In search of armistice: Considering the efficiency war in the public sector as the result of a conflict of rules. The case of telework in a public and bureaucratic environment

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Abstract
Teleworking is part of the strategy of modernization of public organisations in Belgium and is largely perceived as a management device coming from the private sector that is not adapted in a public environment. In the first case study we conducted, telework was rejected; while it has been successfully implemented in the second case we studied. The conventional approach we mobilized allowed us to interpret these wars and their respective ends as a political process and, more specifically, as a conflict of rules from different natures and levels. We then distinguish conventions from social regulations and argue that the armistice comes from a re-regulation process that may lead to re-negotiate the prevailing organisational conventions.

Keywords: teleworking, regulation, convention, control, management

Introduction

Considered first as a technological innovation, telework constitutes nowadays a component of a flexible way to manage work that is emblematic of the modern private firm. Telework involves “the decoupling of work activity from one material workplace such as ‘the office’ (…) as well as from prescribed working hours, work schedules, scripts and practices” (Tietze, 2002: 385), thus challenging traditional organisation theory and management practices, based on the visibility (i.e. the capability to observe the employee) and the presence (i.e. the capability of the employee to interact with co-workers) of employees (Felstead et al., 2003).

Consequently, it has been demonstrated that telework involves a re-regulation of work, i.e. a re-organisation of the conduct of work (Taskin and Edwards, 2007). In this process, control issues appear to be critical, especially for management, because teleworking

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alters the structure of work and supervision in a very fundamental way through despatializing employees.

This paper proposes to study of this re-regulation process. Our contribution is two-fold. First, the study focuses on the public sector. Prescriptive texts on telework treat it as a technological solution that is applicable anywhere, but does it fit all types of organisation? More critical studies have focused mainly on private sector workers and consider telework as suitable for flatter structures (Clear and Dickson, 2005). This paper addresses the public sector in Belgium. If the UK public sector has been infused with private sector logics for over 20 years (what should give the study of telework no special resonance), Belgium has seen much slower reform of industrial relations in general, while public sector modernisation has been more limited (Andersen et al., 2002; Pichault, 2007; Stenmans, 1999).

We conducted two case studies within federal public agencies (both disguised with pseudonyms) that seek to implement telework in the context of an efficiency war: At ECOMIN, telework was implemented for a group of translators in order to increase their productivity while in the second public agency, HUMIN, it was introduced in order to improve working conditions and motivation, as a means to contribute to the diffusion of a new culture promoting autonomy and responsibility, and, finally, efficiency. In the first case, and despite the potential value of telework for the translators, the project did not proceed while it succeeded in the latter case.

Second, in order to analyse those contradictory results (and the conditions of the armistice, in the terms of the metaphor of war), we draw on the conventional approach proposed by Pierre-Yves Gomez and Brittany Jones (2000) in the management literature. This leads us to understand the respective armistices to the efficiency war (leading in one case to the adoption of telework and in another to its rejection) as the result of a conflicting system of rules and norms between the work organisation (especially the nature of the bureaucratic work organisation and control) and the norms telework introduced (or, as the result of the congruence between them).

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1 The complete research project on which this contribution draws on also investigates the implementation of telework in the private sector, what allows an interesting comparison we will just mention in the paper (see Taskin, 2007 for further details).
The paper is structured as follows. First, the analysis is placed in the context of the relevant literature on teleworking, management and control in order to understand the potential impact of telework on the organisation of work. The background of the cases and the methodology of the study are then presented. Results for each case are next laid out in turn. The discussion section offers an interpretation of those results in conventionalist terms, and proposes to analyse the Armistice as a process of re-regulation, i.e. a political process of negotiation of rules.

**Telework, management and control**

The phenomenon of teleworking is emblematic of new forms of work organisation. Indeed, it reflects and simultaneously reinforces major trends like the flexibilisation and individualization of work and the increased use of ICTs (Felstead and Jewson, 1999; Kirkman et al., 2002; Taskin and Devos, 2005). Although teleworking is widely used, it is likely to become even more prevalent in the near future due to pressures on estate costs and space, the growth in the use of hotdesking, the increase in commuting times and costs, and the sensitivity of employees to balancing private and professional roles (Cascio, 1999; Manoochehri and Pinkerton, 2003; Stanworth, 1997).

Referred as an alternative work arrangement facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICT), teleworking enables employees to work physically outside the conventional workplace by bringing work to the workers (Fairweather 1999; Feldman and Gainey, 1997; Nilles, 1994). Such flexible work arrangements include various alternatives to traditional offices, such as home, satellite offices, telecentres or telecottages, client’s premises, modes of transportation, and other places of transit (Felstead et al., 2005). Otherwise, telework may be characterized by three main elements: (i) a distance, i.e. a spatial and temporal dispersion, (ii) a frequency, i.e. the extent of time spent teleworking, and (iii) the use of ICT.

