

# Telework and emerging forms of control: a case study of the banking and financial sector during the COVID-19 pandemic

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On 17 March 2020, with the announcement of the first lockdown, French companies suddenly made full-time telework compulsory for employees. These emergency working arrangements were made possible by new information and communication technologies, but they also ushered in new modes of organising work, in particular new forms of control. According to literature on telework, such a change usually goes hand in hand with increased output control. However, the findings of our exploratory study, involving 17 employees from the banking and financial sector, showed a drop in output control. While this drop can be partly attributed to the exceptional circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic, our study also underscores the emergence of new forms of control based on behaviour (micromanagement, increasing the number of meetings) and inputs (increasing the time devoted to training). The study chiefly highlights the increase in technological control and the emergence of a more diffuse form of self-control through the collaborative development of a business culture based on urgency, hyper-responsiveness, a high degree of accountability and peer control.

## Introduction

On 17 March 2020, a lockdown was imposed on the entire French population pursuant to emergency order no. 2020-260 and Act no. 2020-290. Telework was immediately rolled out in most businesses amid these unusual circumstances, in accordance with Article L.1222-11 of the Labour Code: “In the event of extraordinary circumstances, such as the threat of an epidemic, the rollout of telework could be deemed a necessary workplace arrangement to guarantee business continuity and protect employees”.<sup>(1)</sup>

All of a sudden, most employees switched to full-time telework for an indefinite period. This situation, unprecedented in organisational history, provided an excellent opportunity for researchers to gain more insight into telework. It also came with the major responsibility of assisting businesses in navigating

this challenge with far-reaching implications. Several authors have already examined this topic in order to gauge the positive and negative impacts of compulsory full-time telework (Taskin, 2021; Hansez, 2021) and its effect on managerial relations (Diard & Hachard, 2021). Conducted from April 2020 to February 2021 with the participation of 17 employees from four banking and financial organisations, this exploratory study focused on the various modes of work control.

Telework has brought about a shift in the modes of control. Thierry Breton (1994), a former Minister for the Economy, Finance and Industry, alludes to this in one of the first official French definitions of telework, which describes it as an “arrangement for organising and performing work carried out on a regular basis by an individual under the following conditions: [...] (i) remotely, i.e. outside the immediate premises where the output of this work is expected to be produced; where physically there is no possibility for the contract giver to monitor the service rendered by the teleworker; [...] (ii) using IT and/or telecommunication tools”. When employees switch to telework, the expectation is that

<sup>(1)</sup> This article was translated by the Translation Center of the French Ministry of the Economy, Finance and Industrial and Digital Sovereignty

their managers more closely monitor their output since they are unable to observe them directly as they work (Lautsch et al., 2006; Pontier, 2014; Richardson & McKenna, 2014; Snell, 1992).

However, several studies have challenged this idea, especially now that telework has been widely embraced in large businesses. New information and communication technologies are paving the way for new methods of control (Fernandez, Guillot & Marrault, 2014; Sewell & Taskin, 2015), and employees seem to feel less pressure about their output when they are teleworking (Groen et al., 2018). The widespread adoption of telework in 2020 also changed how the scheme was implemented in businesses, and prompts the following research question: how have businesses adapted the control of their employees following the sudden shift to full-time telework during the COVID-19 pandemic?

We will first set out the theoretical framework of telework, and specifically its related modes of control, and then elaborate on the methodology adopted. Finally, the study's findings will be analysed and discussed in detail.

## Literature review

### The development of telework in the French banking and financial sector

#### Development and definition of telework in France

Telework is by no means a recent phenomenon: the first conceptualisations of this new working arrangement date back to the early 1970s. Nevertheless, its use was limited for a long time, and it was only starting in the 2000s and the advent of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) that it became a widespread practice in businesses (Tremblay, 2001; Taskin, 2003 and 2006). Today, telework typically constitutes “an arrangement in a service-sector business with over 250 employees” as noted in the 2020 annual study by Malakoff Humanis. However, telework covers a wide range of practices (Vayre, 2019), such as partial or full-time telework, and researchers highlight both its advantages – particularly in relation to work-life balance and stress reduction – and drawbacks (which generally relate to working longer hours at home) (Metzger & Cléach, 2004; Storhaye & Bouvard, 2013; Lasfargue & Fauconnier, 2018; Tissandier et al., 2019; Vayre, 2019).

