

Forced telecommuting during the COVID-19 lockdown: The impact on corporate culture in Spain and Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Organizational culture and climate studies explore how people interact in organizations, including between leaders and employees, and among peers. These two concepts are also affected by and can be looked at differently based upon cultural differentiations between countries and external incidents that affect the way employees understand their own culture. During the COVID-19 lockdown, many organizations were forced to establish telecommuting as their daily work arrangement for weeks on end and without preparation or prior strategic positioning. Through quantitative research, this study aims to analyze how workers from two very different countries, Spain and Kazakhstan, reacted to the challenge of working from home. The data suggests that, even when analyzing two diverse countries in terms of their cultural historical, and sociological contexts, companies' reactions impacted their employees somewhat similarly and engendered similar responses. At the same time, the reactions of Spanish and Kazakhstani professionals vary on certain aspects, and, surprisingly, converge in terms of avoiding uncertainty, which suggests a conservative reaction in both countries. This study concludes that structure (clarity of procedures, norms, patterns) and leaders' recognition of their employees' efforts to overcome uncertainty were of utmost importance. Finally, this article proposes further exploratory study of how organizational contexts are affected by unexpected, informal and even radical changes, as well as of organizations' ability to manage said changes by looking to their cultural values.

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Introduction

During the first several months of 2020, nearly the whole world succumbed to the COVID-19 health crisis, forcing companies and public institutions to suspend not only public facing functions, but also to send their employees to work from home. Unexpected lockdown all over the world has propelled a transition towards new forms of work, including telecommuting from home, the use of intranets and VPNs, videoconference platforms, shared work software, to name just a few (Prodanova & Kocarev 2022). It has also pulled employers and employees into a totally new scenario that has shaken the foundations of organizational climate and internal

culture, and even prompted some to altogether question the meaning of organizational culture (Berman and Thurkow 2020; Hosoda 2021).

Although the general narrative tends to support telecommuting, based on a series of supposed benefits (Dvorak and Jamal 2000; Crumpton 2000), there is also a significant amount of scientific literature that sees it less favorably (Felstead and Henseke 2017; McArdle 2017; Kossek and Lautsch 2018; Delanoëje, Verbruggen and Germeys 2019, Wei and Kim, 2021). Border theory scholars (Clark 2000; Marsh and Musson 2008) question telecommuting and its main pillars, i.e., the loss of spatiality and the eventual disappearance of office space, teleworking as good for employers (they gain in efficiency and increase profit because they have less overhead), as good for employees (they gain flexibility and do not have to commute to work), and even as good for the environment (lower carbon print). Critics especially focus on negative experiences in terms of work and family balance.

We must not lose sight of the fact that individuals have not freely chosen telework under the current conditions; rather, it is part of and imposed by a situation outside of our control that is linked to a public health threat. At the same time, this plight has allowed for a general test of telework, allowing some to personally experience the associated pros and cons (Morilla-Luchena et al. 2021).

Scholars have widely defined organization culture (Schein 1990; Wayne 1990; Denison 1996, Van Houtte 2005; Schneider, Ehrhart and Macey 2013; Ilie and Ghită 2019) as a group of values, founding principles and even a worldview shared by a community. It is a way of “doing things” and solving problems creatively, a job style, and a concrete relationship style between employees and their bosses, and among employees themselves. Culture is, therefore, to a society or civilization what organizational culture is to an institution.

Most white-collar professionals maintain, in one way or another, face-to-face interaction with their bosses, subordinates, and/or colleagues in a physical space or office. But, during the coronavirus health crisis, these same people have had to work remotely with no face-to-face contact for 90 days or more, even indefinitely, and many of them find themselves in complex situations. Suffice it to imagine the less than optimal situations in which people are completing their work, including, to name just a few, reduced workspace at home, lack of technical means and/or insufficient conditions to carry out their work from home (poor Internet connection, insufficient lighting, lack of adequate furniture and appropriate technological means), having other family responsibilities (children, elderly relatives or other dependents), the need to balance work obligations with family or personal ones, getting COVID-19, being distressed by the circumstances surrounding the pandemic (personally or on behalf of a family member), experiencing the complexity of new communication relationships with bosses, colleagues or subordinates, adapting one’s work to new environments (offline to online sales, face-to-face to online classes, customer relations, etc.), and dealing with new leadership relationships.

The big question that emerges in this research is how organizational culture and climate have been affected by the extraordinary circumstances that the pandemic has imposed on physical work in offices (Sapta, Muafi & Setini 2021). In addition, it seeks to explore whether telecommuting substantially affects the way people understand and live out organization culture.

Organizational culture and climate research

Research and academic conversation on organizational climate came before and was once more abundant than that which regards organizational culture (Field and Abelson 1982: 182), but in the 1990s and first decades of the twenty-first century, things began to even out, most likely propelled by the growth of corporate discipline, and organizational culture is now more equally studied among scholars (Díaz-Soloaga 2019). Over time, many have come to use climate and culture as interchangeable concepts, seeing climate as the practical and personal-subjective way of understanding the more abstract idea of organizational culture (Hogan, Kaiser and Chamorro-Premuzic 2014). But nuances between these concepts also exist and help researchers to

differentiate them. For instance, Litwin and Stringer pointed out the importance of motivation in organizational climate, especially as applied to conflict resolution. They focus on personal and individual aspects and even propose four variables for managers (1968: 168): (1) consider the motives and needs that individuals bring to the situation (2) evaluate the objectives that the organization must develop (3) contemplate the climate that describes the work situation (4) acknowledge the strengths and limitations of the operating manager. On the other hand, other relevant authors on organizational culture (Denison 1996) highlight an aspect that was previously criticized by many researchers, namely the application of quantitative methods to studying a cultural reality that quantitative methods more appropriately capture.

Among other variables, the concepts of organizational culture and climate are usually linked to buildings and physical spaces, such as offices, bureaus, departments, factories, rooms, centers and all manner of facilities (Groves 2010). In those places, people get together in common and personal locations, hold meetings, and solve problems alone or in groups. But what happens when the office disappears, and work invades the home? Does the concept of shared values and purpose make sense when the office and one's living room are indistinguishable? If I am working surrounded by my mother-in-law, husband and three children, should I try to interact with my coworkers beyond what is strictly related to my work?

Schein (1990: 111) defined organizational culture as a pattern of basic assumptions developed by a group in the resolution of internal or external problems, and transmitted to new members as the right way to behave in relation to similar situations.