In the literature, teleworking has been presented as a strategy to help organizations decrease their costs and increase their productivity (Baruch and Nicholson, 1997; Jackson and van der Wielen, 1998; Mitel, 1998; Neufeld and Fang, 2005), respond to employees’
needs for a healthy work-family balance (Baines and Gender, 2003; Chapman et al., 1995; Hill et al. 1998; Maruyama et al., 2009; Mokhtarian et al., 1998), and reduce air pollution and traffic congestion (Perez et al., 2004; Salomon and Salomon, 1984). According to this perspective, telework is often perceived as a ‘win-win solution’ that benefits both to the employer and to the employee. Teleworkers are often portrayed as organizing their working days autonomously, managing their own work schedules, and shaking off workplace controls (Felstead and Jewson, 2000). To a certain extent, however, the advantages of teleworking seem to sometimes take on mythical proportions (see Taskin, 2003).

Researchers have, however, highlighted some challenges linked to this new form of work organization. Widely quoted and studied is the danger of social and professional isolation for teleworkers in terms of work-life balance (e.g. Maruyama et al., 2009; Golden et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2003; Felstead et al., 2002; Kurland and Cooper, 2002). Previous research also focused on strategic HR issues such as turnover, commitment, culture, performance and knowledge management (Cooper and Kurland 2002; Illegems and Verbeke 2004; Clear and Dickson 2005). However, the political implications of telework, as conflict-laden processes, in terms of employment and management relationships have rarely been studied and this contribution addresses this.

We assume that teleworking, like other despatialised forms of work that ‘extract’ employees from the traditional workplace, is critical for management and employment relationships, at least for two reasons: first, the existing and traditional management practices as well as social relationships are challenged because they are built on the principles of presence (i.e. the capability of the employee to interact with co-workers) and visibility (i.e. the capability to observe the employee) of employees which seem not directly applicable to remote working arrangements like telework (Felstead et al., 2003). Indeed, working time and activity have closely been associated to the employee’s physical presence, especially in stable environment like the public sector. In other words, teleworking modifies the “rule of the three units” (of location, time and action) which characterizes the traditional exercise of control, where the unity of location allows the supervisor to control de visu and in situ the work of subordinates (Lallé, 1999: 98). When Teleworking, work is carried out –partly– out of the presence of the hierarchy and the
colleagues, from one—or several—other place(s). In terms of control, the principle of the unity of time results in assimilating working time and the result of work. Again, when the operations are well defined and reproducible, employers have only to control the duration of work in order to control work. However, despatialisation makes this temporal control difficult. The term unity of action refers to the ability to define work procedures, methods and rules. In structured environments, this is reasonably straightforward, but telework entails functions that are more characterised by variety and the unforeseen, which makes a unity of action more problematical. Our first intuition therefore assumes the transformation of existing management practices when employees work remotely.

Second, this new situation would require the development of new employment and social relationships. On the one hand, and more than the physical distance, this is the psychosociological distance that has to be managed in order to prevent social isolation, lower organizational commitment, and other outcomes that have previously been identified in exploratory studies (Bélanger, 1999; Harris, 2003). This capability of managing those two forms of distance refers to the notion of despatialisation that has recently been conceptualised and studied (Taskin, 2007). On the other hand, telework may recast the social relationships among workers.

In fact, several studies point to re-regulation. Wicks (2002), studying the introduction of telework in a financial services company, found an increased use of technologically based supervision. Deffayet (2002) noted increased performance monitoring of engineers working for an auditing and technical advice company. Valsecchi (2006), in an analysis of home-based telework in an Italian telecommunication company where remote audiovisual control of employees was legally prohibited, found alternative methods of control including collective performance monitoring and the encouragement to customers to report any problems. Dambrin (2004) also pointed the development of new control practices when introducing telework. This process was conducted through managers in order to legitimate their role in a context of despatialisation. To the best of our knowledge, in the existing literature we mentioned, control was implicitly considered as the management’s prerogative and little attention was paid to co-workers, what constitutes a gap in the current scientific literature that has been revealed recently (Golden, 2007).
The case of two public agencies

Yet it may be harder to introduce telework, with its heightened control, in a public sector context. Previous empirical works focused on the study of home-based telework in IT and consultancy companies (Peters et al., 2004; Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Teo et al., 1998), which are emblematic of highly-skilled employment and deregulated work, i.e. where flexibility, informal arrangements and high-commitment practices are widely used. The reason is that telework mainly developed in those sectors. However, the future development of telework depends on its ability to be adopted in other organisations where the conduct of work appears more regulated. A public organisation such as a public agency constitutes a promising field of enquiry. The formalisation characterising such work organisation allowed us to identify the norms of control and to observe the regulation process taking place around the telework project. The two cases presented below took place in the same broad context: for more than eight years, the Belgian public sector has been involved in a major restructuring process: the “Copernic plan”. Its main goal was to increase the service offered to the citizens by developing a customer- and results-based approach. In order to do so, five HR-related levers have been identified (work organisation, management culture, HR vision, organisation structure and communication) by the initiator of change, i.e. the Belgian federal government. Note that the underlying and taken-for-granted assumption is that the public sector underperforms and that the introduction of private managerial practices will overcome this matter of fact.