The Act of 22 March 2012 regulates telework in France, giving it a formal legal status. Telework is defined as “any form of organising and/or performing work, on a voluntary basis and using ICTs, where work, which could also be performed at the employer’s premises, is carried out away from those premises”.<sup>(2)</sup> Furthermore, since 2018 a company-level agreement no longer needs to be signed when the employee and employer

agree to adopt telework arrangements, allowing them to formalise their agreement by any means (Article L.1222-9 of the Labour Code): “Telework is implemented under a collective agreement or, failing this, a charter drafted by the employer after consulting the social and economic committee if applicable. If no collective agreement or charter is in place, and the employee and employer agree to adopt telework arrangements, they formalise their agreement by any means”. It should also be noted that the national agreement of 26 November 2020 (expanded on and published in France’s *Journal officiel* of 13 April 2021) focuses on “a successful implementation of telework”, demonstrating the extent to which telework has become a major issue not only from a legal standpoint but also particularly from an organisational and managerial one. Signatories of this agreement explicitly call for an overhaul of managerial practices and upskilling to deal with the organisational implications of telework. Businesses are therefore encouraged to provide training on remote management, compliance with the legal framework on working hours and the right to disconnect, regulated use of digital and collaborative tools, and cybersecurity.

#### Telework in the banking and financial sector during the COVID-19 pandemic

The banking and financial sector was one of the first to introduce telework arrangements in France. Firstly, it is one of the sectors with the greatest access to new technologies (Child & Loveridge, 1990; Lallé, 1999). Telework is also very concentrated in sectors where the proportion of managers is high, in a number of target departments and in head offices (ANDRH, 2017). Telework is typically prevalent in the telecoms, digital and banking sectors. It is also worth noting that the first studies by Jack Nills (1973) on telecommuting were conducted on a bank and an insurance company in Los Angeles, supporting the theory of telecoms supplanting transport (Diard & Dufour, 2021, p. 30).

The COVID-19 pandemic therefore did not cause all employees in this sector to switch to telework overnight, but rather it bolstered and extended this mode of organising work to all employees. The pandemic also increased the number of hours teleworked per week. According to the survey conducted by Malakoff Humanis, the proportion of teleworkers peaked at 41% on average in France in 2020, versus 30% pre-COVID. In January 2022, 37% of teleworkers worked outside the office two days a week, with 24% doing so three days a week (DARES).

This increase in the number of partial telework hours worked has triggered a radical change in the modes of organising work. Over time, this trend has redefined the spatial and temporal parameters of work, which has become an activity that can be done anywhere and at any time (Taskin, 2006). It has disrupted the continuity of three dimensions – time, space and activity – and calls into question how management typically operates (Lallé, 1999). This phenomenon strengthens the role of trust and autonomy at work (Diard & Hachard, 2021) while showing that the concept of controlling employees’ activities needs a rethink.

<sup>(2)</sup> Article L.1222-9 of the Labour Code, amended by Act no. 2018-771 of 5 September 2018 – Article 68, [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexteArticle.do;jsessionid=1E2C7614F007A3238E5DDD31CF7FBBF06.tplgfr33s\\_3?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&idArticle=LEGIARTI000038923860&dateTexte=20180907&categorieLien=id#LEGIARTI00003892386](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexteArticle.do;jsessionid=1E2C7614F007A3238E5DDD31CF7FBBF06.tplgfr33s_3?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000037367660&idArticle=LEGIARTI000038923860&dateTexte=20180907&categorieLien=id#LEGIARTI00003892386)

## The various forms of control of teleworkers' activity

### Work control

Control is an intrinsic aspect of work, constituting "any influence that establishes order, a certain regularity. A control situation exists [...] when an individual's behaviour is influenced by something or someone" (Chiapello, 1996, p. 51). In other words, from the moment interaction occurs with others, whether in a professional situation as an employee or independent contractor, a control situation is taking place. In bureaucratic organisations – in the broadest sense – control is intensified, and could be defined as a set of procedures that ensure that the decisions and conduct of individuals forming the organisation are in line with its own goals (Merchant, 1998).

In addition, control takes many forms at work, and Snell (1989) has sorted them into three broad categories. Firstly, behaviour control systems, which are based on a centralised hierarchy, adherence to procedures and the possibility to observe individuals when they are working. This form of control assumes that there is a causal link between the observable behaviour of individuals and their performance. The second category is output control systems, which are based on a decentralised hierarchy in which individuals do not directly choose their goals but rather the methods used to attain them. These systems afford a great deal of autonomy to individuals, but require elaborate coordination and information control systems to be in place. Lastly, input control systems are based on advanced selection and training mechanisms for individuals. They are particularly suitable in cases where the output is highly uncertain, such as in the world of arts or scientific research (Menger, 2018).

