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Workplace change within the COVID-19 context: a grounded theory approach

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ABSTRACT

The purpose is to investigate the current status and future evolution of the workplace within the COVID-19 pandemic context. Documents, publications and surveys from numerous sources have been analyzed to find out more about the employees' and organizations' experience with remote working and the advantages and disadvantages of accessing the workplace during the pandemic. The analysis of the data made possible the identification of patterns within the available literature regarding what has happened and, especially, its influence on the workplace. The revolution initiated by COVID-19 has changed the way companies and employees work and will continue doing so, requiring a constant reinvention of how they operate and causing actions never seen before, generating deep changes in the workplace. Therefore, the idea of the workplace will never be what was expected before COVID-19, where reinvention of work, technology and safety are key points in its transformation process.

1. Introduction

According to McKinsey (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic brought new ways of doing business according to which organizations must change how they operate along with the role of offices in generating secure, successful and rewarding careers (Catalyst, 2020; McKinsey, 2020b; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020a; World Economic Forum, 2020b). Moreover, COVID-19 brought unparalleled challenges, where many companies around the world have demonstrated their ability to face the challenges, responding with pre-designed crisis management plans (Mikušová & Horváthová, 2019) and creating new work conditions to protect workers within an unforeseen situation (Gartner, 2020b; KPMG, 2020d, 2020e). Companies will learn from this situation, under which remote working has been a key factor in the continuity of business, to explore new ways of carrying out the work as well as the new role of the office (Gartner, 2020a).

COVID-19 exposed many weaknesses and issues that have been present in business for a long time, in particular how to carry out daily activities from physical to virtual interactions perspective. In the new way of operating, companies are able to identify which roles need to be carried out face to face or which of them do not, and to what extent (BCG, 2020; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020b). This process has become a mandatory action, where the best time to think about it and decide in an orderly manner is now, as depending on how it is organized, the workplace will inevitably evolve from basic on site towards face to face, remote or a combination of these (World Economic Forum, 2020a). For instance, under remote or hybrid scenarios, such as partially remote and partially on site, there may be advantages for both company and employees in the way the workplace is designed, as it can allow them to work from their home office or even a dedicated remote office close to employees' homes, with fewer geographical constraints as compared to reaching the main headquarters office (Harvard Business Review, 2020). Therefore, people will live where they prefer, sometimes at lower living costs or close to loved ones, which consequently will turn the workplace into a more attractive place to work.

Assigning jobs to the different workplace models can help to determine which people can work locally or remotely. This can be an advantage for companies and employees, as it will allow employees to be more comfortable with their jobs and workplaces, and more motivated, resulting in greater productivity for companies (BCG, 2020; Diligent Insights, 2020).

What is known: Since the last century, numerous investigations have been carried out on organizations and organizational life, such as Meyer and Rowan (1977), Ritzer (1996, 2005) or DiMaggio and Powell (1983), where important findings have been found in the field of business organization (Alvesson & Spicer, 2019). In general, it has been observed that rationality, in its pursuit of efficiency, has been accompanied by a gradual dehumanization of organizations (Ritzer, 2005) which threatens employees' sense of identity and their relationships with others (Gill, 2019). On the other hand, it has been found that internal and external intangible capital influences the productivity of companies and, therefore, economic growth (Rico & Cabrer-Borrás, 2020).

The workplace can simply be understood as the building or place where people perform their jobs (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), however the concept goes further, where existing literature continues to expand on additional dimensions such as social relationships, gathering, creativity, training, motivation, engagement, self-realization, among others (Endrissat et al., 2015; Fisher, 2010; Gill, 2019; Goffee & Jones, 2013).

It is well known that following the "modern rational trends", workplaces' physical space has been continuously reduced over recent decades, turning the actual office into a grid where employees carry out their tasks in spaces smaller than three square meters. This leads to reduced well-being for individuals and worse results for companies for multiple reasons, including as illness, absenteeism, together with an overall poor contribution to society (Pfeffer, 2010).

Therefore, the authors of this paper have established extensive data research covering worldwide data sources, some of them especially relevant for this case study. Documents, publications and surveys from highly reputable sources, such as Forbes,

Gartner, McKinsey, Gallup, WHO, Boston Consulting Group, KPMG, PwC, EY, Deloitte and others, have been analyzed; however, the research has focused on seven major global consultancy firms and on publications produced between March 2020 and July 2020.

What is new: Now more than ever it is necessary to understand the factors and processes that make it possible for a workplace to be transformed from a dehumanized place into a nice place to work, that can give meaning to people's work and turn around society (Michaelson et al., 2014) and, as part of companies' policies, can improve talent management practices (Younas & Bari, 2020).