Said author differentiates culture from organizational climate arguing that climate is a more subjective and day-a-day concept, in addition to the fact that culture reveals the profound convictions held not only by managers, but also by any other individual worker in the company or institution. He also points to the importance of socialization in the process of transmitting culture to new members of the group (Schein 1990: 115).

The other big part of culture and climate pertains to leadership, which plays a key role in the efficacy of institutions' main objectives. And precisely the situation surrounding the COVID-19 lockdown relates to these two aspects, i.e., the places related to and the physical relationship with authority in organizations. This new state of affairs will forever change how and when face-to-face work is conducted, and so managers are now asking themselves if it is possible to strengthen and protect culture and work climate within remote work environments.

We decided to study both concepts together since the most profound aspects of culture can only be observed through remote employees' behaviors. The subjective feeling that professionals have about their jobs, bosses, co-workers, offices, tasks, schedules, environments, etc. are, at the end of the day, what make up companies' real culture.

National culture as a mediator variable

Organizational climate and culture are very much related to individuals and groups' origins and identities (Veiga et al. 2000; Ilie and Ghită 2019: 154). Where we were born and raised and our childhood education are not only part of our conscience, but they also establish the parameters of our moral and value systems, the goals we seek in life, and the strengths and weaknesses of our character. For decades, Hofstede (2001) has studied the dimensions that differentiate countries from one another and established six pairs of counter values (1) power distance, (2) individualism versus collectivism, (3) masculinity versus femininity (4) uncertainty avoidance (5) long versus short-term orientation (6) indulgence versus restraint.

In this titanic project, he aimed to determine how national cultural values influence the way people work and how each country develops different types of company cultures depending on their deepest unconscious beliefs. In order to explore national culture's mediation function in this study, two culturally distant— perhaps even opposite— countries were chosen, namely Kazakhstan and Spain, in order to observe employees' demeanors and companies' organizational cultures amidst a forced telecommuting situation in each respective place.

Our personal work experience was fundamental since we live and work in the two countries examined. For many years, in different working circumstances and contexts, we have studied and analyzed the role that cultural values and managerial practices have in the day-to-day for employees in each country. When the COVID-19 emergency pushed the whole world into forced telecommuting, we realized the unique possibility before us to study the nuances of the switch that companies had to make in order to keep their organizational climates afloat (Santana 2021). We applied Hofstede’s online simulator (Figure 1), available on his webpage (www.hofstede-insights.com), to obtain an initial comparison between the countries studied and found that Kazakhstan and Spain are quite different countries. Hofstede’s six counter-values reveal recognizable (and perhaps stereotypical) aspects of each country.

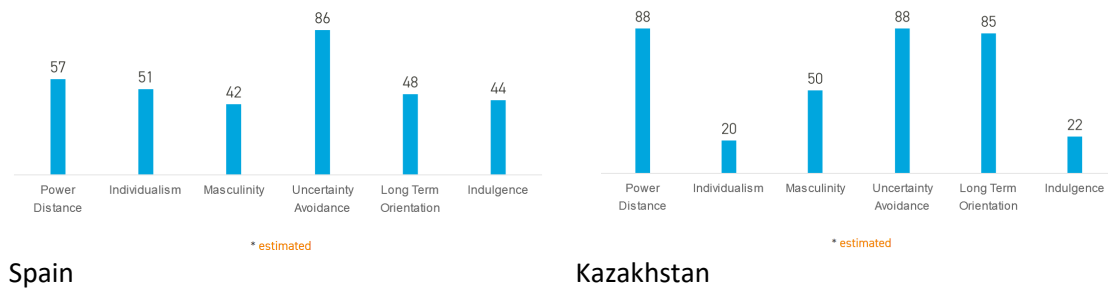


Figure 1: Results from Hofstede's national cultures simulator

For instance, to illustrate these differences, we can focus on the concept of “indigenous management” in Kazakhstan, studied by clannism HR management experts Minbaeva and Muratbekova-Touron (2013). They revisited previous studies and identified that the country has a high level of avoidance of uncertainty, is dominated by collectivism (but is gradually moving towards individualism), is high in power distance, has a higher level of particularism (social orientation) than universalism, and is quite high in context culture.

Spain, for its part, is a mostly feminine country, where conversation, emotion and care for others are present in the way people usually behave at work. A collectivist country in comparison with other European countries, but not with Kazakhstan, it is evolving into individualistic forms of being based on singular and new ways of living and working. For a Spaniard, family and friends are the most valuable things in life, even before work and health. This does not mean that everybody has a large and/or loving family. Fulfillment of the personal and individual will is important in Spain and the individual pursuit of happiness is welcome. Spaniards’ short-term orientation is part of the Spanish makeup, and the Spanish character views improvisation and flexibility as advantageous. Respect for authority and criticizing the boss are compatible in this country.

Although Spanish workers used to work all their lives, and people used to be loyal to one company, globalization has had a big impact and changing jobs throughout one’s career is now a normal practice.

Telecommuting in Spain and Kazakhstan

Spain, the Eurozone's fourth largest economy, is located in the southwest part of the continent, and its peninsular formation contributes to its idiosyncratic character. At the same time, Spain has never been alone or isolated; rather, it was fully immersed in the Roman Empire, and, after the fifteenth century, became inextricably linked to America (Marias 2014). After joining the European Union in 1986, rapid economic modernization boosted Spain’s dynamic and quickly growing economy, which recently posted four straight years of GDP growth above the EU average and emerged from a severe economic recession that began in mid-2008 (CIA 2020).

Since Spain has a reluctant, challenging past with telecommuting, we decided to focus analysis thereof precisely on the cultural factor that most marks telecommuting. Firstly, according to

Mayo, Pastor, et al. (2009), in many organizations, a leadership style based on contingent reward regulates the relationship between organizational and employee constraints and impacts the firm's decision to offer telecommuting. They also revisit theories around executives' belief that employees will not work hard unless closely supervised (Jarvenpaa 1998; Cascio 2000), a factor typical of the Spanish scenario. For this reason, such leaders might resist adopting telecommuting practices (Topi 2004). Pastor et al. argue that leading a workforce with high degrees of discretion involves adopting a congruent management philosophy that relies on results-oriented performance management systems. Another problem often named is the underdevelopment of skills needed to perform well remotely (Pulido and Martínez López 2005; Caparrós, 2022).