In order to study the re-regulation process affecting control practices, we conducted two case studies in the Belgian public sector: ECOMIN and HUMIN. These cases are not statistically representative of the Belgian public sector, but, we can draw analytical generalisations on (Gombault, 2005). This research strategy allows us to understand relational processes, organisational (dys)functioning and decision processes (Yin, 1990; Miller and Friesen, 1982). Authors like Edwards (1992), Friedberg (1993) or Hlady-Rispal (2002) demonstrated the utility, the richness and the rigorous scientific character of case studies, namely for identifying causal links and in the study of change processes.

[Case studies] have a sharper view of both dependent and independent variables than is possible from surveys. For the dependent variable, case analysis can consider just what
something like team working really meant and how far it was embedded. For independent variables, surveys can measure the number of job losses but not the qualitative effect on employees’ perceptions of job security (Edwards et al. 2002 : 103)

Case studies have two main characteristics: a long observation period of time and the deep examination of complex processes. According to Yin (1990), the case study is a contemporary empirical research method that studies a contemporary phenomenon in its real context, when limits between the phenomenon and its context are not clear and in which multiple evidence sources are mobilised. The strength of re-regulation approaches is to put emphasis on the range of contingencies acting in the process studied: economic and organisational contexts, but also the process of change itself. Widely associated to empirical work studying labour transformations, these approaches focus namely on the continuing contests and contradictions of any system of control (see e.g. Edwards et al., 1998; Geary, 2003), what is at the core of our investigation.

Interviews followed a semi-structured schedule and we used a mixture of descriptive and contrast questions (Spradley, 1979). We started with descriptive questions asking the interviewee to present her/himself as well as the organisation and, subsequently, the organisation of work and the nature of the employment and social relationships. NVivo software assisted us in the data analysis by allowing the grouping of the situations we observed and by systematising the coding process. We distinguished two levels of coding: (a) descriptive (themes), mentioning facts and biographical information, and (b) interpretative, through ‘conceptualising categories’ referring to more complex processes (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2005). This second list helped us to identify emergent themes useful for theory building.

The ECOMIN case draws on 28 semi-structured interviews (8 translators, 2 HR Directors, 3 persons in charge of the telework project, 14 chiefs and employees of the HR department interested in teleworking and one trade union representative). The interviews took place between January and April 2005. All lasted for between 40 minutes and one hour and 45 minutes in duration and were tape-recorded and fully transcribed. Telework was not implemented, for the reasons we will develop later. In order to understand this failure, we conducted additional interviews: we met the persons who were in charge of the project in November 2005. Understanding the failure of the project is our key
empirical focus. To gain an insight into the reasons, we therefore investigated the only public agency where telework has been implemented: HUMIN. There, we interviewed 8 people between April and June 2006 (leader of the project, managers and teleworkers from two business units where telework was proposed). The results of this additional investigation are presented relatively briefly below. Interviews were conducted in French; translations below are the first author’s.

ECOMIN: telework’s clash with bureaucratic logics

Background

ECOMIN employs around 3,000 persons and is one of the largest public agencies in Belgium. Its mission is to develop a sustainable economic policy. The teleworking project was developed for the HR department, and more especially for a group of translators. HR department counts 177 employees among which 76% are low-qualified workers, i.e. having no qualifications at all or only a secondary school diploma.

The horizontal and vertical division of labour is high. Most of the tasks of the 177 workers belonging to the HR department are dedicated to the application of rules and procedures, coming from administrative law or decided by a small number of experts. The content of the job of those low qualified people is composed of a very limited number of tasks: working hour’s calculation, encoding of days-off justifications, recruitment, appraisal, etc. Work is therefore characterised by standardisation and relies on both formal and relational controls. In addition to the clocking-in machine and indicators of absenteeism, the hierarchical supervisor personally ensures that the workers are sitting in the office and putting in the hours, before worrying about what they really do and how they do it. The exercise of control is closely linked to the presence and visibility of workers. According to those elements, the work organisation at ECOMIN may be characterised of bureaucratic.

