



**Distancing Skills in Employees' Management: narratives
from HR managers**

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Distancing Skills in Employees' Management: narratives from HR managers

Abstract:

Purpose - This investigation aimed to identify the essential skills required by Human Resource Management (HRM) professionals to effectively respond to the various modes of labour organisation implemented due to the mandatory lockdown imposed by the Portuguese government in March 2020.

Design/methodology/approach - Data is based on 34 semi-structured interviews with HRM professionals from companies in different activity sectors.

Findings - The results reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought out the development of socio-emotional skills among HRM professionals such as creativity, improvisation, self-exploration, innovation, collaboration, team spirit, resilience, flexibility, problem-solving, adaptability, priority management, emotional intelligence, social influence, social contact, interpersonal relationships, communication, and e-learning.

Research limitations/implications - It will be interesting for future research to explore 'what' and 'how' HRM managers are planning, organising and implementing training and development plans to improve the skills of remote workers, which tend to grow in a post-pandemic COVID-19 phase.

Practical implications - This research emphasises the importance of HRM managers' role in better coordinating the work of employees who are physically distant from the company. It also highlights the need for different skills required for effective digital HRM, support, and monitoring of remote employees.

Originality/value - The research is original for twofold reasons: 1) HRM professionals are usually not trained to manage remote workers, which also means that they probably lack the skills to take the most out of remote working models; and 2) HRM professionals and the HRM function need to address the skills required to successfully implement flexible forms of work organisation.

Keywords Remote work; COVID-19 pandemic; Distancing skills; Lockdown; Home-office; Portuguese context, Qualitative research, Training and development

Paper Type Research paper

1. Introduction

The proliferation of the new SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in early 2020 led the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) to declare COVID-19 a pandemic on 11 March. Governments around the world reacted with a series of measures that involved the need for physical distance, restrictions on travelling between countries, closures of institutions and many organisations, and remote work (Biron *et al.*, 2021). With the government imposing lockdowns, organisations quickly adopted remote and hybrid working.

Recent literature (e.g., Donnelly and Johns, 2020; Errichiello and Pianese, 2016; Yu, Burke and Raad, 2019) suggests that remote working is nothing new, since back in the 1970s, Jack Nilles defined the term 'telecommuting' to refer to the work done remotely at the NASA complex (Yu *et al.*, 2019).

Although technological advancements in recent decades have enabled the implementation of more flexible working models (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010; Morrison and Macky, 2017), bringing various challenges related to HRM (Bondarouk and Brewster, 2016; Errichiello and Pianese, 2016), it is primarily in 2020, with the COVID-19 pandemic, that remote work assumes greater significance and scale (Donnelly and Johns, 2020; Park and Cho, 2022). This adaptation entailed acquiring and developing a set of soft skills to operate within the new reality. Physical distancing demanded key skills for effectively communicating and managing remote employees and work. Morales (2020) refers to this cluster of skills as "distancing skills," which are characterized by integrating the virtual

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3 into socio-emotional skills. The literature argues that there are various benefits associated
4 with social skills in the professional world, which are mainly due to boosting
5 communication, promoting social relationships, and triggering democratic participation
6 in decision processes (Peña-Acuña and Sánchez-Cobarrob, 2017). However, the benefits
7 of distancing skills are not yet known, as their use is very recent. The combination of a
8 pandemic period and the emergence of Industry 5.0 makes this study pertinent in a
9 geographical context that has been covered by very rigid and sudden lockdown measures.

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11 Given (1) the context of the pandemic crisis experienced since 2020, (2) the widespread
12 lack of experience in remote work among organisations located in Portugal, and (3) the
13 need to quickly respond to the lockdown imposed by the Portuguese government to keep
14 people at home while continuing to work from their residences, this study seeks to explore
15 the distancing skills required by HRM professionals to manage their employees during
16 periods of crisis. Specifically, the research focuses on the socio-emotional skills of HRM
17 managers.
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20 This study adopts a qualitative approach, to gather the perspective of HRM managers on
21 the skills required to address the implementation of work during times of crisis.
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23 Due to the lockdown, managers' emotional skills were put to the test, as personal contact
24 and intergroup relationships were lost (Guillén *et al.*, 2022). Thus, this study contributes
25 to the existing body of research on remote work, specifically in the context of the COVID-
26 19 lockdown. Additionally, this research explores the importance of emotional
27 knowledge and the ability to manage emotions during lockdown, by giving insights into
28 the emotional growth of HRM managers and their relationship with remote workers. On
29 the other hand, this article contributes to the literature by showing that the mentioned
30 skills influence employees' perception of more flexible work arrangements, particularly
31 remote work. Furthermore, this investigation contributes to enriching research on
32 emerging skills in contexts of greater uncertainty and fragility, providing insights to help
33 organisations rethink their management practices for remote employees. Of specific
34 interest to existing theory is the role of HRM professionals in supporting remote teams'
35 management. From a practical standpoint, this research underscores the importance of
36 socio-emotional skills of HRM staff (Walker, Brewster, Fontinha, Haak-Saheem and
37 Lamberti, 2021; Kim and Beehr, 2022).
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41 The structure of this article is as follows. Firstly, we provide a literature review related to
42 remote work, with a specific focus on the home-office modality and professional skills,
43 particularly socio-emotional ones. Secondly, we outline the methodological procedures,
44 and thirdly, we present and discuss the main results. Finally, we summarize the main
45 conclusions, emphasizing the theoretical and practical implications of this study.
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47 **2. Literature Review**