Going further, some researchers suggest that, in Spain, among other southern European countries, companies do not seriously consider the possibility of implementing work schedule arrangements for employees or employers (Chung and Tijdens 2012; Caparrós 2022). This factor seems plausible in the case of Spain and sheds some light on the way organizations manage telecommuting (outside of the COVID-19 outbreak) given that this modality can provide some flexibility and variety to employees. That is why, in Spain, telecommuting is less frequent compared to its European neighbors. According to official statistics, in 2019, 8.3% of employees worked from their homes at least temporarily, a 2.4% increase over 2009 (INE 2009-2019). In the first period of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Central Bank of Spain conducted research that found that almost 80% of the companies surveyed shifted to telecommuting in an immediate response to the shelter-in-place order that went into effect with the declaration of a state of emergency on March 14, 2020 (Anghel, Cozzolino & Lacuesta 2020). However, according to Eurofound (2020), these figures are among the lowest in Europe.

Kazakhstan, for its part, is the biggest country in Central Asia and the ninth-largest country in the world; it is a landlocked, transcontinental republic located on the ancient Silk Road. Many ethnicities coexist in its mosaic of cultures, amalgamated in a rich country in terms of abundant natural resources and manufacturing facilities. Previously an independent state with impressive cultural development (Minahan 1998) and nomadic roots, it was ruled for decades by Russia first and then the USSR. This subjugation came to an end when the country obtained its independence in 1991 (the last Soviet republic to do so) after the Soviet Union collapsed. The ensuing transition brought with it aggressive reform initiatives, like the liberation of trade and pricing, the privatization of state-owned enterprises, breaking up monopolies and supporting investments (Tugut and Lee 2007).

The literature on organizational culture in Kazakhstan is quite scarce and varies among scholars depending on their emphasis on various historical factors. Some authors highlight the legacy of very centralized organizations that are managed bureaucratically and autocratically. This style is an inheritance of both the Russian Empire and the USSR (Ardichvili and Gasparishvili 2001), an association reinforced by the fact that the country was the last one to gain its independence.

Other authors (Lee 2019) suggest that the country's organizational culture is based on ancient roots and political dependency, resulting in a disregard for the value of human life, a strong emphasis on traditional hierarchy, and ideological loyalty to a state-controlled economy.

In recent years, 1.6% of Kazakhstan's total labor force was engaged in telecommuting (according to the state's official labor statistics). Regarding it with suspicion, many managers see this work arrangement as difficult to control or manage, even though telecommuting is part of Article 221-1 of Kazakhstan's Labor Code. It has been estimated that, during the first days of the official state of emergency (announced by the government on March 12, 2020 and officially put into effect a week later on March 19), 75% of publicly registered companies in the country encouraged their employees to adopt telecommuting. They did so in accordance with the specifications of the nation-wide state of emergency declaration and with the related shelter-in-place order by which all offices that provide non-essential services were forced to close. In addition, among official governmental bodies, 70% of employees were forced to telecommute

during the pandemic (it should be noted that the spread of COVID-19 was higher among government officials).

As previously stated, the personal circumstances and experience of the researchers was the main motivation for the comparison. In addition, we take national culture as a key factor to compare a European country with organizational culture tradition and literature, with a Eurasian country in which there is little research on the subject prior the pandemic. The study helps draw attention and make visible the impact of a global challenge in a country in the global south that receives little attention from the scientific community, with a modern country in southern Europe.

Methodology

The questionnaire designed by psychologists Litwin and Stringer (1968) turned out to be the instrument that best suited the needs of this study. It reflects a clear understanding of organizational climate, which is defined by the authors as a set of measurable properties in the working environment (Litwin and Stringer 1968). The original questionnaire included 53 assertions, grouped around the following properties: Structure, responsibility, reward, challenges, relationships, cooperation, standards, conflict and identity. We simplified the questionnaire, eliminating two properties (cooperation and standards), and adding a new one, namely warmth and support, which Kolb first proposed along with seven factors related to a company's organizational climate (Kolb, Rubin, and McIntyre 1984). With this addition, we intended to measure employees' perceptions of a factor that we consider highly relevant to the way individuals perceive the culture that surrounds them. Considering the impact that the COVID-19 lockdown, and subsequent telecommuting arrangements, has had on relationships among employees, we found this factor important and thought it would enrich responses. We also devoted fewer assertions to each of the properties considered.

Some of the assertions were reformulated to reflect new realities in the workplace at the time that coronavirus lockdowns went into effect. With this adaptation, we hoped to ensure that participants would reveal their feelings about and impressions of how companies with diverse organizational cultures reacted according to certain patterns.

As a result, 33 assertions were proposed. All of them were evaluated on a 10-point Likert scale, from (1) strongly disagree to (10) completely agree, which was meant to provide greater variability in responses.

The survey's 33 assertions were grouped into eight properties as follows: Structure (assertions 1-5), responsibility (assertions 6-9), reward (assertions 10-13), challenge (assertions 14-16), relationships (assertions 17-21), conflict (assertions 22-26), identity (assertions 27-30), and warmth and support (assertions 31-33).

The anonymous questionnaire was translated into two languages, Spanish and Russian (one of the official languages of Kazakhstan) and distributed through the LinkedIn social network. We chose this platform because it is a global professional network that treats all employees equally, and let us extend the questionnaire to a specific profile of workers.

The study intended to capture responses from white-collar professionals with managerial profiles, including those occupying high and medium-level positions, consultants, section directors, and project managers across different industries in both the countries. From May 16-June 8, we collected 142 responses from Spain and 115 from Kazakhstan, with a total of 257 valid responses. Of those, 71 responses came from men and 186 from women, 167 had small children at home and 90 did not. 215 did not have an elderly or otherwise dependent person at home and 42 did. 28 were single, 57 lived as a couple, 61 had 3 people at home, 55 lived with 4 people at home, and 56 had 5 or more people living in the same home. 188 persons from the sample stated that they telecommuted during the COVID-19 lockdown, and 69 said that they did not. Also, the professional profile of the respondents was identified as shown in Table 1. Finally,

190 noted they have spent more hours working than usual compared to 67 that have not worked more hours than they usually do.