The truth is that COVID-19 has taken everyone by surprise and the situation has changed radically since March 2020, leading to a serious rethinking of what the workplace currently is, and what it will be during and after COVID-19 (World Economic Forum, 2020b, 2020a). Certainly, it seems that nothing will remain the same, and this paper tries to provide the lines that lead to this new workplace that was impossible to imagine a few months ago (McKinsey, 2020b).

Aim of the study: The objective of this research is to assess how COVID-19 is influencing the workplace and research the existence of possible drivers that will enable the study, analysis and monitoring of what the workplace of the future is going to be. Of particular interest is how workplace change can occur in organizations, in pandemic environments such as COVID-19. Initially, it seems that remote work, family reconciliation and flexible working schedules are determining the survival of the workplace during the pandemic period, however other variables such as engagement, passion at work, mindfulness, could also be considered relevant within this process as well as the COVID-19 context.

2. Methodology

2.1. Grounded theory

The data collection was founded on the Grounded Theory, a methodology initially introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1969), that uses data to create theories, and by means of that, relevant aspects could be discovered under specific social fields (Strauss & Corbin, 2012). The criteria to identify a good Grounded Theory was described by Glasser (1978): it has to fit the data, considering that it has to explain the events and foresee what can occur. Consequently, Strauss and Corbin (2012) maintain that, when adequately employed, the methodology fulfills all the requirements of rigorous scientific research.

Although the Grounded Theory has been applied to sociology fields, Cuñat Giménez (2007) emphasizes that numerous works can be found in other areas of knowledge, such as hotel tourism management (Connell & Lowe, 1997), general management (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1997; Partington, 2000), innovation (Lowe, 1995), company creation (Locke, 2001) or company mergers (Lowe, 1998); and, as indicated by Strauss and Corbin (2012), allows a more in-depth and comprehensive interpretation of a phenomenon that has already been studied. The development of responses regarding social aspects in terms of what happens and the reasons why are encouraged by the qualitative part of the methodology.

Therefore, the Grounded Theory allows theory construction straight from the data and not based on previously defined theoretical frameworks. The theory is inductively generated from a set of data and, if done properly, the resulting theory fits with the studied reality. This contrasts with a theory deductively derived from a large theory, without the aid of data, which may not fit with reality (Cuñat Giménez, 2007).

This methodology considers the case perspective rather than the variable-based one. There are two main strategies to develop it: (1) constant comparative method and (2) theoretical sampling. In the first stage the researcher codes and analyses data at the same time as developing concepts, identifying their properties, exploring the interrelations and integrating them into a coherent theory. In the theoretical sampling stage, the researcher simultaneously selects new cases to study according to the possibility of refining or extending concepts and theories already developed.

The Grounded Theory seeks an explanatory theory regarding a specific occurrence in an inductive way, which favors the exact explanation of the phenomenon studied, rather than its generalization. As such, the Grounded Theory allows the generation of theories extracting concepts from the collected data (Glaser & Strauss, 1969). Glaser (1992) indicates that this methodology could be applied within organizations' social behavior, as business processes are also considered social processes and labor factors, consequently the Grounded Theory can be considered as fit for the study purpose (Douglas, 2003, 2004) and, therefore for the workplace analysis in the terms proposed in this paper.

As Cuñat Giménez (2007) points out in relation to Glaser's (1978) comments, the data can come from different direct sources such as interview and questionnaire, but also from indirect sources such as experiences or case analyses. Therefore, the employed methodology allows for the combination of all of them, as the Grounded Theory allows for the collection of data from a wide range of sources as presented here.

2.2. Data sources and collection

This study was carried out based on publications, interviews and surveys by major global consultancy firms, establishing extensive data research using online data sources, covering worldwide data sources, some of them especially relevant for this case study based on their tight relationship within the workplace context. Documents, publications and surveys from highly reputable sources, such as Forbes, Gartner, McKinsey, Gallup, WHO, Boston Consulting Group, KPMG, PwC, EY, Deloitte and others, have been analyzed, mainly from March to July 2020, covering more than twenty countries and regions, where the main facts concerning the situation of the workplace in relation to COVID-19, the return to work and future scenarios were extracted. The complete literature input is detailed in Table 1.

Information gathered from consulted studies and interviews has been subsequently refined to support and fine-tune the results. Once all the data from each of the consultancy companies had been collected and classified, notes were taken, and common categories were postulated as described in the Results section.

Table 1. Input literature blocks. Own elaboration.