48 *2.1. Implications of home-office for GRH*

49 The phenomenon of working geographically away from the company is called remote
50 working. The existing literature (e.g. Allen, Golden and Shockley, 2015; Carnevale and
51 Hatak, 2020; Donnelly and Johns, 2020; Golden and Eddleston, 2020; Haubrich and
52 Froehlich, 2020; Pataki-Bittó and Kun, 2022; Ulate, Vásquez, and Murillo, 2020; Yu,
53 Burke and Raad, 2019) has used similar terms such as teleworking, remote working,
54 working from home, telework, e-work, e-commuting, telecommuting, and home-office.
55 Remote work is thus work carried out outside the company's physical premises, using
56 information and communication technologies (Balabanova and Balabanov, 2020;
57 Eurofound, 2017; Park and Cho, 2022).
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3 In the Portuguese legislation, “remote work” is used to refer to “work performed with
4 legal subordination, usually outside the company and using information and
5 communication technologies” (Law no. 102/2009). Portugal was one of the first countries
6 in Europe to regulate remote working in the private sector (Rebelo, 2019), and heavy
7 investment has been made in information and communication technologies (Boavida and
8 Moniz, 2020).
9

10 Remote work has three main dimensions: the first one points to the unconventional
11 location of work, since there are places where the worker can carry out their activity; the
12 second dimension is the notion of a form of flexible work organisation; and the third
13 dimension concerns the use of information and communication technologies to carry out
14 work (Yu *et al.*, 2019; Carillo, Cachat-Rosset, Marsan, Saba and Klarsfeld, 2020).
15 Working from the employee's home (i.e. home-office) refers to a specific category of
16 remote work (Rosenfield and Alves, 2011), and this category is the focus of this research.
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19 Before the COVID-19 pandemic, home-office working was used to an insignificant extent
20 all over the world. In 2019, on average, 5.4% of the employed population in the European
21 Union worked from home, with the highest figures in the Netherlands and Finland
22 (14.1%), while the lowest rates of remote workers were in Romania (0.8%) and Bulgaria
23 (0.5%) (Popovici and Popovici, 2020). The pandemic brought by COVID-19 has
24 triggered the transition from traditional work, carried out entirely on company premises,
25 to the forced home-office regime (Abulibdeh, 2020; Carnevale and Hatak, 2020).
26 According to a study conducted by Parry and colleagues (2021) in the UK, prior to the
27 lockdown imposed in March 2020, only 2.7% of employees worked from home.
28 However, after the lockdown, the number of people working from home rose to 30%
29 (Parry *et al.*, 2021), spanning across a wide range of sectors. Similarly, in Portugal,
30 working from home also increased significantly, with 2.7% of employees working from
31 home at the beginning of 2020, and within just two months, this number rose to 23.1%.
32 This figure remained consistent throughout the second quarter of 2020 (INE, 2020),
33 indicating that more than 1 million employees in the Portuguese labour market were
34 working from home.
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38 This scenario of home-office working was a novelty for many companies, whose greatest
39 fear is associated with the impacts on people's productive capacity and potential effects
40 on social systems, personal and professional morale (Abulibdeh, 2020; Carnevale and
41 Hatak, 2020; Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-Basariya, 2020). In this context HRM played a
42 central role, due to its role in achieving important work-related outcomes, such as
43 productivity, well-being, and employees' health (Newman *et al.*, 2023; Straus *et al.*, 2023;
44 Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-Basariya, 2020).
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47 Although home-office is based on various characteristics of conventional remote work, it
48 nonetheless has specific conceptual boundaries, such as its mandatory and unprepared
49 nature (Carillo *et al.*, 2020; Silva, 2021). Despite initial difficulties, the joint efforts of
50 employees and managers have allowed the home-office to emerge as a form of work that
51 suits the circumstances and preferences of both employees and companies in times of
52 crisis (Abulibdeh, 2020; Haubrich and Froehlich, 2020; Carillo *et al.*, 2020), with HRM
53 being the most capable area to manage people (Cepellos, 2020; Pieracciani, 2009). In this
54 work scenario, HRM is tasked with managing, coordinating, controlling, training,
55 motivating, evaluating, and effectively communicating with employees who are working
56 remotely without deviating from the performance desired by the company (Park and Cho,
57 2022). This requires a set of skills capable of promoting employees' emotional stability
58 (Cepellos, 2020; Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-Basariya, 2020), as well as profound changes
59 in the processes of attracting and managing employees (Nogueira and Patini, 2012),
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3 training and developing skills that respond to new ways of communicating, interacting,
4 and sharing, and adapting their respective communication channels towards the digital
5 world (Gigauri, 2020; Vasanthi and Rabiyyathul-Basariya, 2020).
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8 9 2.2. *Skills in managing employees in the COVID-19 time*

