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Workplace harassment in psychosocial risks and teleworking in times of health crisis

Acoso Laboral en los Riesgos Psicosociales y el Teletrabajo en Época de Crisis Sanitaria

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Abstract

This study seeks to reflect on the relationship between teleworking, workplace harassment, and psychosocial risks in the context of labor resolutions adopted in Ecuador in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The purpose is to identify the relationship between mobbing in the telework modality and its effect on psychosocial risks. The following questions arise: how does mobbing manifest itself in telework? How not to confuse the results of teleworking with mobbing? Can mobbing be considered a psychosocial risk factor? For this, a systematic review of the literature and previous studies of the proposed variables and the analysis of the information from the Ministerio de Trabajo in Ecuador on a survey was conducted to evaluate the consequences of teleworking on workers. Despite the limitation of knowledge and relevant data, it has been established that workplace harassment or mobbing is also present in teleworking, with negative consequences; when the characteristics and conditions of work are not clearly defined, it is accessible to transition to mobbing, and, therefore, the increase in psychosocial risks in workers.

Resumen

El presente estudio busca reflexionar la relación entre el teletrabajo, acoso laboral y riesgos psicosociales en el contexto de las resoluciones laborales adoptadas en el Ecuador frente a la pandemia por Covid-19. Se plantea como objetivo el identificar la relación entre el mobbing en la modalidad de teletrabajo y su efecto en los riesgos psicosociales, de lo cual surgen las siguientes interrogantes: ¿de qué manera se manifiesta el mobbing en el teletrabajo?; ¿cómo no confundir los efectos del teletrabajo con el mobbing?; ¿se puede considerar el mobbing como factor de riesgo psicosocial? Para ello se realizó una revisión sistemática de la literatura y estudios precedentes de las variables planteadas y el análisis de la información del Ministerio de trabajo en Ecuador sobre una encuesta aplicada para evaluar las consecuencias del teletrabajo en los trabajadores. Pese a la limitación de información y datos relevantes, se ha establecido que el acoso laboral o mobbing también está presente en el teletrabajo, con consecuencias negativas, cuando no están claramente delimitadas las características y condiciones del trabajo es fácil transitar al mobbing y, por lo tanto, el incremento de riesgos psicosociales en los trabajadores.

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Palabras clave: Crisis sanitaria, Covid-19, teletrabajo, acoso laboral, riesgos psicosociales.

Introduction

The use of social networks and the Internet as technological tools in the personal sphere have produced a dynamic use of digital media which ease companies to integrate them as support resources for their employee's performance. This has facilitated the transition to teleworking. And therefore, to remote work. In this way, most companies, except for plant areas and operational or technical work, choose to develop this type of work modality, especially in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Teleworking, in Europe at the end of the 90s, became one of the most flexible forms of work, for which the use of technological instruments such as computers, mobile phones, and sophisticated software became the primary work tools. (Tavares, 2017).

In the new labor trends, the difficulties of face-to-face work are not excepted, such as the phenomenon of mobbing or workplace harassment; this problem affects both organizations and the worker, deteriorating their performance (Görgülü et al., 2014).

Workplace bullying harms the individual, psychologically and economically, since it is directly related to decreased productivity, absenteeism, and staff turnover (Instituto Nacional de Seguridad e Higiene en el Trabajo, 2009). Women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment and harassment, which is generally related to the structure of most organizations, where women are traditionally placed in a situation of subordination that makes them more prone to this type of violence (Saldaña-Orozco et al., 2022).

Mobbing is a problem of interest to public health; therefore, it is typified and cataloged within the main types of violence at work that affects workers' quality of life. Lanata-Fuenzalida (2018) affirms that mobbing in all kinds of organizations must have priority attention since it is a factor that is included within the psychosocial risks, becoming a problem that requires precise and defined regulations through laws. And rules that protect the employee in his workplace (Oviedo-Vega & Vásquez-Flores, 2016).

