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Re-humanizing management through co-presence: lessons from enforced telework during the second wave of Covid-19

Laurent Taskin[1], Ive Klinksiek, Michel Ajzen

Louvain Research Institute in Management and Organization, UCLouvain, Belgium

Abstract

The use of enforced telework during the Covid-19 crisis sheds light on the importance of co-presence – i.e., presence mediated by information and communication technologies instead of physical proximity – for managing people. Previous studies on telework have exposed the risk of social isolation, which can lead workers to feel dehumanized. In this paper, we investigate how management adapts to co-presence by drawing on 28 semi-structured interviews conducted in February and March 2021 among employees and managers from private and public organizations in Belgium. Surprising results show that co-presence was mainly lived as a way to maintain proximity and constituted an opportunity for some managers to re-humanize their work approach, and for employees to feel humanely managed. Finally, we discuss the implications of our results for the study of humanization and co-presence in management, including some critical considerations regarding the very notions of 'de-' and 're-humanization', and make recommendations in terms of technology, work organization, and management.

Keywords

Telework, co-presence, humanization, managing humanely, care, distance, Covid-19

[1] Corresponding author : laurent.taskin@uclouvain.be

Introduction

Moving to remote work requires a series of readjustments in such areas as oversight (Taskin & Edwards, 2007) and social and group relationships (Harris, 2003; Ajzen & Taskin, 2021) to avoid major disruptions to work organization. Management research focusing on telework stresses the effects of its frequency (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). The more frequently an individual works remotely, the greater the psychological impact. This can include feelings of social isolation, invisibility, or changes in motivation and well-being (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Golden & Veiga, 2005; Golden et al., 2008). Before the pandemic, working from home was generally limited to one day per week in Europe and subjected to coordinated policies (Eurofound, 2019). However, by imposing continuous teleworking, the Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted this balance.

The pandemic-induced normalization of telework was not without consequences, as it caused changes in workers' interaction patterns (Wu et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2022), challenged team collaboration (Waizenegger et al., 2020), emphasized issues related to work-life boundaries (Hughes & Donnelly, 2022), and called managers to re-think their leadership practices (Contreras et al., 2020). As physical encounters were significantly reduced, *virtual co-presence* has become commonplace. In new technology and work studies, *virtual co-presence* is defined as co-presence—i.e., a mode of human togetherness (Zhao & Elesh, 2008)—in digitally mediated situations, enabled using social media tools in organizational settings (Subramanian et al., 2013).

While this virtual co-presence is expected to continue, it appears to pose significant challenges for management. For example, Harris (2003) showed that working remotely decreases the involvement of employees in the organization, who feel less a part of it. Lamond (2000) and Hodder (2020) explained that the relationship with management is experienced differently, thereby justifying a change to line management practices. Recently, Taskin et al. (2019) reported the feeling of dehumanization in the context of flexwork—i.e., the combination of shared offices and working remotely from home. This dehumanization finding extends previous studies that pointed to a risk of de-socialization of employees, who reported feeling invisible in the context of virtual co-presence (Allen et al., 2015; Boell et al., 2016; Lee, 2016). If telework were to become widespread, as desired by employees themselves (see, e.g., Leesman Index, 2022), how could management address these risks of dehumanization, and what role could co-presence play in that context?

To answer this question, we conducted 28 semi-structured interviews between February and March 2021 with managers and employees who were working remotely on a permanent basis. We questioned them about how co-presence affected team management, the relationship between team members and the manager, and the management practices used in this specific context.

This article is structured as follows. In the first section, we introduce the known link between telework and dehumanization, the more recent concept of co-presence, and the challenge it may pose for managing telework. We then present the methodology used, followed by the results of our interviews. Finally, we discuss the implications of co-presence for management: the re-regulation of the physical presence at work and the conditions for the sustainable re-humanization of line management.

Dehumanizing effects of telework

Dehumanization refers to the denial of human characteristics in other human beings (Haslam, 2006; Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). The Haslam study notes that dehumanization may be animalistic (treating humans as animals) or mechanistic (addressing humans as machines). The former negates characteristics that differentiate humans from animals, such as cognitive capacity and refinement, while mechanistic forms of dehumanization deny individual characteristics that distinguish people from inanimate objects, such as emotionality and relatedness (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014).

Organizational literature has identified multiple antecedents and consequences to feelings of dehumanization among employees. The antecedents include abusive supervision (Caesens et al., 2019), needs and opinions of individual employees not being considered (Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018), and a lack of procedural justice (Bell & Khoury, 2016). The consequences of dehumanization include reduced job satisfaction and higher turnover rates (Bell & Khoury, 2016; Taskin et al., 2019), social loafing (Alnuaimi et al., 2010), absenteeism (Lagios et al., 2021), burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993) and psychological strain (Lagios et al., 2021; Taskin et al., 2019).

Technology is another contributing factor to dehumanization in organizations. Firms often use technology to enhance performance at the expense of individual emotional needs (Haslam, 2006; Väyrynen & Laari-Salmela, 2018). This is evident, for instance, in the use of algorithms and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) reports in personnel decisions (Dillard et al., 2005).

Hence, technology may make humans more susceptible to a mechanistic form of dehumanization, where human characteristics such as emotionality, interpersonal warmth, and individuality are denied in the other (Bandura, 2002; Haslam, 2006).

As such, scholars have recently begun to pay more attention to the dehumanizing effects of technology in organizations, particularly in the context of telework. Telework reduces the visibility of teleworking employees in the organization and may create a barrier between people as human interaction becomes mediated by technology (Afota et al., 2022; Collins et al., 2016; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). This might lead employees to feel emotionally distant from their co-workers and other organizational members, reducing interpersonal warmth and decreasing opportunities for human bonding (Collins et al., 2016). For instance, Alnuaimi et al. (2010) showed that geographically dispersed team members who interacted with each other via ICTs were more likely to have a dehumanized perception of their teammates than those working in physical proximity. The authors reasoned that physical distance creates a perception of dissimilarity and detachment from others, as opposed to the psychological closeness that tends to arise in face-to-face interactions. In addition, research has also linked telework with reduced participation in social activities such as networking with colleagues, informal learning, and mentoring (Collins et al., 2016; Cooper & Kurland, 2002; Sewell & Taskin, 2015), which may lead to employees feeling invisible and alienated, contributing to their dehumanization.