10 The concept of skill originates from two perspectives: the Anglo-Saxon approach
11 (McClelland, 1973; Boyatzis, 1982) which distinguishes between technical skills (hard
12 skills) and interpersonal skills (soft skills), and the French approach (Le Boterf, 1997),
13 which explores the concept of skill by distinguishing between knowledge, including a
14 theoretical dimension (knowing-knowing), technical dimension (knowing-doing), and
15 behavioural dimension (knowing-being). Ceitil (2010) proposed a more comprehensive
16 approach to the concept, associating skill with assignments, qualifications, personal traits
17 or characteristics, and behaviours and actions. Thus, the concept of skill can encompass
18 different characteristics of the individual, such as personality traits, skills, aspects related
19 to image, social role, or knowledge, that contribute to effective performance in carrying
20 out work tasks (Boyatzis, 2008).
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23 With the need to transition from traditional work to home-office, the concept of skill
24 becomes increasingly important in carrying out work activities (Wang, Liu, Qian and
25 Parker, 2021). Lyons and Kass-Hanna (2020) suggest that to overcome the emerging
26 challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, employees, in addition to technical and
27 human skills, need to possess digital skills to achieve better results. Digital skills refer to
28 the set of knowledge, attitudes, and skills that enable active participation in digital
29 environments and the use of digital collaboration and communication tools (Amis and
30 Greenwood, 2021; Oberländer; Beinicke and Bipp, 2020; Wang *et al.*, 2021).
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33 The lockdown measures, which worldwide required people to stay at home from March
34 2020 onwards, required proficiency in digital and socio-emotional skills for home-office
35 workers and those who were responsible for managing employees remotely (Abbad *et al.*,
36 2021; Balabanova and Balabanov, 2020; Sawitri and Rini, 2021; Ulate *et al.*, 2020).
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38 Poláková and colleagues (2023) state that there is no single definition or conceptualisation
39 of socio-emotional skills, considering that they can be referred to as social skills, people
40 skills, or interpersonal skills. Regardless of how they are called, development of these
41 skills depends on the interaction between individual innate traits (i.e. personality and
42 abilities) and contextual factors (i.e. changing jobs and work conditions). The authors
43 further state that “soft skills are a set of socioemotional capacities and skills that people
44 use in interactions and are crucial to achieving personal and work success, soft skills are
45 non-technical and non-reliant on abstract reasoning involving interpersonal and
46 intrapersonal abilities to facilitate mastered performance in particular social contexts”
47 (Poláková *et al.*, 2023, p. 5).
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50 According to several studies (e.g. Davidson, 2020; Feldman and Mazmanian, 2020;
51 Kawashima *et al.*, 2020; Sawitri and Rini, 2021), socio-emotional skills are crucial to
52 success. These skills include: (1) the ability to maintain social contacts to encourage
53 human interactions, (2) social influence to motivate the team towards achieving work
54 results, (3) collaboration in the use of technological resources, (4) professionalism to
55 ensure efficient performance and timely response to requests, (5) effective
56 communication to support remote interaction and the ability to express oneself or share
57 ideas and messages, and (6) adaptation and self-exploration of digital work tools.
58 According to Guillén, Tirado, and Sánchez (2022), it is crucial to develop socio-
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emotional skills such as emotional intelligence, resilience, and engagement. These skills help individuals to feel, think, and act sustainably and in harmony with the environment, especially during times of health, economic, and social risks.

In this new context of total or partial remote working, managers are required to make a greater effort to manage teams, and remote communication and information sharing are key skills for building a good working relationship between managers and employees. On the other hand, these skills help managers ensure greater success in managing remote employees, particularly in managing their professional performance (Nogueira and Patini, 2012). When working remotely, it is important for employees to understand that their relationship with their managers is built on trust (Daim *et al.*, 2012). This trust can be supported through online communication systems that help promote social interaction between team members. By using digital communication strategies, employees can develop closer social relationships with both their managers and teammates (Nogueira and Patini, 2012; Park and Cho, 2022). This can lead to greater clarity regarding tasks and priorities (Abulibdeh, 2020) and help prevent delays in completing assigned tasks. Some studies (e.g. Bick, Blandin and Merters, 2020) have shown that effective online communication can also help with task management and prioritization. Furthermore, Guillén and colleagues (2022) suggest that emotions contain valuable information about a person's relationship with their environment and are usually triggered during crisis situations.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the digital transformation, requiring greater development of digitalisation and collaboration skills in home-office workers, who are now highly dependent on the use of technology to carry out their professional tasks (Sheppard, 2020). Gardner, Lepak and Bartol (2003) emphasise that remote communication technology has automated operational HRM which, in this pandemic period, has required greater proficiency in digital and socio-emotional skills for managing home-office employees. In terms of remote employee management skills (i.e. distancing skills), recent literature (e.g. Charlier and Kloppenburg, 2017; Gigauri, 2020; Morales, 2020) suggests that adaptability, problem-solving skills, collaboration skills, emotional intelligence, emotion management, the power of employee recognition, creativity, continuous process innovation, leadership skills, flexibility, efficient and flexible time management, continuous learning skills, effective visual and written communication, transparent management by objectives and digital skills will be at the top of the pyramid of remote employee management skills. Recently, the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2023) suggested that there are 10 skills that will be most in demand in the labour market by 2027, including (1) creative thinking; (2) analytical thinking; (3) technological literacy; (4) curiosity and continuous learning; (5) resilience, flexibility and agility; (6) systems thinking; (7) artificial intelligence and big data; (8) motivation and self-awareness; (9) talent management; (10) service orientation and customer care.

