

Telework outcomes in marketing and communication agencies through the lens of creative directors and executives

Ana Marija Mustafai and Klement Podnar
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how creative directors and other executives in marketing and communication agencies perceive the outcomes of telework.

Design/methodology/approach – For this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 creative directors, managing directors and project managers of marketing and communication agencies in Slovenia. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with coding carried out in MAXQDA to identify and refine key themes.

Findings – Teleworking offers flexibility, autonomy, work–life balance, higher productivity and job satisfaction. However, it can lead to work–life conflict, social isolation, communication problems and difficulties in knowledge sharing. The study also shows that while teleworking allows focus on creative tasks, face-to-face collaboration is essential for spontaneous idea generation.

Practical implications – The study offers valuable insights for managers and organizations implementing telework policies, emphasizing the need for balancing telework with opportunities for in-person collaboration.

Originality/value – This study contributes original insights by focusing on the specific experiences of creative directors in marketing agencies and by highlighting nuances of the impact of teleworking on creativity, collaboration and management challenges, areas that have been less explored in the existing literature.

Keywords Telework, Marketing and communication agencies, Creative directors, Managers, Creativity, Telework advantages, Telework disadvantages

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The move away from traditional office environments is captured by terms such as telecommuting, work from home, remote work, virtual work, flexible work, and telework. While these terms are often used interchangeably, they can emphasize different aspects of non-office-based work, such as location, organizational structure, and technology. Remote work refers broadly to work outside conventional offices, while telework specifically involves using ICTs to perform tasks off-site (Athanasiadou and Theriou, 2021). Driven by technological advances and a growing demand for flexibility, telework has become increasingly popular in various sectors, including creative industries such as marketing and communications (Eurofound, 2022).

Despite its growing prevalence, research on teleworking remains inconclusive, offering a wide range of findings regarding its benefits and drawbacks. While many organizations have implemented telework policies based on presumed positive outcomes, critical questions persist at both the individual and organizational levels. Most studies on telework have focused on employees, leaving managerial perspectives underexplored (Gohoungodji *et al.*, 2023).

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Belanger *et al.* (2012) advocate for a multi-level approach, emphasizing that telework outcomes are shaped not only by individual workers but also on their colleagues and supervisors. Similarly, Silva-C *et al.* (2019) highlight the crucial role of managerial experience in shaping attitudes toward telework implementation, though findings on managers' perceptions remain inconsistent.

Managers focused on operations are more likely to identify the benefits and disadvantages of teleworking that employees may miss. For instance, telework can facilitate talent acquisition and retention by alleviating the burden of long commutes (DiMartino and Wirth, 1990). Other examples include lower staff turnover, a gain in office space, a positive image of the organization, or on the negative side, a negative impact on the security of internal data (Illegems and Verbeke, 2004). Conversely, employees may be more attuned to the interpersonal and psychological effects of teleworking, including reduced social interaction and challenges to individual well-being. These differences in perspective are significant, as managerial attitudes not only shape the implementation of telework practices but also influence how employees experience and evaluate them (Shipman *et al.*, 2023).

Managers' experiences differ from those of their subordinates, leading to different or even contradictory perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking (Omoredé and Berglund, 2024). Their views reflect a dual perspective: as supervisors aligned with leadership and as employees themselves. Despite their pivotal role in shaping and regulating telework (Lladós-Masllorens *et al.*, 2024), research on how managers perceive their own roles remains limited. This study addresses that gap by examining managerial attitudes toward telework, offering a more comprehensive understanding of its implications across organizational levels.

Literature overview

Telework outcomes

For decades, teleworking was seen as the future of work, but since the Covid-19 pandemic, this future has become a reality. Since then, extensive research has explored its features, drivers, and effects across various sectors (see Athanasiadou and Theriou, 2021).

A key characteristic of telework is flexibility, as it enables employees to control when, where, and how they work (Coenen and Kok, 2014; Kossek *et al.*, 2006; Hill *et al.*, 2008), thereby enhancing autonomy and discretion in task management.

