Research Idea

Transitioning Towards Remote Working: The Challenge of the Peruvian Civil Service Authority in Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: During the initial phases of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, many countries immediately introduced emergency measures regarding social distancing, closing borders, schools, and non-essential businesses. They also arranged remote working for civil servants to avoid the suspension of essential and non-essential public services. Schuster et al., (2020: 792) highlight that “COVID-19 has changed the location of their work, their work tasks, the demands at work, and the demands they face beyond work”. In Latin American countries where vaccines shots were made available later compared to Western economies, governments started adopting policies and guidelines allowing civil servants to work from home safely (CEPAL, 2021; Sandoval-Reyes et al., 2021). This research aims at discussing how Peru is dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic by presenting the case of the Peruvian National Civil Service Authority (SERVIR) in the effort of wide-spread remote working. In particular, the paper will focus on the 2020 Peruvian Government policy about introducing a legal framework for remote working. The qualitative analysis is developed through the documental analysis of Government executive orders, guidelines (published by SERVIR), and other academic and professional contributions to reach the triangulation of sources. Moreover, the paper delivers a critical discussion of practices adopted and preliminary recommendations on how to strengthen remote working in Latin American countries.

Introduction

Recently, the literature on remote working has been particularly active also thanks to the application of new technological solutions in everyday work. In particular, scholars concentrate on explaining the logistical, psychological, motivational, and performance-related advantages of remote working. For example, Mahler (2012) specifies that remote working offers a greater variety of opportunities compared to traditional organizational settings by reducing office costs, requiring less space to accommodate employees (Flores, 2019; Morgan, 2004). Hence, remote working improves retention (Caillier, 2013; Flores, 2019; Lim and Teo, 2000), and motivation because it positively affects the work-life balance of employees (Caillier, 2012, 2016; Palumbo et al., 2021). About the latter, the literature shares contrasting results (de Vries et al., 2019). Nonetheless, contributions published during the COVID-19 pandemic confirm that remote working improves the wellbeing of employees (Almarcha et al., 2021), but they also warn about the potential dark side of technologies related to overload, complexity (Molino et al., 2020), and psychosocial risks (Barriga Medina et al., 2021).

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Latin American countries have rooted traditions of remote working, even before the mass-scale industrialization era (ECLAC/ILO, 2019). However, they recently pushed harder for encouraging remote working as a working modality for a larger number of employees (CEPAL, 2021; International Labour Organization, 2021). In a scenario where nations around the world are struggling to get citizens vaccinated, Latin American countries are generally behind Western countries as for the number of shots administered and they are still registering COVID-19 deaths\(^9\). In Peru, there have been 2,192,205 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 199,945 deaths, reported to WHO and – as of October 22\(^{nd}\), 2021 – a total of 32,957,509 vaccine doses administered. In this scenario, it is absolutely relevant to understand which actions Latin American countries are pursuing in terms of promoting remote working. Accordingly, this research focuses on the recent efforts by the Peruvian Civil Service Authority (SERVIR) of enhancing remote working.

**The Peruvian Civil Service and Remote Working before the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Historically, Peru belongs to a group of Latin American countries within which political obstacles to civil-service reform are severe, due to civil services’ features (Braga, 2015). According to the classification by Geoffrey Shepherd\(^12\), Peruvian Civil Service refers to patronage bureaucracies in which the *spoils* system is widespread, appointments are politicized and impermanent, and the turnover is high due to the change of the political elite. Historically, the Peruvian Civil Service has been characterized by its complexity and by the lack of effective planning and management mechanisms, due to the coexistence of different labor regimes with different rules. Starting from the 1990s, several reforms were implemented to better perform the Civil Service, but without producing the expected outcomes. After two unsuccessful attempts to reform the Civil Service\(^13\), the 2008 reform aimed at introducing meritocratic, flexibility measures and by unifying labor regimes. The reform enclosed the creation of the National Civil Service Authority (Autoridad Nacional del Servicio Civil - SERVIR) as a specialized technical body under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which is aimed at managing the Civil Service of Peru. According to the DL n. 1023 (art. 10-18), the National Civil Service Authority (SERVIR) acts as a regulatory, supervisory, and executive body\(^14\).

