

Secretarial work in the Covid-19 pandemic: the perception of professionals regarding the adaptation to remote work on the pandemic context

Trabalho secretarial na pandemia do Covid-19: a percepção dos profissionais quanto à adaptação ao trabalho remoto no contexto pandêmico

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RESUMO

This study's main objective was to investigate the perception of executive secretaries regarding the adaptation of remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic. To this end, the concept and regulation of teleworking was analyzed, in addition to its benefits, difficulties and the secretarial skills involved. Using online forms and semi-structured interviews, a qualitative and descriptive research was carried out with ten graduated executive secretary professionals working in different organizations. The results indicate that most of them felt prepared, totally or in part, to continue their activities working from home, thus demonstrating the ability to adapt. Among the challenges of this pandemic period, the internal communication of organizations was especially evident, which was affected due to the isolation and, consequently, the distance from co-workers. However, most participants mentioned communication competence as being very important when it comes to teleworking. Although challenges existed, they didn't prevent the demands from being carried out and completed. Finally, most of the interviewees identified benefits and positive aspects through the experience of remote work, whether in their personal life or for the organizations as a whole.

Keywords: Secretarial skills. Remote work. Covid-19.

ABSTRACT

Este estudo teve como objetivo principal investigar a percepção de secretários executivos quanto à adequação ao trabalho remoto durante a pandemia do Covid-19. Para tal, foram trabalhados o conceito e a regulamentação do teletrabalho, além dos seus benefícios, suas dificuldades e as competências secretariais envolvidas. Utilizando-se da aplicação de formulários on-line e da realização de entrevistas semiestruturadas, uma pesquisa de abordagem qualitativa e natureza descritiva foi realizada com dez profissionais de Secretariado Executivo graduados na área e atuantes em diferentes organizações. Constatou-se que estes, em sua maioria, se sentiram preparados, totalmente ou em partes, para continuar suas atividades em home office, demonstrando, assim, a capacidade de adaptação. Dentre os desafios deste período, evidenciou-se principalmente a comunicação interna das organizações que foi comprometida em função do isolamento e, conseqüentemente, o distanciamento dos colegas de trabalho. Entretanto, a maioria dos participantes mencionaram a competência da comunicação como sendo de muita importância quando se trata do teletrabalho. Observou-se também que os desafios existiram, contudo, eles não impediram que as demandas fossem devidamente cumpridas. Por fim, boa parte dos entrevistados identificaram benefícios e pontos positivos proporcionados pelo trabalho remoto, seja na vida pessoal de cada profissional, seja para as organizações como um todo.

Palavras-chave: Competências secretariais. Trabalho remoto. Covid-19.

1 INTRODUCTION

Although remote work has been considered for a long time as an unfeasible working method, the advent of the new Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic has made public and private organizations reinvent themselves (Nascimento; Torres; Nery, 2020). This profession model of work is regulated by law and has the same rights guaranteed to other workers (Oliveira et al.; 2017). As a result of the scenario that began in Brazil in March 2020, this model gained strength due to its necessity, when the spread of the new disease happened at an accelerated pace and people did not immediately know which attitudes would prevail under the circumstances.

Therefore, in the midst of a context of fragility in the country, the World Health Organization (WHO) highlighted sudden measures to prevent the transmission of the virus, where the need to avoid agglomerations and social isolation became a reality for all. In order to minimize the impacts caused by the health crisis, adjustment to the new reality and the transition from face-to-face work to telework became necessary very quickly.

In view of this situation, the problematic that inspired this study is to understand the perception of executive secretaries regarding their adaptation to remote work in the pandemic context, taking into account the advantages and challenges of working from home and the duties required of those professionals.

In this study, it was sought to specifically analyze the work of professionals graduated in Executive Secretary degree at the Federal University of Viçosa (UFV) and those who are working in their area of expertise. With a qualitative approach, a survey of graduates of the course was carried out and individual and semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten secretaries from different organizations.

