

Bachelor Thesis

A Social Welfare Department without Face-to-Face Interaction

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An Empirical Study of the Impact on Caseworkers

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has greatly changed social interaction. Local governments have had to restrict contact with customers in order to protect health. Alternatively in many cities, communication is almost exclusively through technology, which could have implications for work and people. This qualitative case study examines the extent to which the lack of face-to-face communication with clients affects the job satisfaction of caseworkers at a social welfare department in a medium-sized German town. More specifically, it investigates whether the change in communication makes it more difficult for caseworkers to get work done and reduces satisfaction with client communication. It is found that four of the five interview participants state that they are less satisfied with their job since the closure of the office and that this is primarily due to the fact that the work is more difficult, their discretion is reduced and the relationship with the customer, due to the lack of presence, has deteriorated. Thus, using the theories of street-level bureaucracy and social presence, the study is able to show the consequences for caseworkers of communicating only through technical means in times of external shocks.

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1. Introduction

Digitalization is one of the greatest transformation processes of the 21st century. As previous analog processes are transformed into digital applications and devices, daily life accelerates, becomes efficiency-oriented and loses in transparency. Public administration is not excluded from this process. As research has shown digitalization has a high potential to increase the efficiency of governmental organizations. It is able to speed up processes, make governments more transparent, and reduce costs for citizens as well as the organization itself (Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Srivastava & Teo, 2007). In addition, research suggest that e-government has the potential to enhance the perceived effectiveness of government and that it increases trust in government (Darrell, 2004; Tolbert & Mossberger, 2006; Horst et al, 2007; Reddick & Turner, 2012). Since it is financed by taxes and is responsible for the delivery of public goods, efficiency is a condition that citizens value highly. Herbert A. Simon (1947) is the most prominent representative of the criterion of efficiency in administration. He argues that the criterion causes “that choice of alternatives which produces the largest result for the given application of resource” (Simon, p.179, 1947). In the long term, proponents of this view therefore argue, given sufficient resources, digitization should be fully exploited.

However, little research has been done to date on the potential negative consequences of digitized administration. One aspect that needs to be studied more closely is the impact of digitalization on human interaction. Investigating this phenomenon is useful because satisfactory communication and interaction are important components of an effective organization (Sisson, 2017). The investigation of the consequences of increased digital, telephonic, and postal forms of communication was difficult to achieve until recently, as the shift to non-face-to-face service delivery was still the exception rather than the rule, and a trip to the administration was still necessary for most matters. However, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, a new and unfamiliar situation arose in many cities. Suddenly, in many areas public administrations must provide their services in digital, postal, and telephonic way only, as contacts have to be avoided to protect public health. The resulting situation offers research opportunities to examine how the shift to complete non-face-to-face public service delivery plays out. This research is therefore important as it can reveal the consequences of a digitized public administration in times of an external shock. It is unlikely that such an extreme form of impersonal service delivery as the one studied will become a daily reality in the foreseeable future. It does not meet the needs of citizens, and research has already shown that face-to-face interaction is important in public service delivery (Buffat, 2015; Hansen et al,

2018). Nevertheless, research on this topic is needed to assess the consequences of replacing face-to-face interaction with impersonal communication channels, thus providing another perspective on the topic of digitization and human interaction.

This research is taking the approach of analyzing the impact of interaction on work satisfaction of employees. This makes sense as work satisfaction highly influences the engagement of an employee and thus also the provision of services (Wright & Davis, 2003; Christian et al, 2011). The argument explored is that as communication channels change and face-to-face interaction disappears, satisfaction with communication decreases and working conditions change. This in turn has an influence on job satisfaction. The impact of communication on an individual's feeling has long been recognized, and research in the area of work motivation has consistently pointed to the importance of communication within and between levels (Park & Rainey, 2011; Orpen, 1997). Satisfaction with social interaction leads to increased self-esteem and thus binds employees to the organization. They feel better, have more desire to work and are more resilient to stress and dissatisfaction. The role of communication technology in the workplace is mostly viewed positively in the literature as it increases work satisfaction (Diaz et al, 2012). However, there are also findings that these technologies can under some circumstances hinder work and lead to increased feelings of stress, loneliness, and dissatisfaction in general in the long term (Chesley, 2014). This is especially the case when the presence of social interaction is reduced due to these technologies. The effects of prolonged replacement of present social interaction by technologies in a public administration is still relatively unexplored, since, as already mentioned, these cases have so far been the exception rather than the rule. Therefore, this research fills a gap and enables the study of communication technologies on employee well-being and especially on work satisfaction.

Job satisfaction of public sector employees has already been intensively researched. This subjective feeling depends on many extrinsic and intrinsic factors. For example, the personal attitude towards work is essential to be satisfied and to enjoy one's work. This intrinsic motivation is rather stable and not so easily influenced. (Park & Word, 2012) However, the issue becomes much more complex when one looks at the extrinsic factors. Research has found that job satisfaction is subject to a wide variety of influences, such as working conditions, pay, colleagues, but also communication. In the past, communication in the workplace was mostly studied in terms of how the characteristics of the spoken word, i.e. choice of words, pitch, facial expressions and gestures, affect people. (Pincus, 1986) The effects of different communication channels have also been studied (Smith et al, 2015). However, the situation studied is unique

and allows for new research on the effect of communication on work. This setting enables to investigate how the absence of face-to-face interaction is changing working conditions and the relationships between the customers and the caseworkers. This should have implications for the emotional state of the caseworkers.

To do so a case study is conducted in the social welfare department of a medium-sized town in Germany. The case offers unique conditions as the department is closed since the outbreak of the pandemic and services are only delivered through non-face-to-face forms of interaction. This allows for research on the consequences of an administration that completely shifts to digital, postal, and telephonic forms of public service delivery.

From the above, the social and scientific relevance is evident. Digitalization has the potential to transform public administrations and improve public service delivery. This entails implications for society as it is the citizens and the employees in public organizations that are directly affected by new channels of interaction. The potential of these channels should be exploited for the sake of efficiency, but an investigation of the consequences of non-face-to-face interaction in public service delivery is necessary to reveal what impact this form of communication has on publicly funded organizations in times of external shock. From a scientific perspective, this research contributes to the existing literature about digital governance and its implications. The experimental situation that arose due to the pandemic offers insights on potential consequences of digitalization and the research contributes to understanding the interplay between digitalization and human interaction.

