

Physical Distance and Internal Communication Quality: A Phenomenological Exploration of Telecommuters' Communication Experiences

Introduction: The demand for work-from-home jobs increased after the COVID-19 Pandemic. While Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) mediated interactions, such as email, are essential to companies' daily operations, none of the current ICTs can perfectly mimic face-to-face interactions. Total substitution of in-person interactions by ICT-mediated ones may lead to problems related to companies' capability to develop their activities due to internal communication challenges.

Goals and Methods: This study explores how full-time home-based telecommuters perceive their communication experiences of building a shared understanding of their role in the company, their contributions, and their performance evaluation. Following a transcendental phenomenological strategy, 23 semi-structured online interviews mediated by Zoom were conducted. Through purposeful and snowball sampling, five full-time home-based telecommuters, who were part of the researchers' professional network, were invited to participate, and based on their indications, the other 18 participants were contacted. After interview transcriptions, a thematic analysis was performed.

Results: Contrary to previous studies, results demonstrate that physical distance does not limit employees' communication capabilities. Employees experienced improved communication quality as they gained access to more media options than they used to have while working in person, despite not entirely replacing face-to-face interactions, especially for social occasions. Employees could evaluate each media's main characteristics and choose the most appropriate for each situation. The main communication problems arise from a lack of clarity, consistency, and information segregation, which are unrelated to physical distance.

Conclusions: Nowadays, a significant part of communications is ICT-mediated. For the participants, their location has little perceived impact on their communication experiences but they perceive a link between internal communication problems and poor management. Therefore, work-from-home does not necessarily increase internal communication challenges.

Keywords: Phenomenology. Online Interview. Internal Communication.