The telework project

The telework project, agreed in June 2004, potentially affected all 177 members of the HR department. The motivations were first organisational since teleworking was
perceived as a strategic lever contributing to the development of a performance culture, namely through the introduction of some performance indicators and the elaboration of a tacit contract between the worker and the HR Director who perceive telework as a means to increase job performance and to reward deserving employees. In that way, telework is an element of the war on efficiency declared through the Copernic plan. Second, the HR Director considered telework as a means to better balance work and family duties. Third, the implementation of telework aimed to meet the translators’ demand who perceived it as a way to escape the workplace. Translators composed the teleworking pilot group.

The translation service of ECOMIN is composed of 4 translators-reviewers, 3 translators and one translator-director. In order to ensure their anonymity, we will name indifferently those 8 persons ‘translators’. Those who have a master’s degree in linguistic studies have the title of translator-reviewer or translator-director, performing on seniority. Translators consider themselves as ‘technicians of the language’ performing a very exacting job. They work for the different general directions and support departments of ECOMIN, which they consider as, and name, ‘clients’. They mainly translate texts from Flemish or French into Flemish, French, English and German. Within the translation service, some strong principles characterise the organisation of work, notably the need to meet the deadlines assigned by the clients and a management tool of incoming/exit translations (collective mailbox).

Telework, looking for efficiency in the context of a war of waste

As mentioned above, the HR Director saw telework as a strategic lever to motivate employees and make them more responsible. He therefore wanted to offer telework only to the most deserving employees, as a reward, and in the context of the negotiation of a tacit and individual contract between the employee and himself. The goal of such arrangement would be the setting of performance targets and the definition of the tasks to perform at home.

At ECOMIN, we don’t have any performance principles today, because we don’t have the carrot or the stick (…) So, we have to find other means and I thought telework would be one for some of my employees. Because, through teleworking, I’ve got a kind of deal to make: “ok, you decide to work according performance principles, i.e. we give you some objectives, you organise your work as you want to achieve it at home or in the office, but you have to show that you achieve the
assigned objectives and, in counterpart, we eventually give you the opportunity to benefit from the advantages of telework in terms of balancing private and professional duties, etc.” [HR Director]

The individual and ad hoc character of this arrangement, as well as its personalisation, constituted a breach of current expectations about the organisation of work within the public sector, which remains characterised by collective, impersonal and general rules.

At the very beginning of the discussion about telework for the translators, the HR Director instituted a new performance indicator: individual statistics. The goal was to make use of an indicator measuring the number of pages translated on a daily basis, and for each translator. The target set was first 5 pages per day, but raised later to 6 pages. For the HR Director, this new rule of control constituted the stick he needed, as well as the carrot since telework would only be proposed to the translators who could reach this productivity rate.

Theoretically, the HRD announced that those who translated five pages a day will be eligible for teleworking, and not the others. That was the message. And that’s a first reason, maybe, why some started to accelerate [Translator].

And it is at this moment that the HRD said we didn’t do it on a voluntary basis, but on a productivity basis. We needed to have at least six pages per day. It was too much because at that time we already had five pages. [Translator]

The introduction of this statistic constituted a new important breach within this bureaucratic structure. Moreover, the translator-director deployed a large range of management tools (collective mailbox where texts come in and out, common platform on the network where translations in progress are available, etc.) that, in the case of telework, seemed to be used for surveillance purposes.

We’re working in a network, we can put translations in and everybody can come in and see what we’re doing, the chief may see it (…) It is then organised by service and we stock the translation on the network and everybody can find its translation…Ourselves, when working, we’re already at the right place and if someone wants to verify what he/she was doing, he/she can easily come into the system and check where she/he stopped his/her translation. [Translator]

We can wonder why translators agreed to this situation of intensified and more controlled work, without too much of resistance. According to Collinson et al. (1998), workers may accept limits to the exercise of discretion and increased effort levels, and thus welcome
new managerially defined disciplines if they perceive some advantage to the situation, namely when this results in a better organisation of work. The ‘disciplined worker model’ may help us to understand why translators accept the measurement of their productivity through statistics, insofar as it brings a sense of order in a context characterised by conflicts. Another explanation of this ‘disciplined’ attitude comes from the opportunity to escape the working conditions of the service (conflicts and open space) that telework offers. In the translators’ view, this intensification of work would be counterbalanced through the time spent at home, far from social control, conflicts and requirement of presence. This valuation of telework is then embedded in the private sphere of employees.