Concluding this introduction, the topic of the research must be concretized by formulating the research question. The thesis investigates the following problem:

To what extent does the lack of face-to-face interaction in social service delivery affect job satisfaction of caseworkers in social welfare departments?

Since it examines the relationship between two variables, it is an explanatory research question with the *lack of face-to-face interaction* as the independent variable and *work satisfaction* as the dependent variable. The units of analysis are the caseworkers in the social welfare department of the municipality.

To structure the thesis, the analysis is divided into sub-questions, which investigate issues that must be regarded to conclude on the main research question. The first sub-question addresses the consequences of the closure of the department for the working conditions. This allows for

an assessment of the extent to which employees have had to change their work environment and forms of interaction due to the closure.

- I. How does the closure of the social welfare department change working conditions for the caseworkers?

Based on the findings of the first sub-question, the impact of changed conditions on employees are analyzed. The focus of the first part is on the influence of non-face-to-face interaction on the performance of tasks.

- II. To what extent does the transition to non-face-to-face forms of interaction affect work execution of caseworkers?

Then, in the next part the focus of this part is on the impact of technology on satisfaction with communication. Hence, the third sub-question asks:

- III. To what extent does the transition to non-face-to-face forms of interaction affect caseworker satisfaction with client communications?

After answering the three sub-questions, the main research question can be analyzed in a third step by examining the extent to which the transition to non-face-to-face forms of communication affects the satisfaction of public service employees.

In the following, first the theoretical framework is described, then the methods for data collection are elaborated and in the end the results are analyzed and conclusions are presented.

2. Theoretical Framework

The local phenomenon studied is a consequence of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the rapid spread of the virus worldwide, many national and local authorities are affected by the impact and have to adapt to the given circumstances. Behind these institutions stand people who are directly affected by the virus and the measures taken. They have to adapt to new ways of working, forms of interaction and rules that hinder them in their work. How do these new requirements change people, how do they perceive them, and how can an outsider understand these processes? In order to understand which processes are taking place, one needs an analytical framework, a lens through which one can understand and evaluate the phenomenon under consideration. For this purpose, an analytical model is created, which is composed of already established theories. With the help of these theories, the phenomenon is examined and

interpreted. In the following, the theories are described, their relation to the topic is established, and the relationship between them is examined.

2.1 Street-Level Bureaucracy

Street-level bureaucracy theory must be regarded to understand the environment in which the employees of the social service department work in. Street-level bureaucracy was first coined by Michael Lipsky in 1969 and he argued that “policy implementation in the end comes down to the people who actually implement it” (Lipsky, p.45, 1969). In 1980, he then developed a fully fletched theory in his book *Street-level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. The focal points of the theory are the working practices and beliefs of front-line workers in public services and the ways in which they enact public policy in their routine work. In his book, he describes the working conditions of social service workers. He asserts that street-level bureaucrats as the linking point between government and citizens know best what the needs of the clients are. Therefore, they should be awarded with autonomy and discretion. (Lipsky, 1980) And indeed managers often award their employees with such autonomy, but two conditions still restrict the discretion. Firstly, there is a shortage of resources. Lipsky argues that an increase in supply in social services is always linked to an increase in demand, which eliminates the abundance of resources. Secondly, there is no plan on how do to deal with the shortage. The employee must find it is own way through and keep up a high level of efficiency. Thus, the social service workers find themselves in a quite complex situation. They must make use of their personal discretion to “become ‘inventive strategists’ by developing ways of working to resolve excessive workload, complex cases, and ambiguous performance targets.” (Cooper et al, p.376, 2015)

Regarding the role of technologies in this theory, two main views have been developed. The curtailment thesis claims that increasing digitalization and technologization is hindering street-level bureaucrats and their ability to work effectively. This is especially the case when it requires the use of personal discretion to resolve complex cases. Enablement theory disagrees, claiming that technological advances, at their best, enhance the street-level bureaucrat's preexisting capabilities and facilitate information dissemination to the citizen. At worst, the effect of technology is ambiguous.

Snellen (2002) was the first to develop the curtailment thesis. He claims that information and communications technology (ICT) reduce the importance of the case worker in case processing. He or she loses his discretion, since the information is no longer transferred in a personal but in a digital way. This leads to the fact that the information has less personal substance and can

theoretically even be monitored. Therefore, the street-level bureaucrat loses his influence on policy implementation. Bovens and Zouridis (2002) develop the argument further and describe the transformation from street-level bureaucracy to screen-level bureaucracy. This means that contact with citizens no longer takes place at a personal level in the office but in front of a screen or on the telephone. With increasing digitization, the authors argue, the discretion of the caseworker will become less and less. (Bovens & Zouridis, p.180, 2002). The difference with Snellen is that he emphasizes the role of information flows, while Bovens & Zouridis emphasize the transformation of public administration as a whole. What the authors have in common, however, is that they claim that “ICT has a negative and curtailing effect on frontline discretion. In computerized public service delivery, street-level bureaucrats partially or totally lose their discretionary power.” (Buffat, p. 153, 2015) Linked to this aspect is the assertion that increasing digitization is leading to a reduction in the autonomy of the employee. This is due to the fact that the digital channels are replacing the traditional face-to-face channels, which means that employees can no longer decide for themselves how they want to interact with their customers. (Bovens & Zouridis, 2002) So here, too, as already mentioned by Lipsky, there is a reduction in freedom and resources that the employee must implement in his work.

The supporters of the Enablement Thesis contradict the claims of the Curtailment Theory. They argue that discretion remains a tool for street-level bureaucrats because ICT fails to capture the entire process. The frontline worker is still necessary to get the job done, and technology is primarily expanding his or her ability to do so independently. ICT could theoretically be used as a means to monitor the employee, but there is a lack of resources such as time and personnel to make this happen. Thus, the influence of ICT is presented as less invasive and is seen as a supportive tool that empowers the frontline worker rather than depriving him of his freedoms. (Jorna & Wagenaar, 2007) Moreover, ICT creates new opportunities for front-line workers, as well as for citizens. The case worker can exercise greater control over his client, while the latter can succeed in using ICT to his advantage and thus circumvent hurdles. This changes the power-dependence relationship between the actors. Ultimately, this gives rise to newer, more complex forms of interaction between technologies, case workers and citizens. (Buffat, 2015)

As part of the analytical model, this theory helps to understand how the changes affect employees in their work. It is therefore primarily important for assessing the answers to the first and second research questions. The analysis focuses primarily on the impact of technologies on employees. An important aspect is to understand how the change to a primarily technology-based way of working in customer contact affects the caseworker. That is, to understand how

the absence of face-to-face interaction affects the aspects of task completion and discretion described earlier. Thus, this theory lays the foundation for the analytical framework. In relation to the other theories, it makes it possible to work out the findings that are necessary for the application of social presence theory. This means that it is first necessary to understand the effects of the change on the way employees work, in order to then be able to use social presence theory to analyze how the change in communication behavior affects work satisfaction. However, it is not only a precursor, but also independently contributes to answering the main research question, as the aspects described by this theory are important facets of the lack of face-to-face interaction.