This article is structured into five sections. This first section introduced the theme that underlies this research. The second section presents, through a theoretical review, the concept and regulation of telework, as well as its benefits, challenges, and the competencies of executive secretaries. The third section outlines the research methodology used in this study and explains how the data was collected. The fourth section provides the analysis and discussion, including the characterization of the participants and the results of the interviews. Finally, the article concludes with the final considerations of the study.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 TELEWORK CONCEPT AND ITS REGULATION

To understand how the transition from face-to-face work to telework took place or, according to Rocha and Amador (2018), “telecommuting or telework” and the results of this transition, it is necessary to understand the idea that encompasses these expressions. Remote work is not a recent modality when it comes to the exercise of various professions. The practice of this model of work already took place in 1950, and, in the decades that followed, the production of clothing, textiles and footwear, packaging and assembly of electrical materials, took place at home (Rocha; Amador, 2018). However, the concepts of the terms may vary greatly. Although there are several scholars dedicated to the subject, and extensive literature related to the theme, there is no proper definition of this occupation model (Alves, 2008). There are many possible definitions for this category, built from experiences and convictions of reality, where none of these definitions is wrong, even if they are divergent (Rosenfield; Alves, 2011).

Even though telecommuting has a complex and variable concept, it can be considered as a flexible category in several aspects. Therefore, from a limited point of view, this category allows employees, supported by ICTs, to carry out their activities and functions in other places, that is, not necessarily within the company in which they operate. In the comprehensive perspective, the International Labor Organization (ILO) has the concept taking into account factors such as: place and/or work space; working hours and/or time (full or part-time work), type of contract (salaried or self-employed), and work content (Rosenfield; Alves, 2011).

Due to globalization and technological advances, the job market has become somewhat competitive, and in a world where corporations seek efficiency and low costs, professionals need to optimize their knowledge, improve their skills and follow such developments to preserve themselves in this environment (Abreu et al.; 2019). It can be considered that technological evolution is a fundamental piece for the advancement of secretarial work, being responsible for changes in the economy and for generating new ways of working, – teleworking is one example (Abreu et al.; 2019).

For Alves (2018), the possibility of providing a service remotely is something somewhat innovative and is necessary in the face of the various transformations in actions and work relationships. The category highlighted in this research is a reality in Brazil, so it should

not be omitted and it is considered that it would be imprudent to devalue it in the current economic circumstances of the country (Oliveira et al.; 2017).

Therefore, the regulation of the profession, that which is the focus of this study, is present in chapter II-A, of decree nº 5.452 of May 1, 1943, present in the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), and determines that telework is considered to be the provision of services outside the employer's establishment, in which the employee enjoys the help of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to carry out their activities and the need to attend the employer's spaces in order to perform specific tasks does not change the modality in evidence (Brasil, 1943). Subsequently, in Law No. 12,551 of December 15, 2011, article 6 modifies, in parts, the previous one, where "there is no distinction between work performed at the employer's establishment, that performed at the employee's home and that performed at a distance", provided that the assumptions of the employment relationship are characterized" (Brasil, 2011). In 2017, Law No. 13,467 was incorporated into Brazilian legislation, which introduces the concept and conditions for the practice of remote work and provides the employee and employer with legitimate security (Ferreira, 2021).

According to Mesquita and Soares (2020, p. 8), on a home office kind of contract, "one must consider: remuneration, which must be the same for remote or presential workers; working hours, which can be flexible or fixed, facilitating the contact with the organization; material supply by the employer; facilities and maintenance to carry out the work". Still on the responsibility of technological tools, article 75-D states that:

Art. 75-D. The provisions regarding the responsibility for the acquisition, maintenance or supply of technological equipment and the necessary and adequate infrastructure for the provision of remote work, as well as the reimbursement of expenses borne by the employee, will be provided for in a written contract. Single paragraph. The utilities mentioned in the caput of this article are not part of the employee's remuneration (Brasil, 1943).

The remote work modality can be started immediately, as long as the employee signs a term of responsibility related to the appropriate care of ergonomics and comfort in the work environment, since this will not be inside the organization (Mesquita; Soares, 2020).

2.2 BENEFITS AND DIFFICULTIES OF REMOTE WORK

The increase in more flexible work models is a feature of the 21st century; it which was made possible by technological advances and vast access to the internet that allows for the performance of assignments despite the professional's location (Santos; Sousa; Oliveira, 2021, p. 387). But just like everything else, remote work is not different, it has a positive and a negative side. When labor regulation is determined and there is trust between employee and employer, this form of trade can offer benefits to both parties and also to society (Alves, 2018). According to Bette et al. (2021), “the hybrid model or even the home office will demonstrate the new configuration of organizations, as they have positive aspects in several ways, both for the employer and the employee”.

