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Teleworking in Greece: a comparative study of the public and private sectors in the post-COVID-19 era

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ΑΡΘΡΟ

Teleworking in Greece: a comparative study of the public and private sectors in the post-COVID-19 era

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Abstract

The current study examines the use of teleworking in Greece four years after the COVID-19 pandemic, following the complete lifting of government measures. Primary research was conducted among employees and managers of private and public sector organisations using two questionnaires, with the aim of investigating the preferences, experiences, and performance of teleworkers, as well as comparing the data with that from the beginning of the pandemic. The results showed an improvement in the experience but a decrease in the performance of teleworkers. The private sector now makes significant use of teleworking, while the public sector has returned to full-time in-person work, with a preference in both sectors for a hybrid model. The cultural analysis showed that the public sector is characterised by low individualism, high uncertainty avoidance, stability, and long-term orientation, while the private sector exhibits higher individualism, greater flexibility, and low uncertainty avoidance.

Key words: telework, COVID-19, organisational culture

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 radically changed everyday life and business operations, forcing companies to adapt immediately to the new reality. Technology played a decisive role, providing tools that enabled remote working (teleworking) and the continuation of business activities. However, this sudden transition posed a number of challenges, such as maintaining employee performance and psychological well-being, balancing work and personal life, and the need for support from managers. Ensuring a healthy and functional workforce emerged as a key factor in business sustainability.

In Greece, where teleworking was an almost unknown working model, the state introduced it as a necessary measure to limit the pandemic (Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2021). Since then, this experience has been the subject of much research internationally and domestically, focusing on its impact on productivity, psychology, and corporate culture. Four years later, with the complete lifting of restrictions (OT, 2023), teleworking in Greece seems to have shifted from being an emergency solution to a topic of discussion on whether it can be a sustainable and stable working model in the post-COVID era.

2. Historical overview

The concept of flexible working first appeared in Munich in 1967 as a solution to employee commuting problems (Koch, 1998). A few years later, in 1973, American physicist and engineer Jack Nilles, known as the "father of telework," introduced the terms "telework" and "telecommuting." Nilles defined telework as the replacement of physical travel for professional purposes with telecommunications, and telecommuting as occasional work outside the office, such as at home or at the client's premises. The second term is considered a subcategory of the first (Uy, 2021).

Telework was recognised by the US Congress in 1978 as a flexible work model with significant advantages (Koch, 1998). From the 1980s to the early 2000s, technological advances, particularly the spread of computers and the internet, made teleworking increasingly accessible and effective (Georgetown University Law Center, 2006). Legislative regulations supported its spread, allowing companies to cover the equipment and expenses of teleworkers (OPM, 1995), while since 2004, all US federal employees have been able to work remotely, provided that their performance remains high (GAO, 2004). However, challenges arose, as many supervisors found it difficult to monitor performance, while employees felt pressure to return to the office (Robinson, 2006).

With the rapid spread of digital technologies, smart mobile devices, and online communication tools, teleworking has become established as a basic form of work (Shin, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 accelerated this transition: in the US, universal teleworking increased from 17% to 44% (Sherif, 2023), with a similar increase observed internationally (OECD, 2021). The highest rates were recorded in highly digitised sectors, confirming the close relationship between technological infrastructure and the possibility of implementing teleworking.

In Greece, teleworking was first legally recognised in 1998 as a "special form of employment" under Law No. 2639/1998 (Article 1) (KEPEA, 2024), followed by Law 3846/2010 (Article 1), which amended and supplemented the initial framework (Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2010). With the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking has become central, with Law 4808/2021 (Article 67) recognising it as a modern form of employment and setting out in detail the rights of workers and the protection of personal data (Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2021). Before the pandemic, Greece ranked low in Europe in terms of teleworking (20th out of 27 EU countries) and made almost no progress from 2009 to 2019 (Milasi et al., 2021). During the lockdowns of 2020–2021, teleworking was mandatory for up to 40% of employees who could work remotely (To Vima, 2020; & Sotiriou, 2021), but the majority had already returned to in-person work by November 2020 (Papadopoulos, 2021). After the total lifting of measures in March 2023 (OT, 2023), teleworking is no longer mandatory but is implemented as an emergency measure, as was seen in June 2024, when it was temporarily imposed due to high temperatures (Ministry of Labor and Social Security, 2024).

