

**SOFT SKILLS AND SPIRITUALITY AT WORK IN A TELEWORK SCENARIO:
PERCEPTIONS FROM BRAZILIAN TELEWORKERS**

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INTRODUCTION

The world has been changing at a fast pace due to the technological revolution and the sanitary crisis with the Sars-Covid 19 since 2020. The firms and enterprises have been in constant adaptation ever since. Due to it, it is necessary a combination of soft skills and hard skills to be successful in the working place (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Dixon, Belnap, Albretch and Lee, 2010; França & Mellet, 2016; Gillan, Koch and Starks., 2021; Hassan, Maharoff and Zainal, 2013). While hard skills are abilities such as academic, experience, technical expertise, soft skills are related to human skills, interaction, communication, and behavior (Wats & Wats, 2009).

Soft skills have different definitions on the literature, regarding the concept of skills and their categorization as soft (Matteson, Anderson and Boyden, 2016; Swiatkiewicz, 2014). Nevertheless, there are skills frequently found in studies, communication, interpersonal skills, ethics and teamwork. All of those studies were performed in traditional working conditions, but what about soft skills in homeworking?

Teleworking was already considered an important topic by academia and organizations, and COVID-19 pandemic made it even more so (Dey, Frazis and Loewenstein, 2020; Góes, Martins and Nascimento, 2021; Nguyen & Armoogum, 2021; Routley, 2020; Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt, 2021; Yassenov, 2020). By the year 2000, it was expected that teleworking would be a revolution on the workplace, the virtual organization being the next stage to be developed (Baruch & King Joan Yuen, 2000). Two decades have passed and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has changed abruptly the way people work. Employees were required to telecommute, regardless their willingness to, a fact that will have its impacts felt by teleworkers and employers in the future (Gorlick, 2020).

In this study, the authors chose as a reference Robles soft skills inventory (2012), who studied executive's perceptions on the most important soft skills to have in the workplace as a basis to study the teleworkers's perceptions of them. The researchers added the concept of spirituality in the workplace as intra-personal soft skill to the inventory, which to Duchon and Plowman (2005) is a concept related to the human need of feeling purpose, finding meaning and connection at work, to see if the sample perceive it as relevant in the scenario. Literature on soft skills, spirituality and teleworking are the basis of this study, aiming to evaluate soft skills importance in current days: not only the teleworking shift was imposed rather than chosen by the employees, but all aspects of life were also brought to home scenario, not only office. The current predicament lead to questions that guide this research: What are the soft skills necessary to be successful in a teleworking scenario? Is workplace spirituality perceived as important when teleworking? Which skills gain or lose importance on teleworking?

The sample of Brazilian teleworkers perceives integrity, responsibility and work ethic as the most important in a teleworker, which can indicate that teleworkers need high morals and self-motivation to extract the benefits of working-from-home. Despite spirituality could be a good framework to manage relationship and connection with other workers, it wasn't perceived as important by the sample. At last, the sample considered communication, responsibility teamwork and flexibility to gain the most importance while personal presentation, spirituality, courtesy and positive attitude to lose importance in the shift from traditional to teleworking. Based on those findings, the researchers propose some actions to help employers and employees to better the experience with teleworking.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVE

Literature on soft skills, spirituality and teleworking is the basis of this study, aiming to evaluate soft skills importance in current days: not only the teleworking shift was imposed rather than chosen by the employees, but all aspects of life were also brought to a home scenario, not an only office. The current predicament leads to questions that guide this research: What are the soft skills necessary to be successful in a teleworking scenario? Is workplace spirituality perceived as important when teleworking? Which skills gain or lose importance on teleworking?

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Soft skills

The literature in the last two decades presents great shifts in the perception of companies and academics regarding the importance of soft skills and hard skills, the latter which were considered the only explanatory factors for success in the working place, an opinion that is not supported anymore (Dean, 2017; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kyllonen, 2013). Wats and Wats (2009) define in general, what categorize as the two types of skills “Hard skills are academic skills, experience and level of expertise while soft skills are self-developed, interactive, communication, human and transferable skills”. Today’s employees that strive to find success in the workplace need to show both of them, as they are complementary and requested by companies in recruitment and for career advancement (Deepa & Seth, 2013; Dixon et al., 2010; França & Mellet, 2016; Hassan et al., 2013).

Deepa and Seth (2013) put soft skills as “an umbrella term covering various survival skills”, which is very fitting, as there are many skills and behaviors put under it by studies in the last two decades or so, which ends up being a problem, as there is a lack of a clear concept of what soft skills are. The unclear concept and variety of perceived skills come to the detriment to studies in the field, which is shown by the number of works that contradict each other, both in what is conceptually right to be called skills and which one of those can be categorized as soft ones (Matteson et al., 2016; Swiatkiewicz, 2014).