Furthermore, since the 20th century, technological control has only intensified (Chiapello, 1996). In Frederick Winslow Taylor's system, the main purpose of work is to keep the machine running so that the pace typical of a mass production economy can be maintained. Control is ensured by technology, as the production standards are set based on the machines. However, control is ensured on an individual basis by supervisors (Dambrin, 2005). Since the advent of ICTs, technological control at work has been intensified and radically overhauled. Previously, control was performed on the basis of a heavily vertical hierarchy albeit at a specific point in time in person. Currently, control can be carried out at any time and remotely with the aid of technology.

### Controlling teleworkers

Telework disrupts first and foremost spatial and temporal parameters (Lallé, 1999; Taskin, 2006). Work is no longer directly visible (Pontier, 2014) and individuals can no longer be directly observed by their superiors. This lack of behaviour control therefore naturally tends to be offset by an intensification of output control (Pontier, 2014; Richardson & McKenna, 2014; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Managers set new targets in response to the considerable degree of autonomy granted to teleworkers (Felstead et al., 2003), creating new performance indicators that are more easily measured

remotely, altering performance standards (Lautsch et al., 2006) and implementing new reporting procedures.

Recently, a number of studies have nevertheless brought nuance to this observation. Firstly, although quantitative targets tend to increase with telework, some employees feel less pressure to meet performance objectives as per the analysis of Groen et al. in a survey conducted in 2018 involving 900 employees from a financial services institution. Perceived pressure in relation to output therefore seems to be different, in spite of raised targets. ICTs also provide alternatives to output control by simplifying behaviour control carried out remotely (Fernandez, Guillot & Marrault, 2014). It is now much more straightforward to monitor deliverables and hold informal progress meetings remotely using new technologies (Sewell & Taskin, 2015). The question arises, then, whether the widespread adoption of teleworking practices – particularly the increase in hours teleworked per week – necessarily results in intensified output control or whether it actually creates new control standards.

### New forms of controlling teleworkers

Some researchers have noted the emergence of new forms of controlling teleworkers, and in particular the introduction of "self-control" that they carry out for themselves (Pontier, 2014; de Vaujany, Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, Munro, Nama & Holt, 2021; Diard & Hachard, 2021). The control of teleworkers is no longer strictly carried as a means to establish direct obedience to authority. Control is now the individuals' responsibility, and they are required to demonstrate their autonomy and self-discipline (Taskin & Tremblay, 2010). As highlighted by Diard and Hachard in a recent study (2021, p. 48), "no formalised control is carried out by managers, but rather teleworkers practise a form of self-control". Teleworkers tend to exceed managers' expectations (overtime hours, higher level of concentration when working, etc.) and readily go above and beyond the requirements "related to the employment contract and the reciprocity of the psychological contract" as they perceive telework as a privilege granted by their organisation. They develop a sense of accountability (Vayre, 2019) towards their organisations that have given them the opportunity to work remotely.

Several authors have analysed the introduction of these new standards and these self-control and "consensual subjection" practices through a Foucauldian and Deleuzian lens (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac, 2013; de Vaujany et al., 2021). The concept of the "panopticon" (Foucault, 1975), the possibility of observing without being seen, underscores how modern organisations use new technologies to put individuals in situations of constant uncertainty and pressure so as to better control them. Individuals have no idea when they are being observed or not, and are therefore forced to engage in self-control to avoid punishment. Today, chief information officers can easily view the connection time of teleworkers on their company software or teleconference tools without them knowing, thereby establishing informal conduct standards at work. Our "contemporary control societies"

as described by Deleuze are also typical of these new forms of self-control. These societies are characterised by a “rhizomatic” extension of surveillance units which do not solely conduct downward and centralised surveillance as is the case for panopticons. An upwards and horizontal approach forms the basis of control (Leclercq-Vandelanoitte & Isaac, 2013), facilitated by quantified self technology and new collaborative participatory tools. The culture of urgency, hyper-connectivity and hyper-responsiveness has formed a set of standards developed by organisations and individuals collaboratively, according to which the individuals in question must constantly be available and reachable. “Ultimately, the breakdown of a company’s working hours and management’s indifference to attendance time [...] have gone hand in hand with modes of control and self-control, based on an internalisation of a company’s goals and values” (Leclercq-Vandelanoitte & Isaac, 2013, p. 18).

## Research methodology

### Scope of study

This study intends to examine the new forms of control that have emerged for teleworkers following the COVID-19 pandemic. We have therefore decided to adopt an exploratory and qualitative approach by conducting semi-structured interviews involving stakeholders from the banking and financial sector. Qualitative methods are particularly well suited for identifying new organisational concepts (Dumez, 2011; Eisenhardt, 1989), while, in our view, the banking and financial sector seems a particularly appropriate choice to analyse new forms of telework. For example, 17% of bank employees in 2017 did not have their own office, according to the French *Observatoire des métiers de la banque*. Furthermore, as the banking and financial sector was one of the first to embrace telework on a large scale, employees in the sector have more experience with the related practices and can more effectively take a step back from them (Diard & Dufour, 2021). An examination of this specific sector will therefore ensure a greater generalisation and transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Yin, 2013).