Following the lifting of pandemic restrictions, mandatory teleworking has been replaced by the hybrid model, a flexible system that allows employees to work either in the office or remotely (Qualtrics, 2024). This model offers multiple benefits, as it promotes work-life balance, reduces stress and commuting costs, and increases productivity (Priyavarsha & Sudha, 2022). At the same time, it enables companies to reduce operating costs and attract talent internationally, thereby enhancing their competitiveness (Kirkham, 2024). Furthermore, the hybrid model can contribute positively to the environment by reducing emissions through the reduction of daily commuting (Muhammad et al., 2020).

However, the experience of full-time teleworking has highlighted challenges that also affect the hybrid context, such as loneliness, lack of social interaction, and inadequate infrastructure (Ipsen et al., 2021), while negative effects on mental health were also observed, especially in women (Pierce et al., 2020). The term "technophobia" was also coined to describe anxiety about the use of new technologies (Priyavarsha & Sudha, 2022), as well as a bias in favor of those who work in the office because they are more "visible" (Mortensen & Haas, 2021).

If the hybrid model is to be established as a sustainable and fair way of working, companies need to invest in trust, recognition, and ongoing training for their employees (Priyavarsha & Sudha, 2022). Humanising hybrid work and developing a culture of flexibility, responsibility, and innovation is vital, as is promoting smart working practices that encourage experimentation and collaboration (EURES, 2021).

3. Methodology

Four years after the outbreak of the global COVID-19 pandemic and one year after the lifting of preventive measures imposed by the Greek state, research interest has arisen in how and whether teleworking is still being used in Greece. Teleworking is a working model that was established in Greece during the pandemic as a means of limiting the spread of the virus, and could now be used to support professional sectors and activities that can accommodate it. This reasoning led to the objective of this study, which is to examine the use of teleworking in Greece today, in both the public and private sectors. In addition, researchers were also interested in employees' views on teleworking, as well as their performance in using it, which were compared with an earlier relevant study conducted during the pandemic in order to compare whether the experience and performance of employees has improved or not. Finally, based on the research results, a comparison of culture between the public and private sectors was made.

The research is quantitative and descriptive in nature, as it aims to systematically record the current use of teleworking in Greece and compare it with previous data from the pandemic period. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed electronically to public and private sector employees. The questions were closed-ended, formulated on a five-point Likert scale, and covered topics related to the use and experience of teleworking, employee performance, and work culture. The data were analysed using descriptive and comparative statistical methods in order to identify differences in experience, performance, and culture between the public and private sectors, as well as in relation to the pandemic period.

The statistical sample consists of companies and organisations operating in Greece, in the public and private sectors, that have made use of teleworking. The sample was selected based on private companies and public organisations operating in the Greek business sector and providing services. The main criterion for selecting the sample was that they had worked remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic, or that the nature of their work allowed them to work remotely. The selection of participating employees was random, made by the companies and organisations themselves that agreed to participate in the survey. When contacting the sample, as many employees as possible were asked to participate, with the only condition being that they had used teleworking or were still using it.

It should be noted that foreign companies with a Greek branch or Greek office were also contacted. The communication was with Greek employees residing in Greece. Greeks working abroad and digital nomads are not a suitable sample for this study, which is why they were not contacted.

The private companies selected as a statistical sample were mainly involved in consulting and management, such as strategy, entrepreneurship, marketing (digital and non-digital), real estate management, IT, event organisation and logistics. We also got in touch with banks, insurance companies, communications companies, shipping companies, and online service providers (food delivery, e-commerce, leasing, courier, and transport companies). As for the public sector sample, ministries, municipalities, research centers, and public services were selected.

Finally, it is worth noting that the sample was selected from all over Greece and not only from large urban centers. The questionnaires did not ask for the topographical location of the employees' workplace or permanent residence. In this way, the results provide an overall picture of teleworking in Greece, without studying each district or municipality separately, since the purpose of the survey is to focus on a general comparison of the public and private sectors throughout Greece.

The survey began on March 11 and was completed on April 11, 2024. Two questionnaires were created for the purposes of the survey and distributed to both sectors (private and public). The first questionnaire was addressed to employees in supervisory positions and the second to employees in subordinate positions.

The responses were compared with the results of a similar survey, which examined the same variables. This survey was conducted at the end of 2021 and was addressed to employees of companies who worked remotely during the pandemic. (Kalogianni, 2022).