Based on the literature review's findings, it was suggested that acquiring distancing skills could help efficiently manage processes and employees in a home-office environment, thereby creating more flexible work settings. This research aims to delve deeper into this skill group in HRM.

3. Method

3.1. Design and participants

This study is based on a qualitative approach to understanding the implications of COVID-19 on HRM, specifically exploring the skills necessary to manage employees

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3 during a pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted for data collection. This
4 technique is used when participants are expected to share information that they consider
5 relevant in terms of content and meaning about the phenomenon under study (Creswell,
6 2007; Merriam, 2009). A total of 34 HRM professionals from companies in different
7 sectors (industry, information technology, retail, commerce and services, hospitality,
8 logistics, and transportation) located in mainland Portugal were interviewed between
9 September 2020 and April 2021. The interview guide focused on a set of questions aimed
10 at understanding how HRM professionals responded to the need for confinement enforced
11 by the Portuguese government from March 2020 onwards, specifically exploring the
12 professional skills required to manage company employees (see Annex 1).
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15 In the study, a total of 21 women and 13 men were interviewed, with ages ranging
16 between 30 and 59 years old. The majority holds a bachelor's degree (28 participants),
17 while the others have a master's degree in fields like human resources (22 participants),
18 social and human sciences (9 participants), or management (3 participants). The majority
19 (23 participants) hold the position of HRM director, while 8 participants hold the position
20 of HRM technician, and 3 participants hold the position of HRM consultant. The tenure
21 of their positions ranges from 2 to 35 years, and they work in companies of different sizes.
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25 3.2. Procedure and data analysis

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27 The criteria for selecting participants in the study were twofold: (1) they had to be
28 responsible for HRM and (2) they had to have been in the role for at least two years, with
29 a minimum of one year in the current organisation. Additionally, participants were chosen
30 because they were affiliated with companies that had employees working remotely in a
31 home-office setting during the lockdown period starting in March 2020. An intentional
32 sample was used with the snowball sampling technique, which, according to Vinuto
33 (2014), is a form of non-probabilistic sampling that utilizes reference chains, making it
34 impossible to determine the probability of selection for each participant in the research.
35 This type of sampling is predominant in exploratory studies (Coutinho, 2013), where it is
36 important to gather in-depth ideas and opinions from participants to deepen the
37 understanding of the topic under study.
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40 Before the interview, participants were provided with an informed consent statement
41 containing the study's content and objectives, as well as to obtain their permission to
42 record the interview. All participants agreed to participate and consented to the recording
43 of the interview under the condition of anonymity and confidentiality. The interviews
44 were conducted via WhatsApp (20 interviews) and the Zoom platform (14 interviews),
45 with an approximate duration of 42 minutes (ranging from 27 to 47 minutes). Three
46 interviewers were involved in conducting the interviews.
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49 The interviews were numbered 1 to 34 and fully transcribed to ensure the information's
50 reliability (Yin, 2011). They were then analysed using the principles of grounded theory
51 (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) by coding them into open, axial, and selective codes. This
52 process helped to identify central themes such as home-office, remote teams, distancing
53 skills, and challenges of the home-office.
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58 4. Results

59 4.1. Professional skills of HRM professionals in pandemic times

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3 The crisis triggered by COVID-19 was unexpected for many of the participants in this
4 study, and it demanded a need for rapid adaptation at all levels of the organisation,
5 particularly in HRM. The interviewees emphasise their inexperience with teleworking
6 and the lack of equipment and material to adapt to home-office. They further highlighted
7 the challenges involved in dealing with COVID-19 cases between employees and family
8 members as well as the need to acquire various professional skills, namely distancing
9 skills: 'Yes, I felt the need to develop new skills' (Interviewee 4).

