


Chapter 17


Determinants of Teleworking Continuance Intention in a Pandemic Context: The Case of the Tunisian Companies

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ABSTRACT

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated home confinement restrictions have prompted companies to start or increase working from home. With the gradual deconfinement, the question arises whether companies wish to perpetuate this practice, which has been irregular since the start of the crisis. Thus, this chapter aims to explore the determinants of teleworking adoption during COVID-19 pandemic and the intentions of Tunisian companies to continue following the relaxation of policies. An empirical investigation through qualitative research was conducted. The results show that managers of the companies surveyed expressed satisfaction and intend to continue teleworking adoption in light of better organization/regularization of this practice. This intention can be determined by several factors, which are grouped into five categories: individual characteristics, job characteristics, technological factors, organizational factors, and environmental factors.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, companies operate in an increasingly competitive and uncertain environment (Moussa & El Arbi, 2020). Terrorist attacks, economic downturns, global financial crises, competitive market un-

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certainties, and political and social instabilities threaten their competitiveness and survival (Bouaziz & Hachicha, 2018). To these constraints and instabilities, a health crisis has just been added, with the appearance of the coronavirus in Wuhan, China, since the end of December 2019. The virus has spread all over the world. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) designated it as a COVID-19 pandemic. This mentioned pandemic has prompted governments around the world to take the situation seriously and prepare for waves of health emergencies by adopting several measures, including nationwide containment in many countries (WHO, 2020).

The exceptional confinement situation imposed due to COVID-19 has caused a sudden upheaval in the course of events. For the first time in history, half of humanity is restricted by two basic rights: freedom of movement and freedom of association. This upheaval has endangered the activities of several companies. However, it was the trigger for a radical transformation at several levels of other companies of which the switch to telework and the use of remote work can be cited as examples.

In fact, companies have been forced into a dilemma between maintaining the health of their employees according to hygiene protocols, on the one hand, and ensuring business continuity, which depends on hygiene measures, on the other hand. To deal with this situation, many employees have been invited to work from home by applying remote working or teleworking. Teleworking can be defined as the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) - smart phones, tablets, laptops and desktops - to perform tasks outside the employer's premises (Fernandez et al., 2014). This practice has many benefits for both employees and companies. As examples, authors (Agrawal et al., 2020; Daniels et al., 2001; Nguyen, 2021) cited some advantages including reduction of commuting, increased concentration of workers on their tasks, more flexible working hours and greater job autonomy from the employees' side. From the company side, they mentioned improved productivity, lower absenteeism, improved employee retention, greater staffing flexibility, quicker responsiveness to the needs and unexpected man-made and natural disasters, and greater resilience to disruption from extreme weather or earthquakes. In this regard, teleworking was widely adopted to ensure the continuity of companies' activities under the COVID-19 pandemic. Statistics have shown an exponential increase of teleworking adoption during the confinement periods (Abulibdeh, 2020; Agba et al., 2020). It is considered as a crucial practice for both the private and public sectors in maintaining and sustaining the economy and work activities (Abulibdeh, 2020).

However, it seems that organizations preferred to return to the normal state with the deconfinement. At the end of the year 2021, telework falls to the lowest level since the start of the pandemic: only 8% of those employed stay at home on a regular basis (Figueroa et al., 2022). The latter author stated that once contagions are controlled, companies are prioritizing going back to the office and the percentage of remote working has been declining. Google, Twitter, Facebook, and Amazon are examples of large high-tech companies that have pivoted to telecommuting and ordered a return to local offices.

As in almost all the countries of the world, teleworking was experienced in Tunisia, in an emergency case and without previous preparation. The Tunisian minister of Technology, Communication and Digital Transformation (2020) had noted that the practice of teleworking has imposed itself, making an encouraging start. According to the minister, companies from the ICT sector were among the first to adopt it. Thus, the migration from face-to-face to remote work has been extensive, sometimes reaching up to 100% of the workforce.

With the gradual deconfinement in Tunisia, the issue of teleworking is gradually decreasing. Now, the question is whether Tunisian companies wish to perpetuate this practice, which has been irregular since the start of the crisis.

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