Input literature blocks	Reference
A. COVID-19 impact and recovery aspects	
Covid-10: Women, equity, and inclusion in the future of work	(Catalyst, 2020)
Tracking The Recovery: What Manufacturers Can Learn From One Another	(Deloitte, 2020d)
Enterprise resiliency: nine areas of focus for COVID-19 crisis management	(EY, 2020b)
Two New COVID-19 Studies Reveal CFO's Focus On Workplace Reboot, Revenue, And Cost Cutting	(Forbes, 2020b)
9 Future of Work Trends Post-COVID-19	(Gartner, 2020a)
COVID-19 Resource Center Insights	(Gartner, 2020b)
Gartner Survey Reveals 42% of CFOs Have No Contingency Plans for Second Wave of COVID-19	(Gartner, 2020c)
Workforce Strategies for Post-COVID-19 Recovery	(Harvard Business Review, 2020)
Reimagining the Office and Work Life After COVID-19	(McKinsey, 2020b)
COVID-19: Impacts on business	(PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020a)
PwC's COVID-19 CFO Pulse Survey	(PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020c)
How the post-COVID workplace will change business for the better	(World Economic Forum, 2020b)
B. Future workplace aspects	
COVID-19: Reopening the workplace in financial services	(Deloitte, 2020b)
Returning to the Workplace: Considerations for Boards	(Diligent Insights, 2020)
Can reopening your workplace help you reimagine your future?	(EY, 2020a)
5 Predictions About How Coronavirus Will Change The Future Of Work	(Forbes, 2020a)
3 Strategies for Leading Effectively Amid COVID-19	(GALLUP, 2020)
Strategies for Returning to the Workplace After COVID-19	(Herman Miller, 2020)
COVID-19 Return to workplace – the new reality	(KPMG, 2020c)
KPMG's Framework for Organizations' Safe Reopening	(KPMG, 2020d)
Return to workplace – Steps to a new reality	(KPMG, 2020e)
It is time to redefine work and the workplace	(People Matters, 2020)
How COVID-19 will reset traditional workplace rules	(PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020b)
Returning to the workplace after COVID-19: What boards should be thinking about	(PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020d)
A guide to thriving in the post-COVID-19 workplace	(World Economic Forum, 2020a)
Considerations for public health and social measures in the workplace in the context of COVID-19	(World Health Organization, 2020a)
Q&A: tips for health and safety at the workplace in the context of COVID-19	(World Health Organization, 2020b)
C. Technological factors	
Remote Work Works—Where Do We Go from Here?	(BCG, 2020)
COVID-19: Accelerate Digitization to Increase Resilience	(Deloitte, 2020a)
Digital transformation through the lens of COVID-19	(Deloitte, 2020c)
How Technology Can Curb the Spread of COVID-19	(Gartner, 2020d)
COVID-19: Accelerating digital transformation in uncertain times	(KPMG, 2020a)
COVID-19 digital transformation	(KPMG, 2020b)
Digital adoption through COVID-19 and beyond	(McKinsey, 2020a)
Workplace learning during coronavirus	(McKinsey, 2020c)

2.3. Data analysis

Data obtained in the collection of reports were analyzed and classified based on the "constant comparative method of data analysis" (Strauss, 1987), Glaser's (1978) indications as well as the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1969).

The collected data from the reports were compiled into categories, confirmed and modified at all stages of the analysis. Data analysis started after the first report and consisted of open coding; the data were coded under various headers depending on their content in order to analyze the data and achieve a constant comparison of situation and categories that emerged from subsequent reports. The categories were

linked to each other, with subcategories describing the specific category linked together, producing a core category (Strauss, 1987).

3 Results

The analysis of the data resulted in a process that led to a core category that showed how the workplace can be re-imagined, re-improved and re-invented, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, where five different strategic categories to achieve that target were identified within this process, namely: (1) Opportunity to Break with the past; (2) Workplace redesign; (3) Technology; (4) Digital strategy; and (5) Remote working and new sense of workplace. The workflow on how the five strategic categories connect and lead to the core category is depicted under Figure 1.

3.1. Core category: workplace during and after COVID-19

The workplace under COVID-19 may be understood as a situation given by the new circumstances where the COVID-19 has triggered a general worldwide transformation affecting the workplace in particular. Initially, companies were not prepared to face a situation where employees had to leave their workplace and do their tasks remotely from other locations or from their own homes. The identified strategic categories are essential to reach the new workplace while at the same time they feed back to each other in such a way that allows certain patterns of observation to be established regarding what could be the workplace of the future, completely different from what is known so far.

The future workplace is neither what is known today, as it is considered as a transition period, nor what could have been under the previous non-COVID-19 conditions, as they will never be the same again. However, inevitably it will be more inclusive, more mature and novel, considering employees' and business needs creating a good balance between them.

3.2. Strategic categories to achieve the core category

3.2.1. Break with the past

During the government-imposed lockdowns, companies inevitably adapted to continue working assuring that main operations were done remotely, however, companies replicated what was done before the pandemic, by translating existing processes into remote working contexts.