### Data collection

Data was collected in two stages. An initial immersive research stage at the firm Natixis was carried out by the third co-author. This approach was adopted with a view to providing a preliminary observation of the field, allowing for subsequent trialling and validation of a research question. This is a valid avenue to observe, and then hypothesise, certain aspects of organisations that are tricky to access, such as organisational control, specifically in the banking sector. This immersion began before the interview stages as part of a fixed-term engagement undertaken by the third co-author. During this observation period, new organisational arrangements were progressively discovered.

The two other co-authors supplemented the study with feedback from the field, involving several other banking and financial institutions. In total, 17 semi-structured interviews with managers and non-managers were conducted.

The interview guide was developed with an inductive approach in mind, so as to better understand the daily teleworking practices of employees in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, without focusing on control practices (Chevalier & Meyer in Chevalier, Cloutier & Mitev, 2018). The guide was developed around the four following themes, and was fine-tuned during the initial immersive research stage:

- Teleworking practices (purpose, frequency, personal experience, working methods)
- The company culture when teleworking
- Colleague relations
- Manager relations

We conducted 17 interviews with employees from four different organisations (see Table 1). The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, and were held during the first lockdown in April 2020 and after the second lockdown in February 2021.

### Analysis method

Data was analysed abductively (Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011). Firstly, we launched a process of open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; King, 1998) and multi-level coding, which is why the concepts of self-discipline, trust between managers and their staff, and an enabling company culture have come to the fore. We believe that the notions of trust and control are all the more integral in our data, and have expanded our literature review on the notions of control and trust in telework situations. Through a continuous process of comparing data and theoretical categories, we were able to identify new categories – in particular output control and self-control categories. A final stage of emergent coding (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2013) identified our level 1 and level 2 categories for the new forms of control when teleworking before reaching a point of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Rheinhardt et al., 2018). (see Table 2)

## Findings

While banking and financial firms were ahead of the curve in rolling out telework in France, the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly forced them to arrange full-time telework for the vast majority of their employees in 2020 and 2021. The banks we examined notably adopted new training modules to keep employees busy and control their working hours. The frequency and format of meetings also changed, with new collaborative and control tools being put in place. Teleworkers have also developed a new form of self-control, developed in cooperation with their peers and their managers, and resulting from an internalisation of the organisations’ expectations.

First name	Gender	Age	Socio-professional category	Seniority in organisation	Occupation
Malika	M	34	Manager	2 years	Legal expert
Karim	M	30	Manager	3 years	IT specialist
Géraldine	M	42	Manager	4 years	HR project manager
Sébastien	M	28	Manager	2 years	Financial analyst
Stéphanie	M	35	Manager	9 years	Project manager
Martin	F	32	Manager	3 years	Legal expert
Sylviane	F	38	Supervisor	7 years	Back office manager
Pierre	F	42	Manager	11 years	IT specialist
Nicolas	F	54	Manager	20 years	Project manager
Marine	F	29	Supervisor	2 years	Back office manager
Gauthier H	M	39	Manager	4 years	Regional sales director
Gauthier R	M	39	Manager	8 years	Senior asset management consultant
Nayana	F	31	Manager	1 year	Head of sales activities and communications for private wealth management
François	M	25	Manager	1.5 years	Bank inspector
Martin	M	39	Manager	13 years	Head of product development
Mickael	M	34	Manager	13 years	Senior quantitative analyst
Annick	F	64	Manager	21 years	IT team manager

Table 1: Characteristics of the sample

Output control	Input control	Remote behaviour control	Technological control	Self-control
Target-driven management	Onboarding of new employees	Close supervision through micromanagement	Use of new technological control tools for remote working	Feelings of accountability counterbalanced by greater autonomy and trust
Organisation of new reporting methods	Training programmes	Increase in the number of teleconference meetings	Right to disconnect (work-life balance)	Rhizomatic surveillance (upwards and horizontal)
			Right to disconnect (increased workload)	Collaborative development of control
				Culture of urgency and hyper-responsiveness

Table 2: Level 1 and level 2 categories for new forms of control when teleworking

### No step-up in output control for teleworkers

The companies examined responded to questions on a case-by-case basis, based on the circumstances and business lines, in relation to the development of targets. Sales departments have generally seen their targets lowered.