Despite this lack of cohesion, multiple studies using different methods found some skills that were frequently in soft skills list or inventories, examples given by Matteson et al. (2016) being “sociability, self-management, communication skills, ethics, diversity sensitivity, teamwork skills, problem-solving or critical thinking abilities, customer service competencies, emotional intelligence, and leadership skills”. It is possible to find the mentioned overlap in inventories like Robles (2012), who gathered executive’s perceptions on the most important soft skills to have in the workplace, ending up with integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, interpersonal skills, professionalism, positive attitude, teamwork skills, flexibility and work ethics. Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteche, Bremner, Greven and Furnham (2010), based on the Goldsmith Review Of Assessment, developed an inventory to measure how important students deemed soft skills for their success, it contained “self-management, communicational, interpersonal, team-working skills, the ability to work under pressure, imagination/creativity, critical thinking, willingness to learn, attention to detail, taking responsibility, planning and organizing skills, insight, maturity, professionalism and emotional intelligence”. Pazil and Razak (2019), after a systematic review on papers that studied the necessary soft skills possessed by graduates in Asia as perceived by employers, found 11 domains: “communication skills, entrepreneurial skills, interpersonal skills, lifelong learning skills, management skills, numeracy skills, problem-solving skills, professional ethics and moral skills, self-management skills, technological skills, and thinking skills”.

It is possible to see commonalities between them like the presence of communication in every list, interpersonal skills, teamwork and ethics being in the majority of the lists. The perceived importance of the before mentioned studies is seen as impactful on the literature, which will be discussed for the rest of this segment.

Communication skills are key to success in the workplace, as employees spend a great deal of their time relaying and receiving information, being efficient in the process is important. There are different ways of communication, oral and written may come to mind first, but listening, presenting and gesturing are important as well (Dean, 2017). Reflecting this view there is a sizable amount of literature on the topic that shows the perceived importance of communication skills ranging from the workplace to the academy (Dixon et al., 2010; França & Mellet, 2016; John, 2009;; Pazil & Razak, 2019; Robles, 2012; Seetha, 2014; Swiatkiewicz, 2014). Ahmed, Capretz and Campbell(2012) did documental research on job opportunities in the IT industry from North America, Europe, Asia and Australia and found that good communication skills were viewed as highly important for all the positions and countries. Similar studies in other locations in South America found that communication and proficiency in languages are important too (França & Mellet, 2016; Maturro, 2013). Pazil and Razak (2019) in their meta-analysis found that 18 of 21 had communication as one of its key points. It was ranked as the second most important skill in Robles's (2012) inventory, receiving a 5 evaluation in a 1 to 5 Likert scale survey by 91,2% of the respondents, the other 8,8% were all 4s.

Teamwork is another skill that is frequently found in lists (Jardim, Pereira, Vagos, Direito and Galinha, 2020; Maturro, 2013; Robles, 2012; Seetha, 2014). Its perceived importance is high in most studies, despite having more mixed results than communication. In the studies that researched job descriptions for the IT industry, teamwork was one of the most frequent necessary traits for almost all positions (Ahmed et al., 2012; França & Mellet, 2016; Maturro, 2013). Seetha (2014) interviewed executives from multiple industries in Malaysia and gathered six critical soft skills for graduate students to possess, those being “communication skills, analytical skills, positive attitude, teamwork, leadership skills and interpersonal skills”, which the follow-up survey showed that teamwork was only less relevant than communication and positive attitude. Regarding Robles (2012), the respondents viewed teamwork as one of the less important skills presented, with only 43, 9% of answers being the max evaluation of five.

Interpersonal skills are more abstract and encompass a lot more than the last two, and can even encompass them, depending on the varying definitions found in different studies (Pazil & Razak, 2019; Robles, 2012). In a broader sense, Hayes (2002) defines them “as goal-directed behaviors used in face-to-face interactions to bring about a desired state of affairs”. In Pazil and Razak’s (2019) review, it was present in 19 of 21 studies, the most frequent one of the 11 fields found. Robles's (2012) definition of interpersonal skills landed itself as the fifth most important one regarding the perception of the executives, where 61,4% of them deemed it as extremely important. In Seetha's (2014) research, it shared the middle spot of the list with teamwork.

Ethics in the workplace is another highly abstract concept that can have multiple interpretations and parts attached to it. In Merriam-Websters web dictionary, the word Ethical is associated with four definitions: “of or relating to ethics”, “involving or expressing moral approval or disapproval”, “conforming to accepted standards of conduct” and “of a drug: restricted to sale only on a doctor's prescription” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). The first and fourth are not of interest for the present study, as it is not trying to contribute to the field of Ethics not it does have anything to do with prescription drugs. The second and third definitions on the other hand fit in with the Ethics found in the workplace, the second being more in line with what is acceptable for the individual and society and the latter regarding following the enterprise’s code of conduct and formally established rules. With that in mind, is possible to put two skills from Robles’s inventory on this definition, the first one being Integrity and the

second Work Ethic. Integrity, in this case, resembles more of the definition that relies on approval based on that person or group's morality, while Work Ethics relies more on the conduct expected and formalized on the company. The results from the survey are contrasting, with integrity being ranked first with 93% of the respondents giving it the highest score and work ethic being the lowest-ranked with 36.8% (Robles, 2012). A study in Portugal measured the perception of workers regarding the importance of ethic/moral skills in comparison with hard and soft skills using a survey, finding in that context, that moral skills were not as important (Swiatkiewicz, 2014).

