

The role of national culture in the telework adoption process in a Dutch and French division of a multinational

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative case-study on the telework adoption process in a French and Dutch establishment of an IT-multinational. The study examines to what extent neo-institutional theory and cultural theory explain the adoption process of home-based telework in these concrete cases. Drawing on semi-structured interviews and document analysis, the study examines managers' attitudes towards telework, their intentions and readiness to allow telework practices in their departments, and the actual adoption behaviour. In the Dutch establishment, telework was introduced in 2000 as a response to strong company growth. In France, telework was introduced in 2002 as part of the firm's marketing strategy. The Dutch policy was reversed in 2005 due to its abuse by employees. Consequently, top management in the Dutch establishment is strongly against the re-introduction of a formal telework policy. Informal practices, however, are turned 'a blind eye to.' In France, top management scaled-up the pilot in 2005. At present, it holds positive attitudes, although French workers should still go through a strict formal telework allowance procedure. Whereas French line managers stress the importance of control over their employees and teambuilding, Dutch line managers emphasize subordinates' accountability and autonomy. In conclusion, although home-based telework does not match well with the mind-set of French managers and employees, growing institutional pressure stimulates the French establishment to introduce more flexibility in their organisation. The Dutch case, however, shows the importance of path dependency in the adoption process. Abuse of telework programs in the past has led to top management's resistance to formal telework policies, despite the presence of ideal cultural conditions, informal practices and line managers' support.

Key words: Telework adoption; neo-institutional theory; national culture; management cognition; comparative case-study.

1. Introduction

Over the past decennia, public awareness of advantages of *telework* has increased due to the numerous academic and non-academic writings on the telework issue [1, 2, 3]. Telework can be defined as an alternative work arrangement in which employees perform tasks elsewhere that are normally done in a primary or central work place, for at least some portion of their workschedule, using electronic media to interact with others inside or outside the organisation [3]. A distinction can be made between mobile telework, self-employed telework and home-based telework. In the present study we primarily focus on the most common type, i.e., home-based telework [4]. In the remainder of the paper, home-based telework, or telehomework, will be referred to as telework. Next to teleworking according to a formal organisational policy, it can also be employed informally. In the latter case, workers spend part of their contractual hours working at home (mostly) with their supervisors' approval, but without formal organisational support [4].

Despite the well-reported advantages for organisations and workers alike -such as increased efficiency and productivity, better work concentration and motivation, fewer absences for medical appointments or minor illnesses, reduced overhead costs, increased firm's accessibility, improved organisational image and improved employees' work-life balance- penetration rates have not increased as much as expected. One of the explanations for the relatively slow growth of telework is the reluctance of managers, focussing on difficulties that may occur with regard to team work, and resulting from a loss of direct supervision, learning on the job, or data security issues [5, 6]. Particularly top managers who are in the position to introduce telework, or line managers who are in the position to judge telework requests can influence the organizations' telework policies and practices. Managers who are well-disposed towards telework, for instance, could function as telework champions. This may not only depend on the firm's characteristics influencing the 'teleworkability' of people and work activities. Individual managers may have various interpretations of the benefits and costs of telework in their organizations [7], depending on their own backgrounds, objectives and individual preferences [8, 9]. Hence, management cognition can be viewed a factor in decisions regarding the adoption of telework [10, 11].

In order to support the introduction of especially formal telework arrangements across Europe, the European Commission successfully urged social partners at the European level to sign a framework agreement on telework, imposing equal rights regarding social and working conditions for teleworkers and non-teleworkers. This type of coercive pressure [12] may lead to convergence in telework adoption across Europe. At present, however, variation in management cognition may be one of the explanations why European countries largely differ in the adoption of telework. Especially the differences in actual penetration rates between Northern and Southern European countries are striking [4, 13]. One of the leading countries in Europe is the Netherlands with a telehomework penetration rate of 20.6% of the employed population. Southern European countries, however, are lagging behind. With 4.4% of the working population working from home, France is in the lower rankings. Also the interest among individuals and organisations varies along this line [4].

Cultural factors are believed to be among the biggest factors accountable for cross-national differences in (international) Human Resource Management [14, 15]. This may also apply to the adoption of telework policies and practices [16, 17]. Studies into the influence of national culture on telework are scarce [1], but may give valuable insights into how telework can be used as an effective corporate strategy of multinationals in a globalizing economy [14], taking into account the specific national cultural context. Differences in national and

organizational cultures may affect seemingly trivial aspects of the work organisation, and therefore, should be recognized with regard to the adoption and management of HRM-practices [18, 19, 14; 20]. Of course, the effectiveness of particular HR-instruments will not only be affected by national culture, but may also depend on other contextual factors, like national legislations, employment relations and other institutional, economic and political issues [21, 15, 16, 14, 20]. An important contextual factor may be the IT-penetration level as an important factor affecting the adoption of telework [16].

The objective of this paper is to explore the impact of national culture on the process of adoption of telework by establishments in the same organizational field and experiencing similar institutional pressures in a globalizing economy. Therefore, it presents a comparative case-study on the *telework adoption process* in two establishments of an IT-multinational. We have chosen to study establishments in two countries that differ clearly with respect to national culture [18] and the uptake of telework [4]: France and the Netherlands. The study explores to what extent cultural theory helps to explain variations in the process of adoption of telework in these concrete cases. Drawing on document analysis and semi-structured interviews with line managers in the two case organisations, the study examines differences and similarities in the telework adoption process as expressed in attitudes towards telework held by management and managers, managers' articulations regarding their intentions and readiness to allow their workers to telework, and the implementation of telework policies and actual adoption behaviour [22]. In doing so, we will combine insights from institutional theory with Hofstede's writings on national cultures.