In Ecuador, the Labor Code (Asamblea Nacional, act. 2021), in article 1, mentions that all labor

relations between employers and employees in all modalities and working conditions are regulated and aligned with the proposal of the Organización Internacional del Trabajo (ILO), which states that it is necessary to establish legal regulations that frame this activity through a contract that guarantees the interests of both the contractor and the worker (Organización Internacional del Trabajo, 2020). According to these definitions, work is subject to laws for the benefit of both parties involved, so mobbing captures interest since it threatens the rights and well-being of workers in the workplace. The state must take into account the psychological consequences that can occur in workers, such as stress, anxiety, fear, and loneliness, as well as the physical effects, such as some of the diseases developed during the health crisis in the families of Ecuadorian society (Naranjo-Zambrano et al., 2020).

The purpose is to identify the relationship between mobbing in the telework modality and its effect on psychosocial risks.

Literature Review

The relationship between mobbing and teleworking is described below, followed by an analysis of mobbing as a psychosocial risk

Mobbing and Teleworking

Teleworking is created with the help of new technologies; it refers to using these in daily tasks when doing remote work. This new way of working combines distance, position, and intensive use of Information and Communication Technologies (Osio-Havríluk, 2010).

Teleworking brings significant benefits to an organization. In the case of Ecuador, like other countries around the world, it is a measure that is increasing and constitutes one of the main protection measures for workers in the face of the threat of Covid-19. Alvarez & Harris (2020) generated unprecedented effects and forced organizations to resort to emerging plans such as teleworking.

Teleworking itself can cause feelings of isolation because it is possible for the worker to develop

the sensation of feeling separated from other people or the same company, since on some occasions, they come to consider that they lose their impact on it, coming to perceive that the organization forgets about him and is not taken into account like other workers (Acevedo et al., 2018).

Regarding mobbing, it refers to hostile or immoral behavior towards an employee in a specific organization, which, in addition to the physical and psychological consequences, brings with it a break in the social context, breaking the subject's interpersonal relationships (Carvajal-Orozco & Dávila-Londoño, 2013).

For Oviedo-Vega & Vásquez-Flores (2016) and Iñaki & Zabala (2015), mobbing causes severe psychological damage to the person who is harassed. When referring to this point, it does so in the following terms: workplace bullying is intended to intimidate, diminish, reduce, flatten, threaten, and emotionally and intellectually consume the victim, to eliminate them from the organization or satisfy the insatiable need to attack, control and destroy, which is usually presented by the harasser, who takes advantage of the opportunity offered by the particular organizational situation (reorganization, cost reduction, bureaucratization, dizzying changes, etc.) to channel a series of impulses and psychopathic tendencies (Iñaki & Zabala, 2015).

In the implementation of teleworking, there are also problems, such as abuse of power, work overload, and personal and organizational conflicts, which lead to workplace harassment or mobbing (Oviedo-Vega & Vásquez-Flores, 2016). If we realize there is a fine line between the disputes of teleworking and mobbing, leading one situation to another. Coming to be expressed as psychological violence, this can include verbal abuse, sexual or psychological harassment, intimidation, and threats, and in turn can consist of "... isolating people, manipulating reputations, withholding information, assigning tasks that do not match the capacities and assign goals and deadlines that are impossible to meet" (Moore, 2018). All this makes it a phenomenon that, by affecting people physically and psychologically, becomes challenging, and its study is critical.

In a study carried out by the Global Union in Commerce, Services and Related Sectors (UNI), an increase in technological and digital jobs is revealed that has an impact on well-being and dignity at work since the increased use of technology provides a sense of control and harassment, which causes stress in workers,

intensifying work and pressure, since the limits between personal time and work time become blurred, thus affecting the perception of decent work (Pilinger, 2017).

Teleworking has become a necessary tool for labor, social and economic transformation at a national and international level, considered a phenomenon of organizational development. It is there where it becomes crucial to emphasize health and safety at work because, for the Organización Internacional del Trabajo (ILO), it is a principle of protection for workers by organizations that monitor the prevention of occupational diseases and accidents, since according to the same entity, every year two million people die from these conditions (Bonilla-Prieto et al., 2014).

Studying the relationship between mobbing and teleworking is relevant since it directly affects the worker, causing physical, psychological, and social conditions. Given the importance and growing modality of teleworking, it becomes imperative to pay attention to the consequent problems in the area of Safety and Health at Work (OSH) since the main objective is to prevent injuries and illnesses caused by work circumstances, promote health, and improving their conditions in the work environment (Ministerio de Protección Social de Colombia, 2015).