In addition, work flexibility is associated with several other outcomes of teleworking. Among the most cited benefits is improved work-life balance (Beauregard *et al.*, 2019). Telework supports better integration of family obligations (Maruyama and Tietze, 2012), facilitates caregiving (Nakrošienė *et al.*, 2019), and helps women remain in the workforce after childbirth (Chung and van der Horst, 2018).

Telework is also linked to higher productivity (Beauregard *et al.*, 2019), due to fewer distractions (Waters, 2016). The option to telework itself may promote reciprocity and commitment (Labrado Antolin *et al.*, 2024). Enhanced creativity (Tønnessen *et al.*, 2021), improved organizational outcomes (Martínez-Sánchez *et al.*, 2007), and reduced absenteeism (Beckel and Fisher, 2022) have also been observed.

Logistical benefits include time and energy savings from reduced commuting (Kurland and Bailey, 1999; Tremblay and Thomsin, 2012), while psychological gains such as relief from workplace pressures and increased well-being through autonomy and flexibility contribute to job satisfaction and retention (Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2015; Anderson *et al.*, 2014; Noonan and Glass, 2012).

While these benefits are well established, less is known about how they are perceived by managers in specific fields, particularly in creative, fast-paced environments. This study addresses this gap with the following question:

RQ1. Which advantages of telework do managers in the field of marketing and communication perceive?

Despite its advantages, telework introduces significant challenges. Reduced physical presence can weaken interpersonal bonds, as fewer informal interactions lead to more intentional, task-driven communication (Blanchard and Allen, 2023; Ficapal-Cusí *et al.*, 2024; Viererbl *et al.*, 2022). This shift may impair organizational culture (van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2019) and increase miscommunication or misunderstanding due to the lack of non-verbal cues (Diefenbach, 2023).

Social and professional isolation is a recurring concern. Telework can lead to loneliness, anxiety, and decreased job satisfaction (Shaholli *et al.*, 2024), while limited access to informal networks may hinder career development and effectiveness (Golden and Eddleston, 2020). The absence of face-to-face contact undermines trust and impedes the transfer of tacit knowledge (Golden and Raghuram, 2010; Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Onboarding becomes more difficult, especially for early-career employees, who have fewer opportunities to learn from colleagues and mentors, and face more disappointments, resulting in early turnover (Charalampous *et al.*, 2018; Myers *et al.*, 2024).

Work-life boundaries may blur, leading to conflict between work and family domains (Eddleston and Mulki, 2017). Challenges also include lack of structured hours (Wöhrmann and Ebner, 2021), reduced team cohesion (van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2019), concentration difficulties (Vander Elst *et al.*, 2017), and technostress (Wahl *et al.*, 2024).

From a managerial perspective, remote oversight complicates performance monitoring and procedural adherence (Cunha *et al.*, 2024). Managers who supervise teleworkers often report greater difficulty than those supervising on-site staff (Park and Cho, 2020; van der Lippe and Lippényi, 2019), while those teleworking themselves may experience heightened workload, role strain, and burnout (Kirchner *et al.*, 2021; Omorede and Berglund, 2024). Organizational reluctance toward telework may stem from concerns over losing managerial control, as one of the only ways for managers to evaluate teleworkers is to focus on their accountability for outcomes (Groen *et al.*, 2018). Given these complexities, this study asks:

- RQ2. Which disadvantages of telework do managers in the field of marketing and communication perceive?

Telework in creative communication agencies

Telework should not be treated as a uniform practice, nor should teleworkers be considered a homogeneous group (Haddon and Brynin, 2005). Outcomes vary depending on job characteristics, frequency of telework, ergonomic support, and organizational context (Beckel and Fisher, 2022). These experiences are embedded in specific work practices (Boell *et al.*, 2016), underlining the importance of contextual research across different industries (Athanasiadou and Theriou, 2021).

In marketing communication agencies, creativity is a central organizational asset. It enables firms to adapt to customer needs, technological shifts, and competitive pressures, resulting in better outcomes (Kumar, 2018; Das *et al.*, 2023). Amabile's componential theory of creativity (2012) emphasizes the influence of the social environment on creativity, suggesting that changes to the work environment, such as the shift to telework, can significantly affect creative performance.