“They have changed the targets for output. They pro-rated the annual margin plan and removed a month of targets”, a senior asset management consultant told us.

“Targets were reviewed downwards, to 80% of last year’s target”, said a regional sales director.

The other employees on the whole did not see their targets change:

“I have my targets for the year, and COVID-19 hasn’t changed a thing” (Senior quantitative analyst).

The targets did not change even though the workload at times had increased considerably.

“I feel that we sent off a lot more deliverables during lockdown than out of it. The pace picked up a bit at that point” (Head of product development).

Companies, caught off guard by the COVID-19 pandemic, did not have very clear guidelines and managers adapted pragmatically to the situation. Most managers decided to change and increase the reporting systems in place. Sales departments have felt this shift:

“More activity tracking is carried out. We are asked to make a bigger effort to maintain activity levels [...]” (Regional sales director).

Support departments have also seen this change:

“[Nowadays] I have an individual review meeting with him [my manager] once every two weeks. It is during these one-to-ones that we set everything, the deliverables, dates, etc.” (Head of sales activities and communications).

Certain managers, unable to check output in person, have amended performance criteria and introduced new strategies to ensure targets are achieved:

“Phones are now factored into reporting” (Senior asset management consultant).

Output control is still in place, but is less centred on direct and quantitative control and more akin to holistic, qualitative control. Controlling deliverables is a frequently observed management practice that sometimes is the only possible control method left in certain business lines (e.g. project management).

### Input control

Input control refers to the processes of selecting and socialising employees, as well as to the processes of training and development (Snell, 1992). However, the string of lockdowns and compulsory full-time telework have made integrating new employees trickier:

“Those who joined during lockdowns told us that it was hell; there was nothing arranged for the onboarding sessions and they had to learn on the job” (IT team manager).

Teams had to be re-organised, managers had less time to devote to new hires, and no informal conversations could be held. This observation, which every manager whom we met agreed with, did not in some

cases apply to young employees, particularly interns and trainees, who seemed less taken aback by the lack of an induction. It is likely that they had no or little awareness of the traditional induction process.

While the difficulties of integrating new employees could be expected, we were surprised to note that many companies used this mandatory telework period to increase the number of training sessions for employees, and thereby indirectly control the working hours of teleworkers. For example, some companies encouraged their employees to complete more e-learning modules:

“We had training courses on data protection and best managerial practices – in e-learning format and also in person for one day” (Senior quantitative analyst).

But according to some managers and employees, the companies were blatantly trying to keep their employees “busy”:

“This approach was less successful when it came to keeping consultants busy. They were mistaken to have this misguided belief that they weren’t busy enough and that it was impacting business. They had many content-heavy training courses to do every week, providing a lot of content. Us local managers also organised workshops for them. Different formats were also provided, further expanding the training offering. Training courses and workshops were being organised, and our schedules were more packed than usual. This state of being overly connected added to the mental load, which wasn’t a good thing” (Senior asset management consultant).

The expression “making the most of” came up several times during our interviews, which gives the impression that companies were trying to keep their employees busy at all costs and avoid any down time.

### A step-up in behaviour control, now carried out remotely

Typically with telework, the conduct of employees cannot be directly monitored. However, the development of new technologies has completely flipped this model, particularly as a result of the widespread adoption of teleconferencing. New formats have made their entry and are here to stay, and new possibilities are available for managers to be involved in their employees’ day-to-day routines at a distance:

“What works well are mini tailored workshops, in small groups in front of a screen; it’s better than mass gatherings with everyone that last an hour or an hour and a half – they don’t work. This format will be kept on post-COVID” (Regional sales director).

In turn, the number of teleconference meetings has soared since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a source of additional stress and pressure:

“I feel a little more mentally drained right now than I did before during standard telework days, when my work-from-home days were slightly calmer, at least when it came to phone calls and meetings” (HR project manager).

“People look at your available slots on Outlook and your diary and they go very quickly. You realise that you don’t have a lot of time to work on your projects. There are also too many meetings; we brought it up to our manager, who wanted us to attend regional

meetings. Nine meetings a week... you simply can't attend all those meetings. We need time to work on our projects" (Legal expert).

Employees must develop new skills in leading meetings and are clearly learning to do so:

"We noticed straight away those who had previously teleworked. Some had put together an agenda and it worked well, while others were clueless and couldn't figure out how to speak. We used both Skype and Teams, and some preferred Skype. There were a few who domineered meetings. Hybrid meetings will be a big matter to discuss when employees are back in the office; some of them have poor connections, and you can't tell who's speaking when the meetings are held in big rooms. [...] I made sure to leave five minutes at the end to just have a chat. More needs to be done" (IT team manager).