Freelance workers	36
Managers	44
Engineers/architects	14
Project managers	56
Technicians/Administrative support	35
University professors/School teachers	72

Table 1: Professional profile of respondents

As the data collected represented a high amount of numerical values, the statistical process started with the principal component's analysis (PCA), obtaining factorial axis. We then performed a factor analysis of those principal components using *Coheris Analytics SPAD 9.1*. This way, a normed principal component analysis -based on correlations matrix of the assertions- was applied, to figure out interrelationships among assertions. Factor loadings, i.e. factor coordinates for normed PCA, are the correlations between the assertions and the unit-scaled components. They account for 36.7% and 40.2% of the most relevant assertion total variability. Assertion factor loadings, which are the correlations between the assertions and the axes, are shown in figures and help to interpret interrelation among assertion variables (Lebart, Piron and Morineau, 2006).

Even when PCA is not a confirmatory technique, but an exploratory one, we will use it to study how the different factors considered supposed real influences, on the way people reacted under a stressful situation.

Findings

In the correlation and test values (Table 2 and 3), we observe a relevant finding that relates assertions 17-19 in the relationship property (assertions 20 and 21 were negative) to assertions 27-30 and 31-33, respectively included in the identity and warmth and support properties. That leads us to hypothesize that, because of a good climate shared between employees and bosses, and the effort that leaders and supervisors have made with their teams (motivating and giving them positive messages), the surveyed professionals felt reaffirmed in their companies' values.

At the same time, workers from both countries felt close to and understood by colleagues when necessary; they displayed noticeable flexibility and openness with their co-workers.

When analyzing the Spanish sample, the data shows a significant percentage of telecommuting workers (78.8%) whose work was not interrupted. 43% live with small children or dependent people at home, 40.8% of those surveyed worked in a university environment (as a teacher or lecturer), and 47.9% were older than 46. Another interesting factor that arose from this sample can be seen in that 82.4% of respondents expressed that they devoted more hours to their work now than under normal conditions.

In the case of Kazakhstan, our statistics indicate a younger sample: 60% of the Kazakhstani respondents reported that they were 35 years old or younger, among whom only 40.9% were able to continue his/her work at home during lockdown. Another important demographic factor arises in consideration of the fact that 92.2% of them report having children at home. The Kazakhstani sample also has 19.1% of respondents with dependent people at home. Most sectors in the sample were connected with new technologies; 29.6% were related to commerce

and 19.1% to marketing. Finally, 63.5% perceived spending more hours working during the shelter-in-place order as necessary.

Table 2: Correlations and test-values Spain

Correlation table																																						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33					
1	1.000																																					
2	0.514	1.000																																				
3	0.491	0.456	1.000																																			
4	-0.092	-0.177	0.018	1.000																																		
5	-0.194	-0.220	-0.074	0.610	1.000																																	
6	0.320	0.373	0.300	0.015	-0.034	1.000																																
7	-0.182	-0.318	-0.203	0.196	0.235	-0.605	1.000																															
8	-0.174	-0.116	-0.150	0.111	0.021	-0.087	0.245	1.000																														
9	-0.176	-0.140	-0.060	0.528	0.353	0.109	0.128	0.257	1.000																													
10	-0.113	-0.152	-0.170	0.018	-0.086	-0.020	0.011	0.220	0.069	1.000																												
11	-0.176	-0.072	-0.196	-0.136	-0.126	0.021	-0.132	0.215	-0.012	0.439	1.000																											
12	0.102	0.039	0.155	-0.160	-0.140	0.231	-0.216	-0.094	-0.113	0.024	0.161	1.000																										
13	0.437	0.445	0.378	-0.149	-0.138	0.321	-0.303	-0.187	-0.071	-0.076	0.010	0.274	1.000																									
14	-0.224	-0.221	-0.198	0.103	0.144	-0.257	0.257	0.168	0.119	0.044	-0.014	-0.151	-0.566	1.000																								
15	0.114	0.299	0.159	0.006	-0.031	0.138	-0.157	-0.045	0.070	-0.045	-0.045	0.040	0.361	-0.128	1.000																							
16	0.219	0.206	0.194	-0.039	-0.090	0.093	-0.187	-0.083	-0.027	-0.007	0.030	0.045	0.251	-0.012	0.121	1.000																						
17	0.292	0.338	0.409	0.002	-0.032	0.343	-0.253	-0.037	0.041	-0.124	-0.115	0.161	0.340	-0.160	0.229	0.157	1.000																					
18	0.372	0.373	0.407	-0.115	-0.137	0.455	-0.428	-0.227	-0.022	-0.148	-0.137	0.334	0.457	-0.344	0.244	0.251	0.433	1.000																				
19	0.416	0.472	0.486	-0.055	-0.147	0.630	-0.424	-0.279	-0.031	-0.165	-0.199	0.247	0.487	-0.346	0.138	0.149	0.490	0.747	1.000																			
20	0.066	0.146	0.072	0.135	0.066	0.132	0.034	0.324	0.106	0.224	0.168	0.007	-0.010	0.170	0.078	0.101	-0.076	-0.080	-0.011	1.000																		
21	-0.120	-0.080	0.065	-0.032	0.124	0.016	-0.072	-0.066	0.065	0.019	0.101	0.048	0.030	-0.044	0.085	0.144	-0.017	0.102	0.097	-0.075	1.000																	
22	-0.172	-0.165	-0.219	0.318	0.184	0.064	0.029	0.284	0.364	0.139	0.217	-0.001	-0.091	0.097	-0.085	0.001	-0.032	-0.072	-0.120	0.072	0.097	1.000																
23	-0.428	-0.290	-0.250	0.288	0.500	-0.180	0.228	0.135	0.335	0.019	0.064	-0.122	-0.179	0.124	-0.006	-0.053	-0.057	-0.157	-0.242	-0.003	0.277	0.391	1.000															
24	-0.291	-0.285	-0.320	0.222	0.254	-0.213	0.287	0.429	0.260	0.225	0.094	-0.109	-0.239	0.256	-0.112	-0.080	-0.209	-0.325	-0.326	0.280	0.118	0.445	0.453	1.000														
25	0.229	0.246	0.223	-0.055	-0.098	0.514	-0.465	-0.266	0.017	-0.077	0.027	0.258	0.222	-0.150	0.163	0.182	0.403	0.390	0.427	-0.175	0.089	-0.141	-0.120	-0.305	1.000													
26	-0.317	-0.264	-0.265	0.370	0.584	-0.042	0.212	0.081	0.352	0.051	0.135	-0.052	-0.229	0.102	-0.008	-0.011	-0.135	-0.151	-0.263	0.100	0.192	0.261	0.643	0.278	-0.030	1.000												
27	0.284	0.329	0.295	-0.271	-0.065	0.337	-0.330	-0.226	-0.088	-0.041	0.004	0.284	0.526	-0.354	0.204	0.281	0.319	0.511	0.527	0.015	0.294	-0.072	-0.067	-0.187	0.260	-0.158	1.000											
28	0.314	0.311	0.294	-0.283	-0.166	0.272	-0.280	-0.099	-0.066	0.009	0.052	0.165	0.520	-0.291	0.292	0.353	0.326	0.433	0.412	-0.022	0.146	-0.055	-0.053	-0.173	0.222	-0.191	0.710	1.000										
29	0.329	0.356	0.339	-0.113	-0.129	0.602	-0.504	-0.135	0.044	0.062	0.026	0.319	0.547	-0.346	0.335	0.267	0.365	0.540	0.524	0.010	0.100	-0.022	-0.171	-0.240	0.483	-0.129	0.470	0.442	1.000									
30	0.319	0.375	0.347	-0.169	-0.109	0.451	-0.438	-0.387	-0.007	-0.131	-0.095	0.351	0.486	-0.344	0.175	0.181	0.338	0.590	0.643	-0.131	0.122	-0.179	-0.114	-0.290	0.442	-0.132	0.662	0.489	0.557	1.000								
31	0.264	0.261	0.320	0.034	0.060	0.459	-0.331	-0.064	0.111	-0.008	-0.059	0.313	0.257	-0.175	0.151	0.179	0.638	0.581	0.529	-0.120	0.039	0.001	-0.111	-0.103	0.441	-0.043	0.376	0.283	0.425	0.481	1.000							
32	0.220	0.286	0.298	0.054	-0.007	0.436	-0.372	-0.033	0.095	0.008	-0.019	0.326	0.221	-0.198	0.228	0.147	0.582	0.479	0.474	-0.065	0.078	-0.015	-0.095	-0.189	0.393	0.003	0.213	0.237	0.413	0.345	0.723	1.000						
33	0.156	0.298	0.272	-0.034	-0.053	0.506	-0.453	-0.020	0.059	-0.061	-0.036	0.291	0.258	-0.266	0.218	0.132	0.536	0.496	0.430	-0.032	-0.052	-0.056	-0.119	-0.180	0.405	0.012	0.219	0.191	0.424	0.370	0.695	0.798	1.000					