Another way telework may dehumanize employees is by demanding flexibility to the point where work overtakes their private lives, thus depriving them of a portion of their individuality. The ubiquitous connectivity made possible by telework has created problems with excessive availability (Cooper & Lu, 2019), overwork (Bourne & Forman, 2014), and an intrusion of work into private life (Nordbäck et al., 2017). For instance, Palumbo (2021) found that employees worked for longer hours in organizations with a higher level of digitization. Similarly, Kelliher and Anderson (2010) showed that employees who worked remotely intensified their work efforts and working hours to reciprocate the flexibility offered by their employers. While one may expect enforced telework to increase de-humanization, a closer look at recent research calls for some nuance. Employees' experiences of enforced telework are shaped by a variety of unique factors such as occupation, gender, caring for dependent children, income, feeling of job insecurity, interactions with colleagues (Eurofound, 2020), perceived organizational support (Gan et al., 2022) or type of control and surveillance (Becker et al., 2022). While most employees interviewed in these studies reported struggling to stay on course,

some have found more pleasant living and working conditions (see Taskin et al., 2022). As a result, the context of enforced telework did not equally apply to all employees, making some more vulnerable to dehumanization than others.

Finally, although confronting the dehumanizing effect of telework can be challenging for employees and management, it seems that co-presence could play a crucial role in that context.

Co-presence

Co-presence occurs when people become simultaneously "accessible, available, and subject to one another" in a given context (Goffman, 1963, p. 22). Campos-Castillo & Hitlin (2013) argue that co-presence lies in the perception of mutual synchronization of attention, emotion, and behavior with another actor. Co-present individuals perceive each other as "being there" for one another (Baldassar, 2016) and have a sense of subjective closeness and mutual awareness (Gibson et al., 2011). Co-presence entails a sense of perceived proximity, where communication and identification with the other play a fundamental role (Wilson et al., 2008). While earlier conceptualizations of co-presence assumed a requirement of shared physical space, more recent research has challenged this assumption by also considering technology-mediated presence (Baldassar, 2016; Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013; Gibson et al., 2011; Subramaniam et al., 2013). Authors have also stressed that physical proximity with other individuals (co-location) does not necessarily imply availability to one another (Millward et al., 2007; Zhao & Elesh, 2008; Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013; Schiemer et al., 2022). Zhao & Elesh argue that co-location pertains to a spatial relationship, while co-presence is a social relationship that doesn't necessarily require physical proximity. Yet, they reason that co-presence requires individuals to be co-located in either a virtual or physical space. In this sense, research has demonstrated that co-presence, through the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), does in fact allow such interpersonal availability and closeness, as they enable individuals to engage in mutual, simultaneous interaction in a virtual environment (Panteli, 2004; Wilson et al., 2008).

For instance, research in communication and family studies has demonstrated the use of ICTs as a tool to be co-present with others despite the physical distance (Beneito-Montagut, 2015; Madianou, 2016; Madianou & Miller, 2013; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). This research has shown that geographically dispersed family members experience co-presence when communicating via tools such as video calls, texting, and social media (Baldassar, 2016; Madianou, 2016; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). The use of ICT allows physically distant family members to mutually

care for one another, demonstrating support and solidarity (Baldassar, 2016). Meanwhile, research has also shown that co-presence in online settings can foster the same relational conflicts and tensions that are commonly experienced in physical proximity (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). In organizations, research on geographically dispersed workers has acknowledged the possibility of "feeling close" with co-workers in the absence of physical proximity (Wilson et al., 2008), as technological tools that allow simultaneous communication (e.g., video calls) have been effective in allowing people to perceive and demonstrate emotions (Baralou & McInnes, 2013; Brodsky, 2021).

The importance of co-presence has been largely acknowledged by researchers. Several studies have shown its importance for creating expressive ties (Khazanchi et al., 2018), managing conflict (Zornoza et al., 2002), and sharing social support (Baldassar, 2016). For instance, Schiemer and colleagues (2022) have demonstrated that co-presence provides a basis for creative collaboration by enabling team members to share ideas, engage in concentrated work and even relax. In addition, Subramaniam and colleagues (2013) have shown that virtual co-presence is a necessary means to align and coordinate tasks and activities among dispersed users in enterprise systems. Conversely, a lack of co-presence has also been identified as problematic for employees. Väyrynen and Laari-Salmela's (2018) findings suggested that physical and emotional distance from supervisors led to a lack of relatedness between employees and supervisors. This, in turn, led employees to feel dehumanized (i.e., treated as "tools" as opposed to human beings). Millward and colleagues (2007) revealed the importance of active engagement among both physically distant and proximate team members for the establishment of a heightened sense of team identification. Their results also demonstrated the importance of physical proximity to team identification to the extent that it allows co-workers to actively engage in the *here and now*; that is, when they are in co-presence.

Co-presence is particularly important in the context of telework, as the reduced physical proximity among co-workers requires different ways of exchanging information as well as discussing, coordinating, and accomplishing team tasks. While teamwork usually requires team members to work jointly in a shared environment (Panteli, 2004), in the context of telework these shared environments are no longer physical. Specifically, team members work in *virtual* environments where interactions are mediated by technology (Schiemer et al., 2022; Subramaniam et al., 2013). These virtual environments include communication software such as *Zoom* that allows for technology-mediated encounters as well as collaborative software such

as *Sharepoint* that offer a collaborative workspace in which employees can work both simultaneously and asynchronously on collective projects. In these virtual environments, the presence, visibility, and availability of individuals can be determined by virtual cues and discursive articulations (Leonardi et al., 2010; Panteli, 2004; Schiemer et al., 2022). For instance, employees can indicate their presence and availability in the virtual workspace by adjusting their availability status in communication software (Leonardi et al., 2010), by responding to emails promptly, or by discussing with others the time they are expected to be connected to the virtual work environment (Panteli, 2004; Wajcman & Rose, 2011). As such, ICTs allow team members to be co-present with each other in a virtual environment without requiring their physical presence.

