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Telework in Baltic Countries during the Pandemic: Effects on Wellbeing, Job Satisfaction, and Work-Life Balance

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Abstract: As a result of the rapid and unplanned adoption of telework by European companies during the pandemic, specific telework characteristics have arisen. Thus, employees' experience of telework requires further analysis. Based on the "Living, Working, and COVID-19" results for Baltic countries, this paper studies the effect of telework experience on wellbeing, both directly and mediated by Work-Life balance and job satisfaction, through structural equation modelling. After verifying the significant differences in telework preferences, the model is also tested in high versus low telework preference groups. The main findings corroborate the effect of a positive telework experience on perceived wellbeing, but only indirectly via Work-Life balance. Additionally, data from the group with a high telework preference best fits the proposed model, revealing not only the mentioned indirect effect, but also the direct positive effect of telework experience on wellbeing. Thus, employees with a negative experience of telework during the pandemic will be more reluctant to accept telework over more traditional work arrangements. The implications as well as some limitations to be examined in further studies are also presented.

Keywords: Baltic countries; telework; wellbeing; job satisfaction; work-life balance

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1. Introduction

Telework changes both the job context and the way employees work and, consequently, affects their work experience [1]. It refers to a modality of work away from the premises of the employer and using technology.

Over the last decade, there have been great expectations for telework to be implemented as a new modality of work. Given the known benefits in the extant literature on the subject (e.g., reduction in commuting and office costs) and the technology breakthroughs (Internet, portable devices, and smartphones), an expansion of telework was anticipated. However, these estimations were not met as expected [2]; instead, the pandemic was the main driver of telework expansion [3].

Within the COVID-19 pandemic, as a result of which lockdowns were imposed, companies had to find new ways to run their businesses by implementing new communication methods and supporting citizens in the context of social distancing. Thus, telework became part of the solution to keep organizations running during the global lockdown between March and June 2020. After July 2020, economies gradually reopened, but the pandemic's evolution and subsequent waves led to imposed restrictions and local lockdowns, allowing telework to flourish like never before [4]. In short, the confinement resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant increase in the use of telework. Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés [3] referred to it as a massive experiment in telework in Europe.

Telework is usually adopted on a voluntary basis; however, during the first lockdown of 2020, people were forced to work remotely because of COVID-19 fears and

government-enforced movement restrictions. The blow from COVID-19 was even greater in low-telework countries with limited telework legislation, emphasizing the importance of studying the impact of pandemic-induced telework in those countries. Considering this, the literature has demonstrated a significant difference between mandatory telework caused by the pandemic and telework in normal conditions [3,5].

Baltic economies experienced the situation described above. Eurostat (2018) [6] data show that Estonia achieved the highest level of telework (7.6%), followed by Lithuania (2.6%) and Latvia (2.5%). During the pandemic, these figures increased to 12.6% for Estonia, which was the only one above the European average (12.13%), and to 5.4% for Lithuania and 4.5% for Latvia [7]. In short, Baltic countries increased their numbers of teleworkers, and Estonia even exceeded the European average for teleworkers in the pandemic.

A comparative study conducted on companies in Poland, Lithuania, and Spain found that pandemic-induced telework increased employee stress because their organizational structures and technological capabilities were ill equipped to deal with the high-magnitude transformation derived from its rapid adoption [8]. Accordingly, telework in the pandemic presented specific characteristics and effects.

The efficacy of telework was also boosted by the growing demand for a work-life balance because of the increasing number of single parents in today's world [9,10]. The rapid development of ICT and the pandemic crisis prompted the recommendation that telework be reinstated. Many organizations started to offer new ways of working in order to effectively respond to these innovations, both in terms of employees' work and personal lives [11]. Working from home is considered to be a way of improving an individual's work-life, balance because working from home allows employees to care for family members [12]. Telework can also positively influence job satisfaction through providing employees with a greater autonomy over their tasks, while at the same time reducing the amount of interruptions. So, telework is an effective method to improve quality of life [13], employee happiness, job satisfaction [14], and openness to creativity and innovation [15].

However, there are also several risks that must be considered when implementing telework, especially if it is unplanned, as was the case in the pandemic. For example, Work-Life balance can be affected if the work and life domains are not clearly separated [16], and job satisfaction can decrease if employees are not sure how they are being assessed by their bosses [17]; therefore, wellbeing will be affected [18]. During the pandemic, the experience and preference for telework may have been important in order to obtain the benefits of telework.

This "telework boom" and its particular characteristics in the pandemic justify the relevance of this research. Accordingly, the present paper aims to shed some light on the effects of telework on wellbeing, job satisfaction, and Work-Life balance. We analyze both the direct effects on wellbeing and the effects mediated by Work-Life balance and job satisfaction in the Baltic countries.

This paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the theoretical background for telework. Section 3 presents the data and methods applied in the present research. Section 4 shows the main results from the empirical analyses. The paper finishes with the discussion, limitations, and main conclusions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Telework and Teleworking Modalities

The pandemic led to numerous new forms of work, including varying degrees of telework (complete telework or hybrid telework—part telework and part face-to-face). Telework can be defined as a work practice in which members of an organization substitute a part of their typical working hours (ranging from a few hours a week to a few days a week) by working almost full-time away from the office—typically from home—interacting with others through technology in order to carry out work tasks [1].

Telework is also comprised of many other terms, including remote work, telework, telecommuting, and even virtual work, which involves virtual teams with their specific

research topics. Other typologies are home-based telework and co-working in tele-centers, where employees share adequate office space with colleagues or employees from other companies. It is usually strictly time-bound and entails the completion of tasks for the benefit of companies located near the shared premises. It could also be a more long-term form, primarily for freelancers, start-ups, or small businesses that use it as their headquarters [19].

From an international point of view, telework is a work modality in which all or part of the work activity takes place away from the organization's premises, using technological means [20]. As a result, it excludes work typologies that have traditionally been carried out in a "distance" mode, using technological means for service, maintenance, or other similar functions. Non-contractual links for the provision of services, such as jobs carried out by self-employed people, are included in both categories. Thus, telework is defined by the use of technology and the location from where employees work [8].

Telework as a concept is well-established in the literature and responds to the historical development of ICTs and the corresponding work arrangements [21]. Over the past three decades, as computers and other electronic devices were unable to facilitate employee flexibility, research on telework focused on the "home office" [22]. However, in recent years, the emergence of highly adaptable "cloud-based" working environments, accessible via smartphones, laptops, and tablets from virtually any location on the planet, has made the concept of telework (as originally defined) appear somewhat anachronistic [23].

According to Eurofound and the International Labour Office (2017) [20] taxonomy, different modalities of telework can be distinguished according to their regularity and the venue at which they are carried out, as follows:

- *Telework from home on a regular basis:* work is performed from home or the employee's address using information technology, communication, and digital tools [10].
- *Mobile telework*, also known as itinerant telework: work is carried out from the office on some days and from home on others. In other words, this type of telework is distinguished by the absence of a fixed location to carry out tasks. As a teleworker, you can spend some days at home, others at the office, and others on itinerancy [15].
- *Occasional telework*: work is performed outside of company locations less frequently or in fewer locations [3].
- *Teleworking in a telecentre*: work is performed in an office other than the company's main office that has been approved by the company. It can be a space for each organization or a shared center where several companies share the costs of maintenance and commissioning [14].
- *Hybrid work*: the combination between physical presence with work from another location via technology. Indefinitely, hybrid work is that which combines both modalities—face-to-face and telework [19].

As mentioned, the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020 resulted in massive use of telework, which displaced jobs that were previously carried out at companies' facilities to workers' homes [3], prioritizing this modality of telework.

Consequently, this research is based on home-based telework because data were gathered during the lockdown while employees were working from home.

2.2. Telework in Organizations

As previously stated, despite the benefits of telework, the organization must exhibit various characteristics in order to ensure the successful implementation of this modality of work [24]. In the pandemic, work was performed at home, so in this work, we are referring to home-based telework. In fact, the introduction of home-based telework occurring during lockdowns was characterized precisely by the lack of preparation, so that many companies resumed face-to-face work in the milder phases of the pandemic [25].

Another important variable in the organization's telework adaptation is its degree of digitalization (e.g., digital procedures, digital platforms, and level of digital skills). For

example, digital procedures in public administration ensured services to citizens during the pandemic [26].

On the other hand, the traditional hierarchical organization is too rigid for telework, whereas a flexible management style contributes to telework adaptation. Accordingly, telework does not thrive in rigid hierarchies, but it is facilitated by organic organizations [27]. Indeed, network structures, virtual structures, and simple structures are all better suited for this work modality. Telework encourages self-directed teams, which promotes workers' decision-making autonomy.

As a result, the organizational structure could be flattened by reducing the middle-level management structure. Therefore, the role of middle management when telework is implemented is critical. More precisely, the return to face-to-face work was triggered by the "cold" response of middle management to telework caused by their fear of losing their share of power, or even their position, in the company [28].

Telework also affects organizational culture [25]. Organizational culture is essential for the sustainability of companies and its adaptation to their environment. Culture refers to the set of values shared by the members of an organization [29]. Culture is partly emotional, and it is acquired through the process of socialization, via employees' exposure to the way of working in that organization. In this process, employees acquire both skills and social knowledge that are important for the organization and align themselves with company values [30].