Table 3: Correlation and test values: Kazakhstan

Correlation table																																					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	33				
1	1.000																																				
2	0.318	1.000																																			
3	0.700	0.246	1.000																																		
4	0.146	-0.094	0.133	1.000																																	
5	-0.158	-0.129	-0.274	0.279	1.000																																
6	0.421	0.404	0.359	-0.129	-0.027	1.000																															
7	-0.222	-0.322	-0.291	0.209	0.220	-0.330	1.000																														
8	-0.169	-0.248	-0.035	0.226	0.062	-0.344	0.429	1.000																													
9	-0.076	-0.247	-0.019	0.343	0.338	-0.082	0.242	0.238	1.000																												
10	-0.026	0.102	-0.058	0.026	0.076	0.071	-0.080	-0.060	-0.010	1.000																											
11	-0.040	-0.011	0.006	-0.067	0.095	0.135	-0.090	-0.115	0.192	0.609	1.000																										
12	0.356	0.187	0.344	0.036	-0.164	0.267	-0.196	-0.048	-0.004	-0.136	-0.139	1.000																									
13	0.357	0.235	0.425	0.164	-0.192	0.280	-0.202	-0.088	0.013	-0.062	-0.149	0.526	1.000																								
14	-0.169	-0.266	-0.304	0.055	0.261	-0.128	0.364	0.103	0.274	0.076	0.182	-0.348	-0.503	1.000																							
15	0.239	0.274	0.258	0.168	-0.157	0.216	-0.148	-0.048	0.022	-0.121	-0.184	0.342	0.544	-0.373	1.000																						
16	0.218	0.224	0.213	-0.065	-0.128	0.282	-0.183	-0.303	-0.117	0.015	0.027	0.220	0.277	-0.153	0.307	1.000																					
17	0.351	0.281	0.345	0.097	-0.097	0.244	-0.273	-0.267	-0.054	-0.049	-0.063	0.422	0.557	-0.334	0.470	0.485	1.000																				
18	0.378	0.276	0.422	0.023	-0.113	0.377	-0.278	-0.302	-0.094	-0.014	0.006	0.491	0.560	-0.317	0.485	0.408	0.706	1.000																			
19	0.415	0.337	0.491	0.108	-0.130	0.441	-0.273	-0.312	-0.085	-0.027	-0.024	0.448	0.578	-0.333	0.440	0.336	0.631	0.839	1.000																		
20	0.160	0.254	0.165	0.205	0.034	0.201	-0.040	0.129	0.204	0.058	0.051	0.224	0.304	-0.160	0.167	0.185	0.227	0.156	0.209	1.000																	
21	0.164	0.041	0.180	0.086	0.193	0.230	-0.048	-0.099	0.023	0.060	0.234	0.172	0.085	0.076	0.103	0.049	0.293	0.249	0.235	0.187	1.000																
22	-0.045	-0.210	-0.136	0.098	0.226	-0.049	0.305	0.302	0.415	-0.035	0.198	-0.090	-0.237	0.332	-0.135	-0.108	-0.240	-0.247	-0.268	0.157	0.054	1.000															
23	-0.122	-0.154	-0.037	0.220	0.427	-0.127	0.219	0.208	0.307	0.019	0.116	-0.266	-0.148	0.211	0.040	-0.074	-0.102	-0.135	-0.132	0.299	0.147	0.356	1.000														
24	-0.310	-0.345	-0.343	0.170	0.321	-0.247	0.341	0.377	0.325	-0.018	0.069	-0.209	-0.222	0.267	-0.109	-0.288	-0.309	-0.327	-0.308	0.138	-0.021	0.479	0.549	1.000													
25	0.317	0.157	0.303	-0.017	0.021	0.427	-0.291	-0.343	-0.066	0.075	0.200	0.127	0.228	-0.124	0.185	0.272	0.268	0.383	0.327	0.153	0.161	-0.053	-0.080	-0.116	1.000												
26	-0.130	-0.172	-0.086	0.398	0.418	-0.029	0.290	0.242	0.238	0.080	0.088	-0.190	-0.052	0.173	0.070	-0.060	-0.061	-0.095	-0.085	0.251	0.081	0.265	0.427	0.314	0.024	1.000											
27	0.324	0.276	0.362	0.236	-0.050	0.345	-0.252	-0.190	0.046	0.130	0.097	0.460	0.486	-0.369	0.365	0.383	0.553	0.498	0.569	0.289	0.217	-0.093	-0.006	-0.152	0.325	0.055	1.000										
28	0.358	0.328	0.322	0.013	0.006	0.450	-0.284	-0.228	-0.063	0.041	0.088	0.440	0.559	-0.436	0.400	0.244	0.471	0.495	0.487	0.292	0.201	-0.121	-0.016	-0.115	0.202	0.051	0.557	1.000									
29	0.443	0.263	0.454	0.082	-0.017	0.501	-0.378	-0.240	0.082	-0.036	0.089	0.562	0.526	-0.321	0.352	0.336	0.499	0.561	0.578	0.257	0.344	-0.051	-0.039	-0.256	0.383	-0.039	0.650	0.687	1.000								
30	0.410	0.256	0.451	0.084	-0.149	0.401	-0.379	-0.231	-0.038	0.058	0.031	0.436	0.682	-0.425	0.413	0.462	0.693	0.645	0.647	0.240	0.227	-0.172	-0.139	-0.313	0.285	-0.066	0.597	0.642	0.589	1.000							
31	0.389	0.356	0.350	0.134	-0.035	0.262	-0.160	-0.086	-0.084	-0.023	-0.045	0.436	0.367	-0.350	0.304	0.329	0.597	0.513	0.482	0.254	0.190	-0.124	-0.189	-0.248	0.212	-0.010	0.480	0.507	0.451	0.557	1.000						
32	0.414	0.301	0.428	0.130	-0.096	0.408	-0.300	-0.262	0.042	0.077	0.167	0.409	0.402	-0.173	0.205	0.472	0.553	0.571	0.585	0.203	0.338	-0.104	-0.203	-0.302	0.367	-0.073	0.547	0.409	0.592	0.639	0.589	1.000					
33	0.467	0.278	0.393	0.128	-0.070	0.358	-0.294	-0.225	0.040	-0.029	0.008	0.373	0.471	-0.254	0.285	0.481	0.630	0.568	0.549	0.301	0.187	-0.123	-0.156	-0.238	0.359	-0.037	0.485	0.425	0.508	0.693	0.635	0.799	1.000				