The present paper seeks to provide an empirical answer to the following research question: How has the process of adoption of telework in the French and Dutch establishment of an IT-multinational developed and how does national culture interact with institutional pressures? The research question can be divided into the following sub questions:

- What telework policies have been adopted by the French and Dutch establishments?
- How has the telework adoption processes developed in the French establishment?
- How has the telework adoption processes developed in the Dutch establishments?
- What role does national culture play in the adoption of Telework in the Dutch and French establishment? How does national culture interact with institutional pressures in the ongoing adoption processes in the French and Dutch establishments?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 The telework adoption process

The *telework adoption process* relates to how the adoption of telework has developed within the organisation and depends on the *drives* for telework and *enabling* and *constraining* factors [23]. Jenkins and Chapman [24] distinguish between four states and, based on Rogers (1995) [25], they identify some mechanisms underlying transitions from one state to the next. The four states are: the separated state, the linked state, the activated state and the adopted state. In the *separated state*, organizations, or managers, are simply not aware of, or familiar with, distance working as a new work mode, which of course, affects telework adoption (Illegems, 2001). Awareness of telework might result from internal or environmental factors. Telework practices can either result from bottom up initiatives, for instance internal institutional forces pressurized by employees, or from top down initiatives imposed by management, possibly affected by external institutional pressures. Environmental factors may be external organizations, consultants, external (government supported) sponsors, or other visible adopters (*ibid.*), the later being an important factor in both facilitating awareness [25], and bringing about a more positive attitude towards telework [26].

In the *linked state*, managers may not be aware of the full potential of telework as an innovative work mode. The transition from the linked to the *activated state*, however, may be influenced by the presence of sponsorship, perceived complexity, risk and adoption advantage [24; 25]. The support of top management, for instance, is one of the key factors in the adoption of innovations in firms, especially with regard to the introduction of formal telework policies. The grounds for the support may be complex and dependant on a range of factors [24].

In the activated state, based on their perceptions of telework, organisations and/or managers weigh costs and benefits, and shape their telework attitudes. Only when the adoption advantage suffices, adoption might be realised. Also the visibility of telework might be a factor in the adoption process [24, 25].

The *adopted state* is characterised by two variables [24]. First, management and/or managers have to declare in some form that they believe that telework is an appropriate and attractive work mode in their company. Second, this belief will need to be combined with behaviour which demonstrates acceptance of telework as an institutionalized work mode. At the organizational level, commitment to the telework practice may be reflected in a formal telework policy. At the shop floor level, acceptance may refer to whether (and how) telework is put into practice. That is, telework as an innovative work mode should be allowed at least once, and there should be ready acceptance for the proposition that it should be used again (*ibid.*).

In conclusion, there may be some iteration between the activated and the adopted states, due to changes in the perceived costs and benefits associated with telework, and, hence, changes in managers' attitudes may be induced by changes in the internal or external environments. Note that the model of Jenkins and Chapman has strong parallels with the model of planned behaviour as developed by Fishbein and Ajzen [22], and can be related to the adoption of telework in firms, i.e., managers' attitudes, intentions and behaviour towards telework in their organisation.

2.2 The role of culture in the telework adoption process

2.2.1 The role of management cognition

Managers may not be convinced of the adoption advantage, one of the most important factors affecting the adoption of innovations [25]. Generally, studies examining reasons why adoption and diffusion of telework have been slow found interest among (line) managers to be low [2]. The main arguments against teleworking may be management problems [27]. In the present study, it will be argued that managerial reluctance towards home-based telework can be reinforced by cultural factors. Some outcomes associated with telework, however, may be considered as barriers in some organisational and national contexts, but less so in others [28, 20].

2.2.2 National culture

In this section, we will discuss the influence of variation in management cognition resulting from differences in national culture on the adoption of home-based telework. Geert Hofstede is one of the pioneers in cross-cultural studies [29]. In his seminal work, he showed attitudes and behaviours towards work to differ significantly across countries [18]. As a product of socialization, culture can be defined as the collective programming of the mind that members of a group or category share and which distinguishes them from others [18]. More than organizational culture or professional culture, national culture affects how people think and act [19]. Therefore, the present study only focuses on the influence of national culture. Of course, other types of culture may also affect the adoption process. Moreover, attitudes do not only differ across, but also within national cultures, across countries or across organisations [30, 28], and typologies always present only a simplistic picture of the real world.

2.2.3 Five dimensions of national culture

According to Hofstede (1991), differences across national cultures boil down to variations with regard to five basic values, which he calls *dimensions*. The fifth dimension was added later [18]. The following dimensions allow describing aspects of national culture, and enable cross-country comparison [18, 31]:

- 1 low versus high uncertainty avoidance
- 2 low versus high power distance
- 3 individualism versus collectivism
- 4 masculinity versus femininity
- 5 long term versus short term orientation

Below, the French and Dutch national cultures are described along the lines of the five dimensions distinguished by Hofstede.