Spirituality

Spirituality in the workplace has been recognized as an important factor with an impact on performance (Duchon & Plowman, 2005). The definition of the concept of workplace spirituality is related to the understanding that employees have their own values and seek purpose, meaning and connection at work. It is important to differentiate religion from spirituality: according to the authors, religion is an organized belief system while spirituality is the search for meaning and community (Duchon & Plowman, 2005). Joseph and Sailakshmi (2011) converge on the definition that spirituality has no connection with religion.

Workplace spirituality is about seeking meaning and purpose and being connected to other people. The aspects of purpose at work and belonging are intertwined. Finding purpose in work, understanding it as significant, can be the relationship between some aspects: (1) by admiring the organization's mission and values, going beyond economic aspects; (2) for performing meaningful tasks that produce satisfaction and joy; (3) for having leaders with attitude and character who sustain a meaningful environment (Duchon & Plowman, 2005).

As for the aspect of spirituality in the workplace linked to the feeling of community, the importance of connecting with other people is highlighted, interpersonal relationships that make the employee feel part and not just present. In this aspect, the leadership practices that build this feeling are discussed, making the group cohesive and productive.

Taking as a starting point the definition that leadership is the art of mobilizing other people to fight for shared aspirations (Kouzes & Pozner (1987), p.30, in (Duchon & Plowman, 2005)). The role of leaders can be transformative because when they value inner life, meaningful work and connections as a community, their employees tend to value these ideas as well and feel encouraged to express their spirituality (Duchon & Plowman, 2005). Fry's (2003) spiritual leadership model brings the role of the leader to the connection between spirituality and performance.

Joseph and Sailakshmi (2011) show that developing spirituality at work is related to developing intrapersonal and interpersonal soft skills such as responsibility, self-awareness and team spirit. According to Matteson et al.(2016), soft skills can be interpersonal, between individuals; or intrapersonal, within an individual. Skill is the ability to access knowledge and use to perform an action or a task, therefore, knowing ourselves and understanding situations that affect us in certain ways, could be an intrapersonal skill, when enabling us to be aware and act accordingly (Matteson et al., 2016).

Teleworking

Being first introduced in the mid-'70s by Nilles (1976), interest in teleworking is booming, both in academia and in the daily life of workers, which can be confirmed by a quick search on Scopus or Google Trends. Advancements in IT and changes to the economy based on information are important to this change, but COVID-19 was the main factor in this swift paradigm shift (Dey et al., 2020; Góes et al., 2021; Nguyen & Armoogum, 2021; Routley, 2020; Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt, 2021; Yassenov, 2020).

The multiple names used interchangeably like teleworking, telecommuting, and remote work, coupled with different fields of study and the existence of numerous conceptualization makes the comparison of studies regarding telecommuting complicated (Allen Golden and Shockley, 2015; Baruch & King Joan Yuen, 2000). As previously said, teleworking as a concept has been on the radar for some time, and having in mind the nuances of the term and its variations, the authors think that the following one is the most complete:

Telecommuting is a work practice that involves members of an organization substituting a portion of their typical work hours (ranging from a few hours per week to nearly full-time) to work away from a central workplace—typically principally—from home using technology to interact with others as needed to conduct work tasks. (Allen et al., 2015, p. 44)

The previous definition encapsulates the multiple variables that are important to keep in mind while studying the topic, which is the amount of time, spent telecommuting, where they commute, if the commuter is a member of the organization or is outsourced and the need to use IT as a medium. It is important to keep in mind the conditions of the telecommuting space, as a lack of appropriate working space and other factors like occasional face-to-face with the team can lead to different results than those achieved in optimal conditions of home office (Gorlick, 2020). At last, the type of job and how well it can be performed through digital means, the familial structure that the worker has a home and his or her fit with the working model are important variables to be aware of (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997). Concerning the type of job, the pandemic attracted major attention to the impossibility of a sizable amount job posts to be adaptable to teleworking conditions with research confirming that mainly high paying jobs have the opportunity to go remote (Dingel & Neiman, 2020; Saltiel, 2020; Yassenov, 2020).

Regarding possible impacts of teleworking, Baruch (2000) provides a list of positive and negative ones, based on who is going to be affected by them. First, are the ones affecting the worker, influence on stress levels and productivity are common concerns. The second group is the effects on organizations; examples are impacts on cost, flexibility and changes in productivity. The last one is on a national scale, major predictions being that higher quantities of telework should reduce pollution and traffic accidents and it could create a society with more cases of isolated individuals.