The last time I was appraised, it was in 1998 and, anyhow, we all had 7.5/10 in order to avoid conflicts, everybody had the same mark (…) Today, we don’t have meetings any more in the service. There are only informal contacts. Anyway, when we had service meetings, it was only to devalue people and to allocate the translations to the preferred employees. It was only to settle old scores and it came to personal attacks on the competency level of people… [Translator]

The building is also tiring. There is the open space, of course, but the building can lead to diseases: the light, the lack of air, and sometimes the temperature that we cannot regulate… This is part of tiring and not really motivating working conditions. [Translator]

In a context wherein the work organisation and control practices were based on presence (i.e. the worker’s ability to interact with its colleagues) and visibility of employees, the introduction of new forms of control (performance-oriented or even trust-based) generated a fundamental conflict between the bureaucratic model and its specific norms of control and other modes of control (see Sisson and Marginson, 2003). In accordance with our hypotheses, it seems that telework was inconsistent with existing rules of control, according the perception of the interviewees.

In people’s heads, telework means taking folders and going home. Except translators, I don’t see who could telework. For those making a policy…I think we have to underline, in order to develop the project, the ability to control easily, even remotely. In the case of the translators, that is the big argument: if we don’t see them, never mind, because they work by using e-mails and other tools that allow us to supervise them. I think it is what we need to say (…) If we want to broaden the experiment, we need guarantees in terms of control. And, here, what is at stake is the liability of chiefs (…). With translators, and with the management tools of the director, the place of work
doesn’t matter: we can see what they translate. We can control the quality of the work. There are no risks. [Project leader]

Understanding the failure

Despite the demand of translators, the fact that teleworking was written down in the management plan of the HR Director and the achievement of the first steps of the project (project of written agreement, identification of ICTs requirements), telework was abandoned. Contextual factors may partly explain this.

First, structural factors (occupational characteristics, organisational size and bureaucratic management) appear not to fit the development of such a new form of work organisation. According to the literature, telework fits better with flatter structures and a management style based on the ‘logic of collaboration’ rather than ‘subordination’ (Peters et al., 2004; Illegems et al., 2001). Clear and Dickson (2005) show that strong hierarchies militate against telework by generating a lack of trust in employees when away from physical oversight. They also point out that telework is most suitable for groups such as managers and key workers, whereas translators lacked the relevant characteristics of autonomy and managerial responsibility.

Second, we observed a lack of transparency in the communication about the project, as well as a lack of strategic support. No formal information meeting took place. Telework was more a rumour than a project for most employees. The project had never been on the agenda of board meetings and the President was believed to be opposed to telework.

I think telework has never been a priority. Because the President belongs to the old generation, he will never allow people to work from home [A translator].

I heard the President was not in favour of the principle. He is afraid of not being able to know what people do outside of the building, and he is also afraid of the reaction of the employees who would not be eligible for teleworking [Project leader].

Third, and foremost, this failure may be explained in terms of a conflict of rules. In the case of translators, some new rules were introduced, breaking with the existing convention, such as the individualisation of rules and of the teleworking arrangement itself and, of course, the implementation of a performance measurement system. The last was imposed on the translators who none the less accepted it. Yet the approach ran
counter to the wider principles on which ECOMIN was run, and lack of support for it led to its demise. The existing bureaucratic principles, largely based on the presence and the visibility of workers, survived and indeed, through the withdrawal of the telework project and the introduction of an open space, were reinforced. In order to understand this failure, we conducted an additional investigation within HUMIN, the only Belgian public agency where telework has been successfully implemented.

**HUMIN: strategic change**

*Background*

HUMIN’s mission is to develop HR policies and support for all the other public agencies, acting as a horizontal institution. Its structure is similar to ECOMIN, but, in contrast to ECOMIN, 40 per cent of the 513 employees have a higher education degree.

Telework was introduced simultaneously with major adaptations in terms of work organisation, such as the withdrawal of the clocking-in machine. Twelve days off were given to the workers in compensation, on the assumption that employees would now work beyond the prescribed hours. This deal was intended to be neutral and was based on the average time employees used, under the existing system, for days off and other time away from work. The calculation of time was therefore suppressed for the qualified workers and for new recruits. Less qualified workers had the opportunity to choose their regime. In addition, project-based work was introduced along with new appraisal methods (regular development meetings).

These changes were initiated by the top management as part of a larger strategic change whose objective was to promote a client-oriented view. Telework constituted one lever of the overall strategy. This contrast with ECOMIN helps to identify the factors allowing the development of telework in a public agency, in terms of work organisation and control modes, even though both agencies faced the same restructuring process.

*Telework project*

HUMIN decided to develop telework in order to improve working conditions and to make the work more attractive. Working conditions were indeed the main lever for motivating employees since wages were not especially attractive in comparison to the
private sector. Other objectives were assigned to the project, such as the improvement of the service provided to citizens (who are called ‘users’) and the improvement of the general efficiency of HUMIN and of its personnel management, for example by decreasing turnover and absenteeism. The project was discussed with the trade union representatives who mainly valued its capacity to balance private and professional duties and decided to support the initiative. The withdrawal of the clocking-in machine was harder to negotiate since it affects the general rules of the administration.