The presence of mobbing in teleworking can be clarified according to (Oviedo-Vega & Vásquez-Flores, 2016), who states that the implementation of teleworking has modernized the management of organizations. However, it also brings negative implications, such as abuse of power or workplace harassment by the employer or any other colleague. Likewise, it can develop ascending, descending, or horizontally and involves the workers.

Therefore, as has been exposed, mobbing can occur in teleworking since it meets the characteristics of a regular job, such as: having bosses and colleagues; meeting goals; workload, among others. In the interaction process of the actors in this environment (bosses, subordinates, and colleagues), there is the possibility that this phenomenon occurs, and the future of abuse of power, exclusion, or creation of rumors, among others, affects the organizational climate and unleashes workplace bullying.

Moobing as a Psychosocial Risk

General approaches to occupational risks apply to the field of psychosocial risks. An occupational psychosocial risk is a fact, event, situation, or state that, due to the organizational form of work, has a high probability of affecting the worker's health, whose consequences are usually necessary. Psychosocial risks, unlike psychosocial factors, are not organizational conditions but facts, situations, or states of the consequent organism, with a high probability of damaging workers' health (Zachmann, 2014).

A characteristic of psychosocial risks is their high probability of causing significant harm. The consequences are more likely to appear and more likely to be more serious (Benavides, 2016).

Psychosocial risks do not refer to marginal or secondary aspects of the organizational conditions of work but to elements of people that can:

1. They affect the fundamental rights of the worker: physical and personal integrity,

liberty, and health. The most cited psychosocial risks, and generally more admitted as such, are violence and workplace or sexual harassment that threaten physical or personal integrity, dignity, or privacy, elements of the fundamental rights of workers.

2. Psychosocial risks affect worker health through stress response mechanisms (Peiró, 2001). As collected by the ILO and the WHO, such responses are mediated by perception and contextual mechanisms; the effects on worker health caused by stress are modulators (Organización Internacional del Trabajo, 2020).
3. Psychosocial risks have repercussions on the physical health of workers, with notable effects on mental health and adaptation processes, their mental stability, and balance. Current data indicates that anxiety, depression, and other indicators of poor mental health are associated with exposure to psychosocial risks (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, 2000).

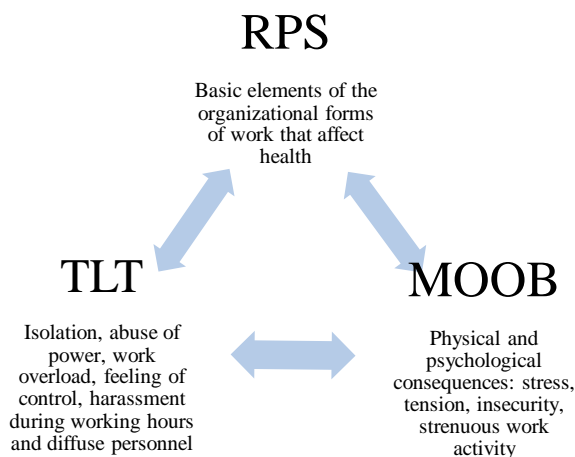


Figure 1. Relationship of study variables.
Note. Mobbing (MOOB), Psychosocial Risks (RPS), and Telecommuting (TLT).
Source: Own elaboration.

After exposing the criteria regarding the implications of teleworking and mobbing, and the latter as a psychosocial risk, Figure 1 shows the relationship between the effects of these on the worker to establish points of agreement between them.

Mobbing can occur in teleworking as long as it allows the emergence of psychosocial risks; however, it doesn't need to happen. One of the types of mobbing that can most likely occur in

this work modality is the descending type since, with the use of ICTs, it is possible to have greater control and communication towards employees, turning this work into a more difficult task. Strenuous instead of making it more flexible (Oviedo-Vega & Vásquez-Flores, 2016).

Another study indicates that factors at work, such as support given by the organization; balance between work tasks and household tasks; changes in job demands; development of labor

competencies and training; Job instability, and financial stress are associated with the development of different disorders, such as anxiety, depression, and burnout syndrome, the consequence of which is an increase in job stress and a decrease in the mental health of employees (Lulli et al., 2021). According to a study carried out at the beginning of 2020 on workers from six Latin American countries, Ecuador has the second highest stress levels in the region, 54%, surpassed by Venezuela with 63% (Mejía et al., 2020).