2.2 Social Presence

Social presence theory was first developed in 1976 by Short et al. and deals with the ability of communication media to convey proximity and presence. These properties are important to establish satisfaction with communication among communication partners. The social presence of a medium is an important precondition for intimacy and is influenced by factors such as physical distance, facial expressions, gestures and the choice of topic. The researchers found that this intimacy is higher in face-to-face communication and decreases when technological means are used. However, it was found that technologies that allow visual communication are more intimate than audio-only and therefore create a better feeling of communication (Short et al, 1976). Another important concept related to this theory is immediacy. This concept is strongly associated with intimacy and describes the quality of connecting one directly and immediately with something. In communication, immediacy is strengthened by the urgency we convey. It gives the interlocutor a sense of importance and closeness. Again, technologies differ in their ability to convey immediacy, and the findings are similar to those on intimacy. Furthermore, the authors argued that it is not only the characteristics of the medium itself that constitute social presence, but that it is also influenced by users' perceptions and attitudes. This means that the extent of social presence depends not only on the objective qualities of the medium, but also on the subjective qualities. (Short et al, 1976) This also makes the theory interesting in the context of this research, since it can be examined to what extent perceptions are different, although the same media are used.

Daft and Lengel (1986) take a similar approach and describe the ability of media to facilitate clear communication. They argue that misunderstandings and contradictions always occur in communication. These are usually more difficult to detect and resolve in non-present communication because of the lack of visual mediators. As a result, less information is

transmitted, which then often lacks quality. Therefore, an adequate application of technology for the respective situation is necessary. To assess the richness of a medium one must examine aspects such as “the medium’s capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and senses involved, and personalization.” (Rice, p.477, 1992) This is an exciting aspect with regard to this work. Because if there is no possibility to use different communication channels, but the choice is restricted, this must have consequences for the quality of the communication. It will then be examined how this affects the employee in his work and his or her satisfaction with work.

More modern research in social presence is increasingly focusing on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and specifically online education. Thus, the claims of this research are less applicable to the addressed research goal. In general, however, it can be stated that virtual communication decreases social presence and lacks intimacy, especially in more complex situations (Croes et al, 2016). The best alternative to direct face-to-face interaction in these situations seems to be communication technologies that work visually, i.e. video chats and video conferences (Croes et al, 2016; Kreijns et al, 2004). The cases that employees deal with in the social field are often complex and sensitive and therefore it is interesting to investigate which forms of communication are available, which are chosen and how they are perceived. This can add to existing theories in the field a new perspective that examines social presence in the modern workplace in times of external shock.

Social presence is an important aspect of effective, intimate and immediate communication. The theories described above show that social presence is indispensable for solving complex communication problems and that a simple e-mail is often not enough, especially when it comes to sensitive topics. For the analysis, these theories allow an examination of what has changed in the direct communication between the caseworker and the customer. Thus, it can be examined how the lack of face-to-face interaction affects the delivery of the service. That is, it can be interpreted how the changed aspects of communication, i.e., effectiveness, intimacy, immediacy, and clarity, affect the satisfaction with the communication. This in turn has an impact on job satisfaction, as communication is an important aspect of this. Therefore, this theoretical part primarily addresses the third sub-question and the main research question. In relation to street-level bureaucracy, it builds on this theory in the analytical model and is used as an in-depth to examine the impact of changing work circumstances on communication.

2.3 Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a popular topic in social and organizational sciences and thus many researchers and practitioners have already established their own definition of job satisfaction. However, there are two definitions that actually appear in almost every scientific article on job satisfaction and they describe this concept as: “the pleasurable emotional state resulting from the appraisal of one’s job as achieving or facilitating the achievement of one’s job values” (Locke, p.1342, 1976); and “the extent to which people like (satisfaction) or dislike (dissatisfaction) their jobs“ (Spector, p.2, 1997). Most theories describe the affective feeling an employee has about his or her job. This means that subjective perceptions and emotions are decisive in evaluating employee satisfaction. This could be about the job in general or their attitudes towards specific aspects of it, such as pay, communication, or working conditions (Lu et al, 2005).

There are many different theories that seek to explain an employee's level of satisfaction. An important aspect in the theories is always the work environment or job design, i.e. the circumstances under which the tasks have to be completed. This assumption was also proven in several studies (Loher et al, 1985; Thatcher et al, 2002; Ellickson & Logsdon, 2002). A prominent theory that examines this connection very clearly and is empirically proven is the Job Characteristics Model by Hackman and Oldham (1976). They assert that job characteristics such as skill variety and task significance impact job satisfaction through psychological conditions. This means that certain characteristics of a job influence how one feels and can create emotions such as meaningfulness and joy. That is why enrichment efforts to make the job more interesting like creating autonomy are important managerial tools to increase satisfaction. In the examined case the employees are constrained due to the measure taken to prevent the virus from spreading. Therefore, it is interesting to research how the claims of the theory, that job conditions influence employee satisfaction, translate into real-life.

As described earlier the two focal points under analysis are the change in effective case processing and the change in the perceived social presence due to the complete switch to impersonal forms of communication. These variables are analyzed to see if they influence employee satisfaction. Earlier studies have found that forced changes in work have a negative impact on job satisfaction. For effective change, good communication as well as inclusion are key (Johansson & Heide, 2008). Another aspect is that employees are also less satisfied with their job if autonomy or discretion is taken away from them (Bradley et al, 2003). As explained by street-level bureaucracy this particularly applies to case workers. Discretion allows them to

solve complex case and build relationships with the clients. Therefore, it is interesting to see how the forced switch non-face-to-face forms of communication affect these aspects. Regarding the social presence aspect studies have shown that face-to-face interaction can increase the well-being of humans. Interaction with all senses creates a closer bond between the interlocutors and communication is easier compared to other forms of communication. (Short et al, 1976; Daft & Lengel, 1986) In the social service department, these relationships are enormously important because the person is at the center and the services are made for the person. Lacking social relationships, dissatisfying communications and inflexible forms of interaction therefore impact the well-being of employees negatively (Chadsey & Beyer, 2001). These feelings then also decrease the level of job satisfaction.