Creative professionals often seek varied environments to fuel inspiration and gain diverse experiences (Cho *et al.*, 2016). They gain inspiration through mobility by understanding shifts in consumer preferences and technological advancement. Research shows that knowledge and creative workers are well suited to telework (Merisalo *et al.*, 2013). However, challenges remain, as telework may hinder collaboration and innovation, which are core demands in creative sectors (Farcane *et al.*, 2022).

Findings on telework's impact on creativity are mixed. Pyörriä (2011) emphasized that telework is essential for creative problem-solving. However, as emotional closeness fosters digital collaboration (Wu *et al.*, 2016), the reduced interaction in telework may hinder

collaboration and knowledge sharing. Scholars also disagree on the role of communication in creativity while teleworking. Some suggest teleworking helps manage distractions and reduce interpersonal strain (Merisalo *et al.*, 2013), while others highlight interpersonal communication among colleagues as a key driver of individual creativity (Manssour, 2004).

Given these complexities, it is essential to understand how telework interacts with the specific demands, values, and practices of creative work. This study addresses that need by asking:

RQ3. What are the specific characteristics of creative professions regarding teleworking?

Method

The research questions were addressed through analysis of interview data from 18 individuals in marketing and communications agencies between March and April 2024. The participant agencies were selected through a random sampling process from a comprehensive list of marketing and communication agencies in Slovenia. A total of 20 agencies of varying sizes were initially contacted, and 16 of them agreed to participate in the study. The sample included marketing (9), and communication agencies (7).

Furthermore, participants had to be in a creative leadership role. The sample included 11 creative directors, 4 CEOs, and 3 project managers. The objective was to obtain a range of perspectives on creative and strategic decision-making processes within these agencies. Participants were selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender and age. Of the 18 participants, 7 were female and 11 were male, aged 30 to 59. The sample size was appropriate given the study's moderately specific aim, targeted participant group, high-quality data, and thematic cross-case analysis, which provided sufficient information power (Malterud *et al.*, 2016). In addition, the saturation of data was verified to ensure the sample size was sufficient, and no new themes emerged from the data in the final interview.

This study used semi-structured interviews to collect data. This method encourages comprehensive responses, rich insights, and specific examples, facilitating new ideas and more accurate conclusions (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). Furthermore, it allows participants to reveal sometimes conflicting attitudes on a subject (Marvasti, 2004). The framework comprised non-directive questions that permitted participants to determine the extent of their responses and express their authentic opinions (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). The semi-structured guide was designed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes regarding teleworking. It included open-ended questions organized around three main themes: (1) the advantages of teleworking, (2) the disadvantages of teleworking, and (3) the impact of teleworking on creativity.

The interviews explored the outcomes of teleworking for participants, their teams, and the agency. Before the interviews, participants signed a consent form, and pseudonyms are used throughout this paper to ensure confidentiality. Most interviews were in person, but 4 were online via Zoom. They lasted between 23 min to 1 h and 4 min, with an average length of 36 min.

The data were coded and analyzed according to Braun and Clarke (2006). We started by familiarizing ourselves with the data. This involved data collection and transcription, as well as preliminary observations. The 114-page transcript was checked against the audio files. The transcripts were imported into MAXQDA for analysis. Data underwent open coding to identify relevant segments. Codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on content. These were descriptive and closely related to the data. Themes were refined by identifying links between the codes, applying concepts, integrating previous literature and integrating all of this with the data.

Our sample showed a hybrid model (9) as the most common working arrangement, including office work and telework. Nonetheless, there is no consensus on which days employees are allowed to telework. A comparable number of agencies mandate full-time

telework (3) or full-time office work (4). However, even in agencies where teleworking is not required, exceptions are made for long commutes, specific management roles, or particular tasks.