2.2.4 Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the degree to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations and, therefore, feel the need for predictability, certainty, safety and formal and informal rules [18]. France scores high on this dimension which is expressed in regulations, formal procedures, systems and rituals which take away feelings of uncertainty [20]. Consequently, French organisations are characterised by a more centralized and hierarchical governance systems [31]. This culture values the traditional work mode in

which managers and subordinates work in the same physical work site, according to a collective temporal work schedule as this allows managers to coordinate, motivate and control employees' work effort directly. This work mode also caters for the need for workers to accumulate firm specific knowledge. An enduring employment relationship makes sure that trustable workers have a shared history, and hence, shared norms and values necessary to communicate, cooperate and carry out the work. Being in the regular work place is often equalled to working, whereas being absent is not. Of course, also in French organizations, rules and regulations not always have to be put into practice [32].

In contrast to the French culture, the Dutch culture scores much lower on the uncertainty avoidance dimension. Dutch managers and workers are more likely to act without clear rules and are less likely to avoid risks. This attitude may fit in better with the use of new information and communication technologies, allowing the execution of work to be increasingly independent of time and space. Of course, also in this culture, managers may have the compulsion about needing to be together with their subordinates. Compared to the Dutch culture, however, teleworking is less likely to fit in with the French culture as teleworkers are less visible and harder to monitor, which reduces predictability [20, 28]. French workers and their managers may feel more uncomfortable with teleworking than Dutch workers and managers [33].

Summarizing, from an uncertainty avoidance perspective, it can be expected that in the French establishment, management and line managers are less likely to adopt teleworking than in the Dutch establishment, as telework can be associated with ambiguity and uncertainty and employers will be less able to control their subordinates directly. In case telework is adopted, however, it is more likely that telework will be formalised and regulated through a written policy. Through such a policy, teleworkers will be much more controlled.

2.2.5 Power distance

Power distance refers to the degree to which members of a culture expect and accept that power is unequally distributed [18]. The French culture scores high on this dimension. That is, in this culture, societal inequality and hierarchy are relatively highly valued, which is expressed in a high level of organisational centralisation, an authoritarian leadership style, formal rules, power differences and the use of status symbols [18; 20]. Telework, however, may not only engender a greater say in workers time-spatial work conditions, but also more decision-making authority and responsibility for control and enhancement of product and/or service quality. This relates to the concept of empowerment. Historically, however, there is a link between views on time and space and beliefs on industrial discipline and status hierarchy. Distance working and self-control used to go together with more authority, prestige and status and is, therefore, traditionally inappropriate for subordinates. Moreover, the enhancement of employees' autonomy or self-control may require fewer management functions. An added reason for managerial reluctance, therefore, will be that managers may also fear a loss of relevance regarding their own position. Summarising, in order to allow telework, managers have to be willing to give up power and status [34].

In French organisations, hierarchical positions and power differences are still manifested, for instance, in the distribution of office space and privileges [35]. This contributes to managers' authoritarian behaviour, which is also expected of managers by employees [18]. Also, France is characterised as a typical 'low trust culture' [36]. Mutual trust between employer and subordinates is rare which stimulates centralisation, direct monitoring and concurrent control. The Dutch culture scores significantly lower on the power distance dimension. Here, the emphasis is on cooperation, decentralisation and more egalitarian relationships between managers and employees. Of course, some people will have more

power than others, but power differences are often legitimated by practical reasons, like the need to have one contact person.

Summarizing, from a power distance perspective, it is less likely for French organisations and managers to adopt telework. Trust between employer and employees is lower. Consequently, employees will be less likely empowered to make their own decisions than in Dutch establishments.

2.2.6 Individualism versus collectivism

Individualism versus collectivism is the third dimension distinguished by Hofstede (1991). A culture can be described as individualistic when the bonds between group members are loose. A culture can be described as collectivistic when individuals are seen as part of a strong group which provides them life-long protection in exchange for unconditional loyalty [18]. The Netherlands can be characterised as a highly individualised society, which is manifested in a high degree of individual accountability (and self-interest) and autonomy [20]. Also, organizational and individual interests are more in line [37]. In cultures that are more characterised by collectivism, one would expect more group solidarity and collective responsibility, also with regard to work [19]. Individuals have less autonomy and are less likely to be held responsible for their own acts.

Telework engenders empowerment and, therefore, is more compatible with a culture that is characterized by a higher degree of individualism. In organisations that can be characterized by a high level of collectivism, people would feel less comfortable with telework practices, as workers' visibility is highly valued [20, 19]. In fact, France does not score very much lower on the individualism dimension than the Netherlands [18], which predicts not much differences with regard to the telework adoption process in this respect.

2.2.7 Masculinity versus femininity

The continuum *Masculinity versus Femininity* describes the fourth dimension as distinguished by Hofstede [18]. A masculine culture refers to a society in which gender roles clearly differ. Men are supposed to be assertive, tough and focussed on success. Women are supposed to be modest and tender, and mainly focussed on the quality of life. A society is feminine in case gender roles overlap, that is, when both men and women are tender, focus on relationships and focussed on improving the quality of life [18]. This dimension also reflects the level of assertiveness compared to modesty, and success compared to helpfulness and solidarity. The French culture scores higher on the masculinity index, as performance, assertiveness, competition and materialism are highly valued. In French organisations, these are appreciated more than social needs. The Dutch culture scores much lower on this dimension. Modesty, caring and solidarity are more highly valued. As a consequence, Dutch organisations are more focussed on relationships, whereas French organizations are more task-oriented [37].

