

# Migration of the workplace to digital environments: psychosocial risks caused by organizational social disengagement

## *Migración del espacio laboral a entornos digitales: riesgos psicosociales ocasionados por la desvinculación social organizacional*

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the social implications of migrating from the work environment to a digital plane due to various factors. The way in which the administration and all management disciplines carry out processes that impact the individual will be analyzed, since the presence of new psychosocial conditions such as techno-stress and digital anxiety is undeniable. Likewise, a critical stance is assumed regarding the way in which the administration manages the migration of organizations. Also the application of administrative knowledge by trends is defended as a possible cause of the increase in these conditions. Finally, a multidisciplinary collaborative horizon is proposed so that, through a comprehensive administrative theoretical assimilation, functional organizational processes can be developed to reduce these new psychosocial conditions.

#### Keywords

Digitization;  
technostress; migration;  
psychosocial conditions;  
virtual environments.

### RESUMEN

*Este ensayo tiene la finalidad de disertar sobre las implicaciones sociales que conlleva la migración del entorno laboral a un plano digital por diversos factores. Se analizará la manera en que la administración y toda disciplina de gestión lleva a cabo procesos que impactan al individuo, pues es innegable la presencia de nuevas afecciones psicosociales como el tecnoestrés y la ansiedad digital. Asimismo, se asume una postura crítica ante la forma en que la administración gestiona la migración de las organizaciones y se defiende la aplicación del conocimiento administrativo por tendencias como una posible causa del incremento de estas afecciones. Finalmente, se propone un horizonte colaborativo multidisciplinario para que, a través de una asimilación teórica administrativa integral, puedan desarrollarse procesos organizacionales funcionales para reducir estas nuevas afecciones psicosociales.*

#### Palabras clave

Digitalización;  
tecnoestrés; migración;  
afecciones psicosociales;  
ambientes virtuales.

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## INTRODUCTION

Talking about the current social structure, in terms of its functionality, implies speaking about the presence of an industrial society, which could also be considered an organizational society (Sánchez-Oro, Pérez & Jiménez, 2020). Work is seen as a social fact, an activity of a socioeconomic nature that operates under temporal conceptions (Marín, 2003) alien to the consciousness of the individual, and this takes place when the person has sufficient capacity to carry out an activity towards an objective.

The perception of work is circumstantial depending on the era in which one is living. Currently, with technological development, the application of information and communication technologies (ICT) and the emergence of digital environments, new perceptions are emerging towards the action of working, which gives rise to certain questions for the administrative field on how its organizational processes impact individuals in the different areas of reality in which society unfolds, so this topic deserves the attention of those who analyze and manage these areas of knowledge (Kirchner & Schüßler, 2019; Snow et al., 2017; Iglesias et al., 2009).

The social phenomenon that is the object of analysis in this paper is migration from the tangible (or physical) work environment to the digital and the new psychosocial conditions that may occur as a result of this, as well as some implications of this shift between spaces (Khuzaini & Zamrudi, 2021; Rodríguez, 2020; Cuervo et al., 2018; Orellana, 2018; Osiceanu, 2015).

First off, it is important to clarify what is meant by migration. Within the framework of competencies and relationships between information and communication technologies and society, two types of individuals can be categorized: those who are considered digital natives because they were born in a developed context of technology and digitality, and digital migrants, those who grew up in a context lacking digital technology and had to adapt to this change (Sánchez-Zárate & García-Morales, 2020).

Highlighting the difference in contexts between digital natives and migrants will be useful when describing the importance of the skills needed for the insertion, development and maintenance of jobs in a digital area; however, the migration which is the object of this analysis refers to the concepts of space, which Echeverría (1998) raises in his perspective on the environments in which human actions unfold, as opposed to the concept of migrant, which arises when analyzing technological and digital changes from a generational context (Sánchez-Zárate & García-Morales, 2020).

Labor migrations from the physical environment to the digital space are a factor that favors the emergence and rise of psychosocial conditions (such as technostress and digital anxiety) that have been identified in different studies on their triggers and consequences in the labor world (Villavicencio-Ayub et al., 2020; Savić, 2020). These investigations point to a growing need to analyze the multiple causes that led to the development of these forms of stress in the digital plane, and that, apparently, one of the factors that propitiate them are the organizational digitalization processes when migrating from workspaces.