According to Alves (2018), as advantages, it can be mentioned the improvement in the management of the worker's time, flexibility during working hours and the absence of commuting. For the employer, there is a reduction in costs for the company, as well as a reduction in turnover and a wide recruitment offer. As for society, there is a lower cost of fuel and, consequently, a reduction in the emission of pollutants and a reduction in the environmental impact, as well as a reduction in traffic congestion.

Productivity is also a factor that must be taken into account as positive for the company. This, in turn, is expected in telework “since the teleworker focuses on tasks assigned to them and there is no interruption or direct interference by co-workers” (Aderaldo; Aderaldo; Lima, 2017). The advantage of work flexibility also brings benefits to the organization. Since the employee has the possibility to “customize” their schedule, they will be able to commit more to the company they work for (Aderaldo; Aderaldo; Lima, 2017).

On the other hand, the adoption of this model faces some difficulties. Disadvantages again affect both the employee, the employer and society. As obstacles, it is mentioned the employee's difficulty in separating professional life from personal life and the possibility of extrapolating the hours worked during working hours, in addition to social isolation (Alves, 2018). Another disadvantage is related to the lack of training for the effective execution of work practices, since the planning of the new routine and the knowledge to carry out the activities motivate the need for training to ensure the quality of deliveries in the remote model (Santos, 2020).

For the company, it is considered a higher cost related to infrastructure and equipment, the limitation regarding the supervision of employees at a distance, and the lack of coexistence, exchange of experiences and teamwork. Society is affected by the precariousness of work relationships and mental illness, for example (Alves, 2018).

Another obstacle for the organization focuses on the need to adjust and deal with the two different ways of working. Since the teleworker is in another space, this requires more attention when it comes to their interaction with others, so that there is no social distancing within the company (Aderaldo; Aderaldo; Lima, 2017).

2.3 THE SKILLS OF THE EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

It was only on September 30, 1985, by Law No. 7,377, that the secretarial profession was regulated (Brasil, 1985). In the course of the history pertaining to secretarial work, several events contributed to the position reaching its due recognition. However, it was only from the year 1990 onwards that these professionals began to introduce themselves as important elements part of the companies and corporations (Kloss et al.; 2018).

Therefore, like many other occupations, secretaries have also undergone advances and changes. Over the years and the evolution of technology, the secretaries had to adjust to the new mold of attributions required by the office, where this professional now fits the profile desired by the organization to occupy a position that works, together with the other members, in order to achieve organizational success (Kloss et al.; 2018). Therefore, the change in the profile of the profession has led secretarial professionals to develop new skills, and currently it is necessary for them to have a general and strategic view of the company, in addition to having to solve small daily problems (Santos; Sousa; Oliveira, 2021, p. 387).

Regarding the expression “competence”, it has been around for many years. Later, the word was introduced to organizational language, but the term originated in the Middle Ages and its evolution characterized individuals capable of performing good jobs (Bittencourt, 2009). Therefore, the individual is classified as competent when he performs something well (Fontes, 2018).

Fleury and Fleury (2001, p. 188) characterize competence as “a responsible and recognized knowing how to act which implies mobilizing, integrating, transferring knowledge, resources and skills, which add economic value to the organization and social value to the

individual”. In this way, the concept of competence is not linked only to individual conduct, since the results of this action imply effects on others and on the corporation as a whole. One must be able to act, mobilize resources, communicate, learn, engage and commit, assume responsibilities and have a strategic vision (Fleury; Fleury, 2001).

For Tagliari and Durante (2009), secretarial practices have been changing in order to meet the demands of society, companies and the job market. Today, the profile of the secretarial professional is no longer limited to technical issues and simplified actions, but encompasses competences and attributions at the managerial level, which expands the opportunities of acting in different sectors and organizational scopes, as is the case of the current occupations of the participants in this research. Relating to studies that demonstrate managerial skills, where such skills establish the profile of professional managers. Tagliari and Durante (2009, p. 34) classified them as “strategic vision, planning, organization, control, leadership, communication, teamwork, motivation, decision-making, negotiation, proactiveness, creativity, flexibility and interpersonal competence”.