It can be expected that the adoption of telework will be more likely in a feminine culture, like the Dutch culture, where more attention will be paid to a better quality of and balance between one's work and private lives, which telework can contribute to. In a masculine culture, like the French, performance is important, even at the expense of one's own benefits [20].

2.2.8 Short term orientation versus long term orientation

Short term orientation versus long term orientation is the fifth dimension of national culture as distinguished by Hofstede [18]. Having a short term orientation means that people focus on virtues that relate to the past and presence, for instance respect for tradition and meeting one's engagements. In a culture characterised by a long term orientation people strive for higher virtues that will be rewarded in the future, like perseverance and thrift [18]. In this fifth dimension, Eastern perseverance in the development and application of innovations is placed opposite to the Western urge for truth, immediate satisfaction and short-term results. These values are more static, whereas the values in the long-term oriented culture are more dynamic. In a long-term oriented culture, the focus is on building an enduring network during one's full career [18]. In a short-term oriented culture, values like calmness, balance, tradition and meeting engagements. In case these are too much valued, initiative, change and risk taking will be discouraged.

Table 1: Cultural differences between France and Netherlands according to Hofstede (1991)

Dimension	France	Netherlands	Differences between France and Netherlands
Power distance	68	38	-30
Uncertainty avoidance	86	53	-33
Masculinity	43	14	-29
Individualism	71	80	9
Long term orientation	39	44	5

From a short-term orientation perspective, telework could be viewed as a flexible work practice that can be used to improve the employment relation that leads to results in the short term. From a long-term orientation perspective, telework can be viewed as a means to invest in the employee in the long run, for instance, creating commitment. A culture characterised by a long term orientation is open to dynamic change and, consequently, is more likely to adopt innovations like telework, compared to cultures that are characterised by respect for tradition.

Western countries, like France and the Netherlands can be more characterised as short-term orientated. However, the two countries do not differ that much, the Netherlands being somewhat more long-term oriented. The Netherlands, therefore, may be more willing to adopt telework as a long-term investment in the commitment of employees.

The scores on the five dimensions discussed above are presented in Table 1 [18]. The comparison between the scores of the two countries shows that there are significant differences with regard to power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity, France scoring higher on these dimensions than the Netherlands. With regard to individualism and long term orientation, the two national cultures are comparable. The focus in this study will be on testing the effects of these five dimensions on the telework adoption process in two establishments of an IT-multinational in France and the Netherlands.

3. Methodology

3.1 Design

In this paper we make use of a case-study research design to test the explanatory force of cultural theory with regard to the adoption process of telehomeworking in firms. A case study research design allows us an intensive and detailed examination of the telework adoption process in its natural context, such that the interactions between relevant factors remain intact [38]. We use a so called ‘most different’ case-study design, comparing two cases of the same phenomenon in different contexts [39].

3.2 Selection of cases

The paper compares the telework adoption in two establishments of an IT multinational in the Netherlands and in France. We selected a multi-national, since many multinationals have introduced formal telework policies for their employees because of potential scale advantages [6, 40]. A multinational in the business service sector was selected, since this sector is considered to be in the forefront with regard to the introduction of telework [41]. Finally, we selected an IT company, since organizations in the IT sector are considered to hold positive attitudes towards teleworking [42]. The two cases differ with regard to their national contexts. We have chosen a French and a Dutch establishment, since these establishments represent the Northern and Southern European model in cultural values. Although both countries have signed the teleworking agreement of the European Commission, we expect them to have different cultural values regarding telework. By comparing establishments of the same company in different countries, we neutralize for the role of sector, organization, and the telework suitability of tasks performed by its personnel, and, therefore, we are able to focus on the role of national culture in the telehomework adoption process. This selection of cases allows us to test the theoretical assumptions we formulated in the theoretical section, by looking into differences and similarities in the telework adoption process.

3.3 Respondents

The two case-studies are based on ten semi-structured interviews with line managers within the French and Dutch establishment, combined with content analysis of internal documents. We chose to select managers in the middle management, since these are directly responsible for replying to employees’ telework requests. Moreover, by having a pivotal role between employees and top management, they are able to determine the adoption of telework arrangements in their particular departments. A lack of support of managers is considered to be the most important bottleneck towards a successful implementation of telework policies [43]. We obtained entrance to the organization through a formal letter to contact persons of the French and Dutch establishments. A call of the chair of the works council of the Dutch establishment helped to find five respondents for the Dutch case. A call of the HR-manager of the French department was less successful. This call only delivered two respondents in France. Therefore, three existing semi-structured interviews with French managers regarding telework conducted in 2006 were added. The seven interviews we performed ourselves were conducted in the period November 2006-May 2007. The face-to-face interviews were carried

out in the respondents' mother tongue of the respondents, which was French and Dutch, respectively, and were taped and transcribed.

