

## Digital Bridges and Social Ties: Middling Migrants' Telework Experiences Across the Covid-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated digital work practices and reshaped the professional and social lives of highly skilled middling migrants. While research has assessed telework during the crisis, less is known about how digitally mediated work experiences evolved across the pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic phases, and how those experiences influenced social ties, mobility opportunities, and institutional engagement. This study explored these dynamics using 23 semi-structured interviews with Portuguese and Brazilian teleworkers employed by globalized firms, reviewing their telework experiences across all three phases. The findings reveal that digital mediation served as a double-edged sword: It acted as a bridge to transnational networks, while simultaneously limiting local integration and profound relationships. Comparative analysis between middling migrants and non-middling migrant teleworkers demonstrates that the pandemic intensified the ambivalence of the middling condition, transforming the workplace social ties and anchoring professionals' sense of belonging to digital visibility. In the post-pandemic landscape, telework has solidified into a stratified practice, facilitating stable digital inclusion for some while entrenching the peripheral status of others. This article contributes to theories of middling migration and digital transnationalism by introducing the concept of differential digital permeability, where the effect of digital tools varies according to geographical and biographical positioning. It concludes with implications for corporations operating across national contexts, highlighting the need for policies that foster genuine inclusion in hybrid work environments.

### Keywords

middling migrants; post-pandemic work; social ties; telework

## 1. Introduction

Technology has long shaped how work is performed, making it a central concern in the sociology of work (Edgell et al., 2015; Edwards, 2014). Developments in digital and networked systems have extended this influence beyond industrial labor to the service and knowledge sectors, enabling the globalization of work while intensifying power, inequality, and relational dynamics issues (Fussey & Roth, 2020; Lupton, 2015; Marres, 2017). These dynamics became especially visible during the Covid-19 pandemic, since they forced organizations across different sectors to adopt telework at an unprecedented scale, profoundly altering everyday work interactions, visibility, and the boundaries between professional and personal life (Labrecque et al., 2023; Mullins et al., 2022). While telework was previously concentrated in information and communication technologies (ICT)-related and highly educated occupations (Haider & Anwar, 2023; Milasi et al., 2021), the pandemic transformed it into a generalized and lasting mode of work, reshaping not only work organization but also the formation, maintenance, and experience of workplace relations.

Research on migration and mobility has long emphasized the role of social ties in facilitating employment and settlement, including among skilled migrants (Barwick, 2022). Much of this literature, however, has focused on low- and medium-skilled migrants, highlighting the instrumental role of strong ties and ethnic networks in labor market entry and integration (Avalos, 2019; McCollum & Apsite-Berina, 2015). Although social ties are also crucial for middling migrants, existing research suggests that these migrants often face particular challenges in developing meaningful personal relationships at work, despite relatively easier access to professional networks (Habti, 2021). What remains underexplored is how these dynamics unfold under conditions of telework, particularly during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, and how digitally mediated work reshapes both professional and personal workplace relationships, with consequences for social inclusion and mobility.

These developments point to the need to examine telework not merely as a technological or organizational arrangement, but as a social process that reshapes workplace relationships under conditions of digitally mediated interaction. This is particularly relevant for middling migrants, whose professional trajectories and social embeddedness are already characterized by structural ambivalence and constrained opportunities for relational inclusion.

This article sustains that the telework experience of middling migrants during the Covid-19 pandemic ought to be reviewed at the intersection of their structurally ambivalent position in transnational labor markets, the dual nature of their workplace social ties (instrumental networks versus relational embeddedness), and the forced digital mediation of all workplace interactions. Focusing on the social ties, we assess how the collapse of physical co-presence reconfigured the possibilities for building and maintaining close, meaningful, and trust-based professional relationships, identity formation, and personal well-being; we further question whether digital tools bridged relational gaps or exacerbated the existing insecurities of the middling condition.

In this article, telework is understood broadly as a set of ICT-enabled work arrangements in which tasks are performed outside the employer's premises, encompassing hybrid, mobile, and cross-border forms of work (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Di Martino & Wirth, 1990). This conception includes, but is not limited to, remote work arrangements in which employees are not expected to maintain regular physical presence in a central workplace (Pfeffer & Baron, 1988).

Building on this analytical perspective, this article investigates how telework across the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped the workplace social relationships and the meanings attached to them by teleworkers, including current and pre-pandemic middling migrants. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted across the three pandemic phases, we assess how digitally mediated work both enables and constrains relational practices in the workplace. The analysis draws on interviews performed with Portuguese and Brazilian professionals employed in firms operating across multiple national contexts. These cases provide an analytically coherent setting for assessing digitally mediated work and mobility, considering that participants are embedded in transnational labor markets and professional circuits that structure everyday practices across national boundaries; in addition, the participants shared a common language that enabled interviews to be conducted in Portuguese. This article provides empirically qualitative insights into how telework transforms workplace interactions, particularly for professionals with middling migration experience. Theoretically, it advances debates on the social meaning of work and relational sociology by foregrounding the interpretative dimensions of digitally mediated workplace ties. From a policy perspective, the article highlights how organizational and mobility policies intersect with telework practices, shaping the relational inclusion of middling migrants in transnational labor markets.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *Middling Migrants, Skilled Mobility, and Social Ties*