"I think the difference is that we have more organised meetings to the point that eventually over the day it becomes overkill. The problem is more to do with the informal catch-ups we are told to organise during the day, because of course we don't bump into people any more" (Head of product development).

Informal meetings have become more organised, and manager expectations have risen. Managers can call on their employees at any time thanks to teleconferencing and organise team meetings more frequently, resulting in a form of behaviour control at work.

### Technological control: an exacerbating factor in the "hyper-availability" of employees

Remote technological control has intensified in two ways in the companies we examined during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some companies have put in place new technological control tools, with one of them introducing a new customer relationship management (CRM) system:

"I wanted to track [activity] with the aid of CRM tools; we trained staff to use CRM tools to prove that their work was actually being carried out. In the past, things were a bit lax" (Regional sales director).

New features of teleconferencing tools have opened up more opportunities to monitor the work of employees:

"My superiors sometimes ask me to share my screen to show how much progress I've made on my work" (Banking inspector).

New technological tools have also made employees a lot more available. As workloads and working hours increase, employees are struggling more and more to draw a line between their work and personal life. An overload of requests enabled by such technologies results in a hyper-connectivity characterised by informal orders.

"Sometimes you just have days like these, you don't have a choice, you just have to make progress on your projects so you have to do it [...] I feel like I'm more connected, more often, until later and with longer working hours [...]"

For another employee, "emails and phone calls outside of work hours are not manageable, sometimes I have to reply to queries at lunchtime, in the evenings and over the weekend".

Employees therefore consider their work-life balance their main concern.

"I always try to force myself to switch my computer off and put it in sleep mode for an hour for lunch and in the evenings, when I don't have late meetings, I make an effort to disconnect, switch off my devices and not check my emails" (IT specialist).

But this is often very tricky.

"I break up my day, but clocking out in busy periods is just not possible. Sometimes I wake up in the night to work because I'm so stressed" (Banking inspector). "I'm not good at managing my time, I tend to have a fixation on finishing my tasks. My husband brings me back to my senses: I take breaks and have a coffee with him, and join the virtual after-work drink and coffee break events (on Thursday evenings once every fortnight) to have the opportunity to socialise; I now spend the time I spent commuting working; it's a slog and tiring" (IT team manager).

### Self-control

Employees tend to practise self-control by directly internalising the company's needs and bearing the responsibility of control. During the extended period of remote working, many employees developed a strong sense of accountability, as well as the idea that they needed to be available constantly. A legal expert told us:

"I feel a greater need to be on hand, which is currently stronger than ever". It is also the case for this back office manager: "It's perhaps more difficult right now to say no in the evenings because we're not physically leaving work, we can't say that we're packing our bag and going. We're at home, so it's maybe a bit trickier to turn down a meeting at 7pm, whereas making people stay in the office for a meeting at that time happens a lot less".

Some employees even feel guilty and believe that they need to justify their entitlement to telework:

"It would help people feel less guilty [...] if everyone, including managers, teleworked".

Some feel the need to make a commitment verging on the unconditional:

"I'm quite flexible. Last week, I wrapped up a meeting at 10pm. I prioritise queries and requests, but because I like my job... I do things how I like" (Regional sales director).

This self-control practised by employees is partially the result of expectations set by their colleagues and peers. Their teleworking needs to be justified, and they have to make an even greater commitment to not punish the rest of the team.

"I think there are people who believe that we don't work as effectively remotely as when in the workplace" (Financial analyst).

"I believe there were perhaps some preconceptions held by managers and even employees concerning telework. In my opinion, those preconceptions will be proven wrong. Yes, I think we need to realise that teleworkers are working. Working remotely is still work" (Back office manager).

These new expectations and working standards are not directly laid down by managers, but rather are developed in tandem with employees:

“We set up a WhatsApp group chat to discuss things informally, in addition to the professional messaging accounts we have. We tried to keep it alive over the weeks. We learnt a lot from doing it; certain things worked, while others didn’t. We came up with additional smaller formats for activities so as to stay connected” (Senior asset management consultant).

“On the first day, I made the mistake of wearing a T-shirt during a video call, and since realising what I had done I have worn a shirt every day. [...] One time I was wearing a sweatshirt and I was told, ‘It’s weird seeing you wear that’ and I said, ‘Okay’. I now get it, and I wear a shirt for peace of mind” (Head of product development).

In this kind of situation, the emergence of a form of decentralised and unspoken control of others is evident. The employee changes their outfit to meet the collective’s new standards.

A manager’s trust is earned when employees demonstrate an ability to organise themselves, act autonomously to complete tasks and exercise self-discipline. The manager therefore does not place all their trust in them: it is earned on the proviso that employees prove that they work just as – if not even more – effectively.