Individual performance is one of the most documented outcomes of teleworking and its effects have been shown in previous studies to be positively related to supervisor and objective measures of performance while self-reported measurements have a mix of non-significant and positive results (Allen et al., 2015; Baruch, 2001; Vega, Anderson and Kaplan, 2015)

The impact of teleworking on job satisfaction has many mediational variables found in previous literature and taking them into consideration, teleworking seems to have a positive effect on job satisfaction when done at moderate levels and the correct circumstances (Allen et al., 2015; Vega et al., 2015). Morganson, Major, Oborn, Verive and Heelan (2010) observes that teleworking arrangements performed at home tend to have similar levels of satisfaction as working in the main office.

Stress and mental health are frequently on the scope of studies regarding telework. Two systematic reviews present a reduction in work-related stress (Allen et al., 2015; Baruch, 2001). Other works show that wellbeing can be positively affected by telecommuting and it is moderated by personality traits like openness to experience and the workers tendency to ruminate (Anderson, Kaplan and Vega, 2015).

Isolation is a recurring problem that comes to mind of both researchers and workers when the topic is teleworking. Previously research on the subject found that isolation is one of the main problems perceived by workers and is moderated by variables like the amount of telework done and the workplace culture (Allen et al., 2015; Baruch, 2001). The research found

that organizational support reduces social isolation levels, which affects raises stress levels and reduces job satisfaction (Bentley et al., 2016).

Another frequently brought up problem in discussions is that teleworkers can often find their visibility and promotion prospects impaired while working remotely (Baruch, 2000). Results both on subjective performance and objective ones like wages are mixed and few and far between (Allen et al., 2015). Recent studies find that teleworkers in the US have a premium on wages, which depends on variables like gender, industry and the intensity of the teleworking (Pabilonia & Vernon, 2020).

Telecommuting impacts on organizational performance are less researched by the academy, with the few researches done pointing to positive results (Allen et al., 2015). Bloom's study on a call center show that home office can lead to expressive cost reductions and other benefits to the enterprise, like lower turnover rates and higher productivity (Bloom, 2014). Outside of academics, Global Workplace Analytics compiled information from different studies that supported claims of cost reduction and performance enhancement on firms (Global Workplace Analytics, n.d.).

On the societal side, pollution seems to be the major benefit perceived stemming from the reduction of traveling and emission of polluting gases. A systematic review shows that accounting for the effects on impacts on greenhouse gases reduction is more complex than previously thought and that current researches are not enough to conclude if telework reduces emissions and energy use or not as results are mixed (O'Brien & Yazdani Aliabadi, 2020).

With all that in mind, the current situation of many workers going into compulsory telecommuting because of COVID-19 paired with the lack of correct working conditions at home has and will continue to generate multiple problems that range from performance ones to mental health (Gorlick, 2020; Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt, 2021). This change in paradigm and its impacts will take some time to be correctly captured by the academia.

Soft skills, Spirituality at work and Telework in current days

The research conducted by Baruch and Yuen (2000) comparing the willingness to opt for teleworking, according to the United Kingdom and Hong Kong employees who work on small companies in the high technology industry, demonstrated that both groups tended to opt for teleworking on a part-time scheme. Skills that make a good teleworker, according to this study, are self-motivation, independence, time management and reliability.

Another research conducted by Baruch (2000) interviewing teleworkers in the United Kingdom analysis the impact on effectiveness, quality of working life, and family life. The interviews contents one open question about the skills necessary to be a teleworker, the main skills presented are self-discipline; self-motivation; ability to work on own; tenacity; organized person; self-confidence; time management; integrity; and communication skills (Baruch, 2000).

By the year 2000, it was expected that teleworking would be a revolution in the workplace, the virtual organization being the next stage to be developed. Teleworking was increasing among companies, but not as much as predicted by futurists (Baruch & King Joan Yuen, 2000).

Teleworking could be a good arrangement if the following conditions are met: the employee personality and attitudes, the job fit, the organizational culture and the home and family interface Baruch and Yuen (2000).

Two decades have passed and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has changed abruptly the way people work. Employees were required to telecommute, regardless of their willingness to. In the United States, it was estimated that 95% of Americans were working from home in April 2020 (Yasenov, 2020). Globally, it is estimated that one-third of employees switched to teleworking due to COVID-19 from March to April 2020 (Dey et al., 2020).

Previous literature about teleworking was not enough to consider the complexity of the situation: not only the shift was imposed rather than chosen by the employees, but all aspects of life were also brought to a home scenario, not an only office one. Teleworking was about home office while COVID-19 was about home life and carried insecure feelings regarding volatility and uncertainty the world was facing.

Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt (2021) present in their study challenges such as the combination of work with childcare, household duties and family demands, and the lack of a proper space to perform telework, rather than improvising on dining tables and couches. The ability to focus despite noise and interruption is considered an important skill in this scenario (Toniolo-Barrios & Pitt, 2021).