Yet, it is important to note that the presence of workers in the virtual workspace does not necessarily imply co-presence. In fact, some studies have also indicated that employees can use ICTs to avoid co-presence. For instance, Leonardi et al. (2010) demonstrated that teleworkers can use ICTs to increase the distance from their co-workers and avoid the negative effects of constant connectivity. The teleworkers in their study perceived themselves to be too connected with co-workers, which negatively affected their flexibility and reduced their focus at work. Hence, they used strategies such as disconnecting or changing their availability status in the communication software to avoid communicating with colleagues. Meanwhile, Christensen and Foss (2021) argued that the use of ICT can negatively affect purposeful physical co-presence when employees engage in "present-but-online behaviors" at work (i.e., using mobile devices during face-to-face gatherings with co-workers).

As such, while the importance of co-presence is evident within organizations, its character remains under-researched in the context of telework, and research to date has yielded ambivalent results. While some studies have pointed toward the dehumanizing consequences of ICTs in organizations, we explore whether online co-presence can counteract or worsen the dehumanizing effects of telework.

Method

To answer these questions in an exploratory manner, we conducted 28 semi-structured interviews, lasting 60 minutes on average, between February and March 2021, with 15 employees and 13 managers. The subjects were 15 women and 13 men, with equal numbers working in the public and private sectors in Belgium. All respondents were already teleworking

before the pandemic but at different frequencies. While most managers used to telework on an occasional basis (ad hoc) or one day per week, employees in general used the practice on a structured basis of one or two days a week (see Appendix 1). We believed it was important to interview both managers and employees to grasp the managerial relationship in its ambivalence, the intentions and feelings when managing, and the feelings when being managed during this period of enforced telework. The interviews were conducted in French and translated by the authors using previously developed interview guides, based on the literature on telework and the known effects of co-presence (see above). At the same time, we openly investigated the challenges faced by line management in such a context. Two interview guides (see Appendix 2) were produced – one for the managers and the other for the employees – with questions addressing the same areas: (a) the experience of continuous telework up to the time of the interview (i.e., benefits and limitations, including line management); and (b) their views on the future working situation in terms of co-presence, telework, and the associated managerial challenges. After fully transcribing each interview, we conducted a thematic analysis that combined first-order and second-order analyses (Paillé & Mucchielli, 2016). First-order themes refer to the informant's meaning and are descriptive in nature; second-order themes are units of meaning produced by the researchers in the analysis during a second reading of the material (Van Maanen, 1979). In this article, the first-order theme describes the experience of telework in terms of the activities introduced by managers and their feelings regarding line management—i.e., direct supervisors such as staff or team managers—in a co-presence context. The second-order theme we coined as "re-humanization through co-presence" refers to the counterintuitive re-humanizing effects of management, which are explained by the desire of line managers to take care of their employees (the "care" sub-category) as well as to be part of a sensitive profession and find meaning in their work as line managers, in a co-presence context. Table 1 shows the first- and second-order themes that we identified and their respective sub-themes.

First-order theme	**First-order sub-themes**	**Accounts (example)**
Experience *[Indications of experiences of managers from working remotely]*	**Activities** *[Indications of activities conducted by managers while working remotely]*	"*[I] really was able to act out my role as a manager, to listen to them, to inspire them, to coach them, to help them grow... Time that I did not swap for face-to-face time*." (Philip, manager)
	Well-being/feeling	"*It's very time-consuming for managers, who have their own work to do, to have to manage all these things,*

	[Indications of effects of working remotely on the well-being of managers]	*to have to manage their team remotely.*" (Deborah, manager)
Second-order theme	**Second-order sub-themes**	**Accounts**
Re-humanization through co-presence *[Indications of re-humanization from working remotely]*	**Care** *[Indications of managers' concern about the psychological health of members of their team(s) from a distance]*	"*Now they [managers], with their teams, I think it's hard, because mentally it's difficult for everyone, and when there are people complaining, moaning, they have to manage all the time. I think that human elements have taken up a larger share of their job, even more than before.*" (Deborah, manager)
	Camaraderie *[Indications of the effects of distance on managers' sense of belonging to their profession]*	"*We have experienced this crisis and we continue to experience it; we continue to do our jobs and do them properly. [...] When someone isn't doing as well, someone else helps them. [...] In the management team, I think that we really feel more tightly knit than we do normally.*" (Bettine, manager)
	Meaning in work *[Indications of the production of meaning through situations of working remotely]*	"*That the work is recognized and that... Yes, that we actually pay more attention to that. As a manager, I try to focus on the fact that everyone is on their own, that we don't always see what is accomplished, I stress that above all.*" (Michael, manager)

Table 1 – Data analysis

Results

We present below the results of the analyses of the managers' experience of co-presence – as reported by the managers and employees we interviewed – by presenting the activities managers performed and their feelings of well-being. We then discuss certain re-humanizing effects of co-presence on management that we were able to identify: namely, concern for others; managerial camaraderie; and the creation of meaning in work when working remotely.

Benefits and limitations of co-presence

Our results point to several benefits and drawbacks of an enforced teleworking situation that drastically reduced physical co-presence in favor of virtual co-presence. For instance, the lack of physical co-presence caused by the pandemic has been cited by most respondents as detrimental to the team. That is, they perceived the team being weakened by the decrease in interactions and serendipitous encounters (see Irving et al., 2019). Social relationships are then

described as poorer than before but also more transactional (Tietze & Nadin, 2011), regardless of previous telework use.