It is important to mention the presence of the digital space (towards which these migratory processes are directed), a plane to which organizations sought to adapt since before the pandemic by covid-19, with the purpose of digitizing in response to the trend that follows the 4th industrial revolution (also called industry 4.0) (Caba-De León et al., 2019).

The integration of ICT to organizations, in conjunction with digital environments, has attracted the attention of the administrative field more recurrently in the last decade. Changes in the internal social interaction of organizations have been explored (Orellana, 2018) and the analysis of the advantages and positive aspects of technological application has been carried out (Veloz & Veloz, 2018).

Organizations are understood as a substructure inserted in the social environment that fulfills a production purpose, and we seek to identify the relationship between the processes by which organizations interact with society and the migration of work environments to the digital plane, in order to broaden the perspective on the causes of the recent increase in psychosocial risks related to ICTs and the concept of digital environment.

Migration to the digital space cannot be reduced to industrial reasons alone. It is globalization, health, social and labor processes that lead to individuals finding themselves in a sociocultural need to be part of this digitized environment, which ends up blurring the line between the use of the network and ICT for personal and work purposes, a factor for the development of psychosocial conditions (Cano-Orón & Llorca-Abad, 2018).

It is of relevant importance to make a dissertation on how organizations assimilated this technological change, and it is possible to establish a gap of analysis on the effects brought by this digital migration: in what way labor migration from the physical to the digital environment, carried by organizations, is producing psychosocial concerns, what measures are taken to do this follow-up? In addition, it is necessary to provide context on the social processes involved in the migration of environments and how this can lead to unfavorable psychosocial conditions for individuals.

### **Administrative assimilation: application without internalization of knowledge**

Social processes are constant and never stop, and the development of the sciences and their impact is no exception. Technological developments produce a technoscientific impact on any discipline whose study focuses on human beings and their behavior, and administration is one of these cases (Jover, 1999).

First, it is necessary to clarify what is understood under the concept of knowledge assimilation and the reasons behind its failure in management theory. Management developed transversally through different epochs full of socio-historical changes, which produced that, being a technical reflection of the management of people fulfilling the action of working, it was involved in modern and postmodern approaches,

which legitimized the technical bases of management (Taylorism) in the context of modernity (Ballina, 2006).

In addition, the sudden changes and demands of the increasingly interconnected and globalized market produced a reduction in the time available to the theoretical framework of the administrative field to assimilate technological development, and all its possible applications to industry ended up exceeding the theoretical administrative capacity to cohere these advances with the company's own processes. Therefore, it began to operate in a tendentious manner due to the primary functioning on which administrative studies are based, which operate in a succession of trends that respond to the historical and social context that organizations require (Larrosa Morán et al. , 2020; Lozada & Arias, 2014).

There is management failure in searching for legitimacy provided by positivist processes that are typical of innovation, so it tends to fall into administrative trends that greatly reduce the perspective of the organization as an organic structure and inserted in a social environment (Marín-Idárraga, 2012). This is because these trends are based on taking interdisciplinary knowledge and applying it to the company to provide an immediate solution that only responds to the current economic and market context.

Application of these trends has intensified over time due to the rise of capitalism and the development of an industrialized society in new panoramas such as the digital area. These trends are legitimized by administrative fundamentals that had their roots in early industrial engineering (Lozada & Arias, 2014). It is this same urgency – increasingly less controllable– of market demands on the factors of production in organizations that cause management to be perceived as a pseudo-applied science (Van-Gigch, 2002).

Management thinking is based on a source of technical knowledge that can be modified according to the context in which the industry develops, because in each temporal and sociocultural period the way of articulating an organization changes. Thus, it is possible to understand the reason why management works by trends, since its own field to apply knowledge is modified and absorbs new technologies to thrive (Caruso, 2018).

Although there are relatively new horizons within the social context of administration, such as postmodern approaches (Llano-Cifuentes, 1994; Marín-Idárraga, 2012) post-industrial or even those related to the digital and social trends currently followed by networks, it is not yet possible to speak of a type of post-administration (Llano-Cifuentes, 1994) with dyes and implications different from those established, since, even in what is proposed by the literature, it points to the need to generate a change in the administrative paradigm on how it applies its knowledge in a more comprehensive and less limiting context to productivity-oriented visions.