Leading remotely also presents specific challenges [3,31]. Transformational leadership can be aligned to telework by promoting broad trust in employees and facilitating their autonomy, both of which are important aspects, as mentioned above [32].

Another factor that can either help or hinder the expansion of telework is labor relationships and the role of unions in their implementation. On this point, trust between managers and employees is critical [33].

Finally, telework avoids traffic jams and presents advantages for the environment by reducing CO_2 emissions. It also contributes to increasing the population located in the rural and remote areas.

In general, empirical evidence indicates that flexible organizations with less management layers, an affordable volume of services, well-endowed technologically, and with an updated leadership style have incorporated telework effectively. Furthermore, organizational cultures with high levels of trust are more likely to allow employees to telework than cultures with high levels of labor conflict. According to Mohalik et al. (2019) [34], there is a spiral positive effect between trust and telework; that is, environments higher in trust are more prone to telework, and telework, in turn, increases confidence, job satisfaction, and autonomy [19]. Consequently, telework questions organizational and management practices and forces companies to modernize their organizational styles in order to promote trust and autonomy in teams and individuals [35].

In the pandemic, as many companies had to adopt telework from one day to the other, neither their levels of digitalization nor their company cultures were prepared for the pandemic telework challenge. Because of this, many employees did not obtain a positive experience of telework.

2.3. Telework and Work-Life Balance

Telework has benefits not only for companies, but also for their employees, because it provides flexibility in terms of employee working time and place of work. Additionally, telework helps to motivate employees and enables organizations to better meet employees' needs by assisting them to balance work and life. Thus, Work-Life balance contributes to maintaining employees' health (e.g., less stress related to communication) and productivity via flexible working hours [36].

In line with the findings of the academic literature, there are examples in recent years of organizations and institutions implementing meaningful changes in their development agendas to ensure and promote a proper work-life balance [37]. What is interesting about

these examples is that the transformations they propose are regarded as strategic and critical in order to ensure the companies' very survival, increasing their ability to attract and retain talent and their productivity, and so sharpening their competitive edge [38,39]. The majority of these changes involve promoting flexibility in work schedules, maternity leave, the right to special childcare-related leave, and telework. This last point is particularly significant, as working from home has emerged in the world of business as a great solution to the problems that impede a proper work-life balance [40].

Nevertheless, as COVID-19 rapidly generalized home-based telework, employees needed to set up and maintain clear boundaries between work and life domains in order to maintain Work-Life balance [20,41]. Maintaining this balance could have been difficult because employees were new at teleworking and did not have proper training and awareness.

2.4. Telework, Job Satisfaction, and Wellbeing

One possible drawback of telework derives from employees working intensively with ICTs. This fact increases the level of "technostress which reduces the perception of wellbeing and subjective quality of life [42,43]. In order to ensure job satisfaction and wellbeing, a climate of trust [44] and communication should exist within the working units. This is a significant challenge for telework, as research on virtual teams found that individual members trust their peers less in comparison with their face-to-face colleagues [45]. As lack of trust can be an impediment to virtual work, it becomes a key factor for telework [46].

In addition, various authors stress the significance of communication quality for employees' wellbeing [1,16]. According to their findings, a lack of nonverbal communication, as well as a general lack of communication quality, can lead to anxiety, confusion, and miscommunication among employees. This conclusion is supported by research conducted in Lithuania [21,45]. From this perspective, telework will deteriorate wellbeing via low satisfaction with interpersonal interactions.

Over the last decades, people have started to prioritize their subjective quality of life, which includes intangible resources [47]. As a result, subjective wellbeing has become an appealing and crucial measure of quality of life and societal development [48].

Traditional wellbeing determinants, such as gross domestic product (GDP), are no longer adequate to explain subjective wellbeing. These evaluations reflect both objective living conditions as well as psychological wellbeing [49]. Thus, a subjective approach is used to determine quality of life, which includes areas such as physical, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing [50].

Apart from the direct relationships between telework and Work-Life balance, job satisfaction, and wellbeing, the present paper also analyzes the mediating role of Work-Life balance and job satisfaction when explaining the relationship between telework and wellbeing.

Extant studies have confirmed that role for both variables. With regard to Work-Life balance, research consistently found positive relationships between this variable and wellbeing [51,52]. Additionally, Work-Life balance plays a mediating role in the relationship of various independent variables and wellbeing [53]. Recent studies have also confirmed that Work-Life balance mediated the relationship between telework and wellbeing via Work-Life boundary violations [54].

Job satisfaction also significantly contributes to wellbeing [55–57]. However, as far as we know, no research has yet analyzed its moderating role between telework and wellbeing. Some support for this mediating role can be based on recent research, which confirms that job satisfaction mediates the relationship between various job conditions and wellbeing [50].