> *The relationship is dead, we no longer know each other, we couldn't even celebrate the retirement of one of our colleagues.* (Anne, employee)

> *Actually, I have fewer interactions with my colleagues. At the workplace, we can talk about work or about anything and everything. Now, once we're at home, I'm not going to contact my colleagues if I don't need them for something specific related to work. […] It became very professional.* (Charlotte, employee)

Results reflect individual attempts to rebuild the co-presence through virtual tools (e.g., WhatsApp, Teams, Zoom), but these are mostly limited to a small number of coworkers with whom a strong relationship was built prior to the crisis (except for those organized by the manager for the whole team). This entails a willingness to interact virtually but can be constrained by one's living and working conditions (e.g., children at home) (see Taskin et al., 2022). Moreover, while some appreciate the feeling of being virtually together, most respondents report poor interactions.

> *Every Friday we have a moment for chat […], everyone says hello to everyone, but it does not last. […] It is a most welcome moment of interaction because we have the opportunity to see each other and have a laugh, […] but it's not really a proper interaction, it's not the same at all.* (Anne, employee)

The spontaneity of informal talks is increasingly replaced by the formalization of interactions over time. Consequently, the number of synchronous interactions decreases and becomes more "straight to the point". While some point to the enrichment and the efficiency of remote collaboration, most complain about the increase in emails.

> *Maybe we don't communicate enough about certain matters and we think that others know about it, but they don't, and so, sometimes it causes misunderstandings. (...) It's mainly word of mouth communication. (...) In the corridor [at the workplace], well, we deliver a verbal message. (...) Now, an increase in the number of emails that people don't even read anymore.* (Bernard, employee)

Work efficiency has been cited as the main benefit of the enforced teleworking context. This is consistent with studies conducted prior to the crisis pointing at fewer distractions and better

concentration while working remotely (see Boell et al., 2016) as well as time saved in commuting (see Wajcman & Rose, 2011). More broadly, we observe that work efficiency relies mostly on sharply different working conditions in terms of working ergonomics (e.g., comfortable chair, desk, screen, internet connection), workspace (e.g., having a dedicated space for work or not) and work context (e.g., presence and age of children, noisy neighbors). This myriad of individual working contexts appears more prevalent than before the pandemic and highlights new issues for managers, such as defining a collective framework for co-presence. For instance, while some employees experience a greater work-life balance, others report overwork, loneliness, and disengagement.

> *(…) I am delighted to be able to spend more time with my children, to be able to drop them off at school, to pick them up*. (Hugo, employee)
>
> *We've been working from home five days a week for a very long time now, and we're starting to have a certain […] demotivation […]. I'm more distracted, I'm more likely to […] look at my cell phone, go down to the kitchen, quibble about something, start the washing machine.* (Anne, employee)
>
> *I realize that the efficiency is decreasing and we are starting to see phenomena in which people are a little left - I will not say "to their fate," but who are left at home, are no longer in a group dynamic, (…) this kind of social dynamic that pushes everyone to do something.* (Arthur, manager)

While these new challenges are individually experienced, it is implicitly expected—at least by the top management—that managers overcome their own difficulties in providing support to their teams, to ensure work continuity and to maintain working communities alive. As a result, virtual co-presence has been found as the main tool to manage the situation.

> *There was an internal survey, and those who responded negatively regarding telework … it was precisely these managerial occupations, because they had on their shoulders the responsibility of keeping the link between us, to know what we were doing, to pilot us but not force us, and therefore also to organize kind of more pleasant moments.* (Katia, employee)

Activities introduced by managers

In terms of work and individual coordination activities, the managers interviewed reorganized work coordination and communication by planning meetings with fewer participants than face-to-face meetings normally include to ensure direct communication between the individuals

involved. They claimed to take on an observational role with the aim of monitoring the mental state of team members and maintaining the relationships between colleagues by, for example, putting them in contact with each other to perform specific tasks together. Managers also mentioned introducing informal channels of communication to maintain relationships beyond formal work relationships.

> *[...] I created two channels: one more official for official information, and one more informal. Really cool.* (Liz, manager)

This increase in communication channels was combined with managers contacting team members in a more individual and personal way, thereby demonstrating the development of a personalized line management.

> *I have a huge number of people who are on their own, who needed closer monitoring, so sometimes I would take the time, at least once a week, to call them to see how they were doing.* (Camilla, manager)

> *There was also a need to greatly develop situational management, to really adapt to each individual, to [...] their personality as well as their age and how they usually communicate.* (Liz, manager)

The organization of work is also evolving through the more extensive use of objective-based management, implemented with certain precautions, such as: giving regular feedback, ensuring an even distribution of workload among team members, and allocating tasks based on the extent to which they can be performed remotely.

> *We had to adapt to correctly assign tasks because at the time, we had not yet established a working method to allow other tasks to be carried out remotely. [...] It was difficult to ensure that the workloads were correctly distributed, that nobody working remotely only had half as much to do as everyone else.* (Michael, manager)

> *He defended my place, […] he helped me a lot, […] he really adapted my working conditions so that I could work more serenely. (…) There are very isolated people in our team who weren't doing well at the time, and he [the manager] was able to take notice of that and work on it.* (Anne, employee)

Our results show that the managers interviewed made themselves more available to their teams than before the pandemic by increasing both individual and team exchanges remotely while regretting the absence of face-to-face interactions.

> *In terms of teams and team cohesion, I think that each manager is really going the extra mile, but human contact is necessary to maintain it.* (Deborah, manager)

These interviews gave us some insight into the development of line management activities—both physical and virtual—aimed at ensuring some cohesion.

Effects of teleworking on the well-being of managers

The new activities introduced by the managers interviewed in the context of co-presence led to an increase in their workload, primarily due to the management of teams in this setting and the desire to be available to team members. Co-presence led to a feeling of isolation among the managers as they struggled to determine which actions might keep teams engaged and invested in their work. Some mentioned uncertainty in terms of leading and managing teams remotely, as well as difficulty in identifying psychosocial risks. Others claimed to have been able to animate their team despite the distance.