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic that hit Peru in March 2020, the public sector is facing a new reality and adversity concerning remote working. This change constitutes a challenge for public entities and a transition phase for civil servants, who need to adapt to the new reality. Figures 1a-b summarize the access to the remote working of civil service personnel.

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\(^{11}\) On October 8\(^{th}\), Latin America and the Caribbean surpassed 1.5 million deaths, while as of October 6\(^{th}\), only 37 percent of people in the region are fully vaccinated (source: WHO).

\(^{12}\) Geoffrey Shepherd classifies three main models of civil service systems: merit-based bureaucracies, administrative bureaucracies and clientelistic bureaucracies. Extract from Shepherd’s speech during the conference “Desafíos y Alternativas para Mejorar el Servicio Civil en el Perú”, Instituto del Perú, March 15th, 2011.

\(^{13}\) The first attempt was put in place in 1990-1992 under the Fujimori Presidency with the aim of reducing the size of government and redefine its role. The second attempt in 1995-1997 focused on the modernization and deregulation of the State for achieving better efficiency. However, the reform received low political support because of the increasing costs of the non-personnel contracts and their conversion into civil service contracts.

\(^{14}\) SERVIR is also responsible for the dispute resolution, which is exercised through the Civil Service Tribunal and includes the ability to recognize claimed or rejected rights.
Figure 1a. Civil Service Personnel Type of Work Distribution

Figure 1b. Civil Service Personnel Work Distribution Across Government Levels

Data on working modalities and relative distribution among the public sector (SERVIR, 2020) shows that at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2020), 53% of the civil service personnel were using paid leave, while 24% were remote working and 23% of the personnel were still in-person. The majority of civil servants on paid leave were from the national Government (61%), followed by local governments (52%). At the regional level, the majority of the civil servants used in-person working. Regarding remote working, as of March 2020 it was most widespread in the national Government (31%) and least used in local governments (12%).

Pushing Remote Working in the Peruvian Civil Service

Together with the emergency measures adopted by the Peruvian government to face the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government pushed for enhancing the remote work modality to support and safeguard the work of the civil service personnel and search for harmony between the work and family balance.

The legislative framework of remote working is governed by two main rules. First, the Title II of the Emergency Decree N. 026-2020 provides various exceptional and temporary measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 in the national territory. Second, the Legislative Decree N. 1505 establishes exceptional temporary measures about HR management in the public sector. For the application of remote working, public entities must take into account those civil servants who are included in the “risk group” according to the framework of the Emergency Decree n. 026-2020. Public entities identify civil servants belonging to the risk group for the mandatory application of remote work to safeguard the right to health and the general interest. Hence, SERVIR issued various provisions for the application of remote working in public entities, among which are those targeting the risk group15.

The strategy for remote working followed a four steps process. First, public entities identified work teams. For the implementation of

the first step, managers select the activities that can be carried out by remote working, define the people who will carry out remote working, and assign activities or tasks for each civil servant or team. Second, managers establish the methodology for remote working. Here, different methodologies can be used to organize the work. Supervisors need to establish a work schedule, define a monitoring system, and determine what technological tools the team uses to coordinate. Third, managers set up virtual meetings. This step is optional and based on the type and the nature of activities or tasks to be assigned. Supervisors can hold virtual meetings to start a new project or service, for explaining features of the project, deadlines, and other details to teams. Fourth, a follow-up phase is executed. Supervisors oversee the progress and fulfillment of the tasks or activities assigned. SERVIR suggests the use of a monitoring matrix for recording the progress, checking the completion of tasks and activities. Accordingly, periodic monitoring (e.g. weekly) can be carried out to review the progress. More recently, SERVIR issued the Emergency Decree No. 055-2021\(^{16}\), which is re-introducing the gradual return to the in-person working of the civil servants of public entities from sectors other than the Health sector. Nonetheless, the Decree specifies that the process will be gradual and according to the changes in the epidemiological conditions of the various regions. With this regard, SERVIR adds that the modality of remote working will be valid until December 31st, 2021 to safeguard the health and life of public servants, as well as their families. Lastly, SERVIR reaffirmed the commitment to ensure the safety and wellbeing of civil servants also strengthening their capacities to meet quality standards and effectiveness of public services.