METHODOLOGY

To find which soft skills the Brazilian teleworkers deem to be more important, this research uses an exploratory and quantitative approach. This study brings new insight in studying soft skills and teleworking together, which makes exploratory research is adherent to the proposition, as the study of the importance of soft skills perceived in telecommuting is understudied, statement that is especially true for studies in Brazil (McGregor, 2020). Furthermore, the study uses an online anonymous survey as the data-gathering tool to fuel up the descriptive analysis in the results section.

The first important methodological step in this paper was to choose which soft skill inventory to use as the basis for the survey. After searching in the literature, the inventory that best fitted this paper's proposition was Robles's (Robles, 2012). The paper is one of the most cited ones in soft-skills literature and had its construction based on specialist's perceptions on which soft skills were the most important to have in the workplace. The fact that his paper was focused on the workplace but is not limited to one industry fits the study's main question well too. As previously mentioned in the literature review, the inventory in question is composed of ten skills, them being: "sociability, self-management, communication skills, ethics, diversity sensitivity, teamwork skills, problem-solving or critical thinking abilities, customer service competencies, emotional intelligence, and leadership skills" (Robles, 2012).

To evaluate the perception of the importance of spirituality at work, the researchers added spirituality to the inventory, as a soft skill based on Duchon and Plowman (2005) definition of spirituality at work. In addition, the skill presented by Robles as professionalism was named personal presentation, with a few changes on the description. During the pilot questionnaire, respondents suggested that respondents, who could feel stereotype profile, could wrongly receive this skill. To avoid this interpretation and clarify that this skill regards professional attitude, the authors did the change.

The next step was to decide the sample to apply the survey. With the study subject in mind, the sample was first restricted to full or part-time Brazilian teleworkers. The researchers employed a convenience sample gathering the responses via the social media platform LinkedIn and e-mail and paired it with a snowball sampling technique, asking the volunteers to share the questionnaire with other possible respondents that fitted the restriction (Saunders, Mark; N.K. Lewis, Philip; Thornhill, 2019).

The online survey was open for 20 days from 21/05/2021 to 08/06/2021 and amassed 177 responses. The questionnaire consisted of three parts, the first one was demographic questions composed by the participant's gender, their age group, enterprise size based on the classification by Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Economico e Social (BNDES), if the respondent lives alone and if they live with their children. The second part of the questionnaire was a means to find which soft skills from the inventory is more important for telecommuting in the vision of the respondents and used 5 points Likert scale to measure it, the points going

from extremely important (5) to very important (4), important (3), of little importance (2) and not important (1). In the third and last part, the respondents were asked to choose up to three soft skills from the inventory which the importance they deemed to have gone up and three that had gone down on the current teleworking paradigm.

RESULTS ANALYSIS

Results

The results section is going to be divided into three parts, the first one discussing which soft skills are perceived as more important by Brazilian teleworkers and the second part is going to analyze the skills that were the most impacted by the change to remote work. The third part discusses the overall results and summarizes the finding, categorizing the skills: (1) high importance skill, gained even more importance in teleworking, (2) medium importance skill, lost importance in teleworking, (3) medium importance skill, a debate about losing or gaining importance in teleworking, (4) low importance skill, lost importance in teleworking.

Regarding the demographic information of the participants, the first one asked was their genre, with 59,3% of the respondents declaring themselves as female and 40,7% as male. Age-wise, the participants mainly fell on the age group of 35 to 50, with 52% of the respondents being in this group, 26 to 35 corresponded for 29,9%, 18 to 25 14,1% and 50 years and up only 4%. The researchers used the classification by BNDES (BNDES, n.d.) to account for company size, big sized enterprises (R\$300 million + in operational revenue) accounted for 61,6% of the answers, 15,8% didn't know the information, 13% were medium-sized (R\$4,8 to R\$300 million), 7,3% were small (R\$ 360,000 up to R\$ 4,8 million) and only 2,3% were micro (less than R\$ 360,000). Lastly, 83,6% of the respondents live with other people and 65,5% of them don't have children of scholar age living with them.

The importance of soft skills perceived by teleworkers

As previously stated, the survey had 177 responses from Brazilian teleworkers that expressed their opinion by rating on a 5 point Likert scale the soft skills present in Robles's work. Table 1 resumes the answers capture by the Likert scale and present the descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Survey responses and descriptive statistics.

Skill	1	2	3	4	5	% of 5	M	SD
Integrity	0	1	4	13	159	89,93	4,864	0,4443
Responsibility	0	0	3	29	145	81,92	4,802	0,4400
Work Ethic	2	0	7	29	139	78,53	4,712	0,6498
Communication	0	0	6	41	130	73,45	4,701	0,5283
Teamwork	1	3	13	47	113	63,84	4,514	0,7546
Flexibility	0	5	14	54	104	58,76	4,452	0,7607
Courtesy	0	2	14	64	97	54,80	4,446	0,6898
Interpersonal	0	5	23	62	87	49,15	4,305	0,8031
Positive attitude	3	9	32	62	71	40,11	4,068	0,9688
Spirituality	12	9	50	56	50	28,25	3,695	1,1370
Personal presentation	5	20	51	60	41	23,16	3,633	1,0475

Source: the authors

Integrity, responsibility and work ethic came on top in the perception of the teleworkers, all of them with at least 95% of the respondents deeming "extremely important" or "very important". The result is not surprising, as past research postulates that telecommuting needs self-discipline to work (Smith et al., 2018), and the three skills can help with this point.