According to Robles-Acosta et al., (2020) in Mexico, the established measures resulted in changes in the employment situation of the workers of the organizations, generating different affectations depending on the activity

they carry out, limiting the assistance of workers in the economic areas to their employment, adjusting the charges work and generating changes in interpersonal relationships and their possible effects on phenomena such as burnout.

As it has been possible to specify, there are coincident points between the study variables, making it clear that mobbing is categorized as one of the psychosocial risks.

The importance of psychosocial risks and their impact on workers' health has forced the development of legal coverage. Well, for a long time, the problems generated by psychosocial factors have been addressed generically. Currently, there is developing legislation that addresses stress, violence, and harassment.

Table 1.
Matching points representing psychosocial risks.

Variable 1 MOOB	Variable 2 TLT
Break in your interpersonal relationships Hostile or immoral conduct Psychological, verbal, or sexual abuse Intimidation/threats Abuse of power and control Decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and turnover Abuse of power and control Stress, tensión, insecurity Strenuous work activity Physical and psychological consequences	Sense of isolation Work overload Feeling of control and Harassment due to the use of technology Schedule flexibility Diffuse personal and work time Increased productivity, decreased absenteeism

Note: The characteristics of mobbing with teleworking have been specified to determine those common characteristics, which are part of the psychosocial risks.
Source: Own elaboration.

In Ecuador, progress has been made to eradicate or reduce the danger of workplace harassment and its related risks through the promulgation of the Organic Law Reforming the Organic Law of Public Service and the Labor Code to prevent Labor Harassment (Asamblea Nacional, 2017) and the Ministerial Agreements, such as MDT-2017-0135 Instructions for compliance with the obligations of public and private employers (Ministerio de Trabajo act., 2021). Article 10 establishes the responsibility of identify and evaluate occupational risks, as well as the obligation to carry out training and training programs in occupational risk prevention, including psychosocial violence; and Ministerial Agreement MDT-2020 - 244, on the other hand, establishes the protocol for the prevention and care of cases of discrimination, workplace

harassment and/or all forms of violence against women at work (Ministerio de Trabajo, 2020a). The inclusion of workplace bullying within the psychosocial risks became necessary due to the lack of regulation of constitutive behaviors and its alarming consequences that have caused inadequate management by organizations, which has led to the numbers increasing. Making it a topic of great interest and, therefore, attention to propose measures that help reduce workers' exposure to this risk factor (De Miguel Barrado & Prieto-Ballester, 2016).

As can be seen in Table 1, there is a similarity between the harmful characteristics of teleworking with those of mobbing. There is an excellent line between one and the other if preventive measures are not taken in the

teleworking modality, which could cause crossover from one to the other. The characteristics of each of the variables and those that are common and are considered psychosocial risk are appreciated.

Methodology

The research exposed concerns about the type of retrospective study because it was carried out during the year 2020, analyzing the results of the application of said survey in personnel belonging to the public and private sectors, with a total of 508 respondents, 38% of the agricultural industry. Veterinary, textile, food, and construction, 34% from the public and private health sector, from the SME industrial sector, 42% work in the administrative area, and 58% in operations. Of which 40% are women and 60% are men, Ecuadorians of mestizo self-identification, with an average of 30 years of age. In addition, statistical knowledge was used to determine the effect of workplace bullying as part of the psychosocial risks in the field of teleworking for both public and private workers in Ecuador (Ochoa-Sangrador, 2020, p. 15).

To develop the present investigation, the methodology was applied qualitatively, given the need to know the incidences of workplace bullying as a psychosocial risk within the field of teleworking in Ecuador through surveys carried out on a group of workers taken at random. Through a random sample of the study, the convergence was given through the guide for the application of the survey for the evaluation of

psychosocial risk prepared by the Directorate of Safety, Health at work, and integral management of health risks of the Ministerio de Trabajo (2018).

The information supporting this study must be obtained to validate the research process. The statistical data of the registered workers by sectors and economic activity of the Ministerio de Trabajo of Ecuador was used to gather meaningful information on the subject raised. Obtained the integration of these documents, such as statistics of employees, and formal and informal workers, the respective analysis was carried out with the contribution of the SPSS econometric program, and the information that could contribute revealing data to the development of this study was selected.