“I think she trusts me, she can see that teleworking hasn’t affected my deliverables or the way I meet expectations” (IT specialist).

“In my opinion, it’s a case of trusting the individual who is working remotely, and them managing their working schedule and handing in their deliverables every day. There’s no surveillance and that motivates me more” (Legal expert).

## Discussion

Telework is by no means a recent phenomenon (Lallement, 1990; Scott, 1990), but its widespread adoption in large companies began in the 2000s (Taskin, 2021). Many companies, particularly in the banking and financial sector, began to allow their employees to partially telework, i.e. generally four days in the office and one day remotely per week. Suddenly, the COVID-19 pandemic erupted and most employees found themselves teleworking full time for a year. This extraordinary organisational situation, a product of the pandemic which has however persisted over time, gave us an opportunity to observe and analyse radical changes to the telework approach adopted by four organisations in the banking and financial sector. Our study shows that, contrary to expectations, output control did not intensify and was supplanted by a new form of behaviour control, which was carried out remotely, with the increase in teleconference meetings. We also shed light on the development of a new form of “self-control” within organisations, shifting the responsibility of activity control from managers to the employees themselves.

### The emergence of a new form of behaviour control, but carried out remotely

When employees telework, managers tend to step up output control since they can no longer directly observe them as in the office (Snell, 1992). This finding

is regularly confirmed in telework studies (Kossek et al., 2006; Pontier, 2014; Richardson & McKenna, 2014; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). We however found that this was not the case for the companies we examined during the COVID-19 pandemic. Firstly, employee targets underwent little or no change. Business targets for both employees and managers were even broadly lowered. Some companies have changed their reporting practices to adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic and new business practices (teleconferencing), but employees have not felt that their output is being more closely monitored. On the contrary, we noted a step-up in behaviour control with an increase in the number of teleconference meetings – which are shorter but more frequent – and the introduction of regular reviews during face-to-face conversations or virtual coffee breaks, which are opportunities for managers to both check their employees are working their correct hours and to remind them of the conduct expected of them.

Can these lowered targets and reduced output control be attributed to the adverse economic conditions in 2020? Yes, but only partly so. With full-time telework for both employees and managers came new working standards. The wide adoption and frequent use of teleconference meetings gave managers an opportunity to enter into the daily lives of employees and monitor their behaviour remotely. As underscored by Taskin in his latest research (2021), telework in 2020 was more of a transposition of the working day at the office to the employees’ home, rather than an opportunity to work independently at home, away from managers and colleagues. Similarly, Duzert and Laval (2021) in Beaulier and Kalika (2021) bring up the notion of a “new normal” and a stage of disillusionment experienced by employees, who see no radical changes being made by the organisation in the post-COVID world.

Teleconference meetings, generally shorter in length, are now also greater in number and more formal. Chats in the hallway and off-the-cuff discussions between an ajar office door have been swapped out for teleconference review meetings scheduled in e-calendars. Informal relations between employees and managers have been replaced with planned and scheduled discussions, in addition to new behaviour standards relating to clothing and speaking in a meeting, bolstering the verticality of manager relations.

During the extended period of telework, managers very quickly turned messaging and teleconference tools into actual “electronic panopticons” (Zuboff, 1988; Poster, 1990; Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992). On one hand, employee calendars can be consulted at all times, and on the other, managers can literally infiltrate the homes and private lives of employees, getting a look at their interior space and children. While this can sometimes make for a funny situation, it can also make employees feel that their privacy has been violated. The situation verges on the literal definition of Foucault’s “panopticon” (1975) – an architectural structure for control – but with this structure being virtual in nature. When employees work from their home, they can be observed at any time by their manager and they have to adjust their conduct accordingly.



## The development of “self-control” by employees

The employees we interviewed told us that they felt more independent on the job, reflecting many other older (Lallé, 1999; Storhayé & Bouvard, 2013) and more recent (Diard & Hachard, 2021) studies on telework. However, this greater autonomy is part of a trade-off (Taskin, 2003; Taskin & Tremblay, 2010). Managers expect a higher level of commitment from their employees working remotely, with some revising targets (Felstead et al., 2003). Most managers emphasise the importance of staying on track when working from home. This insistence – although usually expressed in a positive way through thanks that are as genuine as they are forceful – tends to shift the responsibility of work motivation to the employees themselves. In addition, the autonomy of teleworkers results in a need to be increasingly available, or even “hyper-available” (Mello, 2007; Dumas & Ruiller, 2014). Once again, managers never explicitly demand this hyper-availability, but all employees have stated their troubles in drawing a line between their work and personal life (Dumas & Ruiller, 2014; Lasfargue & Fauconnier, 2018; Metzger & Cléach, 2004; Vayre, 2019). They are required to maintain strict self-discipline, particularly with regard to their working hours, otherwise their family might step in.