Middling migrant research can be situated within the broader transnationalism literature, which conceptualizes migration as being embedded in sustained cross-border ties and practices (Schiller et al., 1992, 1995). It aligns with Faist's notion of transnational social spaces, emphasizing the networks and institutions that connect migrants across borders and give continuity to their lives despite territorial dispersion (Faist, 1998, 2000). While the concept of middling migration has been used in different ways across the literature (Robertson, 2021), it points to migrants whose mobility cannot be reduced only to an economy-induced displacement, since it involves socially and relationally embedded aspirations and practices in transnational contexts.

In this article, middling migrants are understood as tertiary-educated professionals who navigate global labor markets outside the protected circuits of corporate expatriates or the most precarious segments of low-skilled migration. This group is characterized by structural ambivalence: They possess significant cultural capital and agency, yet experience professional insecurity, conditional integration, and a precarious sense of belonging (Ang, 2023; Skey, 2018). Although their mobility is frequently motivated by career advancement and lifestyle aspirations (Barwick, 2022), they encounter systemic barriers such as the devaluation of foreign credentials and deskilling, leading to differentiated inclusion (Mendoza, 2022; Yang, 2022). This condition positions them in an in-between space, across uneven transnational socio-economic structures (Ang, 2023), where their professional trajectories are uncertain and their social integration is often partial.

In this framework, social ties are understood as a critical resource. The literature on skilled and middling migration has predominantly addressed these ties through an instrumental lens, framing them as professional networks that facilitate labor market entry, provide local knowledge, and help navigate bureaucratic systems (Barwick, 2022; Conradson & Latham, 2005). This perspective aligns with broader migration studies that highlight the role of strong ties and ethnic networks to help settlement (Avalos, 2019; McCollum & Apsite-Berina, 2015). For middling migrants, however, the picture is nuanced. While they may

have relatively easier access to professional networks, research suggests they often face significant challenges in developing deeper, meaningful personal relationships at work, which are crucial for a sense of embeddedness and belonging (Habti, 2021). This condition points to an existing gap between instrumental connectivity and relational integration.

The relational and affective dimensions of social ties, the informal collegiality, mentorship, and everyday workplace personal interactions that foster professional identity and emotional support remain underexplored in the middling migration literature. These dimensions constitute what can be termed relational embeddedness, which is vital for understanding one's position and well-being in a new society, especially for those in ambivalent social positions (Skey, 2018). The pandemic-induced shift to telework represents a critical juncture for examining this gap. By relocating the workplace to home or other settings, telework disrupted the primary site where both instrumental networking and the gradual cultivation of relational ties typically occur. This forced a near-total reliance on digital mediation for workplace interactions.

Concurrently, migration research has undergone a digital turn, assessing how ICT fundamentally reshapes transnational social fields and everyday practices. Rather than simply facilitating connectivity, digital tools restructure how migrants maintain intimate familial bonds, access diaspora communities, and navigate host societies, creating hybrid spaces that blur boundaries between here and there (Brandhorst, 2024; Marques & Calla Jesús, 2025). For middling migrants, digital tools are an integral part of their professional life (e.g., LinkedIn) and personal connectivity; however, digital effects are uneven, conditioning not only participation but also the quality and depth of social relations. The pandemic acted as a powerful accelerant of this digital mediation, making it the primary infrastructure for work and social interaction; it also helped to raise questions about how digitally mediated environments reconfigure relational embeddedness under conditions of unequal positioning.

Building on the debates in digital inequality, this article introduces the concept of differential digital permeability to capture how digital tools generate uneven effects across migrant populations. Rather than operating through a binary logic of access or exclusion, digital technologies permeate working lives to varying degrees, shaped by the intersection of geographical positioning and biographical trajectories. The same technology may therefore profoundly reshape some migrants' work trajectories while remaining marginal to others, even under similar conditions of use.

Differential digital permeability foregrounds the contingent and situated nature of digital mediation in migration experiences. While research on digital inequality evidences disparities in access, skills, and outcomes (Hargittai, 2002; van Dijk, 2005), and platform hierarchy approaches highlight power asymmetries embedded in platform architectures (Schor et al., 2020; van Doorn, 2017), differential digital permeability shifts attention to how digital tools are unevenly absorbed into migrants' lives.

The literature reviewed supports a conceptual framework that links the structurally ambivalent position of middling migrants, the dual character of workplace social ties, and the reconfiguring effects of digital mediation. Rather than treating telework as neutral, the framework conceptualizes digitally mediated work as a relational process that can re-stratify access to social connections across migrant trajectories. From this perspective, digitally mediated work is expected not only to redistribute opportunities for connectivity, but also to intensify the ambivalent position of middling migrants by unevenly reshaping access to relational resources at work.