In organizational studies, the analysis is centered on the structure of the company itself. Initially, when systems theory began to take hold in an interdisciplinary way, the company was treated as an open system, accepting the notions of structure-society relationship (Chiavenato, 2009). However, the disruptive cycle of knowledge causes the

organization to be analyzed only within a business context, and not entirely with the social environment where it is located.

### **The labor exodus, digital restructuring with consequences**

By recovering certain approaches from the beginning of the era, when the implementation of ICTs was on the horizon, but digitalization was still considered distant, the definition of two environments in which tangible reality was executed appears: the natural environment (human/nature relationship) and the city environment (human/human relationship) (Echeverría, 1998).

The emergence of a third environment is directly related to the interaction of human beings and ICTs, which creates a concept of global city or telepolis (Echeverría, 1998). Since the beginning of the 21st century, there was an information horizon that described the possibility of technological application to generate a change in the perception and development of human beings with the social environment surrounding them (Caruso, 2018).

With the evolution of the concept raised by Echeverría (1998) in accordance with technological progress, the existence of a digital environment in which individuals must acquire new knowledge and modify the skills necessary for work can be defined. Thus, a fourth environment is created, which is where knowledge dictated by industry is currently managed (Barroso, 2013).

The application of ICTs has benefits for entrepreneurs or those who are in charge of managing an organization, since it allows new forms of business models, immediacy in communication processes and improvements in productivity. One of the advantages for the worker (collaborator) is to be able to perform his/her duties anywhere with internet access, which guarantees greater work flexibility (Rodríguez, 2020).

However, in relation to the structure in which both the employee and the employer are inserted, changes should not be drastic in a short period of time, since the pressure exerted by the system on employees can give rise to stress due to the pressure for that which they ought to learn (Sánchez et al., 2020).

One of the factors that favor the appearance of this type of stress in individuals is the accelerated migration of the work environment due to external causes (such as the covid-19 pandemic). In addition, it is necessary to mention that people were not prepared for this change, so the line between personal and digital work environments was blurred, which generated a burnout related to the use of ICT, defined as technostress (Cárdenas-Velásquez & Bracho-Paz, 2020).

Although this type of condition can be caused by various factors, one of the elements that could accelerate its appearance is the disconnection of theoretical administrative knowledge from the social environment. Companies usually maintain adaptability in the face of new technological advances and evolve (Sánchez-Oro, Pérez & Jiménez, 2020).

The adaptability of organizations –thought towards their own ends and leaving aside the social context in which they are inserted– increased the tension between the individual and the organizational structure or company in which he/she was inserted. In addition, it increased technostress and digital anxiety for workers, even for those who worked independently. In a study of the Mexican population on technostress and its sociodemographic and labor variables, it was found that most of the individuals who presented any of these conditions are collaborators with a higher level of schooling, as well as managers and independent entrepreneurs (Villavicencio-Ayub et al., 2020).

One of the possible causes of psychosocial conditions corresponding to this new work environment may be the hasty application of ICT in organizations (Rodríguez, 2020), in conjunction with the social processes that occur on a daily basis in digital environments, since when we talk about digitization, we refer to everything that can be integrated into this environment, including work (Pfaffinger et al., 2020).

Organizations found difficult to manage themselves through digital media. Although a digital adaptation process had already been noticed, the lack of theoretical administrative interaction –at least in the Mexican context– produced a lack of knowledge in the companies' actions. Unfortunately, they did not have the time or the necessary control to organize and carry out their activities digitally due to the acceleration of the health contingency process. This accelerated change can be defined as “disruptive” (Cedrola, 2017).

As a result of these changes, the diversification of labor relations and the way they are executed has become so extensive that no hard-hitting study or statistic can be found that yields data about the types of digital labor relations and the way they unfold. This entails a risk that work ceases to be recognized as such and is relegated to a set of tasks that make it invisible (Hualde, 2019). This disengagement could be even more limited if it were understood as a psychosocial process that directly transgresses the projection of the individual in the digital environment, so that the disruption is directly affecting some of the channels of company-employee-society interaction.

It is important to mention the relevance of the telework function and the way in which it is applied in the organization. One of the keys to telework being a healthy practice, as has been demonstrated in certain organizational models, is to provide workers with relevant tools and benefits related to the duties they perform (Peiró & Soler, 2020).