> *We really felt isolated, all of us, from the little I talked about it with certain colleagues at the same level - the feeling that we were kind of fiddling about and doing what we could to keep people aboard.* (Liz, manager)

> *It really takes up a lot of time for managers, who have their own work to do, to have to manage all these things, to have to manage their team remotely.* (Deborah, manager)

Some managers found managing a co-presence team energizing as they got better acquainted with their team members – even virtually – and became more invested in their managerial role (i.e., supporting members by listening, inspiring, coaching, and helping them to develop). These individuals were keen to make themselves more available remotely by, for instance, enthusiastically offering feedback and showing recognition and trust toward their teams. This naturally required increased effort and time being invested in the manager's role in order to explore what is referred to in the literature as "the transition from the role of manager-supervisor to manager-coach" (Taskin & Tremblay, 2010, p. 90).

> *I learned resilience and to put things into perspective more, to accept that I'm not perfect and that others are not perfect either. I would say that the key word for me is resilience. And creativity, because I think we've taken a step forward in this area.* (Bettine, manager)

> *I do my job as a manager better when I work remotely.* (Philip, manager)

Being available to their employees in this manner offered managers greater contentment in their role, thereby enhancing their sense of well-being. However, they also expressed difficulties in balancing their virtual presence with the desire not to slide into *micro-managing*.

Re-humanization through co-presence

Our interviews show that line managers want to take care of their employees and partake in a professional community. On the one hand, perceiving – and experiencing – the very demanding working and living conditions imposed by the pandemic mostly expresses their responsibility as managers to take care of team members. As a result, sharing this vision – and daily difficulties – contributes to the development of a professional community. On the other hand, while a new mix of presence and distance is continuously challenging traditional ways to manage remotely, caring is perceived as the main stable element required to cope with a period of uncertainties while tackling the above-mentioned loneliness, overwork and disengagement with the aim of keeping everyone onboard after the crisis. Consequently, we believe that these factors contribute to a phenomenon of re-humanization that is specific to the context of co-presence during the pandemic.

Care: managers' concern about the psychological health of their team members

The interviews describe many situations where attention to the human aspect and the care given to team members by the managers were highlighted because of the distance, thereby demonstrating the re-humanization of work in this context of co-presence. The human aspect of work, groups, and management has thus been assigned greater importance in this context: managers are more interested in the private lives of employees and demonstrate a high level of empathy. These factors appear to have taken on greater importance in the work of managers, who paradoxically feel closer to their team members when working remotely, while at the same time finding it mentally challenging to manage complaints from afar.

> [Regarding managers] *There are human factors, such as the ability to maintain a connection with people who are remotely located, which may not have been assessed before while it would be beneficial to do so. Taking care of people without demanding too much detail (about their needs) is really a special skill: listen to people who are ill without being intrusive, manage the crisis with an effective email. That's it really, the important thing is to be reassuring.* (Katia, employee)

> *I was more interested in the private lives of my employees than before. [...] We showed more empathy than we did before. [...] For example, I talked more about private matters than I did before.* (Alex, manager)

Overall, we observed more actions by managers to ensure the psychological health of their team members. These included frequent informal contact, expressing empathy and kindness, and organizing regular activities to connect with colleagues and understand the difficulties and obstacles faced by team members.

> *What I do is, we get together once a week, [...] but don't talk about work stuff. We have a natter over a coffee. [...] It was partially a way to stay connected, and it worked fairly well. We are still colleagues, we get on well, we know about what is going on in each other's private lives, the difficulties they have to overcome, etc.* (Alex, manager)

> *Even so, our boss wanted us to stay in touch with one another and so she set up weekly meetings to see how the team was doing.* (Charlotte, employee)

> *The managers were concerned about us, we had regular mini-meetings on Skype to see how people were feeling, we had to give our daily update [...] There are people on our team who are really isolated and who weren't doing well at the time and they* [the manager] *was made aware of that and worked on it.* (Anne, employee)

Some of the most difficult challenges imposed by distance reflect the interpersonal nature of a manager's job, but also the barrier presented in these situations.

> *One challenge was when I had someone on my team who started crying because someone had been disrespectful towards them in one of the projects. [...] I thought 'Crap, she's there in front of her screen crying and I'm far away,' and that's how it was. I found that more difficult to manage. [...] When you click 'Log out,' the screen*

> *goes blank, and I don't know how they're doing. At the office, they would return to their desk and I could see, [...] their colleagues would be there.* (Philip, manager)

Camaraderie: effects of distance on managers' sense of belonging to their profession

Distance can lead managers to feel isolated as they struggle to manage their team in a new context of co-presence. The managers in our study expressed a desire to get together more often to discuss their feelings and managerial goals, and to build relationships beyond the bare minimum required for work. Some managers reported feeling closer with their peers as they experienced stronger mutual support during the transition to co-presence.

> *We have experienced this crisis and we continue to experience it; we continue to do our jobs and do them properly. [...] When someone isn't doing as well, someone else helps them. [...] In the management team, I think that we really feel more tightly knit than we do normally ... and more, confident about how we manage.* (Bettine, manager)

Therefore, for some managers, co-presence has led them to develop and strengthen their managerial camaraderie. This realization of an existing occupational community enabled them to assert their professional identity by finding support from those around them and by sharing similar experiences with other managers. This corroborates other recent analyses showing the extent to which the position of line manager has become more visible–in presence and absence–as a result of this crisis.

Meaning in work: creating meaning through telework situations

Managers feel useful and even essential through the actions they introduce to be present remotely, be involved in the lives of their team, and maintain relationships and team cohesion. Activities related to line management thus take on a greater importance compared to operational activities, which are instead delegated to teams where possible. Managers feel more invested in the meaning that teams give to their own work, thus making it meaningful for the managers themselves.

> *My team felt incredibly useful. And I think I really made a difference, not to brag. But I think that if I hadn't been present, challenged them and raised everyone's morale... I think that really made a difference for the team.* (Philip, manager)

The meaning in work can also be enhanced through specific actions such as the systematic sharing of information on activities performed, their outcome, and feedback from clients. By sharing the information and ensuring that work is recognized, line managers ensure the visibility of workers and their sense of usefulness, while helping managers find meaning in their own work.