## 2.2. Middling Migrants' Telework Before, During, and After the Pandemic

The evolution of telework has been closely intertwined with the rise of the knowledge economy and advancements in digital infrastructure, gradually transforming organizational structures and individual work aspirations (Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2006). Prior to 2020, telework remained a niche practice, predominantly adopted in sectors like ICT, consultancy, and education, and was often adopted based on issues of flexibility, work–life balance, and the challenges of maintaining productivity and collaboration at a distance (Di Martino & Wirth, 1990; Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2006).

The pandemic triggered a forced, large-scale shift to teleworking across knowledge-based and service sectors, abruptly transforming it from a selective arrangement into the primary mode of work for millions of professionals globally. This shift generated a surge of research, through the lenses of productivity, wellbeing, work–life balance, and communication (Ameen et al., 2023; Criscuolo et al., 2023; Giaque et al., 2022; Labrecque et al., 2023). Crucially, studies began to reveal how the specific conditions of pandemic lockdowns, such as restrictions on mobility and social contact, fundamentally altered the experience of telework, intensifying issues of fatigue, isolation, and the blurring of boundaries (Bennett et al., 2021; Parra et al., 2022; Shockley et al., 2021). Related research has also shown that the rapid expansion of telework during the pandemic exacerbated existing migrant inequalities, particularly through unequal access to digital infrastructures and markets (Andrejuk, 2022). Research also highlighted the critical role of digital tools, not only for task performance, but also for sustaining a sense of connection and belonging. In this regard, videoconferencing fatigue emerged as a distinct phenomenon linked to the quality of mediated interaction (Bennett et al., 2021). During the pandemic, telework also drew attention to digital nomads, workers who combine remote employment with cross-border mobility. Although often portrayed as flexible and privileged, digital nomadism is uneven and shaped by legal, class, and gendered constraints (Cook, 2023; Mancinelli, 2020). The telework literature provides context for mobile, digitally mediated work without conflating it with middling migrants' experiences.

In the post-pandemic period—defined here as beginning with the World Health Organization's 5 May 2023 declaration of the end of the Covid-19 global health emergency—telework has become a consolidated, hybrid feature of many knowledge economies. Early post-pandemic research indicates a legislative and organizational telework normalization; companies' employees actually perceived benefits from these changes (Türkeş et al., 2024). However, empirical studies capturing longitudinal experiences across all three pandemic phases—before, during, and after the pandemic—remain scarce. This gap is significant, as it limits our understanding of the long-term, transformative effects of this shift in work practices, relational dynamics, and employees' behavior.

For middling migrants, this telework trajectory intersects with their specific vulnerabilities and social dynamics in profound ways. The pre-pandemic telework niche status likely meant that only certain privileged professionals within this group had access to such arrangements. The pandemic's widespread and, in some sectors, compulsory shift to telework suddenly placed all middling migrants in a digitally mediated work environment, irrespective of their industry or seniority. This involved displacing the workplace from the office, which was a key site for informal networking and relational embeddedness (crucial yet often challenging for this group to establish), to home or other locations (Habti, 2021). Consequently, the pandemic-era research themes of digital fatigue, isolation, and the struggle for effective communication and

belonging take on heightened significance for migrants already navigating an ambivalent position in the labor market and society (Ang, 2023; Skey, 2018).

Therefore, this article positions middling migrants' telework experiences within this three-phase chronology, assessing how the sudden shift to, and subsequent evolution of, digitally mediated work reconfigured the social fabric of their professional lives. By comparing experiences across these phases, the study aims to disentangle the effects of telework as a work arrangement from the unique circumstantial pressures of the pandemic crisis. This allows for a nuanced analysis of whether digital tools ultimately acted as "bridges" that helped sustain and even forge the instrumental and relational ties vital for middling migrants, or as barriers that exacerbated their professional insecurities and social isolation in a transnational context.

### 3. Methods

This study employs a qualitative, retrospective design based on in-depth semi-structured interviews. This approach was chosen to reconstruct and compare how middling professionals experienced and ascribed meaning to their workplace's social relationships across three distinct temporal phases: before, during, and after the acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. The design uses retrospective accounts to trace perceived transformations in relational practices, digital mediation, and professional belonging, allowing an analysis of how telework normalization reconfigured work's social fabric for individuals in different positions within global labor flows. A purposive snowball sampling strategy (Bryman, 2012) was used to recruit participants. The inclusion criteria required participants to be Portuguese or Brazilian professionals, to have worked in globalized firms (defined as multinational corporations or firms with a significant international clientele/team structure), and to have experienced teleworking from home before, during, and after the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was originally designed to examine telework trajectories across the Covid-19 pandemic rather than migration per se. Migration status was not an inclusion criterion, but emerged inductively from the sample, enabling a comparative analysis of how digitally mediated work intersects with different geographical locations and biographical trajectories. A total of 23 participants were interviewed, a sample size sufficient to reach thematic saturation.