All in all, earlier research has shown that job satisfaction is a very vulnerable concept that is dependent on many environmental conditions. There is a clear link between the researched aspects of the transition to only non-face-to-face forms of interaction and job satisfaction. Indeed, this is a unique case and there is no comparable research that examined exactly these relationships. But the findings on technology, communication and satisfaction that have been researched in other settings provide sufficient arguments and reasons to propose that there are also similar connections in this setting. The analysis in the later part of this paper assesses to what extent this claim is confirmable and to what extent the earlier described theories apply to this unique case.

2.4 Analytical Model

The previous sections can now be summarized into an analytical model. Figure 1 shows the relationships between the individual variables. As described in the theory, the claim is made that the lack of face-to-face communication must have an impact on work execution and social presence. The variable work execution was primarily captured by the street-level bureaucracy theory and entails the circumstances under which caseworkers have to do their work. Social presence is a separate theory and in this thesis especially, the satisfaction with client communication is considered. According to theory, these two variables should have an influence on job satisfaction. Thus, this model also corresponds to the main research question and the sub-research questions.

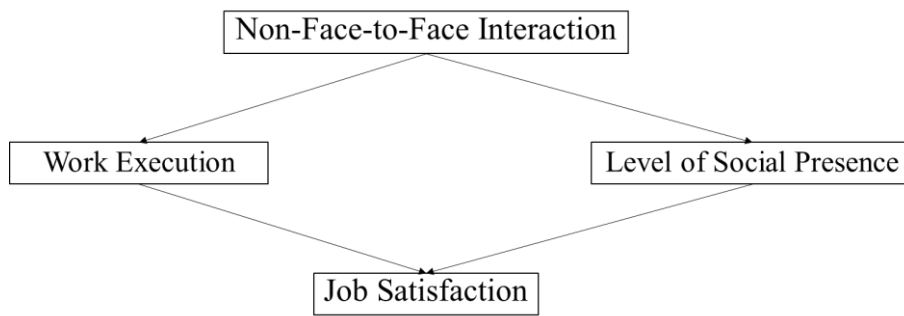


Figure 1. Analytical Model

3. Research Design

In the following, the method used for answering the research question is discussed and justified. To arrive at an answer to the research question qualitative research in the form of an interpretative case study is conducted. This design is most appropriate, as the aim of the study is to investigate the impact of communication technology on job satisfaction in a specific case. By using this systematic approach, the subjective experiences of the employees can be examined and meaning can be given to these findings with the help of the theories. The data for this case study is collected through semi-structured interviews with caseworkers in the social welfare department of the respective municipality.

Case studies belong to the qualitative methods of research. As the name suggests, one or a few cases are studied in a real-world context. The advantage of this method over quantitative methods is that it is more successful in understanding the role of the individual. Another aspect of this design is that case studies tend to place more emphasis on the descriptive-interpretive elements of the causal relationship rather than proving that relationship. (Given, 2012) This is also reflected in the thesis, whose primary goal is not to confirm the relationship using numerical methods, but to understand the influence of non-face-to-face interaction on employee satisfaction. The interpretive case study is one of six specific case study types summarized by George and Benett (2005). First formulated by Arend Lijphart (1971), interpretative case study examines a particular case with the help of already established theories. The aim of this method is neither to develop a general theory nor to improve it. Instead, the aim is to place the characteristics and peculiarities of a phenomenon in a theoretical context. Therefore, this design belongs to the applied sciences (Lijphart, p.692, 1971). Thus, with the help of this design, it is possible to put the statements of the workers into a larger context using the theories.

Although the qualitative method is distinct from the quantitative method in terms of the validity and reliability of the results, these values remain important to preserve the scientific nature of the work. This qualitative design is subject to threats that together can be attributed to three sources: the researcher, the participant, and the methodological process. First, there is researcher bias. This refers to any kind of negative influence of the researcher's knowledge or assumptions on the participants or on the results of the study. To prevent this influence, regular contact is established with the participants throughout the period of data collection, analysis and the verification of interpretations and themes resulting from the analysis of the data. As a way of controlling the influence of knowledge and assumptions on the emerging interpretations, if there are ambiguities about something a participant said, a request to verify the interpretations is sent to the participant. (Brink, 1993)

Respondent bias refers to a situation where participants do not provide honest responses for varying reasons, which may include them perceiving a given topic as a threat, or them being willing to please the researcher with responses they believe are desirable. To prevent this the interview transcripts are sent to the participants and they are asked to read them and provide any necessary comments and corrections. Moreover, the answers are compared to the other interviews in order to determine contradictions. (Brink, 1993)

The risks in the methodological procedure refer to non-transparent achievement of results. To make the study understandable to others, the research is described and explained in each step of data collection and analysis extensively. (Morse et al, 2002).

3.1 Case Selection

As the research is about a specific social welfare department in a municipality, the case stems from there. Since it is not the aim of an interpretative case study to generalize the findings, no sampling method was used. Due to the circumstances in this administration and the characteristics of the city, this case was selected. The city is located in Western Germany in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. It is a medium-sized city with a population between 20 000 - 50 000. The participants in the study are all case workers in the social welfare department and deal primarily with unemployed people (Appendix A.1). The unemployment rate of the city is equal to the unemployment rate of the county in which the city is located. The administration's social welfare department has been closed since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020 and no longer allows visitors. Since then, the case workers have been communicating with their clients exclusively via non-personal forms. This corresponds to the planned research approach. In addition, the medium size of the city is advantageous because it makes it easier to get a sense

of the situation and to have a mixed participant population. The case will be differentiated by considering the personal information of the participants such as the position in the organization and gender. The goal is, to have a mixed group regarding personal attributes, to reveal differences and similarities between the individuals. Five interviews are conducted. The research is promoted and requests for interviews are made by sending an e-mail to the whole department as well as talking to the managers.