In short, previous literature shows the relationships between telework, Work-Life balance, job satisfaction, and wellbeing. Nevertheless, there is a gap in the analysis of these variables regarding the pandemic, where home-based telework presents specific characteristics, as mentioned previously. This research contributes to filling this gap.

2.5. Preference for Telework

Preference for telework shows to what extent employees are inclined to freely adopt this working condition. Preferences influence positive attitudes and exert a motivational effect through activating and directing individual behavior, in this case, towards adopting telework. So, preference comprises the positive evaluation and affective response towards telework. To measure telework preferences, we used the results from the Eurofound survey where respondents were asked if they would continue working from home when there were no restrictions.

Based on the above, the present paper seeks to clarify the influence of the telework experience during the pandemic on employees' wellbeing directly (H1), and indirectly through Work-Life balance (H2a) and job satisfaction (H2b). After dividing the sample into highs and lows based on telework preference, the model was also tested in both subsamples (H3). Figure 1 presents the conceptual model.

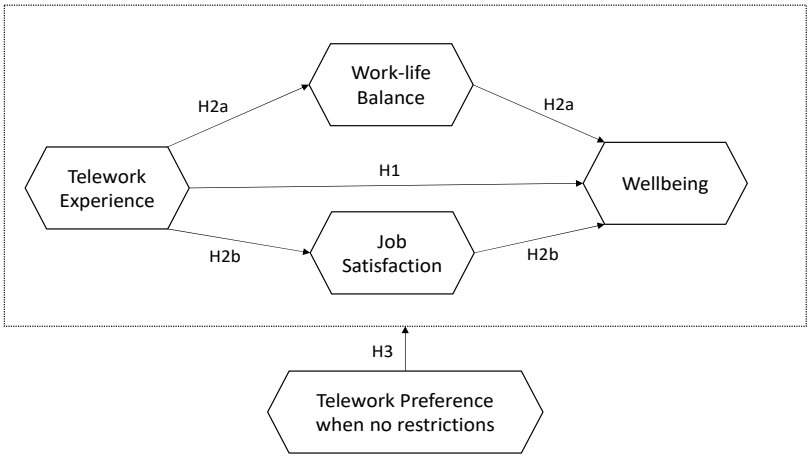

Figure 1. Conceptual structural model and hypotheses.

Although the extant results were not consistent, we expected positive direct relationships between telework experience and wellbeing. We also expected positive indirect relationships between telework experience and wellbeing via Work-Life balance and job satisfaction. Finally, as preferences contribute to a positive evaluation of employees' experiences, we expected that the proposed model would fit the subsample with a higher telework preference best.

3. Methods

3.1. Data

The data used in our empirical analyses came from the Living, Working, and COVID-19 e-survey conducted by Eurofound (2020). More specifically, we used the data from the second round of the survey, conducted in July, when economic and social restrictions related to the pandemic were becoming more relaxed across member states. This e-survey provided the far-reaching socioeconomic implications of the pandemic across Europe and captured the impact of COVID-19 on the way people lived and worked in Europe.

From this database, to conduct our empirical research, we selected data from the Baltic countries (Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia), which consisted of 947 respondents.

Although the information was presented in a merged data file with the three rounds, Eurofound recommended not comparing the different rounds, but instead focusing on each one and analyzing them separately. According to this suggestion, from the data of the second round for the Baltic countries, we chose the variables relevant to our research purposes.

Concerning data gathering, the survey was collected online, using a non-probabilistic sampling methodology. Specifically, snowballing methods were applied to promote the link to the online survey among and beyond Eurofound's network of stakeholders, reaching

out to stakeholders among the member states. In addition, the survey was also advertised on Eurofound's website and on Facebook so as to reach out to as many people aged 18 and over as possible. Although this non-probabilistic sampling method produces a non-representative sample, the composition of data was adjusted using a number of known characteristics of the population. In particular, to adjust the data to the demographic profile of the EU27 as a whole and of each individual member state, the sample was weighted on the basis of gender, age, education, and self-defined urbanization levels. Although large segments of the population have access to the Internet, those without were by default excluded from the sample. Internet penetration levels varied by country and were lower among certain segments of the population, notably the elderly, people living in remote areas, and people with a low education. Taking part in an online survey also requires digital literacy. It is not possible to correct for the bias that is introduced by these factors.

To split the sample into highs and lows regarding preference for telework, standard deviation was added to or subtracted from the mean. The results were two subsamples with different sizes. The subsample for a low preference consisted of 238 participants and the high preference subsample comprised 709 subjects. Even though there was a clear size difference, 238 subjects is a relevant amount from which some tendencies could be obtained.

3.2. Measures

Scales and items were taken from the above-mentioned survey, and were labelled accordingly. Table 1 describes the variables used in the estimations.