Regarding the technical skills inherent to secretarial work in the pandemic scenario, mastering video conferencing platforms, online agenda, software management and other tools demanded knowledge and adaptation and became fundamental for the remote model of work (Bette et al.; 2021). On the other hand, related to behavioral competence, self-management is pointed out as important, due to the routine, self-knowledge and the freedom allowed to the employee due to the home office (Bette et al.; 2021).

Thus, it can be considered that, nowadays, a set of diverse competences are necessary for those who occupy the positions of secretaries in organizations and companies. Improvisation – a term that permeates and integrates, in parts, the present study – is, therefore, a skill linked to these competences, since, in the secretarial area, currently, agile and precise actions are demanded from these professionals when dealing with setbacks in organizations (Padilha et al.; 2021). Therefore, improvisation contemplates spontaneous responses to possible adversities and obstacles, but it is also considered as a tactic by those who perceive possible changes in the path until they reach the final goal (Guimarães, 2019).

3 METHODOLOGY

The research carried out was developed with a qualitative approach, since, in agreement with Oliveira (2008), human beings are not objects, therefore, it is necessary to consider their dissimilarities, since human life is interactive and occurs thanks to the contact between human beings.

The present study is descriptive, as it allows the classification and description of the participants, in addition to enabling a better understanding of the information and the analysis and comparison of the results obtained. Furthermore, it enables closer contact with the public of interest to this research: academics from the Executive Secretary degree from all over Brazil and professionals working in the area.

Data collection was carried out in two ways: Firstly, a form with objective questions was sent to participants through the Google Forms digital platform, – an alternative that provided quick collection of specific data. Secondly, semi-structured and standardized online interviews were carried out (with an already stipulated script and predetermined questions), due to the certain flexibility and freedom they allow during the conversation. This option makes it possible not only to ask the participant questions intrinsic to the research, but also to question them about new demands not previously foreseen, which will help the researcher to reach the final objective of the study (Oliveira, 2008).

Ten individual interviews were carried out between the fourteenth and thirtieth of March 2022, according to the availability of employees. Each of the interviews lasted an average of forty-five minutes, and took place through the Google Meet online meeting platform. Online interaction was chosen both because of the location of the participants, since they were all in other cities, and because of the pandemic scenario resulting from COVID-19, which was still a reality in the period in which the interviews took place.

A survey was carried out with 15 graduates of the Trilingual Executive Secretary degree at the Federal University of Viçosa working in the secretarial area as executive secretaries. Due to the conjuncture, requests to participate in the interviews were due to the proximity to the authors, since the country was experiencing a troubled moment of the pandemic, with cities in lockdown, and few people were available to participate and contribute to the study. In addition, a survey carried out by Fundação Getúlio Vargas in January 2022, the date prior to the interviews, showed that 43% of Brazilian workers were overworked (Ferreira;

Hungerbühler; Guerra, 2022). Therefore, the choice of participants was made through a convenience sample, in which, according to Freitag (2018, p. 671), “the field researcher selects speakers from the population under study who are more accessible, collaborative or available to participate in the process”.

Then, the invitation to participate in the research was made to fifteen professionals, via WhatsApp and email, according to the preference of each one. Two of the people invited did not respond to the contact attempt and another three did not respond to the initial questionnaire sent, resulting in a total of ten participants.

Regarding the form initially shared with the study collaborators, it had objective questions, mostly multiple choice, related to future questions that would be in the interview. These questions were divided into four sections, namely:

1- Demographic data, where information such as the average age among the participants was obtained, in addition to the degree and area of training and the resident city of each one;

2- Area of activity, requesting the present sector of activity of the professional collaborating in the study, which positions he or she works with, how long the person has been working there and scope of the institution, such as the number of employees and size of the company;

3- Reality of work and the institution in the COVID-19 pandemic, asking the period in which the city of the institution remained in lockdown and the level of preparation of the professional to perform remote work, as well as the preparatory training offered (or not) by the institution and whether the sudden transition from face-to-face to remote work affected the performance of the team or the functioning of the company;

4- Improvisation within the institution, where participants were asked if they felt that training in the Executive Secretary degree had prepared them to deal with a moment like the pandemic. This section also sought to identify the greatest difficulties that they felt during the transition period, the essential technical competences when working remotely in the view of the respondents, in which the elements mentioned among the options of the questionnaire were removed and adapted from the studies by Fleury and Fleury (2001) and Tagliari and Durante (2009), in addition to asking whether productivity has been compromised during remote work.