> *The first step is to give practical, well-crafted information. [...] And, the second thing I'd like to put in place is really this study of what I do every day for the client, and to share the feedback and what the meaning of my job is, in fact, to give meaning to everyone and for everyone to take the time to reflect. [...] Listening to a lot more people as well, so I try to go to the technicians and explain the importance of their job, of their contact with the client.* (Deborah, manager)

> *Well, for example - our boss, she still wanted us to keep in touch with each other, so she had fixed weekly meetings to give information on the company, the projects, to see how the team was doing, that we talk, that we discuss a little between us, to keep us a little motivated, etc.* (Charlotte, employee)

Building and maintaining a sense of meaning at work, therefore, contributes to the re-humanization of management and organization, meaning that line managers must invest more time and be more available. Our results show that in an intensive period of telework, greater investment in line management activities can lead to the re-humanization of managerial work; whereas "flexwork" (a combination of telework – usually one to two days a week – and shared offices) has been found to have the opposite effect of dehumanization (as evidenced by Taskin et al., 2019). It thus appears that structured co-presence – and, consequently, the impossibility of physically meeting as a team at the office – leads to an awareness of the need to invest in line management. While this re-humanization is not sustainable as it stands – it requires additional work – it is good in principle because it contributes to the recognition of the specific nature of line management in an original co-presence situation induced by the context of enforced telework.

Discussion

Research that associates telework with dehumanization has mainly considered the role of social isolation. However, due to its intensity during the repeated periods of confinement in the Covid-

19 pandemic, telework has started to be associated with co-presence, although ambivalently. This motivated us to explore how co-presence can re-regulate management practice. We found that co-presence (1) was mainly lived as a way to maintain proximity, and (2) constituted an opportunity for some managers to re-humanize their work approach, and for employees to feel humanely managed. Below we discuss some of the implications of these findings for management research and practice.

From the dehumanizing effects of telework for employees to the re-humanization of management

One of the main drawbacks associated with remote work is social isolation (Golden & Veiga, 2010; Golden et al., 2008), as being physically distant from colleagues and supervisors may foster dehumanization (Alnuaimi et al., 2010; Donnelly & Johns, 2021). Prior research presented in the literature review section pointed to an isolation effect associated with co-presence. Distantiation – i.e., the loss of physical contiguity – leads to a perception of dissimilarity and detachment from others (Alnuaimi et al., 2010; Taskin & Edwards, 2007). This emphasizes the role of management, which is expected to become more ubiquitous by being physically and virtually available in numerous places and spaces but also times (see Hassard & Morris, 2022). Our research contributes to studies on telework and dehumanization by demonstrating how remote management develops, and how management gets re-regulated in a more distant configuration. Previous research has shown that co-presence may make humans more susceptible to a mechanistic form of dehumanization, where human characteristics such as emotionality, interpersonal warmth, and individuality are denied in the other (Bandura, 2002; Haslam, 2006). Our research contributes to this literature – and extends others (Baralou & McInnes, 2013; Brodsky, 2021) – by showing that the use of ICTs may contribute to a more humane perception of managers and their work, from both employees' and managers' perspectives.

In addition, extant research demonstrates that co-presence allows existing relationships, including tensions and conflicts, to replicate remotely (see, e.g., Nedelcu & Wyss, 2016). Our findings suggest that co-presence presents an opportunity of perceiving the managerial relationship and, by extension, line management, as re-humanized. Existing studies have also indicated that teleworkers can use ICTs to isolate themselves from co-workers (see, e.g., Leonardi et al., 2010). Although our research does not explore this further, it directs our attention toward the possibility of a combination of managerial re-humanization and individual

isolation. Hence, the fact that managers and employees report re-humanized management – through care, camaraderie, and meaning – does not prevent employees from feeling socially isolated and avoiding or abandoning social interactions among team members. Concisely, our research shows that enforced telework may promote humane management while also allowing social disconnection between co-workers. The effect of this is to reaffirm a (more caring) vertical or hierarchical relationship in addition to horizontal relationships. In other words, formalization — which is a central feature of bureaucracy, and which also characterizes virtual co-presence in which social interactions are planned — can go hand in hand with the proximity and care that are associated with humane management. While one can assume managers' efforts of re-humanization took place in a specific context of enforced telework, some elements suggest the pandemic has brought new employees' expectations for managers to embody and to develop an ethic of care (Noddings, 2013; Nicholson & Kurucz, 2019). In particular, the pandemic has resulted in a change in the attitudes towards work and the centrality of work for many employees (Adissa et al., 2021; Lott & Abendroth, 2021). Since telework is more frequent than before the crisis (Barrero et al., 2021), the context of co-presence remains topical and implications for managerial work, relevant. While this relates to new expectations regarding work and management - including care - it also invites managers and scholars to re-think traditional ways of managing work and people (Delfino & van der Kolk, 2021) onsite and offsite with the view to maintain working communities alive, build and provide the meaning of work, and avoid massive disengagement (see Laurent et al., 2022).

Does re-humanization embody humanistic management? Some caveats and promises

Surprisingly, our results point to management's re-humanization through co-presence without identifying a preceding de-humanization. There are two main reasons for that and one implication for current and future research on management (de- and re-) humanization. The first reason lies in the method used: we were not able to assess and document the state of management prior to the enforced telework situation under study. While some interviewees compared the past managerial relationship and activities with the present, we did not have the elements allowing us to consider de-humanization—and nothing pointed to that. The second reason is that previous work has established a clear relationship between telework as it was practiced prior to Covid-19—i.e., as a spatial distribution of work, often in combination with shared offices—and organizational de-humanization (see Taskin et al., 2019). This feeling of de-humanization was reported as deriving from the combination of feelings of dispossession

(of space, voice, and professional mastery), abandonment, and an injunction to modernity/nomadism (ibidem). Now, one implication of identifying re-humanization through co-presence that emerged from our data—not from theories and concepts defined a priori, such as organizational de-humanization (Haslam, 2006)—also lies in the possibility to consider humanization in the field of new technology, work and employment and – especially - the humanization of management. While organizational de-humanization focuses on employees' feelings of being de-humanized, we contend that re-humanization may be identified by both managers and employees as the result of intended actions to manage humanely.