3.4 Data collection and analysis

The semi-structured interviews were structured around a topic list including the following themes: the manager's personal background; the establishment's formal telework policy; the (informal) telework practice; manager's attitudes towards and evaluation of telework. Although semi-structured interviews are an appropriate method to get insight in experiences, opinions and attitudes of respondents, they are less suitable for identifying real behaviour. To increase the validity of our empirical analysis, we also studied internal documents. These provided additional information regarding the formal telework policy, the organizational goals, telework selection criteria, and telework arrangements. The internal documents on telework were provided to us by our contact persons in both establishments. We used the software program Kwalitan to support coding and interpreting the interviews and document [44]. To increase the *intersubjectivity* of our interpretations, all material was coded and analysed by at least two of the authors of this paper.

4. Results

4.1 Introduction

In this section, we present the analyses of the empirical data and additional documents. The sub questions introduced in the Introduction will guide our analyses. In Section 4.2, we will give a short description of the status of the formal telework policies that were present in the French and Dutch establishment when the interviews were conducted. In this section, we will look into sub question 1: *What telework policies have been adopted by the French and Dutch establishments?* In Section 4.3, we will present the answer to sub question 2: *How has the telework adoption process proceeded in the French establishment?* In Section 4.4, we will focus on sub question 3: *How has the telework adoption processes developed in the Dutch establishment?* Section 4.5 elaborates the sub question 4: *What role does national culture play in the telework adoption processes in the Dutch and French establishments?* We will answer this question by comparing the adoption processes along the lines of the dimensions of national culture as presented in Section 2.

4.2 Telework policies in the French and Dutch establishments

In 2003, the French establishment implemented a formal telework pilot, initially allowing a selection of 50 employees to work from home on a voluntary basis according to a formal telework contract. According to the policy, only managers ('les cadres'), for instance working in the field of engineering, marketing or administration, are given access to formal teleworking for two days per week. The teleworkers are allowed to work no longer than two days away from the office in order to prevent them from becoming socially isolated. Teleworkers are equipped with a laptop providing them long-distance access to documents

and information, based on a Virtual Private Network (VPN), RAS and WiFi. Recently, they are also equipped with a BlackBerry, depending on the tasks and their position in the organization.

Before managers can formally request access to formal telework, they have to fill out an 'auto diagnostic' questionnaire to test whether the tasks they perform and their personal characteristics are 'teleworkable' in the eyes of the company. The basic principle of telework in the French establishment, however, is said to be 'trust' between a managers and his subordinate. This trust, in turn, is grounded in performance management and regular face-to-face meetings.

In contrast to the French establishment, in 2006/2007, the Dutch establishment had no formal telework policy. In 2000, however, the Dutch establishment introduced a formal telework policy, targeted at managers and their subordinates. According to this policy, employees could sign a formal contract for a year period, in which the agreements and mutual responsibilities of the contract partners were written down. It included agreements on compensation with regard to travel and telephone expenses, technological and home-office facilities, and rules regarding the accessibility of employees. Like in the French establishment, the maximum number of teleworking days was two. Also in the Dutch establishment, line managers were in the position to grant individual workers' telework requests or not. The Dutch policy was reversed in 2005. In 2006/2007, top management was strongly against the re-introduction of a formal telework policy, although informal practices were turned 'a blind eye to.'

The picture presented above, describing the formal status of telework policies in the two establishments, deviates from our expectations, the Dutch establishment having theoretically a far more compatible culture with telework practices than the French establishment. It can be questioned how the ongoing process of telework adoption can explain this unexpected finding. Therefore, in the next subsections, we will describe the drives for the adoption of telework in the French and Dutch establishments and the adoption process after the initial introduction.

4.3 The telework adoption process in the French establishment

4.3.1 Drives for a formal telework policy

Before the introduction of the telework pilot in 2003, employees in the French establishment performed some work from home, be it on an informal basis. In fact, informal telework served as a mode to work overtime. In any case, telework was not seen as a substitute for regular office work. The introduction of the telework pilot in 2003 was grounded in the firm's marketing strategy and was focused on the visibility of the company as a global market leader in ADSL, one of the technologies underlying the spread of telework. According to our respondents, the management wanted to materialize the credo of 'practice what you preach', teleworkers of the French establishment themselves becoming ambassadors of the IT products of the firm. At the same time, however, international cooperation with firms in Europe, Asia and the US made telework a necessity, as employees' work activities were hindered by differences in geographical time zones of the organization's business partners. As the respondents stated, telework offered an answer to the problems associated with the firm's global market activities. In 2005, the HR-department requested a further adoption of telework in the French establishment. Due to the large scale re-location program, involving about 2,000 employees, workers' commuting times had expanded. In order to compensate for the extra commuting time and, in the long run, to increase organizational commitment, the firm decided

to offer the formal telework arrangement to approximately 600 additional employees. This more socially grounded argument in favour of telework was legitimated by the need of the organization to be in line with societal developments.

In conclusion, the telework policy in the French establishment has been established for five years now, and a growing number of managers have been given access to teleworking on a formal basis. In the next subsection, we will discuss the proceeding of the telework adoption process from the perspective of line managers. The focus is on managers' beliefs and actual telework practices.