The sample was analytically organized ex post to reflect a spectrum of middling trajectories: professionals based in their home country (Portugal or Brazil) with no migration experience ( $n = 13$ ), professionals physically located abroad in a host country ( $n = 6$ ), and professionals based in their home country with significant past international work experience (defined as formal employment abroad for one year or more;  $n = 4$ ). Although small, this last group was included in this article to enrich the analysis of transnational careers and their relationship to digitally mediated work.

This structure facilitates a comparative examination of how the middling condition, characterized by the ambivalence of professional privilege and insecurity, is experienced from different geographical and biographical positions. It implements the concept of differential digital permeability by assessing how telework is unevenly absorbed into everyday work practices and relationships, reshaping physical migration for career advancement. The inclusion of both Portuguese and Brazilian professionals provides insight into shared yet differentiated positioning within global labor markets and transnational professional circuits. The participants' characteristics are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Nationality	Brazilian	14 (60.9%)
	Portuguese	9 (39.1%)
Current location	Home country (no migration experience)	13 (56.5%)
	Currently abroad	6 (26.1%)
	Home country (with past international experience)*	4 (17.4%)
Sex	Female	11 (47.8%)
	Male	12 (52.2%)
Current occupation	ICT	9 (39.1%)
	Management/Consulting	8 (34.8%)
	Commercial/Sales	3 (13.0%)
	Human Resources/Communication	3 (13.0%)

Note: \* Participants in the past-international experience category were residing in their home country at the time of the interview but had prior international work or migration experience.

Data were collected between April and July 2023 through online semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom; each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Given the retrospective focus, the interview guide incorporated timeline and critical incident techniques to aid in the reconstruction and to mitigate recall bias. The guide explored: (a) practical details of the participants' telework setup and daily routine before, during, and after the pandemic; (b) their views on company rules and their managers' approaches to telework in each phase; and (c) the difficulties they faced, the solutions they found, and how their overall feelings about telework changed over time. The guide had been pilot-tested with two professionals meeting the sample criteria and revised based on their feedback. All participants provided audio-recorded informed consent at the interview outset, and a subsequent signed electronic consent form.

The study complied with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (2017). The institutional ethics committee determined that the investigation bore minimal risks and waived the requirement for a full formal submission. Confidentiality was ensured by using anonymized codes (e.g., P1, P2) in transcripts and reporting; raw data access was restricted to the research team.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved (a) deep familiarization with the data; (b) inductive generation of initial codes focused on social interactions, technology use, and feelings of (dis)connection; (c) development of candidate themes by collating codes and examining patterns across the three temporal phases and three sample groups; and (d) iterative review and refinement of themes. The MAXQDA 24 software supported data organization and coding. To enhance rigor, the research team engaged in collaborative coding discussions and maintained reflexive memos to document interpretive decisions.

## 4. Results

The analysis of the professionals' telework experience reveals how the pandemic-induced shift to telework reconfigured the social and relational dimensions of their careers. In this section we trace how differential

digital permeability is expressed across groups, since the same digital infrastructure was absorbed into the individuals' working domains with unequal consequences depending on the participants' geographical location and biographical trajectories. The findings were structured considering the participants' experience before, during, and after the pandemic, comparing home-based participants ( $n = 13$ ), abroad-based participants ( $n = 6$ ), and a smaller group of past-international participants residing in their home country at the time of interview ( $n = 4$ ).

#### 4.1. Before the Pandemic

The pre-pandemic telework experience was typically a limited privilege or occasional flexibility, rather than a default mode for most participants, particularly those who were home-based and abroad-based. Telework was generally used one or two days per week and was often framed as a perk aiming at work-life balance, since it avoids commuting or helps accommodate family needs. As one participant explained, "Before the pandemic, telework was uncommon; as a private banking manager, most work was client-facing, with occasional remote calls made only for logistical convenience rather than as a regular practice" (P8, male, Portuguese, home-based). There were, however, notable exceptions linked to occupational roles. Some participants working in ICT reported much higher levels of telework even before the pandemic. As one ICT professional recalled:

As an ICT professional, I think that most of the jobs I've had have ended up, in one way or another, being remote. Even when I had an on-site position, I usually had a fair amount of flexibility, depending on the situation and whenever telework was feasible. There was only a short period when I worked fully in-person, in 2018. (P5, male, Brazilian, abroad-based in Portugal)

At the same time, telework was not a universal practice even within ICT activities, as another ICT professional emphasized: "It was pretty rare for me to work from home. I can't really say how often; if I had some kind of commitment, I could work from home, but even then, it was usually because of a production incident" (P9, male, Portuguese, abroad-based in Brazil). These accounts illustrate low digital permeability, with digital tools remaining peripheral to everyday work practices and professional identities.