3.2 Data Collection

As indicated before original qualitative data is used for the research. This kind of data is defined by its ability to approximate and characterize. Qualitative data can be observed and recorded. It is non-numerical in nature. Qualitative data can be collected through several methods such as conducting interviews and focus groups. It is decided to conduct qualitative interviews as this method is the most appropriate to identify the experiences of the participants. Being in personal contact with the person enables one to steer the conversation and to be flexible in the investigation of experiences and perceptions. To enable flexibility but assuring the transparency of the research as well, it is planned to conduct semi-structural interviews with open questions. This means that preparations are made in advance and standardized questions are formulated, but also that space is created to delve into certain topics depending on the situation. (Flick, 2014)

The goal of an interpretative case study is, after all, to understand the phenomenon on the basis of the theories described. Therefore, the form of the interview also results from the theories described. This means that for the individual sub-research questions, topic areas are created in the interview guide that are related to the theories. The interview guide can be found in the appendix of this thesis (Appendix A.3). Thus, in the first part, questions are asked about the person and their tasks in the social welfare office. Here the focus is especially on the difference between the work processes and the communication before and since the closure. The next section then includes questions based on the street-level bureaucracy framework. In the theory chapter, concepts related to this theory were elaborated. The primary concepts are work effectiveness and discretion and they are examined by looking at performance, assessment, and the extent of autonomy. These concepts are closely related, as noted in the theory, and the goal with the questions is to find out the extent to which these aspects are affected by the changes. An important aspect of this is the personal perception of the restriction and the handling of this restriction. At the end of this part, the extent to which this impacts employee satisfaction is explored by asking whether there is a relationship between the variables in their subjective

perception. In the next section, the third sub-question is addressed by referring to the assertions made by the social presence theory. Therefore, special emphasis is placed on the difference between present and non-present communication. The main question that is addressed is: How and why does the feeling about communication change due to technology-based communication? Important aspects of the theory that are addressed in the questions are intimacy, immediacy and clarity of communication. Again, it is asked whether the participants perceived an influence on their work satisfaction due to the change in communication. The last question of the interview is an evaluation of the interview by asking if the topics discussed have an impact on satisfaction and if so, if these aspects are the main reasons or if there are other, more important reasons. Even though this is a clear structure during the interviews room is made for other questions depending on the situation.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data are analyzed using a coding scheme (see Appendix A.2). For this purpose, the answers to the interview guide described above are assigned to different categories. These are derived from the analytical model described in chapter two. For each topic area, i.e. job description, change in work circumstances and change in communication as well as its influence on social presence, there are several categories covering the facets of these variables. For example, for the variable work execution, there is the category “case assessment” which is aimed at the discretion of the workers. For the variable “social presence” the three main facets intimacy, immediacy and clarity are described as categories. The category job satisfaction exists twice, as it is examined once in relation to the work circumstances and another time in relation to the changed communication. Further explanations of the respective categories can be found in the appendix. The assignment of the statements to the categories takes place under an analysis of the content. This means that examples are established for the respective categories and then a search is made for similar statements in the transcripts. Thus, a stronger objectivity of the analysis is given, since it is determined beforehand which statements belong to which categories. This is then also how job satisfaction is measured. No scale is used, but the statements are analyzed on the basis of theory and the coding scheme to determine supposed changes. In the analysis, the categorized statements are analyzed based on the theories. This means that there is always first a descriptive description of the situations, then a comparison of the statements with each other, and then the statements are classified and contextualized with reference to the theories. By means of these interrelated steps, the aim is to make the work as objective as possible and to keep the subjectivity of the researcher out of the analysis of the results as much as possible.

4. Analysis

Conducting the five interviews with the employees of the social welfare department creates a lot of qualitative data which are stored as interview transcripts that can be found in the appendix of this thesis. In the following, these transcripts are analyzed by interpreting the statements made by the interviewees with the help of the theories elaborated in chapter two. Reference is made to the interviews by stating the case number of the respective interview and the line numbers that are added to the transcripts in the appendix.

4.1 Job Characteristics

All five interviewees work in the Labor and Social Affairs Section of the Social Welfare Department of the city. Thus, they all share the same characteristics regarding their daily job routine and customer characteristics. Together they are responsible for the basic income support for job seekers in the city (SGB II in Germany). That means they take care of the customers by providing consultations and processing applications for the basic income support. The consultation primarily focuses on monetary aspects such as the amount of money the customers get, the regulations they must comply with and sanctions that could be imposed in case of non-compliance (Caseworker 3, lines 15-20). However, as most of the interviewees state they are often also contact persons for matters that go beyond the formal job characteristics (Caseworker 2, lines 68-70; Caseworker 4, lines 88-90; Caseworker 5, lines 68-78). As basic income support is such a personal matter and many customers approach the case workers with other related matters, close relationships are often established, and communication is quite important for the work (Caseworker 1, lines 86-91; Caseworker 5, lines 53-54).

Regarding changes in their daily job routines the interviewees make similar statements. The predominant aspect that is mentioned by all participants is the omission of the open office hours. In these hours the customers normally could come as they wish to talk to the case workers. The open office hours were provided nearly every day and lasted several hours. As the interviewees mention, these hours were an important part of their work because they were low threshold for clients and thus often used, even for minor concerns. In return for the elimination of these office hours, telephone accessibility was greatly expanded, so that the case workers now must be available for almost their entire workday. (Caseworker 1, lines 13-20; Caseworker 3, lines 31-36; Caseworker 4, lines 27-29) Personal appointments are now only permitted in extremely exceptional cases. Therefore, the caseworkers now work more in front of the computer and on the phone. They have less customer contact and personal consultation is eliminated altogether. Ultimately, they have more time to process the applications. One of the participants reports that

the pandemic also means that more remote work is now available, so workers are sitting in the office less and conducting their consultations and work from home (Caseworker 3, lines 24-28).