4.3.2 French managers' telework beliefs

Respondents in the French establishment indicate that general awareness of telework in France is low, and the new work mode has not been adopted widely. The respondents articulate a positive attitude towards telework. They especially emphasize the rise in productivity and flexibility and cost reduction associated with telework. Moreover, they view telework as an instrument to improve their firm's image. *"People start to talk about telework as an important factor in their job decision process,"* one of the respondents said. Managers express more negative expectations with regard to the problem of coordination and control. One respondent told us: *"When a person has been working at home during the week and only comes to the office sporadically, it becomes problematic to judge the contribution of this employee."* Another disadvantage mentioned is the contact with colleagues: *"In our company, especially in France, networks of people are extremely important in order to know what is going on, to be informed about vacancies, all these ways to gather information, that is all very informal and that happens in canteens when people sit together and have their coffees, people working from home lose this type of contact."* According to another respondent, telework causes trouble with respect to bringing together team-members and to creating a team spirit: *"How can that be done when everyone is teleworking, when nobody meets."* Other negative expectations relate to the blurring of boundaries between work and family, due to the associated intensification of work. From a technological perspective, telework can cause data security problems: *"People are not alert, they use their equipment for personal and work related matters and sometimes, they forget that there are data on the mobile telephone, or the laptop that should not be distributed."*

4.3.3 Telework practices in the French establishment

The interviews show that a relative high, but unknown percentage of telework in the French establishment is performed informally, that is, not according to a formal contract. In fact, every employee is equipped with a laptop, and has been given 'remote access.' However, respondents say to have no clue with respect to how often distance working is put into practice, especially as most telework is performed in addition to employees' normal working hours. In order to be eligible for the formal telework arrangement, telework candidates have to convince their managers that there is a serious need to work from home, for instance when commuting times are long, or when work is performed during a-social hours, due to international cooperation with colleagues abroad.

4.4 The telework adoption process in the Dutch establishment

4.4.1 Drives for a formal telework policy

In the Dutch establishment, telework was introduced in 2000 as a response to strong company growth. An additional reason for the adoption of formal telework at that time was the increased pressure for telework arising from the labour market, running parallel with the internet hype. In practice, due to the lack of office space, mobile workers, having business contacts outside the organisation, were forced to work at home for one day per week. After the economic downturn of 2001, the formal telework arrangement was abolished. In 2001-2002, personnel was cut down dramatically, due to the establishment's underperformance. This led to a situation where all workers could be accommodated in the office, which took away the most important incentive for teleworking. In 2006, the works council decided to put formal telework back on the agenda, by presenting a telework proposal to top management.

4.4.2 Dutch managers' telework beliefs

Most respondents hold a positive attitude towards telework in their departments. All managers are convinced that telework would lead to a rise in productivity. An additional positive evaluation concerns the better quality of employees' work and private lives. Managers also mention cost reductions and time benefits. Moreover, they considered teleworking employees to be more creative than their non-teleworking peers.

With respect to negative effects, managers mentioned the loss of control and coordination, employees' work attitudes and the contacts with colleagues: *"One has to trust an employee very, very much, you have to agree on the conditions for telework."* Managers also mention the accessibility problem of teleworkers: *"It becomes more difficult when every one is continuously absent."* Also with regard to team work, managers consider telework a hindrance: *"It is important that employees remain part of the company, of the culture, experience the team spirit."* In addition, the loss of information was mentioned as one of the negative side effects of telework, as managers think it will get harder to exchange work experience and to communicate in an informal manner. Moreover, organizational commitment might be affected by telework: *"Someone who is always teleworking, at home, will loose the connection with the company."* Moreover, managers stress the risk of blurred boundaries between work and private life: *"The risk is that people keep on working always and everywhere."*

4.4.3 Telework practices in the Dutch establishment

After 2005, there has been no formal telework policy in the Dutch establishment. The only remains of the formal arrangement are the internet connections, allowing employees to have access to the organizational network. Informally, however, telework is flourishing, and is a more than common part of workers' daily practices. However, telework is mostly used as an *ad hoc* strategy. Like in the French establishment, telework helps to do overtime and to meet deadlines. In the Dutch establishment, however, teleworkers do work at home full days. Moreover, telework is often used when rush jobs need to be finished. At the same time, however, some respondents indicate that the 'harried' type of work does not allow telework as employees need to be accessible all the time.

4.5 The role of national culture in the telework adoption process

4.5.1 Uncertainty avoidance

With regard to the dimension of uncertainty avoidance, we expected French managers to feel less comfortable with telework than their Dutch colleagues. In principle, the Dutch culture is more supportive for the adoption of telework at the workplace as it is less directed towards control of employees and emphasizes job autonomy. At the same time, as the focus in the French culture is on rules and regulations, we expected the French establishment to have adopted a formal telework policy. Indeed our data confirms this contrast, the French telework practice being much more formalised. According to this formal policy, telework is reserved for people in management positions, and access to telework is arranged via a formal, bureaucratic procedure. In order to be eligible for formal telework, French managers have to show that they meet certain criteria with regard to their organisation capabilities and have a sense of responsibility. In contrast, in the Dutch establishment, telework is allowed to both managers and subordinates. Moreover, Dutch managers say that they strongly dislike formal telework arrangements and allowance procedures. They would rather give their employees permission to telework at an *ad hoc* basis. A telephone call or an e-mail of the employee to the manager suffices to arrange for telework. Managers trust that their employees perform their tasks correctly. *“The atmosphere in the Dutch establishment is quite self-supporting. A boss who is telling you on Monday what you should have performed on Friday is out of the question.”* Access to telework is only denied when a manager notices that a subordinate abuses the telework arrangements in their personal interest. So, whereas French line managers stress the importance of formal control over their employees, Dutch line managers emphasize subordinates’ accountability and autonomy.