Communication is another soft skill that got its importance rated highly, with 171 of its 177 responses being into 4 or 5. Again, this perceived importance complies with the literature that came before as seen in the review (Dixon et al., 2010; França & Mellet, 2016; John, 2009; Pazil & Razak, 2019; Robles, 2012; Seetha, 2014; Swiatkiewicz, 2014). In general, the respondents perceived the soft skills from the inventory to be important, with the first eight ranked skills having at least 80% of the responses falling in the “very important” or “extremely important” category.

Positive attitude, spirituality and personal presentation had perceivable lower importance in the vision of the teleworkers, with spirituality and personal presentation having even lower scores. Personal presentation at the bottom of the list makes sense, as telecommuting has lesser contact and formalities than the ones found in the workplace, which could affect the need for putting extra effort into the individual presentation.

Table 1 with the means and standard deviations shows that the teleworkers rate most of the skills as important for telecommuting, with most of them being deemed very important.

Which soft skills were the most affected in the shift from local working to telecommuting?

Regarding the third part of the survey, Table 2 shows the responses to the question of which skills gained importance in the switch from working in the workplace to telecommuting. As previously stated, the respondents could only choose 3 of the 11 skills of the inventory, with any distinction of importance between the chosen 3.

The results show that teleworkers perceive communication as even more important in telecommuting scenarios, being the only one present in more than half of the surveys. This could have something to do with the changes in how workers communicate in teleconferences (Halbe, 2012), as the frequent lack of gesturing and face to face interaction within teleconferences and other digital channels limits certain aspects of communication while puts more importance on others.

After communication, respondents selected responsibility and flexibility more in comparison with the rest, being selected more than 40% of the time. As discussed previously, the workers deem responsibility to be a necessary skill to have and it is even more so when teleworking. The perceived importance of flexibility on flexible work conditions should not be a surprise, a result that makes sense if the descriptive statistics of the skill are compared with the results from Robles’s research (Robles, 2012). Teamwork is in a similar spot to flexibility, as is one of the most chosen on the survey and has the biggest gap in comparison with the previous result.

Table 2. The skill gains importance in telecommuting settings?

<i>Skill</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes %</i>
<i>Communication</i>	121	68,36%
<i>Responsibility</i>	88	49,72%
<i>Flexibility</i>	78	44,07%
<i>Teamwork</i>	54	30,51%
<i>Integrity</i>	52	29,38%
<i>Work Ethic</i>	42	23,73%
<i>Interpersonal</i>	35	19,77%
<i>Positive attitude</i>	25	14,12%
<i>Spirituality</i>	14	7,91%
<i>Courtesy</i>	10	5,65%
<i>Personal presentation</i>	6	3,39%

Source: the authors

Table 4 shows which skills lost importance, personal presentation leads it by a margin of almost 30% from the second place, a result that makes sense if it is compared to Table 1. If we disregard spirituality for a moment, the remaining skills are linked to social interactions that are external and have something to do with transmitting an impression.

Spirituality at work was considered a skill that lost importance on teleworking by 41,81% of the respondents. It is interesting to note that, spirituality is related to feeling purpose, connection and belonging, the discussion about these results would lead to understanding that this dimension is less important on teleworking, or harder to reach. The reasons why someone could feel that spirituality is more important when working at the office than working at home, would it be because those feelings of belonging and connection are already fulfilled by their personal lives, merged into professional life? Or this answer could be understood that filling the spirit needs would be the smallest priority when teleworking, focusing on much greater challenges such as trying to deliver all the demands simultaneously, personal and professional.

At least 15% of the respondents deemed interpersonal skills and teamwork as losing some importance in telecommuting, the reduced interaction with other people that can accompany teleworking could explain these results.

Table 3. The soft skill loses importance in telecommuting settings?

<i>Skill</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes %</i>
<i>Personal presentation</i>	125	70,62%
<i>Spirituality</i>	74	41,81%
<i>Courtesy</i>	67	37,85%
<i>Positive attitude</i>	40	22,60%
<i>Interpersonal</i>	32	18,08%
<i>Teamwork</i>	27	15,25%
<i>Work Ethics</i>	17	9,60%
<i>Integrity</i>	14	7,91%
<i>Flexibility</i>	14	7,91%
<i>Responsibility</i>	12	6,78%
<i>Communication</i>	8	4,52%

Source: the authors

Results categorization

To summarize the findings, the authors have categorized the skills in four groups: (1) high importance skill, gained even more importance in teleworking, (2) medium importance skill, lost importance in teleworking, (3) medium importance skill, the debate about losing or gaining importance in teleworking, (4) low importance skill, lost importance in teleworking. Table 4, below, summarizes the findings.