This finding appears coherent with the country’s demographics since Kazakhstan is a very young state— the median age is 29.3 years old (Stats 2020)— in comparison with Spain’s median age of 43.6 years old, a country that is part of Europe’s aging population trend.

Referring to the dependent variables present in the sample (Spain and Kazakhstan together), we point to some interesting results in Figures 2 and 3 as follows:

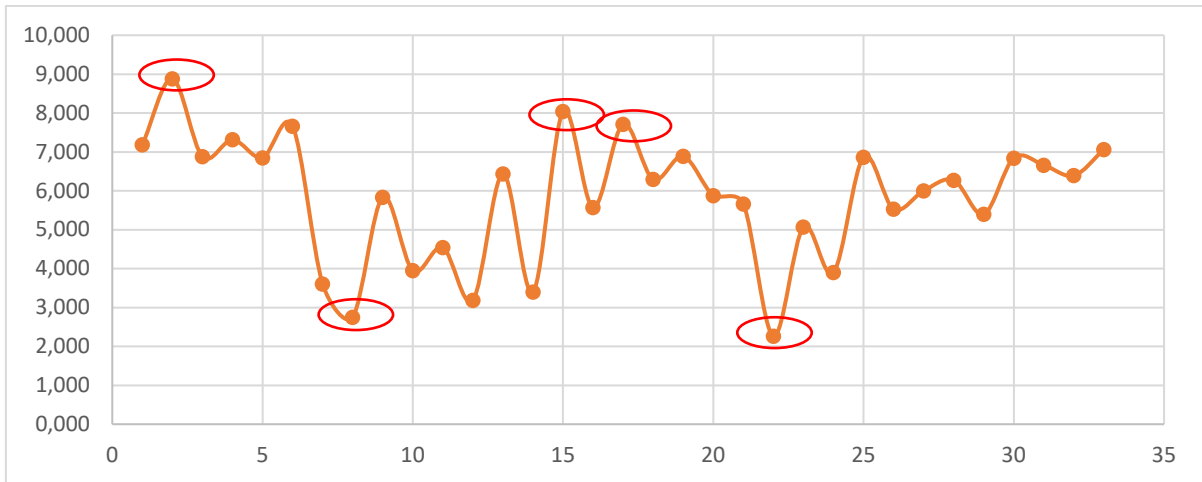


Figure 2: Distribution of professionals’ opinions (mean values)

The assertions that obtain higher rates provide us with an interesting description of the behavior that emerged during lockdown. The first result corresponds to assertion 2 on the questionnaire. As previously mentioned in the methodology section, assertion 2 is grouped in the structure property, and was written as follows: “In my company, every employee knows who his/her boss is, and to whom he/she is supposed to report at every moment.” The second peak, in this case a negative maximum, corresponds to assertion 8 in the second block of properties, namely responsibility. It asks respondents to rate their level of agreement with the following: “During lockdown, I had the feeling that my bosses wanted to control me (they called me at specific times to see if I was connected, I felt observed...)” These two initial findings may be connected by a clear sense of structure in the organization, which was already in place prior to lockdown and thus would not lead to more control during the social distancing period that employees had to comply with. On the contrary, the opposite might be more plausible, i.e., the more clarity and common understanding of leadership positions and to whom one reports, the less employees feel controlled.