4.5.2 Power distance

Also with regard to the dimension of power distance, the data confirm our theoretical expectations, although in the French situation mentality is shifting away from traditional norms and values. We expected power distances to be more manifested in the French establishment than in the Dutch. As telework allows employees more autonomy and self-control which is often associated with a higher status, we expect French managers to be less willing to allow their subordinates this privilege than their Dutch colleagues. *“Corporate culture in France is generally a bit hierarchical. To be there, to be present is much more important in France than it is in the USA”* Indeed, French managers reserve formal telework arrangements for a selected group of managers that already had a higher status in the working hierarchy, while the Dutch managers give access to telework to both managers and subordinates. Power distances are not articulated very explicitly in the Netherlands, although also Dutch managers wish to know where all the members of the team are working: *“If they need it, people are allowed to decide it themselves. I just need to be informed.”*

Nevertheless, also in France, some subordinate jobs are allowed to work away from the office for practical reasons. Especially employees in sales are considered to have the need to be mobile, working at a customer’s or at home. Strikingly, however, the process of globalisation seems to have softened some of the hierarchical distances that characterised the French work organization. French managers work in international teams and, therefore, have to be in contact with teams members situated in Asia and the United States through video

conferencing or phone, mostly at a-typical hours. Within this international business context, control is based on results rather than on direct monitoring. *“You have to be very creative and flexible to get people adjusting to the organisational way of behaviour and at the same time adjust to their regional behaviour.”*

4.5.3 Individualism versus collectivism

With regard to the dimension of individualism versus collectivism, we expect the French to be more directed towards collectivism than the Dutch, although the differences are small and we expected that it should not cause much difference in the telework adoption process. The empirical material, however, shows larger differences in culture than we expected. In France, physical presence in the workplace is considered very important for reasons of team building. French managers emphasize the importance of informal meetings, for instance, during coffee breaks. Moreover, the French company has a vested tradition of having lunch together, which includes a warm meal in a restaurant: *“It is very pleasant to have lunch with your colleagues, or to have a coffee break with the team. In fact, social life within the organization discourages the introduction of telework.”* French managers articulate their worries with respect to the risk of losing team spirit in case telework would be encouraged. In the Dutch interviews, the issue of team building is also emphasized, however, in a different vein. Dutch managers approach their subordinates as empowered individuals who are responsible for their own tasks. They underline the importance of trust in individuals’ self-discipline. With regard to team building, Dutch managers fear that colleagues might think that teleworkers are not working properly. Strikingly, Dutch managers see it as their responsibility to enervate such suspicions, in order to uphold the team spirit: *“A problem that would rise is that some people see that other people are working at home frequently and ask me: “is he really working at home or not?”*

4.5.4 Masculinity versus femininity

Due to the typical masculine French culture, we expected the French establishment to be less likely than the Dutch to have adopted telework practices. The Dutch culture, with more overlap between gender roles, would be more supportive towards helping employees to find a balance between one’s work and private lives, and, hence, probably also more supportive towards telework. The empirical data, however, does not support this expectation. Strikingly, the balance between work and private life was more of an issue in the French interviews than in the Dutch. French managers articulated the need to separate and protect private life from work. The data show that French national culture supports a strict division between work and private life. According to French managers, the weekend should be reserved for family activities: *“To the French, it is clear that the weekend is really the end of the week and that you are only allowed to call people in a case of emergency.”*

The Dutch managers articulate fewer considerations regarding the balance between work and private life. In their views, working from is a practical way to avoid traffic jams and to reduce travel time. However, telework also allows to be accessible for work at a-typical hours, for example, for being on call for services during the night. Protection of private time is definitely not an issue. In fact, managers in both countries consider the care for dependent children as a hindrance for effective teleworking. As a Dutch manager says: *“If a customer is calling and needs you, you have to be there because you are at work. And you are not baby-sitting.”*

4.5.5 Short term versus long term orientation

The final dimension of national culture we considered was short term orientation versus long term orientation. Both the Netherlands and France would be considered to have a short term orientation. We would expect both French and Dutch managers to have respect for tradition and to discourage initiative and change. The data do not support this classification. Both French and Dutch managers are open towards the introduction of telework in their firms, as they see it as way to respond to international market needs. Although short time profit considerations are part of the motives of managers, they also see telework as a way to create an international community of workers, and, in the French case, organizational commitment in the longer run.

4.6 Convergence versus divergence

Institutional theory [12] discusses several institutional pressures possibly leading to isomorphism, also with regard to HR-practices. Cultural theory focuses on difference in national cultures that may enable or hinder the introduction or application of new HR-policies, or the uptake of innovative work modes, like telework policies and practices. In our multiple case study, we have seen that in the ongoing telework adoption processes in both establishments, the multinational's internationally oriented business culture indeed interacts with the two national cultures, explaining variation in the dynamics with regard to the telework adoption processes. On the one hand, the globalisation process has its own logic and leads to convergence with regard to telework adoption across national cultures. Cooperation between departments in the United States, Asia and Europe demands communication, often mediated by IT at a-typical hours. The availability of electronic tools like GSM, e-mail and electronic meeting systems also allows managers to communicate directly to colleagues, also when they are not working in their main offices. Moreover, time zone differences between business locations demand communication at a-typical hours, like early in the morning, or late in the evening. Technological developments may even lead an own life, as people use technological novelties in its own right. Experimental use by some makes what once was a novelty, or a luxury a necessity: *"You simply cannot say: 'I don't have the information. I was not in the office so I am not informed.' Information is supplied via the mobile phone, via e-mail and via the database. So at present, everyone is supposed to have direct information regardless of where one is situated."*