While in the past organizations were simply theorizing about new forms of work, the crisis of COVID-19 has forced them into taking actions, such as actually shifting to completely new ways of working, and even re-imagining new forms of work as required by the new pandemic circumstances. Therefore, companies must identify the most important processes within their organization, geography and functional structure, for their further re-evaluation involving both of management and employees. This effort should re-imagine the existing career development paths proposed by Human Resources – such as promoting intrapersonal relationships with closest co-
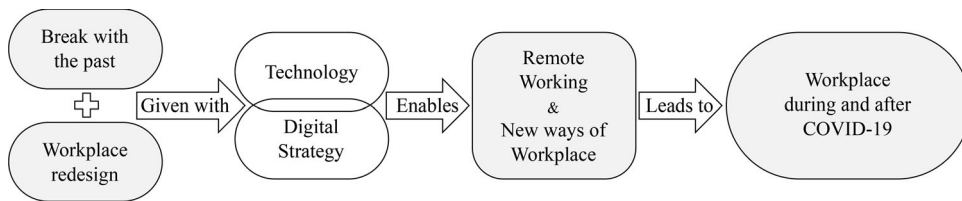
Figure 1. Workspace workflow. Own elaboration.

workers by requiring face-to-face office contact at the beginning while gradually shifting toward remote work – and the execution of different business activity processes or production stages, such as limiting face-to-face meetings for planning activities while working remotely for the actual execution.

The use of automation will be one of the change opportunities for the workplace of the future. Jobs should be redefined according to the desired workplace considerations, such as performance or productivity, that will determine the level and type of automation, where the use of Artificial Intelligence and semi-automation of repetitive and non-skilled work is the current reality. However, the main future concern is going to be about shifting from currently established physical business activity to a virtual or hybrid approach with partial physical contact. This will mean rethinking the whole business process as this transition will inevitably involve a major use of automation where no workplace will be needed.

Organizations must rethink their values and corporate culture so that they can be compatible with new ways of working, for instance: talent development must consider whether aspects such as face-to-face mentoring can be done in the same manner in the digital world. Similarly, the cultural values inherent in the company should be reconsidered. The temptation to return to pre-pandemic approaches should be avoided, preventing mistakes previously made. It is necessary to build the new processes for a digital world, educating and preparing the organization so that there are no differences between the processes related to face-to-face and remote work.

New ways of working will force companies to redefine employees' tasks and how they are performed, especially when working remotely. It will be necessary to re-examine organizations' economic policies of reward and motivation, as well as to have an effective balance between the development of the career model and their productivity. Future jobs will not be the same as those of the past, leading to the need to rethink how performance is measured and, consequently, appraisals may not necessarily refer to the actual performance index but about the employee's ability to overcome uncertainties, adapt to everchanging business scenarios and demonstrate leadership qualities.

Therefore, breaking with the past is the first category to change the workplace. Organizations of any size should consider the present moment as their best opportunity to break the inertia of the past and eliminate old bad habits or outdated ways of doing things. This category implies that all organizations are able to imagine new ways of work, and how the workplace will be, either by their own means or by means of external consulting services.

3.2.2. Workplace redesign

To prepare for the new post-COVID-19 situation, companies should redefine the actual way work is performed and located. Depending on the type of work and the requirements to perform it, it will be important to comprehend the models and dynamics necessary to develop tasks and workplaces according to their needs. Companies will have to align their people, processes and technologies as well as career policies, work models, and even contracts. Therefore, workplace redesign is a basic and prior category on the road to achieve the re-imagined, re-improved and re-invented workplace.

Offices have rarely been considered in detail beyond basic functions, such as work cubicles or confined spaces, meeting rooms, shared services, without really taking into account the fundamental objective of the organization or the needs of the employees. Therefore, in a COVID-19 world it is time to rethink and transform; as a result, companies must design workspaces that can support all forms of interaction that take place on site or remotely. For instance, if the company is conducting collaborative work, possibly a high percentage of the office could be dedicated to meeting rooms; or if the company is focusing on remote working, perhaps it would not require a large amount of office space, which could be replaced by home offices or satellite offices close to the employees' location.

The redesign of the workplace must be based on objective criteria that take into account: safety reasons, such as occupational health and safety regulation; social distance, such as the increase of the employee's minimum required working area; and a real estate revolution in the office market, where remote working will require less surface area and new locations need to be found. When employees return to work, organizations should rethink some aspects of the workplace, such as cleaning, social distance, as well as providing gathering places, common areas, and amenities. Organizations will be challenged to recreate the favorite employee aspects of their homes such as rest areas or their own decoration. Moreover, it will be important to maintain personal interactions so that work environments can meet the needs of employees, whether they work locally or remotely.