Job characteristics also include job satisfaction, which is initially asked in comparison, i.e., how satisfied employees are before and during the pandemic. Summarizing the answers, it can be said that all employees were previously satisfied with their jobs, but that the changed circumstances due to the pandemic have at least partially disrupted this satisfaction. Thus, none of the interviewees states that they are now very dissatisfied with their job or even that they would quit, but almost all of them share the view that the change in the way of working was nerve-racking and exhausting. (Caseworker 1, lines 27-30; Caseworker 2, 34-38; Caseworker 5, lines 96-97) There are also comments that an adjustment to the circumstances has taken place and thus a feeling of resignation has set in, i.e. a coming to terms with the circumstances, which means that frustration had decreased over time (Caseworker 1, lines 64-66). One person stands out from the group of interviewees. This person states that he is now more satisfied with his job. He gives two reasons for this, firstly that he now works more effectively and secondly that he feels more secure (Caseworker 3, lines 39-51). The first aspect will be discussed later, but the latter should be addressed because it stands out from the research. The interviewee explains the increased feeling of safety with the fact that there had been repeated incidents in the open office hours in which customers threatened or insulted the staff. For this person, the potential for conflict with customers represents a risk that he or she prefers to avoid. In arranged appointments, on the phone or by e-mail, the person can protect himself better, which makes him or her feel safer. The aspect of the security of the different communication channels and the effects on job satisfaction is not covered by the theoretical framework and could be interesting for later research.

This chapter has answered the first sub-research question, which reads as follows:

- I. How does the closure of the social welfare department change working conditions for the caseworkers?

In summary, employees no longer have face-to-face customer contact, the time spent on pure processing work has increased, telephone and postal communication has increased in most cases, and except for one case, caseworkers are less satisfied with their jobs. For their work as basic income support caseworkers, communication is an important part of the job, as clients' concerns are of a very personal nature. The following shows how the changed work circumstances affect communication and satisfaction.

4.2 Work Execution

Following the interview structure, the aspects of work execution are now analyzed. These are, as elaborated in the theory, performance and discretion. When asked whether communication technology in general is advantageous or disadvantageous for their work, all interview participants answer that it is in itself advantageous for their work. It allows for more flexible, faster and more effective work because it saves time through quick connectivity. (Caseworker 1, lines 33-38; Caseworker 4, lines 48-51; Caseworker 5, lines 48-52) However, some also express concerns, arguing that in some situations communication through technology can be detrimental. This is when the situation requires a more personal level. (Caseworker 1, lines 37-38) One participant states that even telephone communication has decreased, which seems contradictory given the decrease in face-to-face communication (Caseworker 2, lines 25-30). One reason for this could be, which the theory also points out, is the deterioration of relationships. That is, because the relationship between the customer and the caseworker worsens due to the decrease in face-to-face communication, the telephone consultation also decreases because the threshold for the customer to call the clerk becomes greater.

Due to the altered work circumstances and communication behavior, the completion of tasks has also changed. As mentioned earlier, there has been the switch to increased telephone and digital communication. In light of the second sub-research question, it is therefore important to examine how this affects task completion. Most of the interviewees indicate that the elimination of face-to-face communication had a negative impact on their job performance. Although they now have more time for processing, since there were hardly any moments to do this during the open office hours, it becomes much more tedious. The reasons given by the employees for this were that communication and therefore also consultation is more difficult. Previously, customers could simply drop by and the applications could be filled out together. In direct face-to-face communication, it is easier to explain what is meant and to communicate by hand signals or similar. Now it is the case that documents are often sent back and forth many times before they are completely correct. (Caseworker 2, lines 48-56; Caseworker 4, lines 57-62; Caseworker 5, lines 58-66) According to the interview participants, this is because there are difficulties in understanding due to communication via technology, which have a wide variety of origins. For example, many customers have a migration background and are sometimes not proficient in German, making it difficult to explain what is meant without non-linguistic means (Caseworker 4, lines 62-63). Then there is often a lack of comprehensibility when decisions are made. For example, one employee says that he used to discuss decisions in person so that they would be more transparent, but this is no longer possible, which worsens the relationship with

the customers (Caseworker 2, lines 75-81). Another aspect in this regard is the length of the communication channels. In face-to-face contact, there is a direct interaction in which there is no delay. This is different with digital or telephone communication. Here, there is a delay in responding to each other, and the participants in the study also report that the longer communication channels lead to a delay in getting work done, as it takes longer for the complete documents to arrive. (Caseworker 5, lines 64-65) On the one hand, communication technology promotes work, as has already been described, but on the other hand, in this case at least, it cannot replace face-to-face interaction and even makes work more difficult if communication is only via technology. That is why both sides of the street-level bureaucracy theory show up here. There is an enabling effect in technology, allowing for more flexible and free work arrangements, but on the other hand, it can also constrain the worker if it is the only form of interaction. As Lipsky (1980) described, in this particular situation the caseworker must find a way to get the job done even though there is a shortage of resources, in this case the elimination of face-to-face interaction. To do this, he must use his discretion, that is, the free space he has available to complete the tasks.

Another aspect of the work, counseling, is even more affected by the change in communication. This previously took place primarily in person in appointments or open office hours. Here, the focus was always on the customer as a person, and it was possible to address issues that went beyond the monetary aspects (Caseworker 1, lines 25-27). This aspect of the work has largely fallen away with the closure of the office, because a digital or telephone consultation is not appropriate for the topics being discussed. The advice given by telephone or mail relates primarily to the application process, if at all (Caseworker 1, lines 50-54). Questions about living situations, coping with everyday life and emergency situations are hardly ever asked, because the threshold is too high, and the channels are not suitable. This aspect is also criticized by the employees, since it was precisely this form of interaction that brought a lot of joy and also showed what the employees were actually working for, because in these moments they could help people directly. (Caseworker 2, 75-81) This aspect will be further analyzed when it comes to the concept of Social Presence in a later section of the analysis.