4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

4.1 CHARACTERIZATION OF PARTICIPANTS

The profile of the participants was obtained through the questionnaire sent individually to them. Two, out of the ten participants, belong to the male gender and eight to the female gender; all of them are Executive Secretary, being, therefore, able to participate in the research; seven have postgraduate degrees in different areas. The age group of respondents varies between 18 and 40 years, with a predominance of eight of the respondents being between 18 and 30 years old.

Regarding the location of these professionals, six live in the state of Minas Gerais, three in São Paulo and one in Distrito Federal. All of them reside in the same city where their respective institution is located. Two companies belong to the private sector and the other eight to the public sector, nine being large companies and only one medium-sized. In fact, seven of the ten institutions are national in scope, and the other three are international.

With regard to the interviewees' activity position, all participants support the highest levels of their respective organizations, working from Rectory and Pro-Rectories to Executive Advisors for the Presidency of companies. Seven of the ten respondents have worked in their institutions during one and five years and three have worked for six to ten years. From that point on, more information related to the exercise of each professional will be protected, in order to preserve the identity and guarantee the anonymity of each respondent.

4.2 INTERVIEW RESULTS

The first approach made in the interview was about the training time of each participant. Therefore, two of them graduated 4 years ago; one graduated 6 years ago; three, 7 years ago; two, 8 years ago; one, 10 years ago; and one, 16 years ago.

It is observed that, according to the responses obtained during the interviews, the lockdown - a term widespread and used in different ways in Brazilian states during the new Coronavirus pandemic - was a reality experienced by people. In the cities where the companies are located, this measure was taken between March 2020 and December 2021. When asked how it was to deal immediately with this change in routine within each individual reality, Interviewee 4 replied that it was difficult, but in parts, as work mixed with personal life. Thus, agreeing with Alves (2018), where the author mentions as an obstacle to the separation of

professional and personal life: “There were days when I had to set an alarm clock on my cell phone to remind myself to wash my hair, brush my teeth, because I would wake up and go straight to the computer, sometimes I wouldn't eat...” (Interviewee 4).

Another participant reported that the lockdown was very difficult due to the anxiety generated by the situation. Corroborating once again with Alves (2018) about the discomfort of social isolation, two responded that work was not affected, but both felt a great lack of interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, six participants had no major difficulties in adapting. Demonstrating the speech of Aderaldo; Aderaldo; Lima (2017), as mentioned by Interviewee 1: “I will tell you a lot for myself, so I adapted a lot to the home office [...] I close the door here in the room,... and I work all day, so I do a lot more.” For the purpose of understanding, it is explained that Narnia is the fictional world of the literary series "The Chronicles of Narnia" by C. S. Lewis, composed of seven books and well known by literature enthusiasts.

Regarding working from home during the aforementioned restriction phase, three people worked remotely only during the lockdown period and another seven worked during and outside the lockdown period, where two respondents did not feel prepared to exercise their work in the meantime; four professionals felt, in part, prepared, and another four felt totally prepared. They were asked why they felt this way. Two responded that they did not feel prepared to carry out their work in the meantime, and one of them mentioned the lack of initial guidance from the organization, which weakens the necessary trust relationship between employee and institution mentioned by Alves (2018). Drawing on what was mentioned by Mesquita and Soares (2020) about the equipment to carry out the work, another participant explained that he did not have an adequate structure to work at home. In this case, “I had to buy a chair, I had to buy a table... because I didn't have it [...]” (Interviewee 5).

Four professionals felt, in part, prepared for teleworking. Among these, a professional due to not waiting for such a long “quarantine”; another reported that the company was very well prepared, but, again, lacked greater support related to the structure to work from home, which is an employer's responsibility, as mentioned by Mesquita and Soares (2020); another reported that some of one's activities needed presence in order to be carried out; and a professional, Interviewee 8, reported the need to adapt to the various new programs that emerged within the institution, which demonstrates a lack of training – a disadvantage

mentioned by Santos (2020) and the necessary skill mentioned by Bette et al. (2021) – “So, I think we had to learn to use many programs, you know, that we were not used to” (Interviewee 8).