To change the workplace, it will be necessary to change the paradigm of how space is used: how much is really needed and what are the applications in relation to collaboration, productivity, culture and business objectives. In addition to considering where the offices should be, it is necessary to determine the desired modality for these offices: ownership, rent, coworking or remote work. As a brief note, some reports indicate that prior to COVID-19, only 3% of the US office market was considered flexible space, while their growth was estimated at 25% annually during the last five-years. This means that flexible solutions were already present, and while there has been a 12% and 9% decrease in working time within headquarters and satellite offices, an increase of 20% to 27% in flexible office working is projected. After COVID-19, reducing property costs could be significant, where companies and real estate groups should redevelop the workplace layout, as there is a major potential reduction by 30% of real estate costs up to 100% for fully remote, while reducing the impact of unforeseen disasters. Therefore, all this reassessment will not only improve the way of working, but has the potential to save costs (mainly real estate), improve

operations, and facilitate maintenance, where companies cut these costs by considering alternative workplace strategies and examining new space management approaches.

Within the future workplace, technology is a factor for employees returning to work safely, considering the possibility of future pandemics or lack of vaccines for COVID-19, where companies have to define the ways employees reach their workplaces together with the associated health and safety factors, such as cleaning or social distance aspects.

Therefore, the future workplace has to be more digital, less hierarchical and more flexible, complying with the health, safety and technological conditions required by the evolution of pandemics, such as COVID-19.

3.2.3. Technology

Companies have been very careful with their spending budgets and costs during the pandemic, but have continued to maintain digitalization, research and development, as well as technology and cybersecurity investments. This category explains how technology is a key factor in defining the workplace during COVID-19. Prior to the pandemic, most organizations have been increasingly using technology to engage employees, to facilitate their work and enhance feelings of well-being, health and safety.

Organizations have detected the following key success factors within the workplace that has been established during the confinement and the new reality: (1) Training in remote working tools and technologies; (2) Extension of data collection, using technologies for collecting data on employee health and safety, monitoring employees by means of virtual entry/exit control, monitoring the use of computers at work, conducting productivity tracking or employees' commitment and wellness; (3) Leverage of digital tech and advanced analytics for better and faster decisions; strengthening employee capacity and links to serving customers more effectively; and (4) Establishing a combination of in-house and remote access, using network agnostic tools, cyber-security management including data management and automated digitized workflows, managing to maintain an executive presence virtually. The reassessment of technological protocols and processes together with the use of performance management tools is considered positive, where many companies have established controls that restrict some activities.

Technology helps in collaborative work environments by enabling agile workplace interactions. Frequently, due to the pandemic, workers had to take care of children or elderly people at home, therefore organizations had to adjust the productivity levels required for home-based employees. Regardless of employees' past technological knowledge, the pandemic has presented an opportunity to improve the use of these tools. Although the use of new technologies is often challenging and problems can occur, such as limited access to the corporate network or actual network overload, nevertheless, telecommunication companies have been able to boost their connectivity infrastructure and organizations have been able to enable user interfaces that have facilitated remote work.

As has been demonstrated, the technological component has played a decisive role in remote working, in terms of the digitalization of the company's business processes, and has become the main survival factor facing companies during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has also been one of the levers for employee engagement with the workplace, and to sustain the corporate culture, learning, collaboration and productivity.

3.2.4. Digital strategy

This category considers the acceleration of digital transformations as the trigger to remote working and workplace transformation, while revealing important gaps within the IT infrastructure, workforce planning and digital skills development.

The outbreak of COVID-19 has generated many questions within organizations regarding the impact it could have on the company's digitalization process, which in some cases was already underway, while in others not yet begun. However, the adaptation to COVID-19 has been remarkably successful as, prior to the crisis, the technology already had a highly strategic value for companies, therefore in a very short period of time new remote work models have been implemented, employees have been trained by means of digital platforms within new digital solutions which they were not used to operate, procedures have been adapted and digital collaborative work modes have been encouraged. Consequently, companies with a high degree of digitalization were able to carry out this change process faster and more efficiently as compared to non-digitalized businesses.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 brought to the surface the existing technological transformation gaps within companies, which caused serious issues, such as: how their remote working environments were inefficient; that their infrastructures could not withstand an increase in traffic or have suffered serious cyber-security problems. In addition, companies that were already aware of the security, scalability and flexibility features offered by cloud environments, had realized the mistake of not giving them adequate technological priority.