The pilot programme was launched in May 2004. It was composed of 42 volunteers who teleworked mainly on one day per week (40). Participants were mainly female (30) and high-qualified workers (40), i.e. having a higher-education diploma. For each employee, telework was defined in a written agreement setting out the frequency and the place of telework, the financial participation of HUMIN in the equipment as well as the nature of the tasks to complete from home, the objectives and a period of time during which the employee had to remain available (corresponding to the required presence at work from 9:30 am to noon and from 2:00 to 4:00 pm). But the authority to permit telework also rested with the individual’s line manager.

We conducted our interviews within two distinct units: Knowledge Management and Training Management. Within these units, we met the employees who adopted telework and their managers. They mainly carried out project work.

The critical management of control

The employees adopted telework for its ability to better balance professional and private duties as well as for decreasing commuting times. Telework seems to have had contrasting effects on coordination and group cohesiveness. According to the teleworker’s perspective, this remote arrangement did not impact on team work, though managers underlined the social consequences that telework may have on the group:

This is an individual job and people are always able to contact me if needed. But since we work most of time alone or by two on the projects, it is not critical (…). Moreover, we are connected the whole day on the network [A teleworker].
I prefer not to increase the dose of telework. It could become more difficult regarding team work. I mean that, sometimes, the days where we are all present at the same time become scarce [A manager].

Note here that this ‘de-socialising’ effect of telework, studied generally in relation to teleworkers themselves (Harris, 2003), may also affect managers’ perceptions of control.

Some management practices recently adopted within HUMIN may be considered as part of a broader individualisation of HRM practices, as observed elsewhere (Taskin and Devos, 2005; Vendramin, 2004). This is especially the case with the withdrawal of the clocking-in machine and of the ‘development circles’, i.e. a new appraisal method based on regular interviews between the employee and her/his supervisor, assessing individual competencies.

When we used the clocking-in machine, I recognised we only took presence into account. Anyway, it was a more objective criterion! With such a machine, there is less social control. Now, when I am leaving earlier, everybody is looking at me, here! [A teleworker]

Teleworking is maybe not yet accepted. I already heard some colleagues telling that a colleague was gardening during his day of telework because he seemed suntanned the day after…or that someone was not working at home because she did not answer her e-mails [A teleworker].

Alongside this individualisation –which still remains limited in a public agency– another phenomenon appeared: social control. The social pressures illustrated above contributed to the development of new strategies in terms of communication and self control. For example, teleworkers sent more messages to their colleagues and supervisors, in order to remain visible, even remotely. We call them ‘signalling strategies’ since they are directed to peers and managers in order to demonstrate one’s presence and availability.

I tend to be more strict with myself because I am really frightened that people think I am not working when I stay at home (…) Clearly, as soon as I receive e-mails, I try to answer immediately and I stay close to the phone if someone calls me [A teleworker].

Despatialisation led, at this stage, to several regulations: some decided by the top management (telework agreement, project work instead of the clocking-in machine), some adopted by colleagues (social control) and others determined by teleworkers themselves in reaction to the previous ones. Managers contributed to the process of re-
regulation, by introducing new tools of control: meetings, indicators and technological tools. The levers of control were thus multiple.

In fact, we have means that are both organisation and control means. For example, we have an Excel table on a common electronic platform that allows us to check what people is doing. The goal is not to control them, but to communicate and to manage shared knowledge. But it is also a form of collective control, as well as by myself [A manager].

Interestingly, we observed that managers used management tools with a clear purpose of control. We also observed that control was not the exclusive occupation of management. Socio-ideological levers deeply contributed to constrain (or discipline) teleworkers.

A successful re-regulation

The implementation of telework had complex effects in terms of regulation. On the one hand, managers multiplied and combined electronic-based tools (shared diary, collaborative working, time sheets, collective network, e-mail, etc.) and tended to formalise meetings. On the other hand, employees seemed to increase their electronic interactions when working from home, replicating exactly the professional schedules at home and making themselves available to react in real time to every e-mail or phone call.

Since we are engaged in a trust relationship, my supervisor allowed me to telework. [A teleworker]

I think my supervisor proposed me to telework because she trusts me and she knows I am doing my job properly. Telework is based on a trust relationship. [A teleworker]

Interestingly, teleworkers all referred to the notion of trust in order to explain why they were chosen for telework and how they organised work at home. Trust here acts as a socio-ideological form of control, as a norm internalised by employees to the point of regulating their identity (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Willmott, 2002). By controlling the ‘self’, trust was also the main lever of self-control.