Results

Perceived advantages of teleworking

560

The findings show that autonomy and flexibility are key to teleworking. Adapting working hours and environments to personal needs enhances productivity, as participants highlight that teleworking allows them the freedom to choose where and when they work according to their preferences:

It's primarily about adapting to individuals and acknowledging that we all have different ways of being our best or working most effectively in certain situations. In other words, it's about respecting individuality. Some might need to take a walk between tasks to perform better. Some people are more productive in the morning, while others are in the evening. One person might require complete focus for a task that demands concentration and feels they can best achieve this from home. Or perhaps they have a sick family member at home, an important visitor, or a cat that needs attention. (Agency 16)

This also helps managers to recognize and adapt work to the specific needs of the employees. However, not all teleworking is flexible or autonomous. Some agencies implement specific rules to keep employees constantly connected. For example, one of the participant agencies allows for a 10% reduction in gross salary if the employee fails to respond three times within 15 min.

Greater flexibility was linked to a better work-life balance, particularly among those who felt teleworking allowed them to spend more time with their children:

To describe a typical workday: in the morning, I take my children to kindergarten, a bit later than I would if I were working outside the home. / . . . / I also pick them up a bit earlier than I otherwise would. As a result, they're never actually in kindergarten for a full 8 hours, or longer, as they would be if I were working a standard 8-hour shift elsewhere. (Agency 2)

Some participants had more time to complete non-work tasks but expressed doubts about effectively combining work and family life. A common concern was the »invasion« of work obligations into the family home, disrupting the boundary between work and personal spaces. This is reflected in the following statement:

»I think you need to separate these two spaces; you shouldn't bring your work into your personal space. / . . . / The moment you have a computer on your dining table and you're doing work-related tasks, you disrupt a mental equilibrium that you need, especially for jobs that require more mental effort than physical effort. « (Agency 10a)

Some participants emphasized that teleworking enabled them to travel more frequently or for longer periods, as they could complete work-related tasks from abroad:

I want to spend a week in May without taking vacation while breathing aerosols and teleworking allows me to do that. (Agency 16)

Another perceived advantage of teleworking is higher productivity, especially for tasks that require calm and concentration. As managers are required to interact with their employees consistently, telework allows them to focus on specific tasks without interruption. This is illustrated by the following quote:

I'm very productive at home because it's completely quiet. It's quiet because there's no one around, and there aren't those little interruptions like, "Shall we go for coffee? Do you have this? Just tell me about this, or where's that file?" / . . . / When it's completely quiet, I can accomplish a huge amount in just a few hours. For tasks that require a lot of concentration, it's nice not to be disturbed. (Agency 10b)

At the same time, they often mentioned temptations at home, which required higher levels of discipline to finish certain work tasks:

There are more temptations to not work. So, I need more discipline because there are more distractions. This is related to everything you do at home and what's available at home – the fridge, household chores, and repairs that you keep postponing. « (Agency 3)

Teleworking also reduces commuting time, and this advantage is manifested in various ways. Firstly, managers can use the time gained from the absence of a commute for important work tasks or non-work activities. Secondly, the elimination of commuting enables agencies to recruit talented employees from more distant locations. These findings are exemplified by the following quotations:

Suddenly, you have time for breakfast, meditation, and walking your dog. These are all very positive aspects that replace the early morning rush, the stress of commuting, and all the challenges that come with it. (Agency 7)

This not only expands their job opportunities but also broadens our options as employers, / . . . / For them, this represents a manageable time commitment, and for us, it is a reasonable cost to support someone commuting from Koper twice a week. This is a benefit we could not have imagined 20 years ago / . . . / (Agency 10b)

Moreover, the daily commute for those in the creative industries includes any work-related trips. They often travel to meet clients, which affects their daily travel habits. Telework has significantly minimized these trips, as communication with clients has increasingly shifted to digital platforms, as shown in the following excerpt:

For example, in 2019 and earlier, we used to travel to the client for every meeting, or the client would come to us. This meant that we spent a lot of time each week in cars and in various traffic jams. Today, we can hardly imagine regularly traveling to clients because we handle most things through video conferences. (Agency 1)

In addition, for some participants, the time saved by not commuting is accompanied by an increased perception of physical energy, which enables them to participate more actively in activities outside of work, as the following quote shows:

Physical energy is completely different. For example, when I finish working, I can't wait to put my shoes back on and go for a long walk with my dog. Then, when I get home, I have so much more energy to cook something / . . . / During breaks, I often find myself saying, "I'm going to vacuum the apartment." You become a bit more efficient in a different way. « (Agency 7)

Besides this, telework also allows for a significant conservation of mental energy. Related to their creative leadership role, some of the participants expressed that the absence of the need to perform in front of others reduces the pressure to meet expectations, as highlighted by the next quote:

I also have more energy left because I don't have to perform in front of everyone. They expect us creatives to be showmen. / . . . / I save more energy. (Agency 6)

Most participants said that teleworking improved their job satisfaction and general well-being. This is due to factors like greater flexibility and an improved work-life balance. Additionally, telework appears to create a psychological distance from work-related pressures:

»I believe that, in general, telework has a great impact on my well-being. / . . . / I really like my coworkers and my work environment, but I feel that the distance you still have significantly reduces your stress at the end of the day. Sometimes, the energy and people around you can increase stress just as easily as they can reduce it. / . . . / So, when I'm working remotely, it seems easier for me to handle stressful situations. « (Agency 5)

Although all participants recognized some benefits of teleworking, the majority felt that the (positive) outcomes depended heavily on individual characteristics such as discipline, sense of responsibility, personality type, and a high degree of introversion or extraversion – as the following comment shows:

The advantages of this type of work apply particularly to the individuals who are self-disciplined and self-organized. (Agency 13)

Perceived disadvantages of telework

Despite the benefits, participants identified several drawbacks. Teleworking blurs the boundaries between professional and personal lives, extending the workday. This is intensified by the absence of a physical and psychological transition from the workplace to home:

To be completely honest, the workday has drastically lengthened / . . . / To be fair, our work is such that you can rarely completely disconnect when you go home, but if you're working from home, you practically can't switch off, because your work is wherever you are. It's as if you're at the office all the time, and it becomes very overwhelming. (Agency 15)

Many of the perceived disadvantages are related to relationships with employees. For example, most participants recognize that frequent or full-time teleworking could lead to social isolation, as the following quote shows:

It requires a certain level of care for one's mental health, I would say. Because you still need to make sure you stay in touch with people, to be social, to interact, and so on. It's one thing to work from home one or two days a week, but it's entirely different to work from home constantly, month after month, year after year. That leaves a mark on a person, just like any long-term social change would. (Agency 7)

Considering that most of the participants are hybrid teleworkers, social isolation does not seem to be a major problem for the participants. On the other hand, communication problems seem to be the most frequently mentioned disadvantages. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, it takes longer to solve problems or finalize projects when communicating in writing than when speaking face-to-face. The following observation underpins this:

Certainly, some tasks take longer. For example, if I simply walk over to the designer, sit next to them, and say, "What if we move this logo here, enlarge this, and change this color . . .," it's much faster than if I sit down to write an email / . . . / It ends up being a lengthy email that the person might misinterpret; / . . . / But most importantly, it's about the speed of work. This is really the biggest factor—how quickly you can resolve things in person compared to remotely. (Agency 1)

Not all participants seemed to agree with this. The results show that technology acceptance and technostress could play an important role in the perception of the advantages or disadvantages of teleworking.

As indicated in the previous quote, communication misunderstandings seem to occur more frequently when teleworking, due to the lack of non-verbal cues. This is explained in more detail in the quote below:

As soon as communication shifts to online platforms or applications, there's a higher chance of misunderstandings because people don't just communicate through articulation and words but also through gestures, body language, reactions, and what we often call "chemistry." All these factors are crucial for proper understanding, for being able to respond correctly, and for the other person to comprehend your responses accurately. Physical presence is essential for all of this. « (Agency 12)

Some participants said that less experienced employees prefer working in the office because they learn from colleagues and use company resources more effectively. From the managerial perspective, the socialization of new employees could be more difficult, and some participants

specifically require full-time office work in these cases. In summary, teleworking makes it harder to share knowledge:

For example, some assistants, who are lower-level employees and may have just graduated from university, find it easier to work—I believe they prefer working from the office. They draw knowledge from the people around them because as soon as you start working from home, you are on your own. (Agency 4)