Four participants felt fully prepared for the job, which is in accordance to Alves (2018), one respondent highlighted the link and trust between one as a professional and one's superior; two respondents mentioned that they only continued the work and, finally, Interviewee 2 replied that one received very great support from the company, both technological, corroborating Mesquita and Soares (2020), and socio-emotional: “I felt fully prepared to exercise my work because I have very good technological support in the company where I work” (Interviewee 2).

One issue raised during the interview was related to the provision of preparatory training that would help employees to work remotely. According to the responses, only one organization provided training. These, in turn, were not linked to technical issues and the specifics of the work to be carried out, but to resilience within the remote environment, as was the case with Interviewee 10: “This was not technical training, but it was training more in the sense of how to build resilience for remote work”.

However, drawing on what was demonstrated by Santos (2020), six participants felt a lack of some type of training, whether related to the new systems implemented in the institution due to remote work, or related to time management working at home. This issue was best exemplified by Interviewee 4: “I think that a time management tool, agenda management, would be important, you know, at that moment, and I think this was lacking a lot in the institution”.

Furthermore, among these six respondents, one mentioned the lack of a “general orientation” for the organization as a whole. The other four participants felt no such need.

No, I didn't miss it. I think it's very important that the human factor be considered at such an inhospitable time as this pandemic moment, but at the same time I think this need was met in other ways. So, as I mentioned earlier, I felt this socio-emotional support very strongly... (Interviewee 2).

However, it was reported and observed by Interviewee 9 that some co-workers had greater difficulties with the new occupation model, requiring some preparation for them: “Look, I think it fits really well with our training. For me, based on what I've observed, it might have been easier than for other people” (Interviewee 9).

Considering the statements of Fleury and Fleury (2001) and Tagliari and Durante (2009), as presented in this study, section 4 of the questionnaire had the following question: “in view of the pandemic scenario and the need for sudden change, and taking into account the skills linked to the role of Secretary (such as the ability to improvise, be flexible, resilient, among others), do you believe that your training prepared you to deal with a moment like this?”. Two people answered “yestotally”, where the curriculum and the set of disciplines, theoretical or practical, were responsible for preparing them for a moment like the pandemic.

I believe so, as I told you, we have a profile that is typical of the Secretaryt, right, which is this issue of organization and commitment and everything else, and I think that the course, in a way, prepares us to have this profile, this personality (Interviewee 9).

Six people answered “yes in parts”, as exemplified by Interviewee 6: “I put it in parts because, no one was prepared for a pandemic, but I think I felt a little more prepared than some other colleagues who are not Executive Secretaries by training [...]”.

Disagreeing with what Tagliari and Durante (2009) said, the two professionals who work in the private sector answered no, as was the case with Interviewee 2: “No one was prepared, and these skills that we develop in the Secretarial course, very honestly, for me, these are skills that are not unique to the secretaries as some people make it out to be”.

Another question of the interview was related to the competence of improvisation linked to the concept of (Padilha et al.; 2021) that talks about improvisation. At this point, professionals were asked if they needed to put it into practice sometimes.

One interviewee answered no. Another two responded that they did not need to improvise as much, as reported by Interviewee 4: “A lot of times? No, I don't think so, but I had to use it”, and by Interviewee 10: “In general, I improvise a little today in my work”.

Six participants answered that they had indeed to improvise, where one of them, Interviewee 2, highlighted the improvisation in the company's virtual events: “The biggest margin for improvisation we had was to imagine different formats for events”.

One professional, Interviewee 9, exposed a reality linked not to improvisation or creativity, but to proactivity within the pandemic scenario, a competence referenced by Tagliari and Durante (2009): “Look, I don't know if creativity, but, for example, this question of proactivity, yes. So, for example, who created the group of people in the room when the

pandemic started was me, who organized it, who created the email was me [...]” (Interviewee 9).

Still related to improvisation, the next question was: “Did you feel safe or secure to put this competence into practice?” Five professionals answered “yes”, although one of them mentioned that at the beginning of the pandemic it was something more difficult. Among the reasons were trust, reinforcing the speech of Alves (2018), freedom and autonomy that were assured to them within the institutions. Three respondents reported that they did not feel safe, but for one of them, security came with time. Another participant replied that one felt unsafe, and finally, as previously mentioned, a professional did not need to put improvisation into practice many times during the home office period.