11 4.1.1. *Distancing skills*

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13 The COVID-19 pandemic has brought out the need to develop remote employee
14 management skills, namely *creativity, improvisation, self-exploration, innovation,*
15 *collaboration, team spirit, resilience, flexibility, problem-solving, adaptability, priority*
16 *management, emotional intelligence, social influence, social contact, interpersonal*
17 *relationships, communication, and e-learning.*

18
19 *Creativity, improvisation and self-exploration* were key skills during the pandemic,
20 especially in its initial phase: 'We're thinking of scenarios because there's no certainty
21 about what's going to happen' (interviewee 16) and the solutions found were not foreseen,
22 but decisions had to be made: 'It was about managing the uncertainties and making
23 decisions' (interview 20). Many of these solutions were the initiative of the HRMs: 'It
24 was interesting to realise how they came up with solutions to solve the problem of the
25 pandemic...' (interviewee 17), although sometimes with the help of third parties: 'We
26 must know how to roll up our sleeves and solve what needs to be solved. We weren't
27 prepared to resolve situations in crisis mode (...). We had to ask some partners for help to
28 get some support to resolve this situation' (Interviewee 23).

29
30 The COVID-19 pandemic brought a change in work processes. This change is associated
31 with *innovation* as a skill that enables the dematerialisation of processes, i.e. the transition
32 from physical to digital support, as some participants report:

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34 'It has driven the digitalisation of companies and, consequently, the
35 digitalisation of culture (...), adjusting flexibility to the needs of the company
36 and the people' (Interviewee 5).

37
38 'We've had to acquire the skills to work online, virtually... which has increased
39 the level of demand, for example in terms of discipline and doing activities
40 remotely that we'd never done before, for example, remote salary processing,
41 and this crisis has shown that it's possible to work like this.' (Interviewee 16)

42
43 'We're being forced to come up with innovative solutions, and teleworking is
44 going to be one of them because until we have vaccines, people are going to have
45 to continue working from home' (Interviewee 29).

46
47 However, HRM people recognise that it is essential to innovate to manage teams
48 remotely: 'At the moment, we are changing onboarding from the face-to-face model to
49 remote and digital. We're digitising all the HRM processes, with the aggravating factor
50 that the company is growing now and we're doing it all remotely' (Interviewee 28).

51
52 The uncertainty and lack of knowledge associated with the pandemic period requires
53 more HRM *collaboration* with other organisational stakeholders, as two interviewees
54 pointed out:

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56 'I noticed that people came to us more often than in the office' (Interviewee 12)

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3 'I've had general managers calling me to ask me to simplify legal information to
4 help them keep up with their own business' (Interviewee 16).
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6 In turn, the lack of knowledge about the evolution of the pandemic generates the need for
7 greater *team spirit*. If HRM already showed intra-team spirit, now this skill must be
8 developed across teams, given the demands for mutual help, especially from team
9 managers:
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11 'We have to know how to roll up our sleeves and solve what has to be solved,
12 helping colleagues who are having more difficulties.' (Interviewee 9)
13

14 'A lot of teamwork, the various teams had to work much more closely together,
15 which led to greater team spirit and working with others. We were already used
16 to working within the department team, but now we had to help colleagues from
17 other departments more' (Interviewee 17).
18

19 HRM main concerns during the crisis were all about employees' health. However,
20 decisions require prudence and wisdom, so as not to lose focus on the demands of the
21 business. Participants identify *resilience* as one of the core socio-emotional skills during
22 this pandemic:
23

24 'Resilience is very important because we are at the centre of the storm and
25 everything from problems, anxieties, work or personal difficulties, and
26 leadership doubts about what decisions to make all fall here in HRM, and we
27 have to have a lot of resilience to live through this context, which is very
28 difficult' (Interviewee 34).
29

30 The abrupt change in the organisation of work, namely with the transition from physical
31 presence in companies to remote working from each employee's home, requires *flexibility*
32 from the HRM, namely in the implementation of HRM policies which, if going well, may
33 be taken on in the post-pandemic period:
34

35 'We have to think about how we're going to change the way of working in the
36 organisation, because people have realised that teleworking even works and now
37 we're going to have to adapt the organisation to work in this more flexible way'
38 (Interviewee 9).
39

40 'Post-covid we have to make some HRM policies more flexible, and I think
41 things are going well, which I think will help to make this more flexible and to
42 have a more people-oriented, more flexible approach to work. We didn't have
43 the practice of a lot of flexibility at work' (Interviewee 34).
44

45 *Problem-solving, adaptability and priority management* are also skills highlighted by the
46 participants. Information is scarce, and the uncertainty of companies' actions in the face
47 of the pandemic means that a decision made at the beginning of the week may not be
48 valid at the end of the week. The increased workload has forced them to demonstrate their
49 ability to manage priorities to not jeopardise the objectives and activities inherent in
50 HRM. Participants are aware that they need to continue managing the teams as best as
51 they can, even in an environment of constant adaptation to the legal guidelines imposed
52 by the government:
53

54 'The main skill is adapting to change, which is fundamental, because today's
55 reality is not tomorrow's reality. We start a week saying one thing and end the
56 week saying another' (Interviewee 18).
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3 ‘Strengthening VUCA world skills, this process of adaptability and managing
4 change on a daily basis. You can't stop. You make a decision today, and in a few
5 days it's no longer valid’ (Interviewee 22).
6