From a leadership perspective, giving feedback is more difficult. For example, some participants emphasized the importance of face-to-face interactions for delivering feedback, as it enables a more personalized and empathetic approach. This is exemplified by the following quote:

We attend training sessions where we learn how to work with colleagues, how to recognize their personalities, how to adapt our way of giving feedback to everyone, and so forth. This becomes very challenging if you don't have the person before you. I'm a firm advocate of this [face-to-face] approach. Of course, we do a lot of work through emails, and we must, but what's crucial is how you provide feedback to a person (whether it's positive or negative). This is especially important when it comes to creatives. Every piece of work we create contains a part of ourselves, and if someone tells you that what you've done isn't good, it's almost like they're criticizing a bit of you. / . . . / You must do this properly if you want to have motivated employees and good creatives. « (Agency 1)

Furthermore, telework reduces opportunities for spontaneous social interactions and emotional support. In-person communication helps colleagues understand each other better, stimulates informal discourse, and enables more effective resolution of non-work-related matters. The lack of informal discourse may indicate a decline in organizational culture:

During video calls, you can't do everything. You can't have the casual chit-chat you would normally engage in, and for example, when something happens to someone, you miss the opportunity to discuss it. In our workplace, where a large percentage of employees are women, we sometimes even had discussions about clothing. These types of conversations help maintain a certain atmosphere within the company, as not every discussion has to be strictly about work or projects « (Agency 9b)

Additionally, teleworking hinders the “chemistry” between colleagues. When discussing how telework differs from face-to-face communication, some participants noted that non-verbal cues, such as olfactory stimuli, and “hormonal exchanges” are key to forming relationships and stimulating creativity. These processes are significantly compromised in a virtual work environment. The following quotations illustrate this point:

There's less gesturing. Less body language. Less of what you might call the scents of other people that we subconsciously perceive. There's less of all that. It's much harder now, for example, to charm someone. Because before, when I presented a project to a client, like a new logo or a video ad, I could perform. I was in front of them. And that aspect of performing, when you're on stage as a performer, / . . . / Well, that charisma doesn't work as well now. (Agency 6)

I believe that in creative professions, the personal connection, understanding, and chemistry between two people are very important. I feel that telework cannot replace this. (Agency 5)

Moreover, half of the participants reported feelings of anxiety stemming from a perceived loss of control over their team's activities. More specifically, the inability to directly observe employees led to anxiety about performance levels and the potential misuse of telework flexibility. One participant even monitored their employees' social media activity.

I also think I understand why Fridays and Mondays are considered forbidden days for telework in our case. It seems to me that people would tend to extend their weekends. This would mean that they might finish work earlier on Friday or, especially during the summer, head to the beach on Friday and then complete a few hours of work, thinking, “Well, no one will notice”. (Agency 9b)

Furthermore, some participants find it challenging to assess team dynamics and individual well-being without face-to-face interaction. This is especially important as managers often find themselves in a position where they not only have to consider their mental health but are also responsible for checking on employees who telework. The lack of physical presence makes it harder to recognize emotional states and address interpersonal conflicts effectively:

Leaders have different tasks and perspectives. And yes, having oversight or the feeling of knowing what is happening, of being in control . . . This sounds terrible, but you need to somehow be aware of what is going on. You are responsible if, for example, someone behaves inappropriately towards colleagues, clients, or themselves. (Agency 2)

Conversely, those participants who expressed high levels of trust in their subordinates did not experience anxiety about these issues.

Notably, the perceived disadvantages were significantly shaped by the experience during the pandemic.

Creativity: the good and the bad

The creative process is divided into several stages. One of the first stages is brainstorming for ideas, where team dynamics are crucial. Spontaneity and depth of creative discussions are best-facilitated face-to-face, where team members can freely share unfiltered thoughts and ideas. This is especially important as it fosters a level of intimacy and openness, which is crucial for high-quality creative work.