More broadly, before the pandemic, employment in internationally oriented firms involved several forms of interpersonal and cross-border connectivity. For most participants, work with organizations or clients located in other countries relied on travel, formal reporting lines, and supplementary digital tools, rather than sustained remote collaboration. One participant described this hybrid and transitional form of telework as follows:

Even before 2017, at the company I worked for, I traveled a lot on business. So, when I was staying in hotels, between meetings or clients' visits, that was a kind of telework; I was still working, just remotely connected rather than in the office. In 2017, this became a regular reality for me because I was the only employee in Latin America for that company. The company was based in Israel, I was in São Paulo, and I had to work with clients across Latin America while coordinating with the back office in Israel and the support team in India. (P3, male, Brazilian, home-based)

Participants frequently described that despite working in transnational organizational settings, their sense of professional belonging was shaped less by a shared global culture than by locally embedded norms of

control and trust: “In the United States, telework is standard practice for the company, since it’s an American-based firm. In Brazil, however, they were more reluctant to allow it, partly because they worried that Brazilian employees wouldn’t actually work” (P9, male, Portuguese, abroad-based in Brazil). This account reflects how transnational work was filtered through national organizational expectations, enhancing identification with local offices rather than with a coherent transnational professional community. For abroad-based participants, ambivalence stemmed from market-segmented, digitally coordinated work roles, rather than due to residence duration, legal status, or discrimination.

For past-international participants, the pre-pandemic period was not an introduction to telework but rather its long-term normalization as a strategic tool for sustaining a transnational career. Given the small size of this group ( $n = 4$ ), the following observations ought to be interpreted cautiously. They are intended to illustrate analytically meaningful trajectories. They don’t represent a general pattern among middling professionals. Unlike home-based and abroad-based participants, telework functioned as the foundational infrastructure of their professional trajectories. One participant’s narrative shows that middling mobility was already digitally mediated well before 2020:

We are always talking about the period before the pandemic. [Teleworking was always the case with] small, medium-sized companies that, in practice, gave the impression that they wanted to take risks in the market, wanted to be different, wanted to innovate, and wanted to do something different from other companies. And they were very, very concerned about the well-being of their employees, about keeping them motivated and focused. (P6, female, Portuguese, past-international)

This participant’s telework practice was intrinsically linked to her migration trajectory: first to maintain economic ties and professional identity with Portugal after moving to the Netherlands, and later to work for a firm in a third country (Mozambique). This case illustrates a form of high digital permeability, enabling portfolio mobility across countries. As a result, when the pandemic led to widespread shifts to telework, participants with high digital permeability were not adapting to a new reality but watching others adapt to what was their normal reality. For them, the pandemic functioned less as a rupture than as an acceleration of an already digitized transnational work style, positioning them advantageously in the post-crisis landscape.

#### **4.2. During the Pandemic**

The pandemic-induced shift to telework reconfigured the social and relational dimensions of work for middling professionals, with experiences varying sharply by geographical and biographical positioning.

Participants consistently contrasted the pre-pandemic period of spontaneous face-to-face interactions that fostered trust and closeness with the pandemic reality of digitally mediated work. They emphasized their growing difficulties in building new connections, describing workplace relationships as increasingly transactional and less trust-based.

Although the erosion of informal workplace ties was widespread, its consequences differed across groups. Home-based and past-international participants framed this loss primarily as a decline in workplace culture and camaraderie (P1 and P21, Brazilian men, home-based): “In the company I work for now, I practically never see my colleagues in person. I never greeted them; I never had that contact. It’s a kind of strange thing” (P1,

male, Brazilian, home-based); “I think these friendships between co-workers, going out for drinks, somehow have ended. I feel like it’s very difficult right now, even without a pandemic” (P1, male, Brazilian, home-based).

For abroad-based participants, the challenge was more acute: Their isolation was not only social but also geographical and cultural, making digital tools the primary vehicle for integration in a foreign context. Professionals abroad in Spain and in Portugal (P11, Brazilian female, abroad-based in Spain; P5, Brazilian male, abroad-based in Portugal) faced the compounded difficulty of building networks remotely in environments lacking informal relational “glue.” In these cases, digital tools were highly permeable but not empowering, helping to institutionalize distance and peripheral status. Meanwhile, a participant with past experience in Mozambique and the Netherlands (P6, female, Portuguese, past-international) could leverage memories of strong ties in the past, which contrasted sharply with the transactional nature of her current digital interactions in Portugal, which heightened her sense of relational deficit.

Digital platforms were indispensable for telework during the pandemic but produced contradictory outcomes. While enabling continuity, they also fragmented interaction into scheduled exchanges that limited spontaneous collaboration. For home-based participants, videoconferencing often enhanced inclusion in global corporate structures, though at the cost of digital overload: “Then I realized that I could adjust the team meetings. So today I do it, with the team sessions once a week and the individual sessions every 15 days. This way it gives a good break...” (P2, female, Brazilian, home-based).