Wellbeing. The dependent construct referred to employees' subjective wellbeing. This scale consisted of the following items:

- C005_2 I have felt calm and relaxed
- C005_03 I have felt active and vigorous
- C005_04 I woke up feeling fresh and rested
- C005_05 My daily life has been filled with things that interest me.

Experience of telework. A construct to capture the facilities in teleworking and the satisfaction with telework experience was developed:

- D215_03 With my equipment I have at home I could do my work properly;
- D215_05 Overall, I am satisfied with my experience.

Because variables referred to the situation of working from home, the experience of telework referred to home-based telework, according to the types of telework defined in the previous section.

Job Satisfaction. Two items were included in job satisfaction. They referred to the amount of work and the quality of the work:

- D215_01 I am satisfied with the amount of work I manage to do;
- D215_02 I am satisfied with the quality of my work.

Work-Life balance. The following items measured the balance between professional life and familiar life:

- D004_04 found it difficult to concentrate in your job because of your family responsibilities
- D004_05 found that your family responsibilities prevented you to giving the time you should to your job.

Variables were recoded and rescaled to facilitate the aggregation of items.

Table 1 presents the main descriptive statistics from these variables for Baltic countries.

A reliability test was conducted to confirm whether the data collecting instrument yielded the same results over repeated trials. The measurement of the reliability of a data instrument helps the researcher to gauge the goodness of the variable of measurement. The widely used Cronbach alpha coefficient was employed to assess internal consistency. The entire alpha coefficient ranged from above 0.771 to 0.843, as shown in Table 2. Based on the

coefficient values, the items tested were deemed reliable for this study, as all confirmatory factor analysis coefficients were statistically significant.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Description	N	Mean	S.D.	Min	Max
nD215_03	With my equipment I have at home I could do my work properly	1364	3.770	1.142	1 (strongly disagree)	5 (strongly agree)
nD215_05	Overall, I am satisfied with my experience	1335	3.728	1.172	1 (strongly disagree)	5 (strongly agree)
nD215_01	I am satisfied with the amount of work I managed to do	1354	3.463	1.136	1 (strongly disagree)	5 (strongly agree)
nD215_02	I am satisfied with the quality of my work	1354	3.714	1.010	1 (strongly disagree)	5 (strongly agree)
C005_02	I have felt calm and relaxed	2182	3.720	1.185	1 (at no time)	5 (all the time)
C005_03	I have felt active and vigorous	2187	3.080	0.900	1 (at no time)	5 (all the time)
C005_04	I woke up feeling fresh and rested	2182	3.104	1.036	1 (at no time)	5 (all the time)
C005_05	My daily life has been filled with things that interest me	2180	3.345	0.988	1 (at no time)	5 (all the time)
D004_04	Found it difficult to concentrate in your job because of your family responsibilities	1550	3.970	0.907	1 (always)	5 (never)
D004_05	Found that your family responsibilities prevented you to giving the time you should to your job	1549	4.194	0.883	1 (always)	5 (never)
D216_01	Work from home preferences when there are no restrictions	1130	2.749	1.333	1 (never)	5 (daily)

Source: Items from the "Living, Working, and COVID-19" survey (Eurofound, 2020). Estimations conducted by the research team.

Table 2. Cronbach alpha reliability results.

Variable	Number of Items	Reliability's Cronbach Alpha	Comment
Wellbeing	4	0.843	>0.7; accepted
Job satisfaction	2	0.771	>0.7; accepted
Telework experience	2	0.782	>0.7; accepted
Work-Life balance	2	0.788	>0.7; accepted

3.3. Estimation Methods

After validating the goodness of the measures, a structural model of the latent variables was estimated. Stata v.16 software was used to estimate the SEM model.

Two models were estimated. Firstly, model 1 measured the relationship between telework experience and wellbeing. Secondly, the rest of the variables (job satisfaction and Work-Life balance) were included in the analysis. Model 2 analyzed employees' wellbeing considering job satisfaction, telework experience, and Work-Life balance.

Finally, we compared employees who preferred working from home even without restrictions with employees who preferred working on the employer's premises (models 2a and 2b).

4. Results

This section presents the main findings from the two models described here.

Table 3 shows the goodness of the estimations for all of the models. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was less than 0.08 in all of the cases. In addition, the comparative fit index (CFI) was more than 0.90, and the Tucker−Lewis index (TLI)

was also higher than 0.90. Consequently, the results of the model fit index confirmed the goodness of the estimations.

Table 4 presents the coefficients of the model. As can be observed in Table 4, the telework experience coefficient, both estimated and standard, was statistically significant in model 1. Thus, there was a positive relationship between telework experience and employees' wellbeing. From these results, Hypothesis 1 can be accepted.

Table 3. Structural equation fit indices.