To sum up the investigation we conducted at HUMIN, we observe telework seems formalizing information and communication. Anyway, most of the regulations taking place enabled to rebuild visibility and presence in a context where teleworking suffers from a lack of legitimacy. The re-regulation process we analysed intensifies supervision and technocratic control. In reaction to the eroded social perception of telework, which
can be considered as a social control and which contributes to isolate teleworkers, they constrain themselves by developing self controls. In this sense, this second case especially illustrates how the ability to work from home is considered as an advantage teleworkers balance with the increased supervision and control.

Those two cases raise a lot of questions regarding the re-regulation process we observe. After having presenting them, we can now derive several lessons in the following lines.

**Discussion**

Our contribution aimed at studying the regulation process consequent to the introduction of a managerial practice -typically associated to the private sector- into the public sector. Adopting the re-regulation perspective, we sought to identify the conditions of the signature of the armistice in two different situations. The cases we developed have illustrated telework may fit a public and bureaucratic environment, even if this strategy hides a war on waste and efficiency in the two cases studied here. The re-regulation process we observed pointed the intensification of control through the combination of different mechanisms -the formalisation of processes and the extension of the hierarchical relationship, an increase in social control consequent to the lack of social legitimacy of the teleworking arrangement and the development of ideological controls; These observations brought us to consider the conventional marks and norms as theoretical notions useful for understanding the process of armistice concluded at ECOMIN and HUMIN. In the following paragraphs, we will develop each of these phenomena.

(i) **Telework in a bureaucratic and public environment**

Although telework is commonly assumed to generate flatter structures (Clear and Dickson, 2005; Peters et al., 2004), the second case we considered illustrates that it may also arise in the public sector, characterised here by a bureaucratic organisation, without necessarily affecting hierarchies. The formalisation that characterises such bureaucratic work organisation also explains the intensification of control (in order to reproduce visibility and presence) as well as the extent to which individuals strongly internalise corporate values and collective norms (see Pulignano and Stewart, 2006). Therefore, the sector as such does not appear as the critical factor shaping the degree of acceptance of
telework. Indeed, telework is in many ways compatible with bureaucracy and public organisations.

The comparison of the two cases identified three concrete contingencies that may be useful to understand telework adaptability, and that are not specific to the public sector. First, we pointed to some structural factors, mainly occupational characteristics, organisational size and bureaucratic management. These factors have been identified previously and extensively studied in the literature, especially in the case of private companies (Perez et al., 2004; Illegems et al., 2001). HUMIN was smaller than ECOMIN and its workers were more skilled. As argued elsewhere (e.g. Daniels et al., 2001), telework is more suitable for the so-called knowledge workers benefiting from higher autonomy, performing complex tasks and working on projects. These profiles were more common at HUMIN. Second, we went beyond these structural features to identify issues related to the management of the telework projects, for example a lack of strategic support and of transparency in the communication about the project at ECOMIN. Third, we want to focus on the content of the re-regulation process. We briefly mentioned the need for organisational coherence between the levels and the nature of the rules. Indeed, telework seemed embedded in a more general and cultural change within HUMIN; whereas, at ECOMIN, it was more of an appendage and introduced local rules that were in contradiction with general bureaucratic principles.

(ii) The armistice as the result of the conventions’ dynamic

The local regulations introduced at ECOMIN – entailing performance management, non-presence and non-time related control – clashed with what we have called the broader bureaucratic principles, and that will further be refered to as the conventions. The new norms of control linked to telework practice (result-based control) appeared dissonant with the convention that prevailed (Gomez and Jones, 2000) and the internalised and collective norms that individuals shared within this bureaucratic structure, and that may be summarised through the principles of visibility and presence. By contrast, this tension was managed at HUMIN where the convention –and the associated conventional marks- transforms and made telework possible. This phenomenon refers to the dynamic of conventions.
In order to understand the contribution of the conventional approach developed by Gomez and Jones (2000), let’s briefly introduce some key features. According to these authors, conventions –that refer to the rules of the game- produce a set of marks (called “screen of symbols”) to which actors may refer to adapt their behaviour, especially in situations characterized by uncertainty. In our study, for example, the clocking-in machine acts as an element signaling the general principles of the convention (here, visibility and presence). The specificity of their approach is to consider the dynamic of conventions, i.e. by considering conventions are not (externally) imposed to actors but that they are also produced by them through regulations that are historically and culturally produced. As illustrated in the Figure 1, two conventions may compete: actors facing uncertainty may refer to a new set of marks for adopting the behaviour they assume to be the most adapted to this new situation. Alternatively, a new situation may produce dissonance in regard to the existing convention, what will contribute to search for other marks (associated to another convention), in order to adopt the “right” behaviour. For example, I may know that the time schedule is 8:15 am to 4:30 pm but, when seeing some of my colleagues working from home and being physically out of the office, this generates dissonance in regard to the prevailing principles valuing presence and visibility.