Every creative director may have their own approach, but when I have very good conversation partners, I find it easier to brainstorm ideas and develop concepts through discussion. However, this type of work is very specific, and sometimes the ability to freely express oneself can be a challenge. At our company, you really need to allow yourself not to self-censor. In ideal conditions, you should be able to say almost anything that comes to mind in the early stages of projects when you are formulating creative ideas. This means that by doing so, you reveal a lot about your very intimate thoughts and perspectives on the world to your conversation partner. I mention this because it can only happen in a live dynamic. (Agency 15)

However, telework seems to be a welcome work arrangement in other stages of the creative process, as most participants would agree that solitude is a crucial part of the creative process. This is evidenced in the following quote:

In the creative development of an idea, there are clearly several phases. There is always one phase where it's better to be alone. Then, there is a phase where collaboration with a team is beneficial. Finally, there is a phase where you need complete peace and quiet to bring the idea to fruition. In this last phase teleworking is particularly advantageous / . . . / (Agency 12)

Another drawback of telework is the lack of spontaneous creativity. Some participants noted the loss of chance encounters that spark ideas, such as those in the office or brief, unstructured conversations. These moments are hard to recreate in a remote setting, as illustrated in the following quote:

I admit that sometimes I miss the moment of spontaneous creation. Not the kind where we have a meeting, prepare for it, sit together, and brainstorm in an organized context. But more in the sense of random encounters and spontaneous ideas. The kind where you go across the office, sit down at someone's desk, discuss a bit, and then say, "Oh, that's right, I have that." Or when someone passes by and says, "Hey, what about this?" (Agency 7)

Nevertheless, not all participants seemed to agree that the office is an environment for spontaneous creative moments. Some of them felt that the change of environment is crucial for their creative output as it can lead to ideas that would not emerge in a traditional office environment, as the following quote shows:

»At the same time, a change in environment encourages a flow of thoughts that otherwise wouldn't emerge. In short, if I take a break and go out on the balcony with my cat to water the plants, something can quickly come to mind during that thinking process, which otherwise wouldn't have. So, changing the environment, especially when facing bigger challenges with creative tasks – where it's not just an hour of routine work, but you need to come up with a concept or idea out of nowhere – is quite beneficial. Also, I don't know, when you're on a walk or even in a store and you see some quirky product arrangements, such random everyday situations, which aren't office-like, can trigger certain thought processes that otherwise wouldn't occur.« (Agency 16)

Modifying the work environment does not necessarily entail teleworking. Many participants, including those who do not telework, support occasional changes to the work environment. One agency provides a backyard space for employees, while another permits them to complete tasks at alternative locations.

Findings, limitations and further research

This study examined how creative directors and senior managers in marketing and communication agencies perceive the outcomes of telework. Participants highlighted a broad range of benefits, including increased flexibility, autonomy, improved work-life balance, enhanced productivity, reduced commuting time, greater job satisfaction, and improved well-being. These findings align with prior research (Nakrošienė *et al.*, 2019; Maruyama *et al.*, 2009; Chen and Fulmer, 2018; Anderson *et al.*, 2014). Many also reported experiencing higher physical and mental energy levels, enabling fuller engagement in non-work activities. While Kurland and Bailey (1999) emphasized improved physical energy, participants in this study pointed to preserved psychological energy, attributed to reduced performative demands in digital client interactions. Notably, positive effects were perceived as highly dependent on individual traits, aligning with Beckel and Fisher (2022).

Despite these benefits, participants identified a series of challenges: work-family conflict, social isolation, communication barriers, impaired knowledge sharing, fewer spontaneous interactions, and increased anxiety. These results are in line with previous work (Wöhrmann and Ebner, 2021; Diefenbach, 2023; Charalampous *et al.*, 2018; Shaholli *et al.*, 2024). A unique concern, not extensively addressed in existing literature, was the loss of “chemistry” in collaboration, particularly relevant to creative and client-facing roles.

Conflicting perceptions of telework were closely tied to participants' dual identities as both employees and managers. As employees, they appreciated autonomy, flexible hours, varied work environments, and greater energy levels. However, as managers, they faced difficulties delivering feedback remotely, delays in task completion, and anxiety about reduced oversight. This is consistent with earlier findings by Park and Cho (2020), Cunha *et al.* (2024), and van der Lippe and Lippényi (2019). Some participants also emphasized leadership's emotional and relational demands, particularly the challenge of supporting team members' well-being in remote settings, which remains underexplored in current research.