Results and Discussion

One of the most common statistical analyses in sociological studies, which is used to compare two independent groups of data concerning a numerical variable, is the non-parametric chi-square test. It is applied to establish the null hypothesis in the following way: there is no relationship between the two types of variables; dimension of evaluation of psychosocial risk and impact on work stress in citizens who, due to the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic, had to carry out teleworking in certain activities of the economy. In other words, the assumption is made that the correlation between these two variables can be considered a comparison, yes or no significant (Ochoa-Sangrador, 2020).

Table 2.
Characteristics of psychosocial risks.

Results by the dimension of psychosocial risk assessment			
Survey Dimensions	Low Risk	Medium Risk	High Risk
Other Important Points: Discriminatory Workplace Harassment	13-16	8-12	4-7
Other Important Points: Workplace Bullying	7-8	5-6	2-4
Other Important Points: Sexual Harassment	7-8	5-6	2-4

Note: Taken from Ministerio de Trabajo (2018).

The mathematical model is based on a correlation analysis measuring incidence levels through a technical sample of 508 workers to whom a survey was developed with multivariate questions directed at stress levels ranging from low risk to up to high, with dimensionless values

ranging from 2 to 8, as shown in Table 2. Once the incidence of the sample was established, the information on the variables measured in the dimensions of the survey was elaborated, and they are shown in table 3 below.

Table 3.
Cases of Work Stress by Level of Harassment.

LEVEL OF PSYCSOCIAL HARASSMENT	WORK STRESS No. of Workers
8	56
6	71
4	76
2	51
2	20
7	15
2	10
8	76
5	28
6	25
4	25
7	20
5	15
2	20
	508

Source: Own elaboration.

Once the regression statistic is established, which describes the strength of the relationship between these two variables on an interval or ratio scale, it is seen that the correlation coefficient is 0.34. It is a proportion or percentage; it can be said that 34% of the variation in the number of workers who have suffered some type of stress in their daily work is explained or accounted for by the levels of workplace harassment to which they have been exposed in teleworking.

The correlation coefficient (R); measures the strength of the linear relationship between two variables, while P is the correlation coefficient that determines the probability of incidence of

correlation between the two variables studied, which are: psychosocial dimension versus the number of workers. When the points on the scatterplot appear close to the line, it is observed that the correlation coefficient is usually high. Therefore, the standard error of estimate and the coefficient of relationship relate to the same information but use a different scale to report the strength of the relationship. The correlation between the levels of harassment and the number of workers with job stress was objective and characteristic ($R = 0.34$, $P < 0.01$, $n = 114$), which shows that areas with significant numbers of workers report being at higher risk levels (see table 4).

Table 4.
Correlation between the Level of Psychosocial Risk and the Number of Workers with Occupational stress in Teleworking.

Regression Statistics					
Multiple Correlation Coefficient	0,32454188				
Determination Coefficient R ²	0,10532743				
R ² adjusted	0,03077139				
Typical Error	2,21345824				
Observations	14				
	Degrees of Freedom	Sum of Squares	Average of the Squares	F	Critical Value F
Regression	1	6,92151705	6,92151705	1,41272824	0,25759437
Waste	12	58,7927687	4,89939739		
Total	13	65,7142857			
	Coefficients	Typical Error	t-Statistic	p-value	lower 95%
Interception	3,76788305	1,09078504	3,45428561	0,00476714	1,39126662
Variable X1	0,03001897	0,02525611	1,18858245	0,25759437	0,02500937

Source: Own elaboration.

Established the linear correlation analysis between the two variables analyzed and with the help of the Chi-square, Table 5 can be arranged:

Table 5.
Chi-Square of the Psychosocial Risk Level Cases.

f_o	f_e	$f_o - f_e$	$(f_o - f_e)^2$
8	7,56	56	56,4
6	9,09	71	67,9
4	9,44	76	70,6
2	6,26	51	46,7
2	2,60	20	19,4
7	2,60	15	19,4
2	1,42	10	10,6
8	9,92	76	74,1
5	3,90	28	29,1
6	3,66	25	27,3
4	3,42	25	25,6
7	3,19	20	23,8
5	2,36	15	17,6
2	2,60	20	19,4
68	68	508	508

Source: Own elaboration.