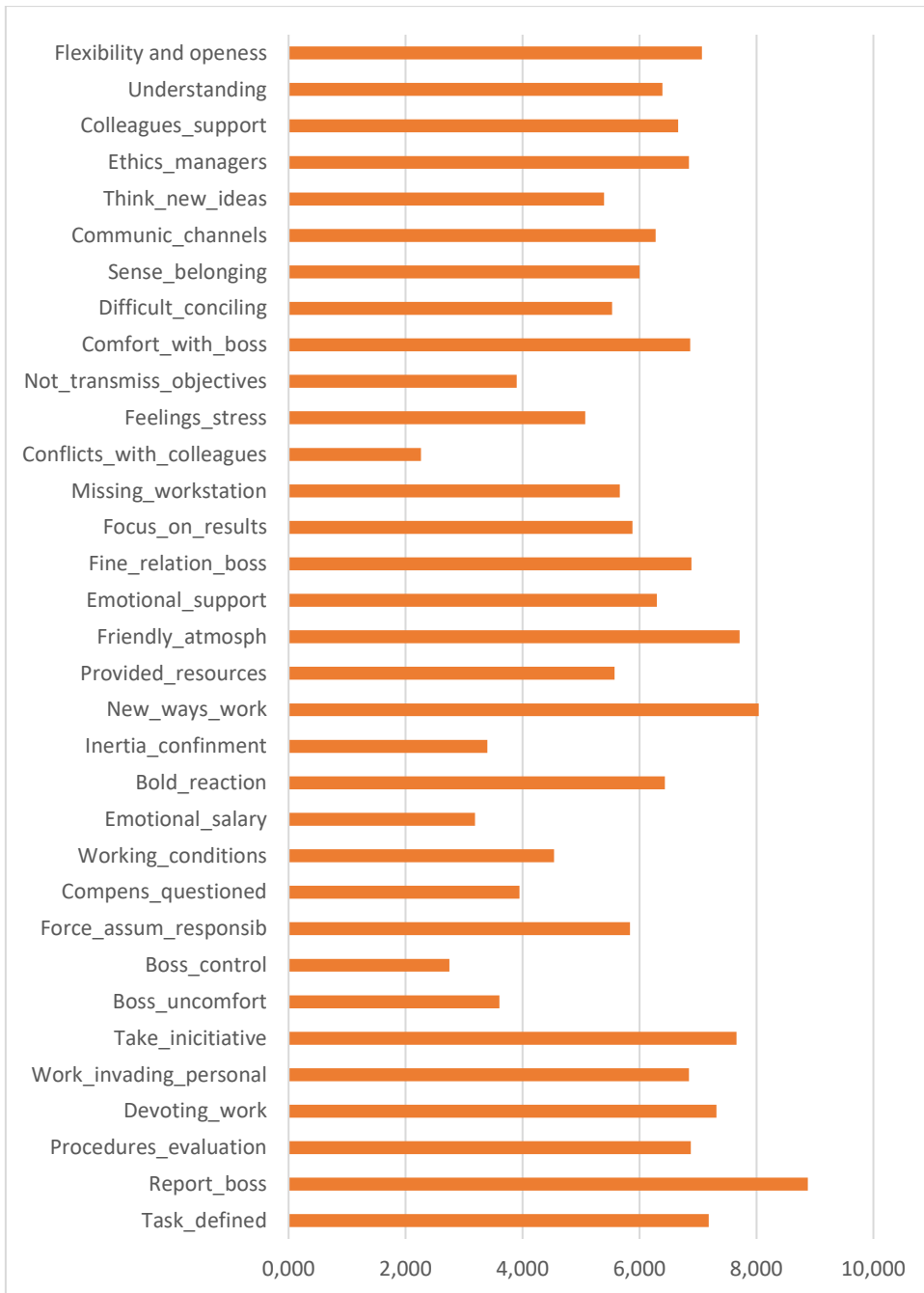


Figure 3: Presence of variables in the sample

The third response to consider is found in assertion 15, included in the challenges property, which goes as follows: “My company has promoted new forms of digital work during these months (teleworking, connection to the virtual office through remote systems, etc.)” This assertion is among the most related to the new digital environment created by a lockdown, and to organizations’ proactive response in facing this unusual challenge. This assertion highlights the positive, technical reaction that organizations had in creating an optimum scenario in terms of digital work to meet employees’ expectations and responses.

The fourth highest response is from assertion 17 in the relationships property, which states as follows: “The climate with my coworkers has been friendly and we have had the opportunity to be in contact beyond the strictly necessary aspects of work (calls, messages, conference calls, etc.)” This assertion is, in turn, highly related to the final peak we obtained— a minimum or

reverse maximum— that covers a sensitive topic included under the conflicts property. The assertion, number 22, states, “During lockdown, I have had several conflicts with my colleagues and bosses.” The contrasting responses that we obtained for these two assertions are of course related precisely because the population surveyed perceived their relationships with colleagues as one of the most valuable forms of support they received; thus, they correspondingly perceived a lack of conflict or argument during lockdown.

Now we focus in values ≥ 0.5 (Pearson correlation between variable and axis) represented in the top of figures 4 and 5. In the case of Spanish professionals, 22 of the 33 assertions were highly rated when asking about telecommuting and organizational culture. Of these 22 assertions, five belong to the structure property (assertions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5), three to responsibility (assertions 6, 7 and 9), one to reward (assertion 13), three to relationships (assertions 17, 18 and 19), four to conflict (assertions 22, 23, 24 and 25), four to identity (assertions 27, 28, 29 and 30), and two to warmth and support (assertions 31 and 32).

SPAIN	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9,13,17,18,19,22,23,25,26,27,28,29,30,31,32
KAZAKHSTAN	1,3,5,9,12,17,18,19,23,24,29,30,31,32

Table 4: Most highly rated variables from each country

The Spanish sample tended to score higher overall, choosing more assertions as representative of their situation. In this sense, the organizational culture that Spanish professionals have lived in during this period could be described as unique and enriching. The sample population highly rated four of the eight properties, including (1) structure, (2) relationships, (3) conflict, and (4) identity, meaning that those assertions (which describe real situations) adequately describe their experiences with work, colleagues, supervisors and/or bosses and with their personal and family environments.