4. Results analysis

The survey was based on two questionnaires, one for subordinates (N=361) and one for supervisors (N=233). The majority of participants were aged 41–60, had a high level of education (over 40% had a master's degree) and many years of professional experience (75% of subordinates and 86% of supervisors had more than 10 years). Before the pandemic, only 17% of subordinates and 22% of supervisors worked remotely, while after the pandemic the percentages increased (39% and 52% respectively report some form of remote work). However, the majority of both groups continue to work in person, while the hybrid model is preferred as ideal (72% of subordinates and 58% of managers).

With regard to the experience and performance variables, the employees showed a neutral attitude towards time flexibility (AP=3.11) and functional flexibility (AP=3.40), but higher values for support from their supervisor (AP=3.85) and work commitment (AP=3.66), while work exhaustion remained relatively low (AP=2.96). From the supervisors' perspective, the perception of their subordinates' performance was positive, with average scores of 3.63 for individual competence, 3.69 for adaptability, and 3.32 for proactivity, indicating satisfactory but not particularly high performance in the context of teleworking.

After the comparison of the results with an earlier study conducted in 2021 (Kalogianni, 2022), it appears that in 2024, existing employees will have increased time flexibility and reduced work exhaustion (by 0.19), but there's a slight decrease in support from their boss and in functional

flexibility, while work commitment stays the same. In contrast, performance variables show an overall decline, suggesting a deterioration in overall employee performance compared to 2021. More specifically, individual competence decreased by 0.87, adaptability by 0.61, and proactivity by 0.48.

EXPERIENCE VARIABLES	Average Price	
	2021	2024
Time flexibility	2.98	3.11
Support from supervisor	3.89	3.85
Functional flexibility	3.42	3.40
Work commitment	3.66	3.66
Work exhaustion	3.15	2.96

Table 1: Comparison of experience variables of employees

PERFORMANCE VARIABLES	Average Price	
	2021	2024
Individual competence	4.50	3.63
Individual adaptability	4.30	3.69
Individual proactivity	3.80	3.32

Table2: Comparison of performance variables of employees

5. Comparative analysis of the public and private sectors

A comparison of the responses of employees in the public and private sectors reveals significant differences in demographic characteristics, use of teleworking, and attitudes toward flexibility and work commitment. The public sector is dominated by older employees (41–60 years old, 84%) and those with long-term experience (90.9% with more than 10 years), while the private sector is dominated by younger employees (25–40 years old, 58.1%) with less previous experience. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking was limited in both sectors (82.4% in the public sector and 83.8% in the private sector worked exclusively in person). However, today the private sector shows a clear increase in the integration of teleworking, with 49.6% working partially or fully remotely, compared to only 20.5% in the public sector. Nevertheless, in both sectors, the majority had no choice in how they worked (86.9% public, 61.5% private), although the overwhelming majority prefers a hybrid working model (73.4% and 69.2% respectively).

With regard to experience variables, greater temporal and functional flexibility is observed in the public sector (3.14 and 3.22 respectively), while the private sector excels in support from supervisors (3.99 vs. 3.60). Work engagement is higher in the public sector (3.91 vs. 3.51), while work exhaustion is more pronounced in the private sector (41.1% feel exhausted at the end of the day, compared to 31.4% in the public sector).