Chi2		p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Model 1: Wellbeing and telework experience						
Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)	2898.724	0.000 ***	0.999	0.999	0.014	0.012
Model 2: Wellbeing, telework experience, job satisfaction, and Work-Life balance						
Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)	3992.924	0.000 ***	0.988	0.982	0.041	0.035
Model 2a: Low in telework preference. Wellbeing, telework experience, job satisfaction, and Work-Life balance: subsample 1						
Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)	1036.864	0.000 ***	0.984	0.976	0.048	0.053
Model 2b: High in telework preference. Wellbeing, telework experience, job satisfaction, and Work-Life balance: subsample 2						
Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)	2834.794	0.000 ***	0.988	0.983	0.039	0.031

Note: level of significance: *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Table 4. Structural equation model.

Dependent Variable: Wellbeing	Standard Coefficient	Standard Errors	z-Value	P > z	95 % Conf. Interval	
Model 1: Wellbeing and telework experience						
Telework experience	0.345 *	0.009	37.24	0.000 ***	0.327	0.363
Model 2: Wellbeing, telework experience, job satisfaction, and Work-Life balance						
Telework experience	0.149	0.091	1.63	0.102	−0.030	0.328
Job satisfaction	0.113	0.090	1.25	0.211	−0.064	0.290
Work-Life balance	0.200 ***	0.035	5.72	0.000 ***	0.131	0.269
Model 2a: Low in telework preference. Wellbeing, telework experience, job satisfaction, and Work-Life balance: subsample 1						
Telework experience	0.191	0.159	1.20	0.230	−0.121	0.504
Job satisfaction	0.090	0.163	0.56	0.579	−0.229	0.410
Work-Life balance	0.321 ***	0.069	4.61	0.000 ***	0.184	0.458
Model 2b: High in telework preference. Wellbeing, telework experience, job satisfaction, and Work-Life balance: subsample 2						
Telework experience	0.223	0.134	1.66	0.096 †	−0.040	0.486
Job satisfaction	0.039	0.127	0.31	0.759	−0.210	0.288
Work-Life balance	0.152 **	0.044	3.45	0.001 **	0.065	0.238

Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$; ** $p \leq 0.01$; * $p \leq 0.01$; † $p \leq 0.10$.

When job satisfaction and Work-Life balance were included in the analysis as mediators (model 2), telework experience influenced wellbeing through Work-Life balance, whereas job satisfaction did not mediate the relationship between telework experience and wellbeing (model 2), even though telework experience was strongly related to job satisfaction (Figure 2). Additionally, telework experience lost its direct predictive power on wellbeing. From these results, only Hypothesis 2b could be accepted.

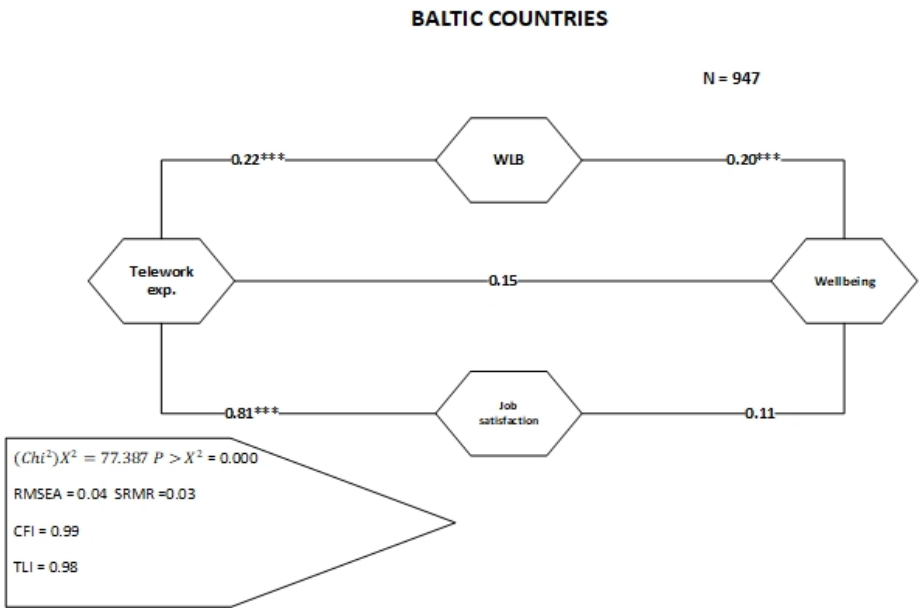

Figure 2. Structural model 2. Source: Elaborated by the research team. Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$.

After dividing the sample into two, i.e., employees who show a low preference for telework (model 2a) and employees who prefer to continue working from home without any existing restrictions (model 2b), some differences arose. Such discrepancies between models 2a and 2b are relevant because they can orient telework beyond the pandemic.