Both globalisation and technological developments have been supportive to the adoption of telework practices in both establishments. On the basis of Hofstede's classification of national cultures [18], however, we expected the Dutch establishment to be more supportive towards the introduction of telework practices than the French establishment. Our empirical data, however, show that telework has become gradually accepted in France by top management, be it in a superficial way. Access is only given to managers and the selection procedures and criteria are strict. Informal telework means that workers conduct overtime at home, which does not lead to a reduction of employees' face-time during office hours. The French respondents themselves explain the adoption of formal and informal telework practices by referring to the self-evident dominance of international business rules, which demand workers' permanent accessibility. *"With my Chinese partners, for example, I prefer to have business contact until 12.00 AM. At some days, this means that I have to start working at five o'clock in the morning because of an interview."* French managers seem to accept that this international culture of permanent accessibility is gradually replacing national cultural rules regarding the strict division between work and family life. In addition, our empirical data also show mimetic pressures to play a role in the adoption process. In the

narratives of the respondents, it showed that some national cultures act upon the local telework adoption processes as role models. Especially in the French establishment, managers emphasized the importance of the United States as a role model with regard to flexibility and business norms. French managers also referred to the Belgian representative of the particular multinational under study as a role model and talked about telework adoption in this establishment in an admiring fashion. In the multinational under study, the management culture is characterised as decentralized, and the introduction of telework is left to local establishments. Organizational change is supported via encouraging establishments to be in touch with each other, rather than by directly enforcing it through strict rules and regulations. Contact with key persons in the Belgian establishment is encouraged in order to stimulate the introduction of telework pilots in other establishments. *“In general, the Belgian establishment is our biggest support. So you can see that if other establishments are adopting a telework project, for example in Spain or in France, they have very good contacts with the Belgian people which started the Belgian project.”*

In the Dutch establishment, informal telework has become a normal way of working for both managers and their subordinates. One of the striking features of the adoption process in the Dutch establishment, however, was the abolishment of the former formal telework policy and top management’s resistance to re-introduce formal telework practices. The lack of formal telework practices can neither be explained by the Dutch cultural orientation, as telework fits in very well with the Dutch national culture, and they also used to have a formal policy, nor by the ongoing process of globalisation which also affects Dutch employees’ temporal work location. Next to national culture and globalisation, the concept of path-dependency can be applied in order to explain convergence and divergence in the telework adoption processes in the two cases. Our case-study shows that the development of the telework adoption process in the Netherlands explains the current lack of enthusiasm for formal teleworking amongst top management. During the economic upswing in 2000, top management introduced a formal telework policy in answer to the prevalent accommodation problems the company faces as a result of company growth. Some employees, however, abused the trust that was given to them. Moreover, social cohesion and commitment to the organisation vanished. When staff was reduced from 1,000 to 250 employees, the remaining staff was told to return to the main office again, and the formal telework policy was abolished. In the interviews, Dutch managers recalled several events that grounded the management’s decision, like teleworking employees not being available for work and refusing to come to the office during office hours, because of private obligations and activities that were not agreed upon by their managers. They refer to these examples to show that a culture of ‘laissez faire’ should be prevented and should be a concern for both top management and individual line managers.

5. In conclusion

In this concluding section, we refer to the theoretical expectations we formulated in Section 2. We wanted to test the theoretical assumptions regarding the role of culture in the adoption process of teleworking. Although home-based telework does not match well with the mind-set of French managers, growing institutional pressure stimulates the French establishment to introduce more flexibility in their organisation. In the Dutch situation the opposite is the case. Although home-based telework matches very well with the mind-set of Dutch managers, abuse of telework programs in the past has led top management to hold a negative attitude towards a formal telework policy. On the one hand, globalisation and technological

developments lead to convergence with respect to the telework practice, although national culture definitely plays a role with regard to the diffusion of telework in the organisation. On the other hand, the Dutch case shows the importance of path dependency in the adoption of a formal telework policy.

Our data show that growing international cooperation and competition affects both management cognition and practices. In an ideological sense, the United States are seen as a role model, to which national cultures have to adapt their norms and values. The Belgian establishment functions as a role model for how European companies can implement these values. It is not clear, however, why the Belgian establishment of this international plays such an important role. Additional research is needed to find out whether the European Telework Agreement plays a role in this regard. Also at a practical level, cooperation between companies in different countries, requests the use of electronic support. Communication with partners in the United States and Asia can only take place via e-mail, video conferencing and GSM. Time zone differences between different locations ask for communication during periods early in the morning or late at evening, when employees usually are at home.

Finally, our material shows the importance of the particular history of telework in a company. We refer to this mechanism with the term path dependency. Organisations can be seen as learning communities; experiences in the past influence attitudes in the present and expectations about the future. As the Dutch case shows, negative experiences with telework in the past may negatively influence managers' attitudes and behaviour, notwithstanding the positive support of both national culture, as articulated by line managers, and institutional pressure.

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