**Figure 1** – The dynamic of conventions
This process refers to the dynamics of convention: when two sets of symbols (or marks) characterizing the existence of two conventions (X and Y) appear to compete, three situations may arise, according to Gomez and Jones (2000: 704):

(a) Resistance: Convention X remains the same in the face of any alternative convention Y, because it provides more coherent signals;

(b) Collapse: Convention X disappears in a very short period of time by rapid defection of its adopters who come to relate to a more coherent and thus more convincing alternative convention. Among other nonjustified beliefs, the former collective routines are abandoned;

(c) Adaptation: This is the most usual situation in practice. Convention X evolves by modification of symbols, behaviours, discourses or objects so as to increase its overall coherence.

Back to our two cases, the conventional framework helps us to understand and to conceptualise that work organization was deeply rooted in the principles of visibility and presence of the employees, which are considered as being the broader principles of the convention. According to these principles, the physical non-presence of colleagues is associated to their absence (which is, in turn, associated to private activities and time) and, since the prevailing convention values physical presence, one needs to be seen to be considered as working. This perception is promoted by a direct management (associated to a direct control) not favourable to this arrangement (from which they are excluded as ‘managers’) or who consider it as an element of comfort, thus secondary and coming after the requirements associated to the job (meetings, reactivity, etc.). Facing those interpretations and missing informal (and sometimes formal) communication, teleworkers feel isolated and their managers consider them distant, far from the office, not directly involved in the day-to-day operations. This is the real starting point of the self-regulations we observed: teleworkers tend to rebuild their visibility and presence remotely and in a more constraining way in terms of schedules, interactions or respect of the authority. From the management side, the regulation leads to a new compromise based on the planning of coordination and communication activities. In one way, we can say telework did not contribute to transform the existing convention. Reversely, the existing rules of
the game constrain telework activity by producing control modes that allow them to survive and, somehow, to be strengthened. This is particularly illustrated through the prevalence of time schedules and supervision: the former constitutes a strong mark for expressing its visibility when teleworking (referring to the need to be at work at 8:15 in the morning) and became institutionalized through telework while this temporal norm remained informal previously.

The armistices we observed are the results of such a dynamic. At ECOMIN, the new marks introduced through Teleworking (results-based control, non-presence) were rejected and the prevailing convention resisted; At HUMIN, we faced an adaptation of the existing convention: the principles of the organisation of work remained visibility and presence but strong symbols of them, like the clocking-in machine, were removed what allowed to other principles (project work, responsibility) to impose and to contribute to guide people’s behaviours.

(iii) In search of armistice: identifying and solving a war of rules

The conventional approach illustrates that the war on efficiency we studied consists in a war of rules. The re-regulation that took place when a change (telework) was introduced, produced new rules (mainly of control, as we demonstrate). Those rules came into conflict with the conventional norms that prevailed in the first case we analysed. This illustrates that the norms produced through re-regulation differ from the conventional norms in their level and nature. First, the level of the re-regulation is the individual and the group: together, actors negotiate and produce the rules for overcoming the new situation they face. Those rules have to be compatible with the conventional norms that are, in Gomez’s terms, the rules of the game. Imagine that soccer players decide to take the ball in hands for scoring a goal: the game ends. This is what we observed at ECOMIN where the regulations produced around teleworking did not fit the conventional norms. Second, the nature of the rules is not the same. Social regulations are produced by actors in order to manage a specific situation. The rules produced may be formal or not, and their span of action is limited to a group of actors (which can be large). Conventions have a normative background since they are historically produced. They are less dynamic (past
and present actors build conventional marks and define the convention) but not static: this is the core idea of the dynamics of conventions.

**Conclusion**

This paper has addressed two distinct questions. First, does a new form of work organisation like telework fit to the public sector? Second, how to understand the conditions of the armistices we observed?

We have seen that telework in itself did not generate resistance among public sector workers. It was, rather, specific factors around the organisation of work that were important. This result has paradoxical implications. On the one hand, telework fits various environments. And the modernisation of the Belgian public sector suggests that in general such new practices may be consistent with a public sector context. On the other hand, there were more specific contingencies in the two cases that affected the nature and extent of telework, and to the extent that similar factors exist elsewhere telework may have a more limited impact than its proponents suggest.

In line with the conventional approach, our study illustrates we must identify the conventional context of public organisations facing change. It also underlines that a successful change –on a processual dimension- appears when the regulations produced by the actors are not in contradiction with existing conventions. This clearly calls for qualitative studies offering a broad perspective on contextual factors (including an organisational diagnostic) for understanding the processes through which the war operates in the public sector.
References


\[\text{The description of the two cases presented below draws heavily on Taksin and Edwards, 2007.}\]