For many companies, this unforeseen situation has served to identify basic aspects required for a digital workplace environment, such as the wide variety of processes that are still supported by paper documents that could be easily digitized to avoid such dependence, and therefore this could help organization in designing their digital transformation plan and raise awareness that the higher the level of digitalization, the greater the adaptation speed to the new workplace and the market.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need to address the different technological challenges regarding companies' digital transformation process, that together with the development of new technological enablers, such as artificial intelligence, 5 G, blockchain, quantum computing or virtual reality, could have a significant impact on the whole society, and could continue to do so in the coming years, such as: (1) Technological infrastructure ready for ubiquitous remote working; (2) Deployment of cloud ecosystems adapted to responsive mobile devices and data-driven decision-making organizations; (3) Acceleration of cybersecurity systems together with increase of threats; (4) Hyper-automation, robotization of processes and commoditization of artificial intelligence solutions; (5) Collaborative work and e-

learning platforms, promoting innovation and creativity in organizations; (6) Customer-centric strategy oriented towards the new digital channels for interaction and virtualization of experiences; and (7) Significant increase of E-commerce platforms and contactless technologies.

At the same time, it is necessary to change the organizational culture towards promoting agility and collaboration, however given the impossibility of foreseeing the future, top management will be constantly required to analyze all potential scenarios and provide the necessary flexibility to rapidly address any unexpected event that could surface in the future.

The analysis of the initial situation, together with the impact of the expected different technological solutions and enabling technologies on the organization, will serve to develop a digitalization strategy and a transformation roadmap which will establish the baseline for the future deployment of transformation initiatives from both digital and change management points of view; together with the cultural changes, this will result in a better adaptation of the workplace and, ultimately, of the company itself to the new market circumstances.

The acceleration of the digital transformation and operational models forces organizations to monitor how these digital platforms and new consumption habits affect their activity: stimulate strategic thinking, strategic decision-making and improve processes that facilitate the discovery of new business opportunities, consequently resulting in a better workplace that encourages companies and employees to generate positive feedback.

Companies should review the set of metrics used to monitor the performance of their operations and their investment priorities, as reducing costs or investments in the digital field could be counterproductive for the future of the company. Therefore, it is necessary to maintain investment in digitalization by first developing the initiatives that provide short-term support to employees, together with those that provide a potential increase in revenue and/or cost reduction, mainly by optimizing business processes while avoiding salaries or resources cuts. The effects of COVID-19 make this category extremely important in the evolution of the workplace, as companies must face up to a profound transformation, this opportunity being the catalyst and accelerator of changes through digital transformation.

The workplace has entered a process that goes beyond a mere transformation, where an accelerated change process is deployed in the adoption of digital enablers and the implementation of initiatives that maximize the flexibility and creativity of its employees, pursuing the opportunities to emerge from the crisis in the most successful way.

As the digital transformation process is already in place, the effects of COVID-19 make this category extremely important in the evolution of the workplace, as companies must face up to a deep transformation, this opportunity being the catalyst and accelerator of changes through digital transformation, where employees, companies and workplaces will inevitably become more agile and dynamic than ever.

3.2.5. Remote working and new sense of the workplace
Although most of the companies were reticent to have employees remote working, this pandemic has forced a worldwide experiment where many more people had to

work from home, since COVID-19 accelerates new working and workplace models, therefore resulting an increased overall flexibility.

Prior to the pandemic, the prevailing mindset was that on-site offices and workplaces were critical to productivity, culture and attracting talent, where companies strongly competed for first-class office spaces located in major city centers around major world capitals, together with open, collaborative and welcoming office designs as their main strategy.

The speed and effectiveness with which the forms of digital collaboration have been adopted by companies has been remarkable, where, in the majority of cases, results have exceeded their expectations. Remote working has spread rapidly thanks to the technologies that companies have been able to provide to their employees, allowing them greater flexibility to work both in and out of the office. Days after the pandemic began, many businesses were able to have more than 90% of their employees working remotely. Some jobs that would never have been thought of as being done remotely, such as customer service, insurance companies, brokers, etc, have been able to maintain operations effectively.

Several surveys regarding the future of the workplace, covering companies whose jobs are not on-site dependent, reveal that the majority believe that their jobs will be more remote than ever: (1) 40% believe that will use remote working in the future; (2) 37% expect that 25% of their employees will be able to work in a hybrid model; (3) 48% of employees prefer remote work as compared to 30% before COVID-19; (4) 80% of respondents who work at home would continue home working, 41% consider their productivity to have increased while 28% consider their productivity to have been unaffected; and (5) remote working during COVID-19 showed that productivity has increased by 15% to 20%, absenteeism has been reduced to 40%, turnover has been reduced by 10% to 15% and there is more than a 20% reduction in potential costs in the use of property and resources.

It is important for companies to have a complete vision of what remote work means, since this concept does not necessarily mean that all employees work from home, because remote work can be organized in such a way that employees work partially from home and partially at the office, according to a predefined calendar or through rotating schedules. Specific times can be defined to be on-site, off-site or anywhere if employees can work remotely all the time, with availability to come to the office when required. Depending on the location of the workplace, the new workplaces could be "fully located", "alternating on site", "on demand on site", "remotely connected" or simply "working from anywhere".