Table 4. Summary of the results and categories found.

SKILL	% OF 5*	% OF 4+5**	GAINED IMPORTANCE	LOST IMPORTANCE	CATEGORY
INTEGRITY	89,93%	97,18%	29,38%	7,91%	(1)
RESPONSIBILITY	81,92%	98,31%	49,72%	6,78%	(1)
WORK ETHIC	78,53%	94,92%	23,73%	9,60%	(1)
COMMUNICATION	73,45%	96,61%	68,36%	4,52%	(1)
TEAMWORK	63,84%	90,40%	30,51%	15,25%	(1)
FLEXIBILITY	58,76%	89,27%	44,07%	7,91%	(1)
COURTESY	54,80%	90,96%	5,65%	37,85%	(2)
INTERPERSONAL	49,15%	84,18%	19,77%	18,08%	(3)
POSITIVE ATTITUDE	40,11%	75,14%	14,12%	22,60%	(3)
SPIRITUALITY	28,25%	59,89%	7,91%	41,81%	(4)

Table 4. (Continued)

PERSONAL PRESENTATION	23,16%	57,06%	3,39%	70,62%	(4)
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Source: the authors

High importance skill, gained even more importance in teleworking

All the skills that were already considered important gained importance during teleworking scenarios: Integrity, Responsibility, Work ethics, Communication, Teamwork and Flexibility. This category contains abilities such as being honest and ethical, doing what is right, being accountable and having self-discipline, having self-motivation, initiative and willingness to work, communication capabilities, teamwork and collaboration, adaptability, and the ability to learn. All these high importance skills, considered important previously according to the literature, have been considered even more important in current days.

Medium importance skill, lost importance in teleworking

Courtesy in the skill found in this category. Having manners, business etiquette, and being respectful was not a strong soft skill, and according to the respondent's perception, it lost importance during teleworking. It could be debated if the reason behind this result is the virtual reality, "colder" than work at the office.

Medium importance skill, debate about losing or gaining importance in teleworking

Interpersonal skills and positive attitude were skills that were not strong previously, and the results cannot lead to a conclusion if the respondents understand they gain or lost importance during a teleworking scenario.

Low importance skill, lost importance in teleworking

The last category considers skills that were already low in importance previously and lost importance during teleworking: spirituality and personal presentation. Spirituality at work regards feeling a connection with work, finding a purpose on the job, nurturing the spirit. The loss of importance could represent that people fill that gap in personal lives, already merged with professional lives during the reality of teleworking. Personal presentation skill was already an ability that had the importance under debate when working at the office, one should be free to dress however they felt comfortable if respecting colleagues. Moreover, telework allows employees to dress with more freedom of choice.

Analysis

The authors deemed relevant was a direct comparison of the results from this paper with Robles (2012), as it could lead to some insights into the difference between the perceptions from the executives that responded to Robles's survey in a traditional working setting from the teleworkers surveyed in this article that aren't necessary executives and are from a developing country. Table 5 shows the difference between the findings from both works.

Table 5. Results comparison.

<i>Skill</i>	<i>This Work</i>				<i>Robles (2012)</i>			
	Rank	M	% of 5	% of 4+5	Rank	M	% of 5	% of 5+4
<i>Integrity</i>	1	4,86	89,93	97,18	1	4,93	93	100
<i>Responsibility</i>	2	4,80	81,92	98,31	4	4,63	71,9	91,2
<i>Work Ethic</i>	3	4,71	78,53	94,92	10	4,12	36,8	75,4
<i>Communication</i>	4	4,70	73,45	96,61	2	4,91	91,2	100
<i>Teamwork</i>	5	4,51	63,84	90,40	8	4,12	43,9	70,2
<i>Flexibility</i>	6	4,45	58,76	89,27	9	4,18	42,1	77,2
<i>Courtesy</i>	7	4,44	54,80	90,96	3	4,81	84,2	96,5
<i>Interpersonal</i>	8	4,30	49,15	84,18	5	4,46	61,4	84,2
<i>Positive attitude</i>	9	4,06	40,11	75,14	6	4,35	45,6	89,5
<i>Spirituality</i>	10	3,69	28,25	59,89	-	-	-	-
<i>Personal presentation</i>	11	3,63	23,16	57,06	7	4,35	47,4	87,8

Source: the authors

Both works find that integrity is the most important skill in the perception of the workers and despite this apparent importance in both of the researches, the only other work that addresses it is Baruch's, in which he finds that integrity is one of the qualities that help a worker to fit in telecommuting (Baruch, 2000).