As mentioned earlier, Fleury and Fleury (2001) describe competence as “knowing how to act responsibly”. Therefore, those who answered positively were asked - even if in parts - if this security to improvise was due to training, experience, working time and/or previous knowledge of the organization. Therefore, two interviewees answered that it was due to their previous experience and knowledge of the company, as mentioned by Interviewee 4: “I think it is more related to working time, knowledge of the institution than to my training itself”. A participant added the organization affinity.

One respondent mentioned experience, as well as prior knowledge of the company and training. Another respondent specifically mentioned the experience. Finally, three professionals said that this security was the result of the sum of all the mentions made in the question.

In the questionnaire initially sent to the interviewees, each participant was asked to select, among the listed aspects, the greatest difficulties they had during the transition period from face-to-face work to remote work. There was no limit to a minimum or maximum number of choices per person. The result can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1 - Essential skills for professionals

Factors	Number of Responses
Compromised internal communication	7
Time management	5
Deal with contingencies	5
Information Exchange	4

Team coordination	3
Teamwork	3
Support to the team leader	2
Schedule management	1
Delegation of tasks	1

Source: search results (2025).

It is observed that, among the factors, the biggest obstacle prevailed in the internal communication of the organization that was compromised during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such competence is listed by Fleury and Fleury (2001) and by Tagliari and Durante (2009), and the option was chosen by 7 participants. Then, dealing with contingencies and time management were the second and third most selected aspects, where both were chosen by 5 participants.

In addition to the aspects already listed, others were mentioned during the interviews, such as the lack of structure to carry out activities at home, the lack of socialization with co-workers, which is a difficulty pointed out by Alves (2018), and the difficulty in understanding the organization's culture while working from home. These were also points related to obstacles faced in the telework period.

There were people who came in during the pandemic and only met their colleagues in person and went to see the workplace afterwards, and then for these people I understand that maybe the biggest difficulty is what I'm telling you, understanding the company's culture, how that it works, what everyday life is like there (Interviewee 9).

Also in the questionnaire, professionals were asked to select, among the fifteen options, five skills that, for them, are essential when working from home. The Table 2 exemplifies the result in the number of responses per competence.

Table 2 - Professional essential skills

Technical skill	Number of Responses
Communication	9
Discipline	7
Organization	6
Emotional Intelligence	5

Objectivity	5
Planning	4
Ability to delegate tasks	2
Flexibility	2
Patience	2
Ethics	1
Initiative	1
Leadership	1
Facilitating agent profile	1
Strategic vision	1
Agility	0

Source: search results (2025).

One of the participants selected only two alternatives. It is noted that Communication was the most chosen competence, in accordance to Fleury and Fleury (2001) and Tagliari and Durante (2009). Discipline was chosen seven times. Only Agility was not selected by any of the participants.

In addition to these skills present in the form, others were mentioned during the interviews, such as the need for therapy, adaptation, time management, communication, patience, organization, dialogue and “thinking outside the box”, which can be understood as creativity. This was the case of Interviewee 3: “I think that what you mentioned here in the interview, the question of adapting and being ready to overcome obstacles in other ways that you might not normally do, so... thinking outside the box was essential”.

According to the considerations made by Aderaldo, Aderaldo and Lima (2017) and presented in this article, the next question was about productivity during the period of remote work and whether it was compromised or not. Five people answered “yes, in part”. Among them, Interviewee 2: “Having a face-to-face meeting is much more productive than an online meeting. So, for me that was the main reason. General tiredness of all people”.

Showing a different perspective of the authors, another five answered “no”, for example, Interviewee 3: “So, the demands have changed, but they haven't... let's say, they changed in the sense of the way they arrive, but specifically what I did has not changed”.

The penultimate question of the interview was related to the positive points: whether the home office was satisfactory when thinking about issues such as increased quality of life, flexible hours and income of each interviewee. Seven of the ten professionals answered “yes”, thus strengthening the idea of Alves (2018), who elaborates on benefits as the flexibility during working hours and the unnecessary travel to go to the company. Among these professionals, Interviewee 6: “I know there are people who have not adapted, but I was born to work from home. Wow, the quality of life is different, absurdly better”, and Interviewee 1:

Before, I had to wake up 2 hours before being at the company, and then I started to live for work, you know, take a shower, have breakfast, get dressed, change clothes, take a traffic, waste time in traffic until I get to work, then not today. Today I have much more time for myself (Interviewee 1).