When the mediated model was tested in the subsample with a high preference for telework (model 2b), the relationship between telework experience and wellbeing via Work-Life balance was confirmed. In addition, the direct link between telework experience and wellbeing was significant at a 90% probability level ($\beta = 22$; $p \leq 0.10$). Conversely, the subsample with a low telework preference (model 2a) showed no relationships between telework experience and wellbeing—either direct or indirect. In both subsamples, telework experience was strongly related to job satisfaction (Table 4 and Figures 3 and 4).

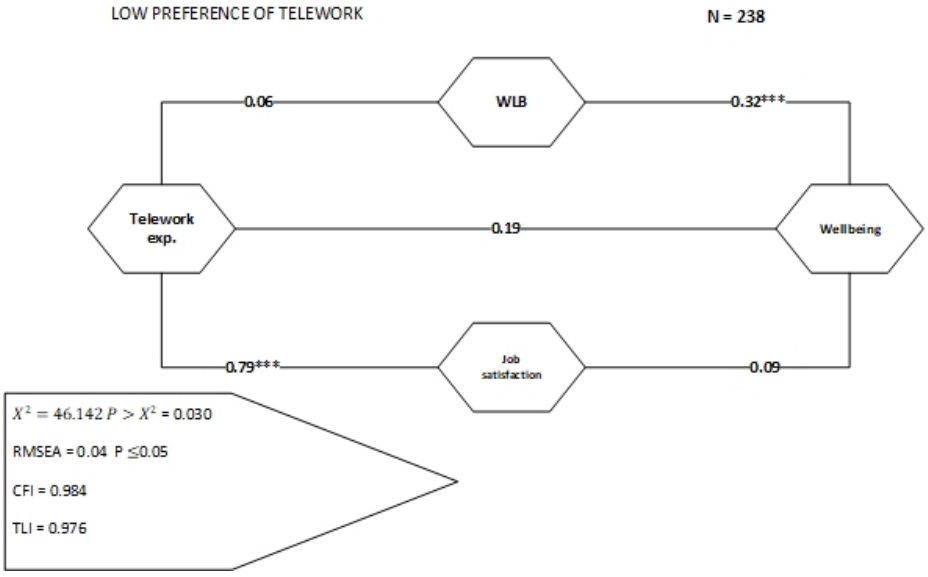

Figure 3. Structural model 2a. Elaborated by the research team. Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$.

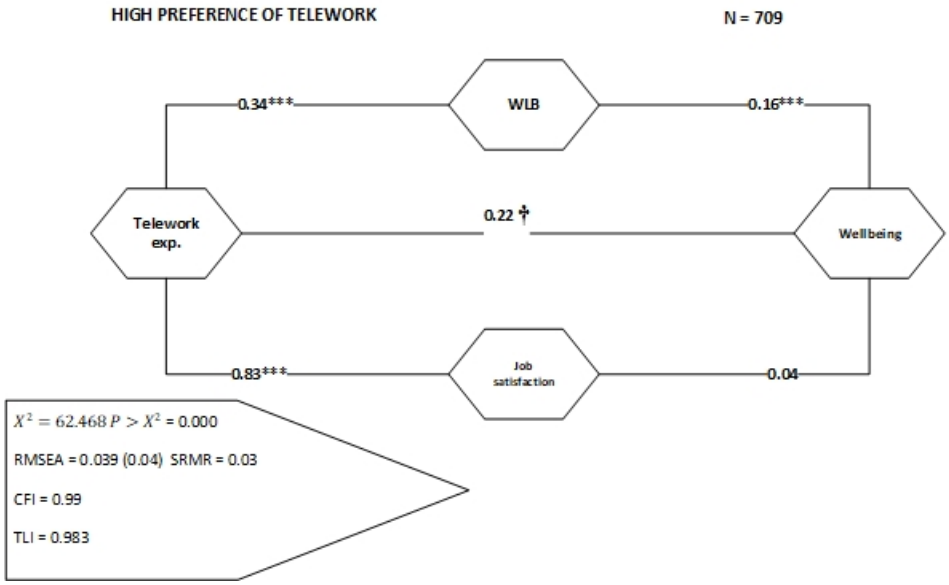

Figure 4. Structural model 2b. Elaborated by the research team. Note: *** $p \leq 0.001$; † $p \leq 0.10$.

It should also be underscored that employees mainly presented higher preferences for telework (N_A = 238; N_B = 709).

Figures 2–4 show the main relationships found in the empirical analyses.

As mentioned, Figure 2 presents model 2, which shows the indirect relationships. Moderator variables, including telework experience, lost their positive predictive power on wellbeing. On the other hand, Figure 2 also depicts the positive significant relation between telework and Work-Life balance, and Work-Life balance and wellbeing. Figure 2 also shows the positive and significant relationship between telework experience and job satisfaction.