The next two places differ between the two works, this study finds responsibility as the second-ranked and work ethic as the third while Robles's paper ranks them as fourth and last respectively. Those are contrasting results that open possibilities for further inquiry, does skills that could be cataloged as more of moral skills, which are linked with the proficiency that someone can act according to ethically and morally accepted manner (Swiatkiewicz, 2014), like integrity, responsibility and work ethic be even more important in telecommuting?

Teleworkers perceived Communication and teamwork as fourth and fifth while the executives ranked them second and eighth place respectively. Regarding communication, despite its slightly smaller mean and fewer respondents deeming it as "extremely important" in this study, both respondents perceived it as a very important skill in the workplace, a result that makes sense in light of other studies (Ahmed et al., 2012; França & Mellet, 2016; Matturro, 2013; Pazil & Razak, 2019; Seetha, 2014). Now teamwork was another skill that has a big gap in the comparison of both studies. Teleworkers deemed it to be one of the top five most important skills, while Robles's sample found it to be one of the lesser important ones. The result from this paper is more in line with what most of the literature that tried to measure the importance of the skill (Ahmed et al., 2012; França & Mellet, 2016; Seetha, 2014; Swiatkiewicz, 2014).

Robles's work ranks courtesy, interpersonal skills, positive attitude and personal presentation higher than this one, showing that on that specific sample of American executives that work in a traditional workplace, skills that are linked towards external interactions and presentation matter more than in online environments.

Robles's (2012) inventory did not consider Spirituality at the workplace, but this study adds it as a means to evaluate the perception of its importance for the sample. The perception is of low importance, and it was considered a skill that lost importance in a teleworking scenario. The cause of this perception would be a recommendation for further studies. Literature available presents the importance of spirituality and its impact on performance (Duchon & Plowman, 2005), the employee search for meaning and purpose and connection in the workplace is considered an important aspect. On the other hand, the results of this research contradict the literature on spirituality at work.

CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH.

COVID-19 brought a drastic change in how people work, and one of those changes was an increase in work-at-home practices that will not necessarily go away with the crisis. This change in paradigm brings the importance of studies in teleworking environments to contribute to the literature on the teleworkers and the firms are affected by it and how firms and workers can have a better experience and results.

This work contribution is an exploratory and non-probabilistic view on the perceptions of Brazilian teleworkers regarding the importance of certain soft skills based on their experience. Using a survey methodology with a convenience sample of 177 teleworkers reached by an online questionnaire based on an adapted version of Robles's (2012) soft skill inventory. The researchers found that integrity, responsibility and work ethic are the most important skills in the sample, followed by communication, teamwork and flexibility. The three first soft skills shows that the sample may feel that working at home may be a struggle against oneself to extract the most of it and skills that align with Swiatkiewicz's (2014) definition of "moral skills" may be of major importance on work-at-home scenarios. Teleworkers deemed communication, teamwork and flexibility very important in teleworking, the three being perceived as some of the skills ta gained more importance in the shift from the workplace to home.

Spirituality was not considered important, conversely to the literature, moreover, was considered to have decreased its importance even more in the current scenario. The implications could be debated, this perception would be caused by the circumstances, where the employee is surrounded by the family, filling the needs of community and purpose? Or the employee is so stressed that could not even imagine or consider the importance of inner connection?

These findings have practical uses to Brazilian employers that are trying to introduce teleworking and want their employees to have the best experience and the organization the best performance. The first three skills are internal to the teleworker and not necessary passive of training. Practices that could help according literature, guarantying that the flexible work schedule is desired by the worker is one indicator with compatibility (Morganson et al., 2010), provision of teleworking and social support by the employer (Bentley et al., 2016) and certify that the employee has correct infrastructure to work-at-home (Gorlick, 2020). These measures can help limit teleworking to employees with have the infrastructure to work, important traits and motivation that with correct support can bring benefits to themselves and the employers.

Regarding communication, teamwork and flexibility, a more traditional approach of training and teambuilding exercises with teleworking in mind can be beneficial. The part of keeping telework in the forefront is key, as is documented in the literature that communication habits change in those scenarios (Halbe, 2012), and that team working in online projects has different challenges than face-to-face (Saghafian & O'Neill, 2018), which will lead to a need to adapt training programs to the teleworking reality.

The present work is limited in its sample and methodology, as it uses a convenience sample from teleworkers in Brazil with a non-probabilistic approach, its results cannot be generalized and can only be used as a means to get insights in a phenomena that is understudied in Brazil to spur new research on the topic.

With future studies on the topic in mind, utilizing probabilistic methods with random and larger samples would be a next step in the study of the perception of the importance of soft skills in teleworking. Qualitative studies with teleworkers could go in deep to answer why moral skills like responsibility are so important in the work regime and how employers can support them. Studies on the impact of teleworking on communication and teamwork and how those skills can be enhanced in those situations could have important practical value. At last, this paper used an already validated soft skill inventory that was made in a non-teleworking environment; the developing of one with teleworking in mind could lead to new insights.

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