For home-based participants, successful telework could enhance an identity as global professionals without the need to migrate, potentially satisfying mobility aspirations digitally. Their sense of belonging was anchored to the corporate network rather than to a physical location. For abroad-based participants, however, digital mediation was more fraught, showing high but constraining digital permeability. These participants acted simultaneously as bridges to their teams and as barriers to the host country’s informal workplace sphere, often cementing a structural peripheralization. Belonging was precarious and tied to digital visibility, intensifying fears of being “out of sight, out of mind” in the host country and directly threatening their professional legitimacy and career security abroad. In this context, empathetic management styles were particularly important. The experience of P15 (male, Portuguese, abroad-based in Spain) is particularly illustrative. Although not a sampling criterion, this position as the sole representative of a specific national or regional market recurred across abroad-based participants. Despite 17 years of residence in Spain, his current position managing the Portuguese market kept him digitally and organizationally segregated from his Spanish colleagues. He described a profound sense of being both inside and outside the company: “Sometimes I almost felt that ‘I am from the company, but I am not from the company.’” The absence of shared physical space and common clients meant that weeks could pass without contact, a distance that existed before but was solidified by telework norms. Digital tools did not bridge this gap; they were the medium through which functional isolation was enacted. Generic virtual events failed to address market-based isolation, enhancing a peripheral professional identity shaped by role specialization and team structure: “The Spaniards want to know what comes from the Spanish colleague...not from the French [or Portuguese] colleagues” (P15, male, Portuguese, abroad-based in Spain). For the respondent, meaningful integration required shared work rather than scheduled social interactions. This case underscores how, for middling migrants abroad, digital tools can institutionalize a peripheral professional identity, with belonging negotiated not only through screens but against the constraints of the market assignments and local team structures.

Past-international participants displayed more strategic digital literacy, drawing on past experience to manage digital tools more effectively; for example, using asynchronous communication to counter fatigue (P21, male, Brazilian, past-international). Their accounts reflected a hybrid identity, combining local embeddedness with a transnational professional orientation, sometimes frustrated with the limitations of digital work compared to earlier, richer in-person international experiences.

In conclusion, while all groups experienced digitally reorganized work relationships, the consequences diverged sharply: Abroad-based participants faced heightened exclusion, home-based participants experienced cultural loss, and past-international participants balanced a digitally mediated present against an embodied professional past. This comparative analysis underscores that experiences of digitally mediated work within global labor markets are not uniform but are shaped by the individuals' geographical positioning and biographical trajectories, including, but not limited to, middling migration.

### 4.3. After the Pandemic

After the pandemic, the trajectories of the three groups diverged, as telework consolidated into a permanent condition that mitigated or intensified different forms of ambivalence associated with different positionings in global labor markets.

For abroad-based participants, the post-pandemic landscape often intensified long-standing forms of ambivalence linked to their position in host-country labor markets. Hybrid and fully telework arrangements did little to dismantle those participants' structural isolation, which instead became entrenched through market-specific roles. One participant stated:

Today my boss sees that sometimes I'm online and sends me a message, "It's already late, isn't it?" Other times, I send a good morning message at five o'clock in the morning. I ended up sending it because I forgot about the time difference. I thought, "Wow, I was already awake and working at that time."  
(P10, male, Brazilian, abroad-based in Portugal)

These difficulties persisted even when the participants attended the office. As another participant explained: "The basic work I do is always remote. I may be in the office, but the people I work with are not necessarily there with me. They weren't before the pandemic, and they aren't now" (P11, female, Brazilian, abroad-based in Spain). Such arrangements restricted access to informal exchanges and high-level decision-making, enhancing peripheral positioning and highlighting the constraints of remote inclusion.

While the pressure for continuous digital visibility eased slightly with the reintroduction of some in-person workdays, the underlying challenge of integrating into the local professional fabric of the host country remained. Occasional quarterly in-person European meetings, as noted by P15 (male, Portuguese, abroad-based in Spain), functioned as symbolic corporate rituals that provided temporary camaraderie but did not alter the everyday reality of being the sole representative of a different market. In this context, post-pandemic telework risked solidifying the condition of being a digital satellite to the main organization. In these cases, sustained digital permeability did not foster inclusion but rather stabilized a peripheral professional identity.

For home-based participants, the post-pandemic period offered a more stable form of digitized inclusion, with telework consolidating as a viable long-term strategy for global engagement without relocation. As one participant put it:

We have a benefit here called “WFA,” which stands for “Work From Anywhere” for a certain period. So, for every three months worked, you are entitled to five consecutive days to work from anywhere. So, there are people who wait a year to get five days every quarter and take a month off, go travelling, and do WFA somewhere. And it works really well. (P10, female, Brazilian, home-based)

This configuration reflects a moderate but enabling form of digital permeability, expanding opportunities while shifting challenges toward managing overload, boundaries, and relational depth. Participants stated they were learning to rely more heavily on asynchronous communication, reducing synchronous forms of communication and planned collaboration: “I think nowadays we text more and call less. To me, texting is kind of the easy way out instead of picking up the phone and talking” (P17, female, Portuguese, home-based). Their sense of belonging became more firmly attached to the corporate networks rather than to a specific geography, representing a new form of middling professional identity that was globally connected yet locally grounded: “In my case, it seems like I don’t even have a boss. Every now and then he shows up to say something. I spend most of my time at the client’s company” (P1, male, Brazilian, home-based).