This calls for two remarks. First, while some authors in organizational psychology have considered 'humanization' as the exact opposite of 'de-humanization' (see, e.g., De Ridder et al., 2019) and 're-humanization' as a process leading to organizational humanization, this study conceptualizes the latter as emerging from empirical fieldwork. Hence, we argue that the managers' reported attempts to nurture their team members constitute empirical evidence of a 're-humanization' of management. Nevertheless, we also recognize that opposing dehumanization and re-humanization comes with important caveats. One of them lies in the mechanistic and instrumental character it gives to humanization. Second, we acknowledge the connections between our findings and humanistic management literature. Humanistic management builds up management that focuses on human ends, drawing on specific considerations of human dignity and the common good, among other factors (see Von Kimakowitz et al., 2021). Humanistic management looks at characteristics of a humanistic ethos for managing business: the view of the individual and human work, the role of the individual in society and in interacting with nature, the business firm, and the purpose of business in society (Melé, 2016). Humane management shares this humanistic anthropological foundation, while promoting recognition at work and management practices and policies that are "work activity-centered" (Taskin, 2022; Taskin & Dietrich, 2020). Both approaches and their implications draw on critical management studies (Aktouf, 1992; Ghoshal, 2005) hence they propose a shift toward more humane practices in managing organizations. While closely collaborated with—and supported by—workers, these approaches propose guidelines and principles that still require operationalization, which has proved challenging (Marti, 2012). Our research is empirical in nature and shows how managers have developed actions that can be categorized according to humanistic and humane management principles. However, this was not our intention, since our original research question was far from the humanistic turn that the results—hopefully—forced us to take, as a virtue of exploring qualitative research. Further

work could allow us to explore deeper the connections (convergences and divergences) between what we labelled here 're-humanization' and humanistic/humane management.

The more critical side of managerial re-humanization through co-presence

While some existing studies converge in depicting the de-humanizing effects of telework (e.g., invisibilization), no research to our knowledge has focused on how managers react to the dehumanization caused by telework and its management. Our research shows how managers became aware of the deleterious effects of enforced telework but also developed managerial actions to counterbalance such effects. The line managers we met were reinvesting their efforts in people-management. Our analysis shows how employees appreciate these efforts which include showing concern for individuals, considering their needs, and utilizing their concrete work experience. This relies on managers' willingness to re-humanize work, as reported by some of them, which itself adds to their workload. While this resistance to fatalism may appear risky to their own well-being, the managers actually derived major benefits in finding or reconnecting with a major feature of their job: namely caring, supporting, and promoting. By extending the meaning of work to others, they also discovered the meaning of their own work (see e.g., Tosti-Kharas & Michaelson, 2021). As such, the crisis presented an opportunity to (re)invest in activities that were purportedly disinvested prior to the crisis. For example, Richardson (2010) showed how telework may involve managers in more macro-management activities such as strategy development, reporting, etc. Thus, for managers, caring also means getting tired, with the risk of eventually altering the re-humanized identity work described here if they do not feel cared for in turn. More critically, research on caring leaders underlines the specific workload of such managers by suggesting that the "caring leader identity implies a self-understanding as being highly present, supportive and helpful to subordinates' development" (Levay & Andersson Bäck, 2022: 953). At the same time, they also suggest that such management style may induce dependence among subordinates. Future research should hence address managers' expectations in terms of reciprocity: what do they expect from their team members when providing for them?

Nevertheless, in the unique context of co-presence, many felt unsure about what constituted the proper actions required to care for individuals and the team. Here again, the crisis presented an opportunity for managers to connect and share concerns, tips, or camaraderie. In a sense, distance helped managers to become closer to their peers and develop a sense of belonging to a professional community (see Rooney et al., 2010; Baldry & Barnes, 2012), with the potential

to also shape a slightly different professional identity which would incorporate such humane character in the way of managing others. This also merits further research.

Managerial & technological implications

The Covid-19 crisis has raised many questions about the future of work (see Méda, 2019; Schlogl et al., 2021); particularly with regard to the role of the office (Capelli, 2021). While the future of co-presence remains unknown, some predict that telework will "stick" (see Barrero et al., 2021), and so should co-presence. This would lead to several managerial and technological challenges to enable the "next normal" workplace (Kulik, 2022).

First, the manager's willingness to re-humanize work takes place in a generalized context of telework, meaning it is expected to be temporally limited. Thus, managers' investment in co-presence is a transitory measure associated with an increase in their workload, consequently affecting their roles and activities. Combining an over-investment in re-humanizing work with other traditional activities appears to be unsustainable. Moreover, it may gradually lead to a disinvestment in such practices. This invites HR practitioners to consider the role and place of people and community management activities in comparison with other strategic and operational aspects of the manager's occupation. Additionally, it suggests that the humanistic stance is not only a managerial issue but also related to a broader organizational culture. As such, it creates a paradox for management since many post-bureaucratic organizations promote flatter or less hierarchical structures and workers' empowerment and accountability (Taskin & Edwards, 2007; Teubner, 2001).

Integrating virtual co-presence with traditional co-presence at work requires technology supportive of high-quality virtual co-presence. Beyond the selection and development of technological options enabling the fluid combination of traditional and virtual togetherness, the challenge is to develop comprehensive training schemes oriented toward emerging or reinforced issues of co-presence, such as the proper use of technology and associated psychosocial risks (e.g., fatigue, hyperconnectivity or work-family conflict). Our study reveals that many managers felt unprepared and hesitant to handle certain individual situations and struggled to keep working communities alive. HR practitioners can address this issue by identifying not only relevant training programs but also how to organize co-presence within teams. Previous studies have shown that telework is locally re-regulated beyond managerial and HR policies (see Ajzen, 2021; Ajzen & Taskin, 2021). Therefore, the manager has a

decisive role in promoting the collective definition of a *modus operandi* and *vivendi* between presence, co-presence, and distance. Several studies have found that distance can lead to problems of equity, socialization, promotion, job satisfaction, and absenteeism (see Boell et al., 2016; Vilhelmson & Thulin, 2016; Taskin et al., 2019). In the same vein, an important step forward might be the institutionalization of discussion groups between peers. Our research reveals how the emergence of a managers' community not only enabled them to find comfort or camaraderie but also to identify appropriate practices.