Self-control, a form of performance control self-imposed by employees, also involves the “rhizomatic” extension of surveillance units as theorised by Deleuze (Leclercq-Vandelanoite & Isaac, 2013). Employees tend to naturally develop feelings of guilt towards their colleagues, as if they have to further justify their opportunity to telework. What is even more remarkable within the scope of this study is that these feelings of guilt are not directed towards just employees working at the office (Diard & Hachard, 2021) given that everybody is teleworking. These feelings are abstract and relate to the apparent belief that better overall performance is guaranteed in the office. Employees have internalised the idea that they must further justify their work since they are not physically in the office. The rhizomatic extension of surveillance units is indirectly carried out through the establishment of informal standards via social media such as WhatsApp. Employees themselves set up virtual groups on their personal mobile phones to keep in touch with their colleagues. While this need for belonging and social interaction is essential and widely encouraged by organisations, it also further blurs the line between work and personal life and creates new social control standards.

We have observed the development of a hybrid mode of control of telework that is more vertical and horizontal than the conventional in-person modes of control. This method was initially more vertical, as managers can now more easily track the activity of their employees remotely using new technologies. As they are also teleworking, managers impose less boundaries and intrude on the private life of their employees. New telework standards, particularly relating to coordinating teleconference meetings, also make it easier to put direct behaviour control in place. The control method then became more horizontal as employees and their peers set new telework standards, on their

own initiative, regarding productivity and commitment. In fact, most new standards are rarely imposed by managers or the organisations. This new hybrid mode of control is based on mutual trust between employees and their managers. This trust, which is instrumental in telework, as several researchers have previously highlighted (Lallé, 1999; Storhayé & Bouvard 2013; Tissandier & Mariani-Rousset, 2019), nevertheless requires truly capable managers and a positive organisational environment (Parker, Knight & Keller, 2020), without which this trust can quickly devolve into a transfer of managerial responsibilities to the employees themselves.

## Limitations and contributions to the field of management

The findings of our exploratory study give a closer insight into the new forms of management and control in a telework context. However, they do have their limitations that merit explanation. The field of our study, the banking and financial sector, is particularly ahead of the curve when it comes to the rollout of telework in France. The scope of this study should therefore be expanded to include other sectors where telework is less widespread. As we previously mentioned, our study was conducted against a unique backdrop: mandatory, full-time telework over several months during the COVID-19 pandemic. This unusual situation gave us an unprecedented opportunity to gain more insight into the organisational changes resulting from telework (Hansez, 2021), but it also requires prompt confirmation from other studies in order to monitor the sharp growth of telework in the coming years.

Lastly, our study’s reach extends beyond the academic community: the panorama depicted by this study can be used to draw up management recommendations for practitioners. First, while a relationship of trust between managers and their teams while teleworking should be established (Lallé, 1999; Storhayé & Bouvard 2013; Tissandier & Mariani-Rousset, 2019), it must not devolve into an outright delegation of managerial responsibilities (Philippe, Meyer & Culié, 2022). Managers still need to be involved in establishing performance standards in tandem with teleworkers. As telework is mainstreamed, managers must be more aware of any increases in workload and the hyper-connectivity of employees. Work control cannot solely revolve around self-control, otherwise psychosocial risks, particularly forms of acute stress and burnout, can emerge (Ray & Bouchet, 2010; Fernandez et al., 2014; Diard & Dufour, 2021). In addition, the development of new technologies and the increasing number of days teleworked tend to simply make teleworking the same experience as working in the office for employees. Managers absolutely must try to avoid this pitfall by creating new forms of output control without running the risk of relying on micro-management and behaviour control, worsening the drawbacks of both working in the office and teleworking.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to examine the new modes of control that have emerged when telework was widely adopted in 2020 and 2021 following the COVID-19 pandemic. Contrary to expectations, output control barely or not at all intensified in the banking and financial companies we studied. However, we observed the establishment of new organisational practices, such as an increase in the number of teleconference meetings, which directly resulted in the development of remote behaviour control and reinforces the tendency of employees to engage in self-control. Our study therefore confirms the recent findings on the implementation of new forms of telework control (Tissandier & Mariani-Rousset, 2019; Diard & Hachard, 2021; Taskin, 2021), and moreover supplements them by underscoring the development of hybrid modes of control that are both more vertical and horizontal than the conventional in-person modes of control.

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