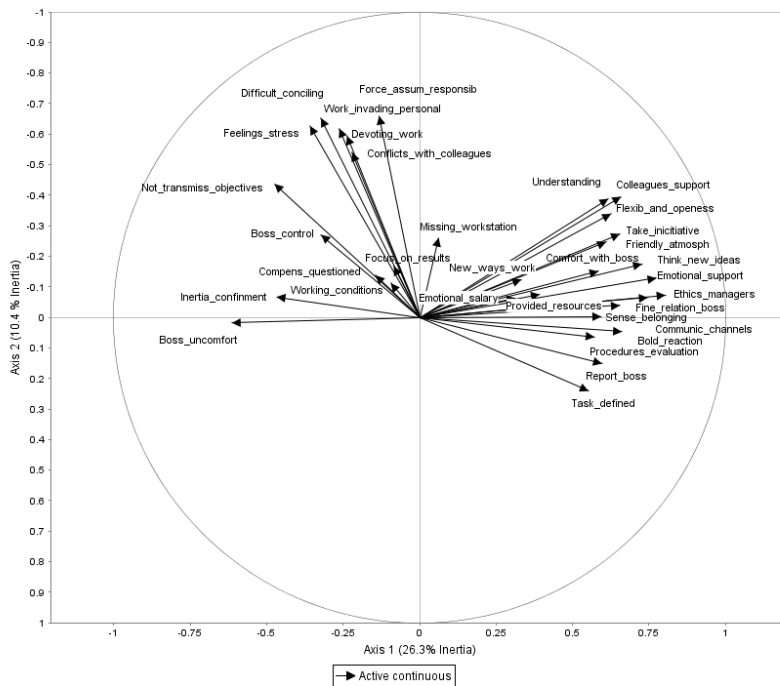


Figure 5: Principal component analysis of Spanish professionals' opinions

The first axis opposes the variables on the right to three of them on the left, which provides us with fundamental findings. The three assertions are: "If I make decisions, come up with new things or look for solutions on my own my direct bosses would feel uncomfortable with me.", "The organization in which I work has been carried away by inertia during confinement, without posing anything new, as if waiting for this stage to pass as soon as possible, to return to business as usual." and "The new digital scenario has not facilitated the transmission of objectives (communication) between me and my superiors, and on some occasions, I have felt pressured or uncomfortable.". This fact shows the interrelation of the variables on the right, as opposed to the variables on the left. Those on the right are positively intercorrelated with each other. In the same way, those on the left are positively related among themselves (except those with negative values) and those surveyed with high values in the variables on the right have low values in the variables on the left. It is also true vice versa.

The second axis shows the positive relationship between all the variables above.

Spaniards tend to articulate their concerns in a very expressive, sometimes exaggerated way. It is also not uncommon for Spaniards to want to find the party responsible for a bad situation or the culprit for things that go wrong. At the same time, the Spanish sense of solidarity allows Spaniards to catalyze their feeling of powerlessness against the common enemy that is the coronavirus.

On the contrary, figure 5 reveals a more cautious and discrete response from Kazakhstani professionals. They highly rated only two of the eight properties, namely (1) structure and (2) relationships, indicating a more prudent approach to their situation, and curiously overlapping with the two highest scoring responses from Spanish professionals.

Kazakhstani professionals highly rated 14 of the 33 assertions. Three belong to the structure properties (assertions 1, 3, and 5), one to responsibility (assertion 9), one to reward (assertion 12), three to relationships (assertions 17, 18 and 19), three to conflict (assertions 23, 24 and 25), three to identity (assertions 28, 29 and 30), and two to warmth and support (assertions 31 and 32).

Assertions referring to structure are reported below:

facilitated the transmission of objectives (communication) between me and my superiors, and on some occasions, I have felt pressured or uncomfortable.”

These suggestive results allow us to settle some findings. First, given that Hofstede’s counter value of “uncertainty avoidance” is ranked similarly for Spain and Kazakhstan (86-88) and given the results of this survey, it seems that professionals have felt comfortable ensuring that their tasks are well defined and that bosses have been helpful with subordinates, indicating rules and procedures for this new way of working. In turn, professionals have felt that work has invaded their personal lives, and that they have dedicated more time than usual to work.

Another revealing finding is that professionals in both countries did not highly rate any assertions related to challenge properties (assertions 14-16). This leads us suggest that leaders’ inertia when it comes to unexpected situations affects not only workers, but also society as a whole. They tend to keep working as close to expectations as possible and try to avoid the creation of new forms of communication, reward structures, emotional salary, and so on.

Conclusions

This paper studied organizational culture in two different countries during the COVID-19 lockdown, a stressful social and labor context that obliged entire working populations to telecommute from home.

We considered how people have coped with this new scenario, bearing in mind that one of the most relevant aspects of organizational culture and climate is the face-to-face interactions that take place in offices. With telework, that important physical relationship disappears and, since body language has its own grammar, work-related messages logically become open to misunderstanding between leaders and subordinates, as well as among peers.

We started by suggesting that national culture has a relatively important influence on organizational climate and culture. We used this "laboratory situation" of forced lockdown to research what many workers consider a utopian situation, i.e., telecommuting from home (Santana 2021; Prodanova and Kocarev 2022). Flexible work has its pros and cons, but people tend to focus on what they want and to only consider the best parts of their desired outcome, instead of developing a concrete discourse of their expectations (Cañibano 2019; Morilla-Luchena et al. 2021).

The first finding herein points to the fact that the same experience had different consequences in these two different places, which can be traced back to national-cultural values. Spain and Kazakhstan share some common values and, at the same time, are culturally opposite.

People fear uncertainty and one of the best ways to avoid this feeling is to provide them with technical and emotional support to manage a situation. According to other literature (Sapta, Muafi & Setini 2021) during the COVID-19 lockdown, professionals from both countries (Spain and Kazakhstan) expected their bosses to be assertive, driven, attentive and encouraging. And it seems they got just that.

Secondly, a robust structure is mandatory for feeling secure: workers reported devoting more hours to telecommuting at home and even felt that their jobs were invading their personal lives, but they handled it because they knew to whom they should report. Procedures, rules, and methods were clear enough to avoid uncertainty. They even invented new rituals, patterns and practices that helped to reinforce their sense of belonging to the team. On top of this, in their responses, they noted that leaders acted consistently, even admirably, during lockdown and, for this reason, they gained their subordinates’ respect.

Facing a common enemy— the coronavirus— seems to have made workers more positive and less prone to complaining. Workers have been resolute and have tried their best not only in their individual work, but also with their co-workers and teams.

Finally, responses from female participants more than doubled those from males in this sample. Women are assumed to prefer flexible working conditions so that they can better take care of children and/or elderly or dependent persons, but this could just be a long-standing bias. On the other hand, the incorporation of women into professional life has feminized work environments, translating into more concern for workers' personal circumstances and more awareness of the human relationships therein. Thus, independent of the country studied, gender is another factor to consider for future research.

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