The advantages that this situation has brought to employees and organizations include the following: (1) Reduction of transportation times and the associated environmental impact; (2) Better productivity and better time management; (3) Balance between family and work, associated with a potential for greater happiness; (4) An increased feeling of protection and security regarding the potential effects of the pandemic; (5) The opportunity to access talent without geographical boundaries; (6) Implement of new processes aligned with remote work; (7) Strengthening corporate culture; and (8) Reduction in real estate costs. Therefore, while considering the future workplace, it must be taken into account that remote working has obvious benefits in people's happiness and workplace change.

Despite most employees being satisfied with remote working, it must be taken into consideration that all the pillars of organizational culture consolidated before the pandemic, such as conversations, meeting and social contact being threatened by the lack of physical interactions between employees. Temporal remote working could have a minor impact; however, permanent remote working could result in major loss of talent and corporate culture.

Although each employee and each organization have different needs, the overall COVID-19 experience has been considered as positive: productivity has improved, feelings of happiness experienced, remote work performed in a satisfactory manner, and employees' engagement levels have increased; however this has not always been the case. As a result, the most relevant aspect is that there is still an ongoing journey to discover and try new forms of workplace as many of them have not yet been discovered.

4. Discussions

4.1. Conclusions

Various reports, data, surveys and documents together with the role played by individuals, organizations and companies in this situation have been analyzed to understand the processes that will re-imagine, re-improve, re-invent and, consequently, change the workplace of the future, as well as the work that organizations have to do to adapt it accordingly.

The results show the existence of certain strategic categories that are important for re-imagining the workplace after COVID-19, as well as for the process of changing it. The categories leading to the main category show that there are some common company policies that, translated into tangible concepts, can help in the engagement of people with their work (Rožman & Štrukelj, 2020). These policies can be summarized as redesigning the physical space of the workplace, work flexibility, family reconciliation and health security. The study of these policies, based on data analysis, may open up different paths of research which exceed the scope of this document but may allow for the establishment of models in which employee satisfaction is directly related to them.

The five categories discussed in the section "Results" are considered important for people's engagement with their workplaces and organizations (Table 2). Literature reviews show that "Breaking with the past" is necessary (Goffee & Jones, 2013) and should be done from a work order perspective, characterizing it and redesigning the workplace according to organizational priorities (McKinsey, 2020b). This process must facilitate the redesign of the workplace in accordance with the new forms of work and not act as a mere copy or transfer of the usual processes to remote work (McKinsey, 2020b). Companies that are more engaged with employees and more "human-centric" (EY, 2020a) will emerge faster and stronger.

Before the pandemic outbreak, this would have been done in a traditional way, with certain factors and processes transforming workplaces into nice places to work, catalyzing work experiences towards a more just society (Michaelson et al., 2014). The feeling of wellness with oneself remains valid under a pandemic environment as

Table 2. Strategic categories main outcomes. Own elaboration.

Category	Main Outcomes
1. Breaking with the past	*Organizations of any size should consider the present moment as their best opportunity to break the inertia of the past and eliminate old bad habits or outdated ways of doing things, implying they are able to imagine new ways of work, and how the workplace will be, either by their own means or by means of external consulting services.*
2. Workplace redesign	*The future workplace has to be more digital, less hierarchical and more flexible, complying with the health, safety and technological conditions required by the evolution of pandemics, such as COVID-19.*
3. Technology	*Its role has been decisive in new ways of working, digitalization and survival within the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has also been one of the levers for employees' engagement with the workplace, and to sustain the corporate culture, learning, collaboration and productivity.*
4. Digital strategy	*Organizations must face up to a deep transformation, this opportunity being the catalyst and accelerator of changes through digital transformation, where employees, companies and workplaces will inevitably become more agile and dynamic than ever.*
5. Remote working and new sense of workplace	*The overall remote experience has been considered as positive, where productivity, happiness and employees' engagement levels have increased. However, many organizations are still on the journey to discover and try new forms of workplace.*
Core category: The workplace during and after COVID-19	*The future is neither what is known today, nor what could have been under the previous non-COVID-19 conditions, where inevitably it will be more inclusive, more mature and novel, considering employees' and business needs creating a good balance between them.*

working remotely and/or at home is not incompatible with the feeling of being connected. Moreover, if an employee can be an active agent of his or her own work, finding meaning and influencing the environment (Boje & Baskin, 2011; Endrissat et al., 2015), then there is no better place than a workplace at home to do so.

Therefore, it can be stated that remote work and the new ways of work that have emerged in the pandemic may even allow for a greater change of the workplace than in the pre-pandemic situation as the circumstances surrounding the new workplace are different. The workplace can be considered as a friendly, known environment, since it is established in one's own home. However, this does not deny negative feelings such as fear, insecurity or claustrophobia, even when having to be at home for long periods of time.

