consider that frequent virtual meetings interrupt the working day, and the unlimited flow of messages divides their attention, becoming distracters that decrease the ability to concentrate. Teleworking has been a phenomenon since 2020 of the recent legal definition, regulation, and rules in Panama; therefore, employers still require more training regarding the duties and rights of employees under this mode of work.

Panamanian companies have implemented teleworking in the midst of the crisis caused by COVID-19, without any planning, implying the failure of some employers to comply with the provisions of the legislation establish obligations regarding health, wellbeing, socialization, and safety in telework by employers. In addition, in many cases, overtime has not been paid, ignoring what is established by the law. Wellbeing is a vulnerable factor under the teleworking modality, and companies should promote integration plans and an organizational climate for employees working outside the office.

In the specific case of Panama. as it is considered a service economy. not all employers have the possibility to choose this type of work; however, an important group of companies can, without limitations, operate through telework, considering that Panama has good Internet connectivity, compared to other countries in the region. This study it can be concluded that the most impacted dimensions are related to the good practices of teleworking applied in companies according to the existing legal regulation in the country and the well-being of employees, among the reasoning generated from the guestions posed reflect the nature of the data collected in the study sample.

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