Certainly, teleworking will be more practical for an administrative manager than for a production line worker, so it is very likely that the development of digital competencies by people with other types of technical skills will produce a stress reaction, especially when work options are reduced due to the health contingency.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) identified that in 2020, during the pandemic, nearly twelve million people moved into the ranks of labor inactivity, while the active labor participation rate declined from 59.8% to 47.5%. However, the rate increased for the final period of the year due to the possibility of other sources of



employment, to the point that by June only 29.3% of the total number of initial inactive persons were available for work (Feix, 2020).

Likewise, sectors of the population engaged in informal trade were affected by the health contingency; a loss of 10.4 million informal jobs was reported during the initial period of 2020, due to the intensification of health measures and the formalism that people sought in order to have certainty in the reduced options that the labor market was able to offer in the most critical points of the pandemic. By the late 2020s, a less restricted opening of spaces gave way to an increase in informal labor rates (Feix, 2020).

By taking into account the needs presented by workers whose job profile could not be transferred to digital platforms, one can understand the reason why psychosocial risk factors increased in both formal and informal work sectors. According to data from the National Employment Survey conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), in December 2021, 22.9% of people sought employment for more than three months, 34.7% lasted employed from one to three months and 37.1% remained seeking employment for up to one month (INEGI, 2022).

It is evident that labor options are reduced due to the changing situation that the world is going through, so, following the data, the options that provide an appearance of greater stability for employment are those related to teleworking or the management of digital platforms. Therefore, although there are digitally native people and others trained to adapt to this work model, another large percentage of individuals may develop psychosocial conditions due to the context of ICT use.

### **Between digital migration and labor lag: employee symptoms**

Among the triggers of technostress, five factors are identified: techno overload, which refers to the increase in work through technodigital platforms; techno invasion, which is the feeling of transgression between private domains and work caused by technology; techno complexity, which generates gaps between the collaborator's knowledge and knowledge of ICT use; techno insecurity, related to personal information; and techno uncertainty, which occurs when there is uncertainty about the use of ICT and digital environments (Spagnoli et al. , 2020).

In addition, employees may feel anxious or worried if they are disconnected or separated from the technology that allows them to communicate (such as nomophobia, which is the fear of not having a cell phone or related devices), which can lead to health problems (Álvarez, 2020). This can generate dependence, which plays a fundamental role in the amount of use given to different electronic devices.

It is relevant for administrative sciences to be informed of these factors, because even in the face of regulations such as the right to disconnection, it is necessary that both the managers involved in the management of the company and the collaborators can recognize and classify the conditions arising from these new psychosocial risks, which would allow finding a solution or preventing their development.

The generation gap is usually a concept mentioned in management to explain the clash between modernization processes and classical management. However, this type of argument is refutable, since it is not the generation to which the employees belong that has the greatest impact, but the contact with ICTs that they have been previously provided with in their workplaces or their academic training (Osiceanu, 2015).

The transgression implied by a digital migration –in cases where remote work or constant connectivity or hyperconnectivity applies– produces a series of interferences between the individual's relationships with their social nuclei, which is another trigger for multiple stress factors on the part of the collaborator (Oksanen et al., 2021).

The role played by social networks in organizational communication cannot be ignored in order to make information flow channels efficient. The presence of social networks produces a practically mandatory connection in today's society. Notifications, messages, advertising and the need to use our own contact networks for the dissemination of information related to work-related aspects are highly invasive for people (Oksanen et al., 2021; Caruso, 2018).

The resolution of these situations of technostress or digital anxiety is usually perceived as the responsibility of employees, who often opt for psychological care and even more drastic measures such as changing workplace. Coping with such problems can be classified in two ways: 1) proactive coping, when the employee is responsible for improving his or her skills so that he or she is able to manage techno-digital platforms more effectively, but sets a limit on his or her relationship with them; and 2) reactive coping, when the employee responds emotionally to the stressful situation and chooses to distance him or herself from it. Most users are more likely to react reactively than proactively (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019).