In short, our results show the positive experience of telework on wellbeing through Work-Life balance.

Figures 3 and 4 present the results divided into two subsamples. Figure 3 shows the results for employees with a low preference for telework and Figure 4 depicts the results for a high for preference for telework. As hypothesized, the model fit best in the second subsample, which included the high preference. In this case, the direct relationship between telework experience and wellbeing, even after including the moderators, persists, and an indirect effect via Work-Life balance was also found.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

In an attempt to clarify the impact of the rapid telework introduction in Baltic countries due to COVID-19, the present paper analyzed the effect of the employees' telework experience and their preference for telework on their own wellbeing. Under the COVID-19 lockdown, the abrupt and generalized adoption of telework could have an impact on employees' wellbeing depending on how they experienced telework. Extant research pointed to positive and negative effects of telework on wellbeing. Positive effects could be derived from the employees' experience of more autonomy when scheduling their workload or greater efficacy without external interruptions. On the other hand, telework could blur the limits between work and life, making it difficult to disconnect from the former, or having a feeling of dissatisfaction due to the loss of meaningful interpersonal interactions. We hypothesized that a positive telework experience influences subjective wellbeing. From the second round of the "Living, Working, and COVID-19" survey from Baltic countries [58], a structural equation model was estimated to measure the direct and indirect effects (via Work-Life balance and job satisfaction) of telework experience on employees' wellbeing. When the model only considered the effect of telework experience and wellbeing (model 1), this link was positive and significant. However, after adding Work-Life balance and job

satisfaction (model 2), telework experience was only related to wellbeing, indirectly, via Work-Life balance.

Additionally, the present paper tested the model when employees presented high versus low preferences for telework. This comparison could also be useful when the pandemic is over, because the results obtained from employees with and without a preference for telework were different. Without a preference for telework, its experience was only related to job satisfaction, but not Work-Life balance and wellbeing. This result will need further clarification, because based on the theory of the reasoned action [59], past positive experiences about something contribute to developing positive attitudes towards it—telework in our case. Similar results were obtained from studies on technology adoption where this theory had also been applied (e.g., [60]). This result points to the importance of a positive attitude (preference) for telework beyond the experience. Thus, employees with a negative experience of telework during the pandemic will be more reluctant to accept telework over more traditional work arrangements.

Nevertheless, the Baltic countries sample showed a high preference for telework. From these results, we could expect that, after experiencing this modality of work, most Baltic employees will continue teleworking. This finding is in line with the results from the "Living, Working, and COVID-19" survey for all European countries, where most EU employees expressed a preference to work from home several times a week in the long term [58].

As previously mentioned, during the lockdown, working from home helped companies to maintain their business activity. However, telework implementation was rapid and unplanned, which could have impacted employees' experience, which in turn could affect their wellbeing, Work-Life balance, and job satisfaction. Thus, based on the massive telework implementation because of COVID-19, organizations should start to deal with constraints from telework, such as their culture, leadership style, trust, digitization, and flexibility, in order to ensure a positive employee experience with telework, which could positively affect employees' wellbeing [18].

In short, our findings corroborate that both a preference for and a positive experience of telework exert a positive effect on Work-Life balance, job satisfaction, and wellbeing.

From an applied perspective, these results confirm the importance of a positive telework experience and the preference for telework (and their interplay) on employees' wellbeing. Therefore, companies need to assist their employees in the implementation of home telework through providing training in digital competences, facilitating the necessary equipment for working from home, and addressing important telework limitations (e.g., trust in the leader and the quality of the interpersonal relationships). These actions could have a major impact on employees' job satisfaction and their wellbeing via Work-Life balance.

Finally, telework is emerging as a new method of job organization. Digital skills, digitalization, and wellbeing are all relevant in the implementation of telework. Thus, telework can play an important role in the processes of continuous improvement and in increasing employees' motivation and satisfaction [14].

As in every empirical study, this research presented some limitations. As mentioned, the sample was collected using a non-probabilistic sampling methodology. Although the sample was revised to respond to the demographic characteristics of the European population, this situation may have affected our results. Further research should include a cross-sectional database (e.g., European Working Conditions Survey, 2021) to reinforce our results and overcome this limitation. Additionally, further studies should include important demographic variables related to telework adoption, such as the distance to work of the respondents, their means of transport, and size of the apartment. Finally, when analyzing preferences for telework, the two sets of subsamples were not similar in size, so these results could be affected by this bias. In addition, how telework preference and telework experience are related could be important in order to clarify how positive experiences contribute to developing a positive attitude towards telework.

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Informed Consent Statement: The surveyed employees participated voluntarily and anonymously after explaining to them the purpose of the study and offering guaranties that the information provided will be never presented individually, but only as aggregated.

Data Availability Statement: The data are available upon request.

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