It is worth noting that within the analysis of the five categories, "Breaking with the past" and "Workplace redesign" are made possible thanks to existing "Technology" and, to a large extent, to the "Digital strategy" that many companies already had or had been preparing for (EY, 2020a). Companies have taken a great step forward due to COVID-19.

Based on the above findings, together with the needs created by the pandemic such as health and safety, redesign of physical space or real estate, among others, this leads to the possibility of considering the measurement of the change of organizations that make it possible for people to connect with their workplaces.

Following the data and its analysis, it can be seen that mindfulness (especially mental health), safety and engagement are relevant variables in this process, and not always from a positive point of view (World Health Organization, 2020a, 2020b). In addition, organizational practices aimed at flexible working, family conciliation and employee care will be not only convenient to create nice places to work but also mandatory in pandemic situations.

The set of analyses and the conclusions obtained allow a scenario to be envisioned in which the workplace will not only be re-imagined but will change due to the circumstances that arise. Rationality in the search for efficiency has been accompanied by a gradual dehumanization of organizations (Ritzer, 2005) threatening employees' sense of identity and their relationship with others (Gill, 2019), reducing their physical spaces to the minimum expression. At this time, there has been a break with the parameters known to date, where "employee-centric" and "customer-centric" are the paradigms around which the workplace of the future will be built.

It is difficult to know what the situation in the medium term will be. As pandemics can occur more frequently, these changes that are taking place will give rise to workplace models that are unknown at this time. The bottom line is that nothing will remain the same and that not only will the workplace change (social distance, redesigning space, security and physical control) but also its location (new spaces, remote working, home offices, profound changes in the model of real estate, places not yet imagined), and even the concept of workplace.

4.2. Limitations

During the elaboration of this research, the authors have noted a number of limitations, regarding three main aspects, however, from the authors' point of view these identified limitations are to be considered as minor, consequently the paper helps to understand the needs of the actual and future workplace under a consistent research line:

1. Focused on specific publications. The reports of seven major global consulting firms, together with eight main specific reports and four monthly surveys, have been selected. Some of them are the result of repeated interviews with executives of global companies over a period of four months, where others are analysis reports based on the real needs of the consultants' clients and proposals for a "return to normality" over different geographical areas. However, these publications are only a reduced selection from the thousands of publications generated during COVID-19.
2. Limited to the consulting companies' regions of interest. As the literature material is abundant, a vast amount of data has been processed and highly relevant information generated during the pandemic has been obtained and transformed in knowledge about workplaces. From all the reports obtained, common points of convergence have been found, which have been categorized and referred to within the previous sections. These data, however, are different in format, geographical location and time and the conclusions must be evaluated with regard to these facts.
3. Limited timeline selection. The deadline for data collection has been set for July, although subsequent reports have continued to be published matching with the research findings. Possibly, by setting a specific geographical scope or expanding the number of reports, this could be refined and the classification of the five categories could be fine-tuned further on.

4.3. Implications

Different factors of study, such as breaking with the past or seeking new ways of remote work, emphasize the need to think not about changing the workplace but re-inventing it. The feeling of being connected in an affirmative way to existence (Bennett, 2001) has never been more meaningful at a time when social distance and job safety in the workplace are so important, especially the need to "feel safe" in the workplace.

Therefore, further studies could provide answers to these questions and deepen the categories' classification, which can help in knowing how to connect human beings with the newest forms of workplaces. In the study, work engagement and mindfulness seem relevant issues in the remote work and home office environments in pandemic situations like COVID-19. Considering that the research started within a pandemic that has not yet ended, where there may be outbreaks and new waves, everything remains open for new research work to deepen or continue any of the lines drawn by the authors within this paper:

1. Continue with the strategic categories analysis. One line to continue the research is to follow up the documents and publications of the selected consulting firms and analyze the evolution between the proposed theory and the settlement of the categories found with the surveys dated after July and subsequent ones (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2020c).
2. Explore related social and psychological factors in work behavior (Bin Saeed et al., 2019). It is of special interest to deepen the relevance of the employee's engagement with the organization through their remote workplace and mindfulness as a tool for mental balance in pandemic situation (World Health Organization, 2020a, 2020b) .
3. Extend the research to future workspace paradigms conceptualization. Another line of research, perhaps more novel, is to explore the concept behind new ways of working that will lead to new workplaces that do not yet exist, and are even difficult to imagine at this time. The pandemic is changing everything and removing paradigms at speeds never before thought possible. This idea leads the authors to consider that rather than changing the workplace, it may have to be re-invented after first being re-imagined and re-improved.

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