For past-international participants, the post-pandemic period involved reconciling a rich, embodied professional past with a digitally mediated present. Their historical migrant capital helped develop a more critical and reflexive engagement with hybrid work, as illustrated by a Brazilian manager with past international experience (P21, male, Brazilian, past-international), criticizing the persistence of outdated, control-based management, arguing that “the 20th century Fordist work organization was already obsolete before the pandemic. Then it bursted, because how do you control when you are remote?” (P21, male, Brazilian, past-international). That manager actively champions more effective, asynchronous ways of working. His critique is sharpened by his observation of a pervasive climate of fear that stifles innovation: “I see colleagues...who are very insecure, lack autonomy, and are very afraid....People don’t want to change because they are afraid...and this hinders any progress” (P21, male, Brazilian, past-international).

Another participant focused on how she implemented a new way of working:

The other day someone asked me, “How many meetings do you have each week?” I only have one, and it’s very quick, because we communicate every day, so I know exactly what everyone is doing on a daily basis. Therefore, there’s no need for a follow-up meeting to say, “Tell me what you’re doing, what you did last week, and what you’re going to do this week.” (P6, female, Portuguese, past-international)

While not directly attributed to their migrant biographies, their analytical stance, contrasting past and present work practices, suggests a comparative viewpoint shaped by diverse experiences. Given the small size of this group, these insights should be read as analytically indicative rather than representative, highlighting a critical perspective on digital work; such perspective is worth further exploration in relation to middling professionals’ trajectories.

These findings demonstrate that digital technologies did not simply mediate work, but permeated participants' working lives to different degrees, producing unequal relational and career outcomes across professionals who are positioned differently within global labor markets.

## 5. Discussion

This study set out to investigate how teleworking across the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped workplace social relationships among middling professionals. By reviewing retrospective accounts of individuals positioned differently within global labor flows, i.e., those home-based, those abroad-based, and those with past-international experience, we find that the forced digital mediation of work significantly amplified ambivalences associated with the professionals' positioning in global labor markets.

Across groups, the pandemic reconfigured social ties, with digital tools helping as both bridges to transnational opportunities and barriers to relational embeddedness. These tensions had profound implications for the professionals' sense of belonging, revealing the limits of digitally mediated connection when detached from shared physical contexts.

The middling migrant literature has long highlighted the instrumental value of professional networks for labor market navigation (Barwick, 2022; Conradson & Latham, 2005). At the same time, we note a relative neglect of the relational dimensions of workplace integration (Habti, 2021; Skey, 2018). This study addresses that gap directly, by showing how the collapse of physical co-presence during the pandemic exposed the fragility of relational embeddedness when the setup relies primarily on digital mediation. The widespread turn toward more transactional interactions underscores a critical limitation: While digital platforms are effective for sustaining instrumental, task-oriented connections, they are poor substitutes for the spontaneous and informal personal interactions through which trust, camaraderie, and a durable sense of belonging are typically forged.

Importantly, this transformation was not uniform. For home-based participants, the loss of co-presence was experienced primarily as a cultural loss, a mourning of everyday workplace sociability. For abroad-based participants, however, the stakes were considerably higher. Their challenge was not merely to preserve relational depth but to establish any meaningful foothold within the host-country professional communities. Where digital tools became the primary conduit for integration, they often institutionalized a peripheral status rather than overcoming it, as illustrated by the case of P15, whose market-based isolation became digitally codified. This finding critically extends the concept of differentiated inclusion (Mendoza, 2022; Yang, 2022), by showing how exclusion can be enacted and sustained through everyday communicative practices, beyond legal or credential-based barriers.

Research on migration's digital turn has emphasized how technologies create hybrid social fields that bridge distance and sustain transnational bonds (Brandhorst, 2024; Marques & Calla Jesús, 2025). The comparative analysis presented here extends prior studies' conclusions by introducing the concept of differential digital permeability. For participants with past international experience, digital tools have long functioned as reliable bridges, enabling portfolio mobility and sustaining a transnational career. While based on a small number of cases, this pattern is analytically indicative of how accumulated mobility capital shapes the capacity to benefit from digitally mediated work.

For abroad-based participants, however, the same infrastructure frequently acted as walls or filters. Digital connectivity facilitated alignment with organizational centers while enhancing separation from local informal working environments. Corporate-mandated virtual social initiatives were widely perceived as insufficient to address market-driven or territorially rooted isolation. This suggests that the capacity of digital tools to foster inclusion is contingent on pre-existing social capital and structural position; digital mediation alone cannot generate local embeddedness where none previously existed. Such findings call for a more nuanced understanding of digital transnationalism, one that acknowledges its potential to reproduce or intensify marginalization in the framework of global labor markets.