### **Catalysts of new psychosocial conditions in the migration of work environments**

Industry 4.0, global social processes outside the organizational field and the disengagement of administrative practices to manage this migration of work environments have an impact on the previous education of individuals who will be inserted in the labor field. The importance of projecting career plans according to the jobs to be developed according to the current labor market, and adapting curricula to keep pace with technological development has been analyzed (Lent, 2018).

However, this, in addition to subjecting the individual to technostress by developing competencies to measure up to technological advancement, also shows that there is a limitation in technical and professional study centers to respond to the accelerated demands of the market, so that psychosocial risks begin before people are inserted in the labor field.

Digital migration also responds to the work dynamics adopted by the health contingency. To meet the growing problem of the covid-19 pandemic, new work



schemes and modalities had to be developed. It is important to mention that this migration affects in the same way the modalities of telework and remote work (Savić, 2020).

The administrative search to renew itself for the digital industry (4.0) that was being developed previously, was accelerated and forced to adopt these digital environments by the health contingency, which has given rise to a change that requires much more than a simple adaptation to technology. This series of changes demands a whole reconfiguration of the thinking of the collaborator, mainly the one who is not considered a digital native and who needs to adopt a mindset for digital work (Savić, 2020).

Although the use of technology is easier for digital natives, it should not be forgotten that labor migration to the digital plane is not focused, for the moment, on all professions. Constant and recurrent connectivity through recreational use (such as social networks) can cause the barriers between personal and work to be blurred (Caruso, 2018).

To keep pace with this migration in favor of an upgrade to Industry 4.0, employees must have the required digital skills, which will cause a gap to exist between their knowledge and their capacity for technodigital management. The sudden and unassimilated change, coupled with the lack of adequate training provided by workplaces, results in employees in organizational structures to develop health conditions such as technostress (Nisafani et al., 2020).

### **Inoperative regulations of the law, a multi-faceted control**

The governmental mechanisms in charge of defending the labor rights of individuals in a given territory are varied according to the context. Technological and digital processes have impacted the entire world, so that regardless of the socioeconomic situation of each territory (and not forgetting the pandemic situation), it is possible to find laws in common that seek to mediate and regulate labor relations in digital environments, as well as to protect individuals from the possible discomforts that this could generate.

Although it is possible to compare the norms established by all countries in relation to labor regulations in digital environments to get a broader picture, in this essay only three cases will be contrasted with the positions of transnational organizations. Taking examples from Spain and Colombia, we will briefly note the causes and concepts that led to the enactment and promotion of laws with the common theme of the right to disconnect.

The promotion of this right is based on various statistics on individuals and their relationship with ICTs. In the case of Spain, a report on the state of the labor market (infojobs and EXCS-Spain) indicates that 51% of the population inserted in the labor area answers emails and work-related calls on their days off, such as weekends (Saturdays and Sundays) or vacations (Pérez, 2019). In addition, it is mentioned that

incidence of the use of technologies at work is different depending on their nature and job position. If we look at the specific case of middle managers and managers, 68 and 84 percent, respectively, are those who are most connected to digital devices outside their working day (Pérez, 2019, p. 105).

Molina-Navarrete (2017) highlighted the need to renew the classic operation of law, by considering this type of disconnection law as a right that should be standardized, monitored and enforced. Furthermore, he asserts that considering the right to disconnection is transcendent, due to factors such as privacy, access and scopes of information. He also points out that there is a large amount of private information on the Internet, such as personal profiles on social networks, which are sometimes used by the human resources areas of organizations in their selection processes, which shows the need to implement regulations around labor migrations to the digital environment:

It was unavoidable to implement legal solutions to protect the holder of personal data against this renewed and more incisive risk of privacy intrusion. Very recently, faced with the business trend to take advantage of social networks to learn more about their employees and potential candidates, including in job interviews that the account name on Facebook or Twitter is used, the European Union has prepared a Guide or a Code of Conduct [...] in application of its data protection regulation, to try to put an end to this practice of inspecting candidates' social networks just because the information is available on them (Molina-Navarrete, 2017, p. 899).

On the other hand, in Colombia there is still no direct regulation on digital media and the effects they can cause on individuals; however, the concept of disconnection is promoted in response to a type of workplace harassment (Betancourt, 2020). In addition, it highlights Article 2 of labor law 1010 on labor harassment, in which the following is found:

Definition and Modalities of Labor Harassment. For the purposes of this law, harassment at work shall be understood as any persistent and demonstrable conduct, exercised on an employee, worker by an employer, a boss or immediate or immediate superior, a co-worker or a subordinate, aimed at instilling fear, intimidation, terror and anguish, to cause work-related harm, leads to being demotivated at work, or induce resignation from work (2006, p. 84).