7 ‘In one week, we've managed to get almost 600 people in the house and things
8 are still working and flowing’ (Interviewee 34).
9

10 *Emotional intelligence* is another key skill for conveying trust. Even if they comply with
11 physical distancing rules when working on company premises, employees are not
12 indifferent to the fear of being infected by the COVID-19 virus. HRM personnel is aware
13 that they have to use emotional intelligence to mitigate the negative feelings that
14 employees may develop:
15

16 ‘This crisis forced us to have very strong emotional management... from one
17 moment to the next, we were bombarded with questions from employees who
18 were scared about their colleagues who might be infected, and this forced us to
19 have very strong emotional management, and to convey calm to the employees.’
20 (Interviewee 33).
21

22 ‘We have to have the emotional intelligence to be able to calmly and thoughtfully
23 help people make the best decisions and advise them’ (Interviewee 34).
24

25 The transition from the workplace to the employee's home is a completely new situation
26 for those who manage and for those working from home for the first time. Worrying and
27 fearing were common feelings which required HRM people to pay attention to employees
28 working from home:
29

30 ‘This issue of remote working forces us to create rules, things as simple as asking
31 people not to stay in their pyjamas because, unlike other companies, in our
32 company nobody wants to stay at home, and this is the most difficult thing to
33 manage. There are people who don't like working from home (...), but we have
34 to learn to manage teleworking, because it's going to be a good solution and it's
35 going to continue’ (Interviewee 19)
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38 Times of high uncertainty leads participants to consider *social contact* to be a fundamental
39 socio-emotional skill for those who have to manage home-office workers and whose
40 psychological well-being is decisive for guarantying high levels of performance:
41

42 ‘We have several employees who still live with their parents, and there are
43 parents who have lost their jobs, and this is going to be one of the things we take
44 care of when they return, and we are always very attentive to this, which is the
45 question of solidarity and how we can help these people because we know that
46 this affects both the psychological part and the performance of our employees’
47 (Interviewee 19).
48

49 HRM staff recognise that regular *social contact* is decisive for the effectiveness of
50 managing people who are geographically distant from the company, particularly in terms
51 of strengthening employees' emotional ties to the company:
52

53 ‘We want to be closer to the people, and that's why we created “the voice” project
54 ... we got the teams together to find out what we could be better at...we sat people
55 down and asked them to tell us where we could be better, and they indicated
56 proximity and now that's what we're working on’ (Interviewee 5).
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3 'We have to keep people close to the company now that people are more distant
4 because now it's even more urgent to maintain the link with the company'
5 (Interviewee 15).
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7 Interviewees mentioned *interpersonal relationships* as a key skill in a remote setting since
8 interpersonal management is more difficult remotely than in person. They consider
9 human relations skills to be crucial, given that HRM professionals have taken on a central
10 role in managing interpersonal relationships between employees, managers, and
11 teammates. The HRM mission was to be completely available to all employees:
12

13 'I think my role in the group has become more of a human relations role than an
14 HR role (...) It's become something that's very ingrained in the organisation and
15 in people and they really value it. In other words, it's already part of it!'
16 (Interviewee 8).
17

18 This skill was reiterated by another participant who recognises that it is absolutely
19 essential to have it when managing employees remotely, especially when working from
20 home:
21

22 'I felt I had to improve my human relations skills because I've always been very
23 shy. In person, I might go unnoticed in the middle of the team, but online people
24 need us there, always available for them' (Interviewee 3).
25

26 *Communication* was identified as another fundamental skill for managing remote
27 employees since working remotely requires completely remote forms of communication.
28 The interviewees emphasised that communicating remotely is not about migrating what
29 is done in person to online. On the contrary, it requires a whole rethink of the internal
30 communication process within organisations:
31

32 'I felt much more of a need to understand what it is to communicate at a distance,
33 then I realised that it's not at all about transposing what you do in person to what
34 you do online' (Interviewee 1).
35

36 Another change is the use of remote communication platforms (e.g. MS Teams or Zoom),
37 which until then had not been used in most organisations:
38

39 'Personally, I've had more regular and intense contact with digital
40 communication platforms such as Teams or Zoom' (Interviewee 4).
41

42 This skill requires proficiency, especially in the choice of communication channels, in
43 order to avoid sharing incorrect information:
44

45 'As we are responsible for the company's internal communication plans, we have
46 to have this communication skill to realise that communication has to be clear,
47 it has to be fluid in the right channels, and so communication is a skill that needs
48 to be worked on better to ensure that there is no misinformation and that people
49 are reassured by the information they receive' (Interviewee 34).
50