Discretion describes the autonomy and freedom available to the employee in the execution of work. As described in the theory, this space can be reduced or increased. During the interview, this topic also comes up, and it is discussed how this affects satisfaction. Some of the interview participants state that the elimination of face-to-face communication gives them a poorer picture of their customers. This is particularly the case when it comes to new customers who joined

during the pandemic. In the case of customers who have been served for a longer period of time, the problem is not quite as present, but there are also facets here that will be discussed in more detail. (Caseworker 1, lines 57-63; Caseworker 2, lines 65-70; Caseworker 4, lines 69-73; Caseworker 5, lines 85-94) Respondents complain that when communication is exclusively through technology, one does not even know who one is dealing with. For example, one participant states that it could be anyone she is communicating with and not the person who she is supposed to be supervising (Caseworker 4, lines 70-71). Another aspect is that it is much more difficult to judge the person when one communicates only sporadically and does not have intensive face-to-face contact. For example, another participant notes that previously she noticed with time when someone is rather "whiny" (Caseworker 2, line 102) and always complains about everything. Now she can notice this less well, so she does not get to know the character of the people and it is therefore also more difficult to use discretion. One participant also addresses what it is like when the person has been known for a while. She describes that if, for example, something is missing from the application, but she knows from previous applications what information would actually be provided, she then no longer chases the missing information, but approves it as it is. In doing so, she actually violates the regulations, but in order to save time, she uses her discretionary powers and her trust in the customers. (Caseworker 2, lines 59-66) In the first place, therefore, the curtailment effect prevails. Employees find it more difficult to assess their customers, which means they are not able to use their scope for judgment as well. They are more likely to cross a red line. This is primarily due to the lack of substantial information. However, there are also aspects of the enablement thesis. This is the case when the person has been part of the customer base for a long time. Then the technology does not hinder the employees, but they are still able to process cases as contact persists over these channels. Even though, they are violating regulations, their behavior is not controlled since the managers permit the discretion and there are no resources to check the employees.

One of the participants stands out from the group. He says for him, face-to-face counseling is not such an important factor in his work, and he actually likes it better the way it is now, since he has more time to process the applications. (Caseworker 3, lines 39-51) It is the same participant who also states that the security of communication is better now and that this is more crucial than the elimination of face-to-face communication. It seems that this person has a different view of the work than the other participants. The social aspect is not as important to this person as the administrative work.

To conclude this section, the second sub-research question must be answered.

- II. To what extent does the transition to non-face-to-face forms of interaction affect work execution of caseworkers?

Four of the five participants indicated that the change in communication behavior made the work more difficult and lengthier. Although there is now more time for pure processing, the entire process that used to lead to smooth processing is disrupted. Customer service is considerably restricted, and the elimination of face-to-face communication means that it is not possible to build up a closer relationship with customers. In addition, the scope for assessment is at least partially limited, which is due to the fact that it is more difficult to assess individuals, especially in the case of new customers. This leads to a poorer performance level and a worsening of the discretion available to the caseworkers.

4.3 Social Presence

Social presence This aspect refers to the media's ability to convey proximity, as described in the theory section. All interview partners state that personal contact is important to them in their work. As described earlier, proximity is important because it is dealt with sensitive topics at the workplace, and a closer relationship leads to more open interaction. This is especially necessary in counseling, because it is not just about the application, but also other topics that are related to the situation can be addressed. One interviewee notes that the work is enormously enhanced by this consultation and that one really becomes aware of what one is doing it for. For this person, it is now as if she only process numbers and data and the social aspect, the actual motivator for the work, becomes less visible. (Caseworker 2, lines 88-91)

In relation to the first variable of social presence, intimacy, it can be stated that the current communication situation for all participants, decreases the feeling of closeness and confidentiality. The content of the conversations remains mostly on superficial topics and related mainly to the processing of applications. According to the participants, this is due to the fact that no substantive conversations can arise through the telephone or by e-mail. (Caseworker 1, lines 93-95; Caseworker 5, lines 116-124) People often do not take the time to communicate with each other sensibly on the phone because other things are being done on the side. Participants report that they often do not even accept calls because they are busy with something else. (Caseworker 1, lines 73-74; Caseworker 3, lines 78-79) As a result, the content of the conversation suffers. According to theory, this is because the visual aspects of communication, i.e. facial expressions and gestures, are missing. Furthermore, in face-to-face conversations,

people take extra time to communicate with each other, so there is a clear intention to do so. The current situation does not allow a closer relationship to be built and lacks the feeling of talking to a real person. The social presence is therefore reduced.

The immediacy of communication is also an aspect of social presence. The fact that it takes longer to communicate over the phone or by e-mail than face-to-face can disrupt the feeling of closeness, so the theory goes. The participants in the study have a similar view, finding that because the distances are so long, there is no in-depth communication and no feeling of communicating with a person standing right in front of you (Caseworker 2, lines 110-113; Caseworker 5, lines 127-133). This is critical because the aspect of recognizing who you are working for suffers. Thus, delayed communication in this case also leads to a decrease in social presence. The interlocutor is no longer perceived directly, which means that employees are less able to respond to their customers. An intensive and deep communication cannot develop in such a way, which corresponds also to the assertions of the theory. Another aspect that is also clearly mentioned by the participants in this respect is the time it takes to complete the work, because it is no longer possible to fill out the applications together on site, as was already described in the previous section.

A final aspect of social presence is clarity of communication. This was already indicated in the previous section, but it is useful to analyze it again under the aspect of social presence. It was noted by participants that communication over the phone or email creates significant communication difficulties. It is often not clear what is meant, and repeated explanation is necessary. (Caseworker 4, lines 118-122; Caseworker 5, lines 137-141) As a result, the quality of communication suffers, which in turn reduces the feeling of closeness. As the theory claims, misunderstandings lead to dissatisfaction of the interlocutors with the communication and therefore there is no feeling of connectedness. This is particularly noticeable in written communication. Complex topics in particular often require a choice of words that is less easy to understand. E-mails can then not be understood, and a clarification of the problems must then be made laboriously over the phone, which leads to a double burden on the employee, who is then less satisfied with the customer and thus the relationship deteriorates (Caseworker 5, lines 139-141). According to the participants' statements, the extent of social presence is therefore also decreasing here.

Summarizing this section, the third and final sub-research question can be answered which goes as follows:

III. To what extent does the transition to non-face-to-face forms of interaction affect caseworker satisfaction with client communications?

Switching to exclusively non-face-to-face means of communication reduces satisfaction with customer communication. Employees are less aware of the other person in the communication, the topics of the conversations remain superficial, there is a time delay and there are more misunderstandings and ambiguities. This leads to a decrease in the level of social presence and thus the person opposite is less clearly perceived. As a result, the relationship between caseworkers and their clients deteriorates. So, it seems that face-to-face communication is very important for the satisfaction of the employees with the communication. Replacing channels exclusively with technology in this case has led to dissatisfaction with customer communication.

4.4 Job Satisfaction

The last item to be analyzed is job satisfaction. This aspect is analyzed in terms of how it is influenced by the other two variables, work execution and social presence. Due to the research design, it is of course not possible to establish a representative causal relationship, but the subjective perceptions can nevertheless provide information on the extent to which a connection exists for the employees, at least in this case.