This brief review of some general postulates on which laws and norms were created in different places allows us to recognize that the situation regarding psychosocial conditions needs to be regulated for the benefit of the health and labor rights of those who are immersed in this increasingly recurrent work model. It is necessary that managers and all those immersed in administrative sciences apply and follow up the norms within organizations for the welfare of their collaborators.

## Conclusions

What has been described in this essay intends to visualize organizations and their work environments as another point of reference to a complex problem such as the increasingly recurrent use of digital platforms, so that these can be used for the benefit

of processes and collaborators, taking into account the possible consequences and causes to avoid the emergence or intensification of psychosocial ailments.

According to the readings consulted, it is understood that the use of technologies is not necessarily harmful or detrimental; technological updating of spaces could refer to a natural stage in the history of mankind and the relationship we have with these new ICT and digital environments; however, the development of psychosocial conditions due to the use of technology and digital environments can be analyzed from various perspectives, it cannot be overlooked when the causes of the intensification of these discomforts can be identified in any discipline, so the analysis of labor migrations is a good starting point to question organizational thinking and its impact on society.

Exactly, through this analysis of digital migrations we can question the role of work and companies in the social environment where they are inserted. Although organizations have multiple social tensions and use the set of administrative processes and knowledge, as well as organizational management to handle such situations, it is vital that they develop a critical perspective on their vision of the business field, to achieve a healthier digitized labor practice.

This implies a position open to change, but critical of the way in which these migrations of reality take place, with emphasis on the problem of applying technical knowledge of management to organizations that follow trends within the field, as this makes the complexity of organizational study and, of course, of the action of working invisible.

Conversely, they propose that if these processes are already being carried out, it would be more profitable to manage them now that they are in an early implementation stage, so that the consequences of their development, whether good or bad, do not take people by surprise, hence the importance of analyzing the impact of organizational processes on people.

The way in which management assimilates and applies the knowledge of its area slows down interdisciplinary discussions, which often results in proposing immediate solutions to complex processes. It is understandable that in a world whose needs are so ever-changing, rapid solutions to current problems should be sought; however, the blind application of knowledge in the long term only produces theoretical and, therefore, technical stagnation on how to solve these problems.

The proposal is that people immersed in the administrative and management sciences enter into more comprehensive and interdisciplinary discussions. The recent creation of laws that address the problems of the digitalization of the environment could have greater relevance if managers and collaborators of organizations participate and enrich this discussion with the theoretical and technical knowledge they have when observing the day to day in companies.

The solutions outlined in this essay, such as the creation of laws that govern digital labor relations, the creation of organizational manuals to mediate when psychosocial risks exist and the internalization of administrative knowledge in order to

generate a debate that is integrated with the current technical knowledge of the area, are crucial and should be promoted with an integrative and people-oriented perspective.

The world is in constant change, and due to the recent pandemic generated by covid-19, the effective management of safe spaces can produce healthier work environments in the long term, by finding effective methods that manage work that is not centralized in a physical point and, by addition, that it is not invasive for those individuals who perform it, which would even improve the perspective people have of the social action of working.

Improving the quality of work implies progress throughout the organization, so that addressing and solving the problems of labor relations brings us closer to a modernization of the perspectives of work in a more contemporary context, which leads to improving the quality of life thanks to healthy practices with a social dimension.

Because this analysis focuses on organizations, it emphasizes the areas of possibility in the administrative field when it comes to improving and integrating the knowledge that manages digital migration. The company is not thought of as a factor leading to the rise of psychosocial conditions, but rather the emphasis is on the great advantages for working life that a series of improvements on the perspective and application of knowledge would bring.

The emergence of psychosocial conditions in the digitized work environment is still in time to be addressed under comprehensive and interdisciplinary techniques and visions. Migration to work environments is a fact; even if the health contingency were to end, various employment possibilities will remain, which, in order to be taken advantage of, must be analyzed and the advantages and disadvantages involved in their application must be recognized.

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