One professional, Interviewee 10, emphasized that the hybrid work was very positive in the sense of not wasting time with traffic when going to work, benefit for the employee and for society indicated by Alves (2018), in addition to eating better and the model of work that may bring more awareness of their activities and assignments. However, working 100% from home is not: “Because I am a person who needs this contact with people [...]”. (Interviewee 10)

The other two professionals answered no, as reported by Interviewee 2: “I had no increase in productivity, on the contrary, as I mentioned, I had a drop in productivity”.

Finally, the last question was related to the benefits linked to organizations: whether remote work has brought improvements and positive results for the institution. Nine respondents answered “yes”. Among them, Interviewee 8: “Some programs, some technologies that they had to develop because of that moment and they are technologies that are here to stay, like this”, Interviewee 7: “Deliveries were even greater than before”, reaffirming the statement of Aderaldo, Aderaldo and Lima (2017), and Interviewee 3:

We have a lot of employees, we always need more people, but we don't know exactly who does what and if this number of employees is enough for that, in the sense that, we don't know if the work is poorly distributed or if people are really lacking, then... the remote helped a little in that sense (Interviewee 3).

Only one interviewee answered no.

I work in a company that relies heavily on people's creative energy. I think this gets lost a lot in... in that individualization of each one. I think the exchange and being together is very important for this creative energy to flow better (Interviewee 2).

The previous respondent reaffirms what Alves (2018) mentions when citing the lack of coexistence, exchange of knowledge and teamwork as disadvantages of home office.

5 CONCLUSION

The main objective of this research was to understand the perception of Executive Secretaries regarding their adaptation to remote work in the pandemic context. The aim was to understand the reality of the sudden and abrupt transition that took place from face-to-face work to telework due to the new Coronavirus pandemic, which began in Brazil in 2020. This study relied on the experiences of ten professionals trained in Executive Secretary degree, actively working in the area, who exercise their functions among large and medium-sized companies in the public and private sectors.

In view of the above, it was found that most of the professionals interviewed felt prepared, either totally or in part, to carry out their activities during the period of restriction, demonstrating that, even in the face of adversity, the participants' power of adaptation was shown. In view of this, it was observed that there was no differentiation in terms of adaptation between executive secretaries in the public and private sectors.

However, as a consequence of the unexpected change, it is observed that the greatest difficulty faced focused mainly on the internal communication of the companies, which was affected due to the distancing of professionals. The same competence was considered extremely important by most of the interviewees, being necessary in order not to compromise the work to be performed.

Thus, it was demonstrated, through the interviews carried out, that obstacles in home office existed, but did not prevent the tasks from being carried out. In addition, most executive secretaries identified positive points related to remote work, such as flexible hours and no need to travel. Still, almost all respondents indicated, due to telework, improvements and good results for organizations.

Although this research cannot generalize these results, it was noticed that there is no pattern in terms of training time related to the acquisition of skills to perform remote work, and it was possible to infer, from this, that the context, the company and the sector in which the professional is inserted are aspects with great influence on the adaptability and preparation that the market requires.

Participants reported having communication, discipline and organization as the main competences necessary and relevant for the performance, thus confirming what previous studies have shown in relation to competences, in which such qualifications are important. Since most of the participants felt a lack of some type of training, related to time management and the new systems implemented in organizations, for example, as these are essential to prepare professionals. This study demonstrates that the aforementioned competencies are capable of being further developed from these trainings, and universities can also adapt their programmes in order to address these skills and prepare students for the job market.

This research has limitations, such as the fact that it was necessary to choose the sample of participants for convenience, which brings a certain bias to the work. However, due to the pandemic scenario, the authors understand that this does not delegitimize the research. For future research, it is suggested to continue the study in view of the post-pandemic scenario. Therefore, after the pandemic context, it will be possible to verify the real impact of the sudden implementation of telework both in companies and in the lives of executive secretaries. Since the Covid-19 pandemic is a recent fact, some organizations have not yet returned to the conventional model of action. Therefore, in the same way that there was a sudden adaptation on the part of those involved to remote work, new studies may take place in order to understand the readaptation of professionals to face-to-face work or even other possible scenarios, such as new way of work of a mixture of remote and face-to-face.

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