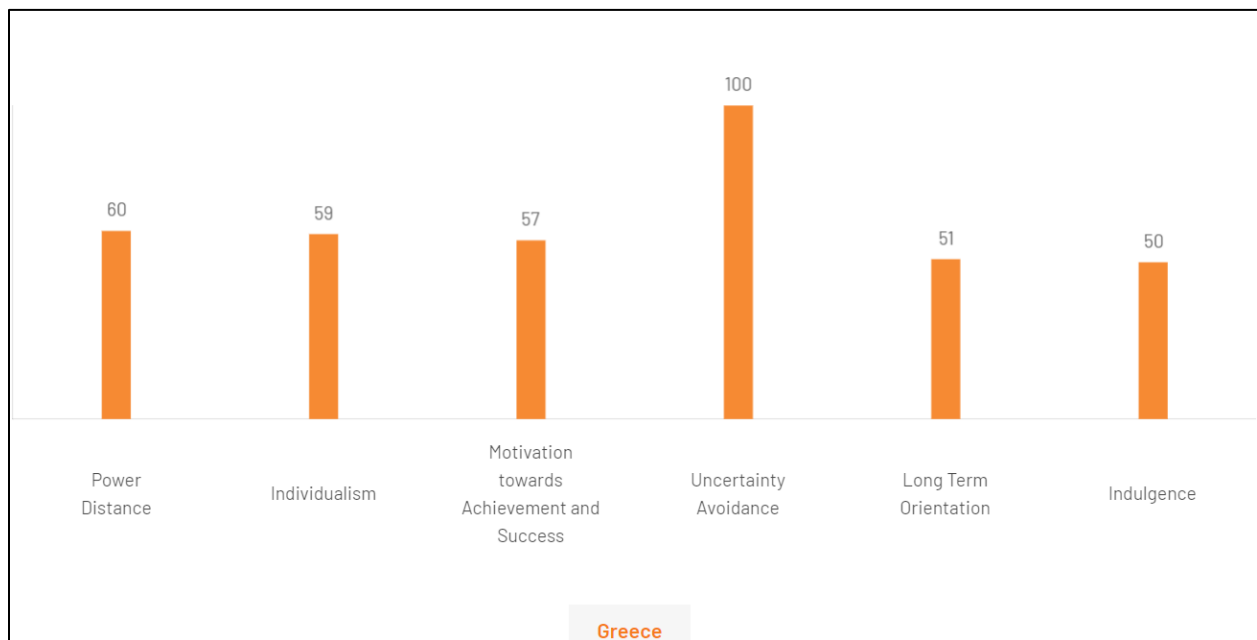
Overall, the data show that, although the private sector in Greece has adapted more to the new reality of teleworking, which is in line with international trends, the public sector continues to offer greater stability and commitment, but with less support and lower flexibility in the organisation of work.

6. Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory

To interpret the differences in work culture between the public and private sectors in Greece, the current study used the cultural dimensions model developed by Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede, which is a widely recognised tool for comparing national and organisational cultures and is widely used to compare societies and businesses worldwide (Wikipedia, 2024). Hofstede's theory includes six basic dimensions (Geert Hofstede, 2024):

1. Individualism, which indicates the degree of independence of the individual within society
2. Power distance, which concerns the acceptance of hierarchical differences
3. Masculinity (motivation towards achievement and success), which is linked to the priority given to achievements over quality of life
4. Uncertainty avoidance, which indicates a society's tolerance for change
5. Long-term orientation, which expresses attitudes towards the past and the future
6. Indulgence, which concerns the control or satisfaction of human desires

The relevant measurements for Greece, as presented by The Culture Factor Group (2024), reflect the country's position in the above dimensions, allowing for a comparison of Greek culture with other societies.



Source: The Culture Factor Group (2024)

The analysis of the results in combination with Hofstede's cultural dimensions shows clear differences between the public and private sectors in Greece. Long-term employment in the same organisation in the public sector (59.43% of employees and 88% of managers for more than 10 years) indicates a high avoidance of uncertainty and a strong collective spirit, in contrast to the private sector, where shorter employment duration (2-5 years) reflects greater individualism and adaptability. At the same time, public sector employees show higher job commitment, reinforcing the image of a stable but less flexible work culture.

With regard to teleworking, the public sector returned almost entirely to the traditional face-to-face model after the pandemic, while the private sector showed greater flexibility and innovation,

incorporating the hybrid model to a significant extent. Furthermore, the lack of choice in working arrangements for the majority of employees in both sectors, especially in the public sector, reflects a high distance of power, where decisions are made hierarchically rather than participatively. Overall, the findings indicate that the public sector remains more traditional and stability-oriented, while the private sector shows adaptability and openness to change, reflecting different aspects of Greek culture in practice.

7. Conclusions

The conclusions of the study can be summarised as follows:

1. The private sector continues to make significant use of teleworking, while the public sector has almost completely returned to the in-person model.
2. In both sectors, employees prefer the hybrid work model because of the flexibility it offers.
3. The experience of existing employees with teleworking has improved slightly since the beginning of the pandemic.
4. The performance of existing employees in teleworking conditions has deteriorated compared to the initial period of the pandemic.
5. The public sector work culture is characterised by low individualism and long-term orientation, as well as high power distance and increased uncertainty avoidance. In the private sector, there are high levels of individualism, power distance, and long-term orientation, but low uncertainty avoidance.

In conclusion, teleworking in Greece is mainly utilised by the private sector, which is consistent with international trends. In contrast, the public sector has returned to a fully in-person work model. This difference between the two sectors can be attributed to differences in work culture, as the private sector is more receptive to innovation and the adoption of new tools and working methods, while the public sector seems to largely maintain traditional practices of organisation and operation.

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