The calculated X^2 is 28,20 and is in the rejection region beyond the critical value of 27,70. Therefore, the decision is to reject H_0 with a level of 0.05 and accept H_1 . The difference between the observed and expected frequencies is not due to chance. Instead, the differences between Buddha and Faith are large enough to be considered significant. The chance that these differences are due to sampling error is minimal.

The non-parametric chi-square test yielded a value of 28.20, which is distant from the values recorded in the table, which is $\pm 27,7$, meaning that it is outside the left of the Gauss curve. Therefore it meets the null hypothesis (H_0), which indicates that, in general terms, there is a direct correlation between the levels of psychosocial risk to which the majority of workers are exposed versus some of the categories that work stress can trigger.

Research hypotheses are presented for future analysis.

H_0 : The presence of exposure to workplace bullying in both public and private companies does NOT directly affect the generation of work stress in the telecommuting personnel.

H_1 : The presence of exposure to the levels of workplace bullying in both public and private companies directly affects the generation of work stress in the personnel who work telecommuting.

After establishing the null and alternative hypotheses, the next step is developing the significance level. The probability of rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true.

The significance level is expressed by the Greek letter alpha α and is sometimes also known as the risk level. This is perhaps a more appropriate term because it is the risk of rejecting the null hypothesis when it is true. No single significance level applies to all tests; a decision is made to use the 0.05 level (often expressed as the 5% level), the 0.01 level, the 0.10 level, or any other level between 0 and 1. Typically, the 0.05 group is selected for research projects; the 0.01 level is for significance assurance before formulating a decision rule and collecting sample data.

Degrees of Freedom (gl) = (number of lines - 1) (number of columns - 1)

Lines =	14
Columns =	2
gl =	(14-1) * (2-1)
gl =	13
Significance Level =	0,01
According to table =	27,7

Reject the H_0 : si $X_0^2 \geq 27,7$ o $X_0^2 < -27,7$ two tails
28,20 > 27,7

For the elaboration of the statistical analysis, the Ministerio de Trabajo (2020b) data was obtained concerning the data of workers in the public and private sectors, in the sectoral spheres, and of the different activities registered in the classification. International Uniform Industrial Industry, mentioned above, since it is the only state institution that reports the information inherent to the economically active population, both for global employment and adequate employment.

The importance of the implementation of non-parametric techniques (chi-square); for the analysis of the correlation between workplace bullying and the levels of stress in the mass of workers who incurred teleworking in times of pandemic indicated that, indeed, these do generate a sufficient impact on the psychosocial risks to which workers are exposed. Workers, a contribution that, through this study, can be visible to the institutions that generate contributions to the community or to the beneficiary population of teleworking.

Conclusions

The results of the information obtained through psychosocial risk surveys should lead to the establishment of corrective measures that allow adequately distributing of the time assigned to work tasks to reduce the psychological demand on the worker. However, said results generally do not generate improvement actions.

As established in the review of the literature and the field mentioned above studies, the line of transition in modalities of teleworking towards mobbing and psychosocial risks is usually excellent, for which it is necessary to clearly define the processes, as well as the forms of monitoring and reporting that do not detract from the worker's autonomy. In addition, organizations must permanently monitor the relationships of bosses with their work teams since, as has been stated, it is in this type of relationship that mobbing occurs most frequently.

The double presence affects teleworking, so strategies are necessary to organize time and tasks and adequately divide the work of domestic and personal activities; for this, clearly defined schedules must be established without exceeding the communications or requirements outside this time through electronic means.

The presence of mobbing has been manifested mainly by the work environment of long teleworking hours with little rest, missed

deadlines, and the need to keep jobs. In addition, the hostile environment that physically and psychologically affects workers adds to complex problems in the family environment.

The correlation analysis applied to measure the levels of incidence of labor stress of teleworking workers resulted in the acceptance of the null hypothesis, demonstrating that the presence of exposure to workplace bullying in companies directly affects the generation of work stress in the personnel that works in telework.

The tripartite elements of this investigation, which are mobbing, teleworking, and psychosocial risks, have played a determining role for the labor force. However, it is true that more than 70% have returned safely to their workplaces. Face-to-face, however, there are other organizations. This experience has led them to propose the virtual modality as one of the complementary modalities for saving administrative expenses and increasing "production" or instead for the unconditionality of the worker.

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