**Perspectives on Future Research**

The present contribution presented the transition towards remote working for Peruvian civil servants amid the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to specify that this research concentrates on the transition towards the remote working of the public sector personnel only. It does not consider nor discuss the measures introduced for private sector employees.

Since the transition towards remote working together with the COVID-19 pandemic are still ongoing processes, it is still early for retrieving preliminary results on the impact of remote working in terms of motivation, effectiveness, among others. Nonetheless, this contribution highlights five main recommendations discussing the process so far as well as areas of development for strengthening remote working in Latin American countries.

First, it is fundamental to check the outcomes of remote working in terms of motivation, personal and team performance. In particular, it is important to understand the impact of remote working on the wellbeing of employees and the development/preservation of soft skills of civil servants (team building, time management, teamwork, and communication above all).

Second, we need to assess how public services have been impacted by the use of remote working. In particular, understanding the difference in performance about quality, efficiency, and effectiveness allows managers and politicians to evaluate which variable led to the change in performance and then which

\(^{16}\) The Urgency Decree N. 055-2021 establishes extraordinary complementary measures that allow the financing of expenses to promote the *dynamicization* of the economy and dictates other provisions. In the final provisions (art. 2 and 4) it rules about the gradual return to the in-person working.
steps are required to enhance the institutional capacity building.

Third, decision-makers in Latin American countries should consider the use of remote working as a permanent working modality for specific back-office jobs and routine tasks. If this is a consolidated trend in Western countries, Latin American countries might want to finally pursue this new challenge. If environmental conditions are favorable, remote working can be a real alternative for specific positions and tasks in the public sectors of developing nations. This might lead to better working-life balance, costs savings for public organizations in the long run.

Fourth, environmental conditions need to be considered carefully. As the majority of Latin American countries, Peru has greater social and infrastructural differences between urban and rural areas. Since decrees about remote working involved national, regional, and local levels, it is important to assess which conditions restrict the effectiveness of remote working in all tiers of the Peruvian public sector. In particular, were civil servants adequately computer literate? According to the decrees, public sector organizations provide the hardware for the civil servants for allowing remote working. However, is the internet connection working properly in both urban and rural areas? Does the internet connection allow civil servants to work effectively and without stress related to the use of technology? As pointed out by Molino et al. (2020: 2), “It is crucial to understand technology-induced stress and its relationship with remote working. This is particularly true in times of radical changes as the current ones, where the crisis has had psychological consequences”.

Lastly, supervision and team working can be harder, more time-consuming, and less effective in a remote setting. In this regard, a few academic contributions adequately investigated this topic, but many professional/newspaper articles pointed out the threats of working remotely. For example, Bakken, (2018) states that “the real challenge becomes adapting to the new workplace” and the major challenges are communication, trust, and productivity. Another study (The Economist, 2021) focused on more than 10,000 employees at an Asian technology company between April 2019 and August 2020 reveals that supervision is harder. Managers are inclined to arrange more meetings than necessary because managers are less certain of their team’s commitment and are holding more meetings to check on them. Nevertheless, the topic of virtual teams and remote working linked to motivation, commitment, and performance need to be investigated further. This is becoming more relevant nowadays because technological and social conditions are pushing harder toward permanent remote working solutions.

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