The chronological framing of this study also connects middling migrants' experiences to broader shifts in teleworking practices. For these professionals, the boundary between broad telework arrangements and more specific forms of remote work was often blurred, since distance-based roles frequently still involve periodic travel and in-person encounters even when daily tasks were performed away from the central workplaces. Remote work, understood here as telework arrangements without expectations of regular physical presence (Pfeffer & Baron, 1988), characterized the pre-pandemic experience of past-international participants, who were early adopters of such arrangements. By contrast, the widespread and, in some contexts, mandatory expansion of telework during the pandemic aligns with research evidencing its intense psychosocial impacts (Bennett et al., 2021; Labrecque et al., 2023). The post-pandemic phase assessed here contributes to debates on the normalization of telework (Türkeş et al., 2024) by showing that this process has become deeply stratified.

Post-pandemic telework has consolidated as a structuring feature that differentially shapes professional belonging. For home-based participants, it offers a relatively stable form of digitized inclusion, allowing global engagement without relocation and anchoring primarily in corporate networks. In contrast, for abroad-based participants, it risks cementing a lasting peripheral position, where belonging remains contingent upon sustained digital visibility. This marks a significant shift: Professional security in global labor markets is no longer assured primarily through the portability of credentials, but through the capability to perform value, presence, and connection through digital channels. The ambivalent positioning often associated with middling migration is thus increasingly mediated and contested within the digital infrastructures of contemporary workplaces.

## 6. Conclusion

This article has shown that the pandemic-induced shift to telework did not simply change the location where professionals work but reshaped the social ecology of work and the bases of professional belonging within the global labor markets. By bringing into dialogue the literature on middling migration, digital transnationalism, and telework, the analysis demonstrates that digital mediation operates as a double-edged sword. It can bridge distance and enable access to global opportunities, while simultaneously undermining local integration and the relational depth through which professional belonging is sustained.

Crucially, these dynamics unfold unevenly across differently positioned professionals. For abroad-based participants, who constitute the middling migrant group in this study, the post-pandemic workplace has become a digitally saturated arena in which the insecurities of the in-between position are increasingly negotiated through screens, schedules, and the relentless pursuit of digital visibility. For these migrants,

digitally mediated work did not simply replace physical co-presence, but actively re-shaped possibilities for integration, often institutionalizing peripheral professional positions within the host-country labor markets. Recognizing this digitally mediated dimension of their experience is crucial for developing more nuanced theories of skilled mobility and for crafting organizational and policy frameworks that foster genuine inclusion in the evolving geography of work.

At the same time, the experiences of home-based professionals and those with past-international experience provide an essential comparative lens for understanding the middling migrant condition. Home-based participants showed how digital mediation can enable stable forms of global inclusion without migration, while past-international participants revealed how accumulated mobility capital and prior transnational experience shape more reflexive and strategic engagements with digital work. Together, these groups highlighted the challenges facing middle-class immigrants abroad, which are not inherent in the telework itself, but arise from the interaction between digital infrastructure, geographical location, organizational role, and biographical routes.

Theoretically, this article contributes in two key ways. First, it advances research on middling migration by showing that the ambivalences associated with migrants' in-between positioning (privilege and insecurity) are today increasingly mediated and negotiated through digitally reorganized workplace practices. Second, this article introduces the concept of differential digital permeability, arguing that digital tools do not function uniformly as mechanisms of inclusion. Their capacity to bridge distance or entrench peripherality depends on where professionals are located within the organizational and market structures, and on their accumulated histories. This perspective reframes social ties in a digitally mediated work environment, showing how the instrumental/relational distinction is reworked under conditions of sustained telework, with significant consequences for belonging and career security.

However, this study has limitations. Its retrospective design relies on recalled experiences, which may be subject to bias. The sample, while diverse, has a moderate size and focuses only on two nationalities, limiting the possibilities of generalization of the findings. Future research could extend this analysis through longitudinal designs, explore middling migrants in additional sectors and regions, and examine more closely how specific organizational policies mitigate or amplify peripherality in transnational careers.

From a practical standpoint, the findings underline the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches to telework in globally distributed organizations. For middling migrants abroad in particular, telework arrangements can exacerbate existing inequalities in relational access and professional visibility. Organizations seeking to foster genuine inclusion policies should move beyond generic virtual initiatives and instead create structured opportunities for meaningful cross-border collaboration on shared projects. Mentorship and sponsorship programs must be adapted to account for geographical and digital distance, ensuring that professionals located outside the organizational centers remain integrated into career pathways. More broadly, the capacity to build trust, assess performance, and sustain relational connections in hybrid environments will be central to supporting equitable integration in the evolving geography of digitally mediated work.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

## Data Availability

The data cannot be shared due to the lack of participant consent and the sensitivity of the organizational information, which could compromise participants' anonymity.

## LLMs Disclosure

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