Finally, our research suggests that both investing in care practices and belonging to a professional community give meaning to managerial actions and work. As a result, organizational efforts (such as training, promoting evolution, and broader legitimization of line managers' role) appear crucial to sustaining such meaning. As we discussed, at stake is managers' ability to stimulate the meaningfulness of work within their teams. More than ever, particular attention must be paid to the meaning of work, especially because of the risk of disengagement (Bakker et al., 2006; Klein et al., 2012, Laurent et al., 2022). The recent "Great Dismissal" in the US context (Robertson, 2021) provides warnings regarding retention or recruitment issues that have not only short-term but also long-term consequences for organizations such as psychosocial strains, knowledge transfer, and innovation.

Limitations

This research has some limitations. Specifically, we draw on employees' and managers' testimonials for exploring the multifaceted phenomenon of management humanization. Such self-reported narratives and presentation of selves in interviews sometimes need to be nuanced (see e.g., Down & Reveley, 2009), which the limited scope of our investigation precluded. Other theoretical limitations have been stressed above and could certainly influence the nature of the contribution, e.g., if one theoretical framework (like humanistic management) would have been selected a priori. Finally, this research does not make explicit the reproduction or enforcement of inequalities stemming from enforced telework triggered by the pandemic as this was not our focus, and it is important to note that access to telework is in itself a witness of inequalities linked to the nature of the work.

Conclusion

Co-presence is not new as such. However, it has become increasingly relevant since lockdowns, when physical proximity (physical co-presence) was replaced by a virtual co-

presence, completely at first, and then a mix was introduced. In our exploration of how management re-regulated over time in the context of enforced teleworking and virtual co-presence, we observed that when co-presence is not eased by a materialized physical space, it requires either an injunction (such as project deadlines and team meetings organized by the manager) or a voluntary engagement to be present with others (e.g., WhatsApp, Teams chat). This questions some common assumptions about distance and presence in a working context – particularly the building of social relationships in between. Moreover, when virtual co-presence is compulsory, questions arise on how to cope with it (such as whether or not to use a camera during online meetings). Consequently, we investigated to what extent this new situation constitutes a game-changer for managers. Our research found that managers used virtual co-presence to develop a greater local presence. While Panteli (2004) and Subramanian and colleagues (2013) identified the potential of co-presence to foster collaboration and teamwork through appropriate use of ICTs, our research shows that the proximity experienced during enforced telework times humanized work and management, both from the point of view of employees (who reported being cared for) and managers (who not only felt worthwhile but also (re-)upgraded the human side of their job).

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Appendix 1 – Interviewees

Name	Gender	Age	Status	Date	Length (minutes)	Prior use of telework
Liz	F	30–34	Manager	3/3/21	87	1 day/week
Deborah	F	40–44	Manager	4/3/21	66	2 days/week
Françoise	F	55–59	Manager	26/2/21	61	Ad hoc
Camille	F	30–34	Manager	1/3/21	49	2 days/week
Emma	F	50–54	Manager	5/3/21	66	1 day/week
Bettine	F	40–44	Manager	3/3/21	76	1 day/week
Inès	F	55–59	Manager	25/2/21	85	Ad hoc
Chloé	F	40–44	Manager	3/3/21	72	1 day/week
Philippe	M	50–54	Manager	24/2/21	59	Ad hoc
Gabriel	M	35–39	Manager	26/2/21	56	1 day/week
Michael	M	45–49	Manager	3/3/21	64	Ad hoc
Alex	M	50–54	Manager	22/2/21	65	2 days/week
Arthur	M	60–64	Manager	23/2/21	60	Ad hoc
Anne	F	35–40	Employee	24/2/21	53	2 days/week
Katia	F	40–44	Employee	4/3/21	87	n.a.
Charlotte	F	25–29	Employee	22/2/21	35	1 day/week
Brigitte	F	45–49	Employee	2/3/21	45	1 day/week
Aurélie	F	30–34	Employee	2/3/21	44	Ad hoc
Jean	F	50–54	Employee	4/3/21	42	1 day/week
Jackie	F	50–54	Employee	3/3/21	51	2 days/week
Jack	M	25–29	Employee	25/2/21	39	n.a.
Peter	M	30–34	Employee	25/2/21	55	2 days/week
Didier	M	55–59	Employee	25/2/21	68	2 days/week
Hugo	M	30–34	Employee	26/2/21	75	1 day/week
François	M	50–54	Employee	22/2/21	47	1 day/week
Bernard	M	45–49	Employee	18/2/21	55	1 day/week
Dorian	M	40–44	Employee	24/2/21	53	Ad hoc
Patrick	M	45–49	Employee	26/2/21	73	1 day/week

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Appendix 2 – Interview guides

Employees	**Managers**
What about yourself, your background, and your current role and activities?	
How did you organize and manage your role and activities over the last year (in terms of time, space, material, and technologies)?	
What are the different configurations of distance, presence, and co-presence you experienced over the last year until now? Please elaborate on each of these	
During each of these experiences, what were the pitfalls and positive sides you experienced to perform your role and activities?	
How did the relationships with your colleagues and your manager evolve?	How did the relationships with your team and your colleagues evolve?
How did the recognition of the work performed evolve over the last year? How? Could you please provide examples?	What attention did you pay to the recognition of work and people over the last year? Could you please provide examples?
To what extent the different configurations of remote work you experienced have led to a change of perspective about presence at the office? For yourself? For the team?	
To what extent presence influences social relations and communities at work? Could you provide some examples?	
What actions your manager have set to support you over the last few months? What do you think?	What actions have you set to support the team over the last few months? Why?
What does it take to maintain ties between teams and team cohesion in hybrid work contexts (presence/distance)?	
What would be the best mix between telework and presence at the office in the future? For you and the team? Why?	
What would be the activities requiring presence at the office in the future? Why?	
What have you learned from the experience of different configurations of distance and presence? How does it affect the ways to perform your role, your activities, and your relations with others?	