51 *E-learning* is another skill that has proved important during the COVID-19 pandemic, as
52 companies have opted to carry out training activities, especially among employees whose
53 work cannot be carried out outside the company's physical premises. Online training led
54 to the need to rethink the organisations' training process, which was initially improvised,
55 moving the pedagogical methods used in face-to-face training online. However, no matter
56 how many changes were made, there was a need to develop e-learning skills, whether to
57 be a trainer or a trainee:
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3 'I even had to learn how to give online training, which I didn't like to do, but
4 circumstances forced me to, (...) and it's not a question of migrating what we do
5 in person to virtual training, far from it' (Interviewee 1).
6

7 'As the HRM department, we had to attend mental health training courses to be
8 able to deal with the emotional state of our people, who started coming to talk to
9 us more often about their emotions, their mental state' (Interviewee 1).
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11

12 13 **5. Discussion**

14 The context of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has intensified the importance of remote
15 employee management skills, very much needed when work migrates from onsite to
16 online. Findings from this study are in line with other cases reported around the world
17 (Abulibdeh, 2020, Donnelly and Johns, 2020) and regularly use digital platforms
18 (Gigauri, 2020; Parry *et al.*, 2021).
19

20 The results suggest that remote working has required a more agile response from people
21 management (Cepellos, 2020; Park and Cho, 2022). Most participants identified the need
22 to acquire or develop socio-emotional skills to manage remote employees. In total, the
23 participants identified 17 distancing skills, which confirms other studies (Balabanova and
24 Balabanov 2020; Charlier and Kloppenburg, 2017; Guillén *et al.*, 2022; Morales, 2020;
25 Poláková *et al.*, 2023). The proficiency of these skills has recently been demonstrated in
26 the literature (e.g. Abulibdeh, 2020; Morales, 2020; Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-Basariya,
27 2020; Poláková *et al.*, 2023) when trying to highlight the positive impacts of the abrupt
28 adoption of remote working.
29

30 One fact that emerges from the results is directly related to HRM managers concern with
31 maintaining regular social contact with remote employees, emphasising one of the
32 concerns in recent literature (e.g., Cepellos, 2020; Silva, 2021; Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-
33 Basariya, 2020). The lack of physical and visual contact are barriers to the success of
34 remote working, which means that HRM professionals must promote a space for open
35 dialogue, transmitting trust and promoting the emotional stability of employees (Cepellos,
36 2020; Silva, 2021; Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-Basariya, 2020). A possible explanation
37 resides in the presenteeism culture of the Portuguese (and other) societies (Hofstede,
38 1992), which suggests that employees need to be physically present, not only socially.
39

40 The lack of physical contact in remote working means that HRM managers need to be
41 more available to accompany employees remotely. In this sense, the quantity and quality
42 of internal communication, even at a distance, is fundamental to reinforcing transparency,
43 trust, motivation, employee peace of mind and contributing to organisational commitment
44 (Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-Basariya, 2020). The results also highlight continuous
45 feedback, regular social contact, resilience, interpersonal skills, and assertive
46 communication. The capacity for e-learning was another skill demonstrated by the use of
47 digital learning platforms to transmit confidence, tranquillity, and employee engagement
48 (Vasanthi and Rabiyaathul-Basariya, 2020; Nogueira and Patini (2012). This evidence
49 underlines the creativity, improvisation and self-exploration that HRM managers have
50 unleashed, which could bring changes to the post-pandemic organisational culture as
51 advocated by Carnevale and Hatak (2020). Even so, the regularity of communication and
52 information sharing was not neglected, as skills that facilitate the quality of the
53 relationship with employees (Nogueira and Patini (2012) and reinforce an organisational
54 culture based on mutual trust between managers and employees (Abulibdeh, 2020).
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The results also show that the use of this flexible way of organising work has led to an acceleration of innovation, while also fostering increased collaboration skills, team spirit, problem-solving, adaptability, and priority management. While recognising that there are greater difficulties in communicating with remote employees than with physically present employees, HRM professionals felt that these difficulties were not all that significant. The social contact and open and constant dialogue that they maintained remotely made it possible to promote emotional stability of most remote employees, partially contradicting the argument in the literature that managing physical employees is easier than managing remote employees (Cepellos, 2020; Vasanthi and Rabiyyathul-Basariya, 2020).

The need to exert social influence on remote employees was another finding in this study, which is in line with what other authors have argued (e.g. Abulibdeh, 2020; Davidson, 2020; Feldman and Mazmanian, 2020; Kawashima *et al.*, 2020; Park and Cho, 2022; Sawitri and Rini, 2021). As advocated by some literature (e.g. Balabanova and Balabanov, 2020; Morales, 2020; Ulate *et al.*, 2020), managers of remote workers must show good interpersonal, communication, resilience, and emotional intelligence skills. Furthermore, the results confirm Guillén and colleagues' (2022) arguments that developing socio-emotional skills can help HR managers to observe and accept personal differences by understanding remote workers' feelings, moods, and motivations. In addition, skills encompassing emotional intelligence, resilience, empathy, creativity, flexibility, communication skills, problem-solving and critical thinking, emerge as critical for cultivating a productive and adept workforce (Poláková and colleagues, 2023). Finally, while the recent results of Poláková and colleagues (2023) indicate that individuals must possess balanced proficiency in both socio-emotional and digital skills to communicate and manage remote employees, our results suggest that socio-emotional skills for effective communication and management of remote employees are predominant. It is possible that these results can be explained by the specific cultural characteristics of the geographical contexts studied (Slovakia and Portugal, respectively).