As described earlier, all participants were satisfied with their work before the pandemic began. All had been working in the field for some time and there was no indication that anyone wanted to leave the profession. Since the closure, this has changed, and satisfaction has declined for all but one. In the meantime, employees have adapted to the circumstances, which means that satisfaction is no longer quite as affected, but most participants still expressed frustration (Caseworker 1, lines 68-70; Caseworker 2, lines 34-38). One important reason for this is the change in working conditions. These are, after all, relatively comprehensive and aimed primarily at customer contact. Consultation hours are no longer available and face-to-face contact is only possible in very few exceptions. This made all processes more difficult. As a result, all but one of the participants state that they are less satisfied with their job. It is particularly striking that the tediousness is so emphasized. Participants say that this back and forth in communication is sometimes so onerous that it puts such a strain on their work that they feel less likely doing it. (Caseworker 2, lines 75-81; Caseworker 4, lines 77-81) Another important aspect is that of discretion. Employees get to know their customers less well, making it harder for them to assess them, which limits their discretion. So, this also limits the flow of information that caseworkers are normally entitled to. This loss of information in turn leads to

employees feeling restricted and thus less autonomous. This also reduces job satisfaction. (Caseworker 1, lines 68-69; Caseworker 5, lines 85-94)

The other aspect is social presence. As described, many of the participants are dissatisfied with the way in which communication currently takes place. The closeness to the customers that is lost in the process is the primary reason why this dissatisfaction arises for the participants. Because intimate topics are no longer discussed, conversations are delayed, and communication is generally less clear, a closer relationship between the two parties does not develop. This aspect is then decisive for the decreased satisfaction with the job. (Caseworker 1, lines 119-122; Caseworker 2, lines 119-123; Caseworker 4, lines 127-133; Caseworker 5, lines 144-148) In the social sector in particular, it seems to be important for employees to see for whom they are doing the work and also to build up a relationship with the service recipients.

These two aspects are part of the work environment and circumstances, respectively. In the theory section, it has already been described that job satisfaction is dependent on circumstances, i.e. there is an association. In this specific case, this can be qualitatively confirmed for the four study participants. They are exposed to a changing work environment, but this happens to the disadvantage of the employees. As a result, dissatisfaction with the circumstances is experienced, which then also has an effect on the general satisfaction with the job. The theory therefore holds in this concrete case and is suitable for describing what happens in the real world. As mentioned several times, one participant stands out from the group. For him, the designed analytical model does not apply. Other aspects such as security, pure case processing and the freedom to decide for oneself whether to communicate are more important to this person than the social aspect of the work. Further research could dock here and investigate which aspects of job satisfaction are particularly important for people in the social sector in times of crisis.

4.5 Discussion

To complete the analysis, there still needs to be a discussion of the results. First of all the responses to the last question of the interview are worth mentioning. Four participants indicate that the investigated topics, i.e. changed working conditions and communication are the main reasons for the decreased work satisfaction. No one of the caseworkers mentions other aspects that are not covered by the analytical framework. This evaluation does not apply to the one person who states that there is no decrease in satisfaction.

The study design is of course not designed to produce representative results, as the case is unique, and the qualitative method was chosen for the specific study of it. The goal of the study is to understand a phenomenon by means of theories and they have been useful to gather empirical information. The analysis has shown that the theories described in the beginning are applicable and reflect aspects of this specific case. However, this case is unique because of the pandemic and the results are not easily generalized to other cases. This could work if the circumstances of the cases are similar, i.e., if social service agencies in comparable communities that were also closed to clients during the pandemic are examined. Again, one has to be careful because there are always cases that perceive the situation differently, like the one person in this study, but one can assume that in cases with similar circumstances, one would find similar results. It would be advisable to have a comparable design and also a similar interview guide for this. This is flexible, but all interviews have a common thread, as can be seen in the appendix. Where it becomes difficult is in the transfer to cases that are examined for these variables independent of the pandemic. The situation studied is a consequence of an external shock that cannot easily be reproduced in scientific experiments. In particular, the coercion factor, i.e., that contact reduction was enforced to protect health, can be replicated at most in small, time-limited experiments. The prevailing situation will not exist for the time being outside of crisis situations such as another pandemic. It is hardly in anyone's interest to run a social office entirely without social interactions, as this study has also shown.

5. Conclusion

Digitization is an ongoing multifaceted process that is fundamentally changing service delivery. The limits of this process are not yet known and many of the facets are still under-researched. One was further illuminated with this study and that is how a digitized administration behaves in times of external crisis. The pandemic has put social interaction on hold in almost all areas of social interaction, including administration. But what does this do to people in the very professions where social contact is actually necessary? This was the subject of this study and, more specifically, the following research question:

To what extent does the lack of face-to-face interaction in social service delivery affect job satisfaction in social welfare departments?

The interviews and subsequent analysis of these have shown that the pandemic has comprehensively constrained the way caseworkers work. These restrictions mean that the

worker is less free in his work and it is often more laborious. These points lead four of the five participants to say that they are less satisfied with their work. Then there is the point of social presence. The lack of proximity to customers, due to limited communication channels via technology, reduces the perceived meaningfulness of the job. What is meant by this is that caseworkers no longer see for whom services are being provided because the visual aspect of communication is missing. According to the participants, this then leads them to be less satisfied with their job and to enjoy their work less. The two variables were deeply examined for their different facets and even though no representative results for a larger population could be produced, it can be stated that in this particular case, the lack of face-to-face communication affects the job satisfaction of the employees negatively. It has also been shown that the theories are useful to gather empirical information. They are a sound tool to explain situations like this. However, the study also revealed that some theoretical aspects are lacking. For example, it was noticed in the study that especially the work constraints, i.e. the mentioned tediousness, which are caused by exclusive non-face-to-face communication, are not yet sufficiently covered theoretically. So, more research could be done in this area. One focus should be on the different communication channels and to what extent they are beneficial for what kind of work. For example, this study has shown that for simpler work, communication technology is very efficient as it allows flexibility and local independence, while for consulting it seems that face-to-face communication is often indispensable. Where exactly the boundaries are drawn of the necessity of face-to-face interaction remains to be seen, and future research should provide clear boundaries for which channels are most effective in which situations.

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