The study further suggests a potential mismatch between managerial concerns and employee experiences. While employees valued flexibility as a productivity driver (Beauregard *et al.*, 2019), some managers remained anchored to models of structured oversight and physical presence (Groen *et al.*, 2018). Concerns about accountability and control often reflected managerial anxieties that may not align with employees' perceptions of increased autonomy and self-management.

Participants also reflected on the impact of telework on creativity. While previous studies have examined general links between telework and creativity (Wu *et al.*, 2016; Pyöriä, 2011), this study highlights domain-specific nuances. Respondents described creativity as a multi-stage process benefiting from both collaboration and solitude. In-person interaction was seen as essential for spontaneous brainstorming and idea generation, while telework enabled deeper focus during later stages of creative development. Many missed the unplanned, impromptu exchanges typical for an office environment, which are critical for spontaneous creativity. Yet,

some noted that changing physical surroundings, such as working outdoors or in different locations, helped generate new ideas. These insights support Amabile's (2012) componential theory of creativity, which emphasizes the role of the work environment in fostering creative output.

Several findings reflect dynamics specific to marketing and communication. Digital client interactions reduced commuting and performative pressure, but also impaired nonverbal communication and weakened interpersonal rapport. The absence of nonverbal cues and "chemistry" in virtual settings was seen as potentially detrimental to client relationships. While the focus was on marketing and communication, the findings may extend to other creativity-driven sectors such as media, design, or consulting, where similar tensions between telework's benefits and limitations significantly affect interpersonal dynamics and creative outcomes.

These insights offer actionable implications for both organizations and society. For organizations, hybrid models should move beyond arbitrary scheduling to strategically balance remote autonomy with opportunities for in-person collaboration. Trust-based performance systems could help mitigate managerial stress while supporting employee independence. At a societal level, telework may reduce environmental impacts through lower commuting demands, but could also exacerbate social isolation, especially among younger or early-career employees. Policymakers should therefore encourage initiatives that combine flexibility with opportunities for social connection, such as coworking hubs or virtual mentorship schemes.

Further research is warranted to explore how telework shapes client relationships and to identify contextual moderators like organizational culture, team composition, or technology acceptance. Comparative studies between employee and managerial perspectives could illuminate the structural tensions shaping telework experiences. The role of nonverbal communication in sustaining creativity, collaboration, and trust also remains an underexplored area of empirical inquiry.

This study has several limitations. It did not fully address variations stemming from agency size, regional context, or the structure of telework implementation (e.g. frequency, voluntariness). In addition, reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for perceptual bias and limits generalizability. Future research could benefit from triangulating findings through mixed-method or observational approaches.

In conclusion, this study shows that creative directors and senior managers view telework as both beneficial, offering flexibility, better work-life balance, and well-being, and challenging, due to strained interpersonal relationships, communication issues, and oversight concerns. Their dual roles as employees and leaders create conflicting views, with personal gains often clashing with professional responsibilities. Telework also has a mixed impact on creativity, supporting focused tasks but limiting spontaneous collaboration. These challenges are shaped by role-based perspectives, individual traits, and the creative demands of the industry. Effectively addressing them requires organizations to move beyond structural fixes and consider the social and psychological aspects of telework.

About the authors

Ana Marija Mustafai is a Ph.D. candidate in Marketing Communication and a researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. Her research focuses on telework, as well as identification, engagement, satisfaction, and other concepts that influence the behavior of employees.

Klement Podnar (PhD) is Professor at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana, where he teaches Corporate Communication, Basics of Visual Communication, and Marketing. He serves on several editorial boards of several international journals. His research has been published in a number of international journals including *Journal of Business Research*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Corporate Communication: An International Journal*, and *Journal of Marketing Communications*. Klement Podnar is the organizer of several international conferences and cofounder of the International CSR communication conference.

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Corresponding author

Klement Podnar can be contacted at: klement.podnar@fdv.uni-lj.si