6. Conclusions and implications

The aim of this study was to explore the skills required from HRM professionals to respond to the implementation of different forms of work organisation imposed by the lockdowns after March 2020. The results show that HRM played a prominent role in the management of remote employees. HRM managers were required to demonstrate distancing skills, specifically socio-emotional skills, such as *creativity, improvisation, self-exploration, innovation, collaboration, team spirit, resilience, flexibility, problem-solving, adaptability, priority management, emotional intelligence, social influence, social contact, interpersonal relationships, communication*, and digital skills mainly, *e-learning*.

The research has several limitations. One is participants' diversity. This study only considered the perspective of human resources management professionals, but it could have been enriched with the perspective of other employees, namely team managers and remote workers themselves. Another limitation is that the data collection period took place during COVID-19. Longitudinal studies are required to understand the dynamics of skills development and consolidation. In addition, we could explore potential groups of socio-emotional skills and digital skills that may emerge, not so much as a reactive response to the lockdown motivated by a period of public health crisis, but also because of the evolution of the digital transformation that we have been experiencing in recent years. Another limitation is the lack of greater numerical, geographical, sectoral and

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3 company seniority diversity. We propose that future studies explore remote working in
4 Portugal, taking this limitation into account. In this way, we could find some answers that
5 would contribute to a better understanding of the subject of remote working and even
6 identify possible idiosyncrasies in companies with different locations, sizes, sectors of
7 activity and seniority in the labour market. To increase the generalisability of our
8 conclusions, we suggest that future studies extend the study to international settings,
9 preferably with more diverse social and cultural influences, mitigating potential biases
10 that may arise in studies with a more limited geographical focus. We believe that societal
11 cultural differences (Hofstede, 1992), different technological development, and the
12 COVID-19 pandemic itself do not have the same impact on different countries. We
13 propose that future studies include greater geographical diversity (e.g. Scandinavian
14 countries, Anglo-Saxon countries, Central Western European countries as well as North
15 America or Asia).

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18 This article contributes to the literature by revealing that we are in a phase of change that
19 involves the dematerialisation of work processes. More than a digital transformation, this
20 study has highlighted the fact that Portuguese companies are undergoing a cultural
21 transformation, as they are now regularly using digital tools that already existed, but
22 which they never or rarely used in the past. The crisis posed major challenges for team
23 leaders, who had to implement more agile but humanised leadership that creates positive
24 and trusting environments. For their part, HRM managers were tasked with thinking up
25 new strategies for training, improving and retraining skills that were favourable to the
26 need for greater agility and digitalisation of the workforce. Likewise, this research
27 emphasises the importance of the role that HRM managers must play in order to better
28 coordinate the work of employees who are physically distant from the company. This
29 study also highlights the need for different skills required for effective digital human
30 resources management, support, and monitoring of remote employees. Finally, this
31 research highlights the necessary acceleration in the transformation of the processes that
32 were underway, requiring everyone to adapt at a much faster rate than organisations,
33 people, and regulators expected.

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37 Finally, the study showed how important it is for HRM to adapt and change policies and
38 tools capable of boosting business and people development. New skills are emerging,
39 especially in the area of socio-emotional skills, which can energize teams, foster
40 commitment and cooperation, and inspire people around a common purpose. It will be
41 interesting for future research to explore ‘what’ and ‘how’ HRM managers are planning,
42 organising and implementing training and development plans to improve the skills of
43 remote workers, which tend to grow in an effective post-pandemic COVID-19 phase.
44 Another contribution seems to be linked to the need to rethink the culture of organisations.
45 As remote working becomes more prevalent, new skills are required to communicate,
46 monitor, and motivate teams effectively. This includes promoting engagement and team
47 spirit, which has been identified as one of the main disruptive effects of the COVID-19
48 pandemic and is applicable across various organisations. As we enter the digital age, the
49 importance of distancing skills is expected to grow. Consequently, organisations that
50 adopt remote working as a strategy must design and implement training programs and
51 develop distancing skills among their employees. This is crucial for the successful
52 implementation of remote work.

53 54 55 56 57 58 **References**

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53 54 55 56 **Annexes**

57 **Annex 1 - Interview script**

58 1. Biographical information

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2. Was your organisation prepared to work remotely when the government imposed flexible working arrangements due to the pandemic? If so, how did the implementation of this working arrangement go? If not, how was remote working implemented?
3. What were the main difficulties you experienced in managing remote teams?
4. In terms of skills, did you feel the need to develop new skills with this emerging remote working context? If so, which ones? And why?
5. In terms of your own HR processes, what were the main changes you had to make? Which processes?
6. What challenges do you think the implementation of a (future) remote working policy could bring to HRM professionals?