

Telework: A Temporary Adaptation or a Milestone in the Changing World of Work

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Abstract

The recent rapid surge of telework was enabled by the information and communications technologies but caused by the restrictive measures related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The challenge in this case was the speed at which teleworking was introduced and the scale it reached. Despite the fact that after the pandemic many employers chose to return to work on premises, the positive experience and the clear interest among all stakeholders in telework or hybrid work, where telework is altered with work on premises is already here to stay. It can be expected that in the near future telework will keep expanding to meet the preferences of employers, workers and public authorities. However, teleworking has its setbacks and they need to be addressed in order to fully unleash the enormous potential of this form of work.

Keywords: telework, remote work, digitalization, work conditions, COVID-19, Eurofound, new forms of employment.

JEL: J20, J24, J58, J81, F69

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic catalysed many processes and frontloaded essential elements of what was considered to be the future of work to the present days. Digitalization accelerated the transition to remote working (Vargas et al., 2020). This phenomenon provokes lasting changes in the world of work.

Remote working was technologically possible, known and used years before the pandemic. It allowed employees to keep working on an exceptional, temporary or permanent

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basis away from their employer's premises. With the development of the information and communication technologies, remote working became much more accessible. It allows the full-fledged participation in the companies' internal processes without interruption and from a geographical distance. The transformation of remote working into teleworking can be considered a milestone in the development of the modern work environment. However, despite gaining ground, teleworking was very much confined to sectors like software development and support and was limited to 5-7% of the jobs in the EU (Ahrendt et al., 2020).

Telework has been defined by the EU social partners in their 2002 Framework Agreement on Telework as 'a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/relationship, where work that could be performed at the employer's premises is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis.' (Framework..., 2002).

The COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of lockdowns transformed telework into a lifeline for many businesses, and even entire economies. The fact that the ICT conditions were already in place, allowed a swift transition to online work under the pressure of the pandemic-related restrictions of mobility. This transition saved businesses and the delivery of public services. We have seen teleworking surging to 22-25% on average during the lockdowns and reaching 37% at its highest points in some EU member states.²

Having demonstrated that teleworking is a possible form of work, it is useful to analyse whether and to what extent it will persist when not being a necessity anymore. The first data show that the preconditions for teleworking to stay are in place. This conclusion can be clearly made after analysing the potential of teleworkable jobs, as well as the interests of the employers and the workers.

The paper's main objective is to shed light on the pandemic's profound effects on how people work across Europe and the future of teleworking, based on findings of extensive research, carried out by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound). To that end the advantages and drawbacks of teleworking, as well as the challenges and prospects for further development have been identified.

Teleworking: advantages and prospects

In a recent study, Eurofound estimated the potential share of the jobs that can be performed online in every EU member state (Ahrendt et al., 2020). The results show that an average of 30 to 40% of the jobs can be performed remotely (see Chart 1). This is above the average share of telework during the pandemic-related lockdowns. Hence, the potential for teleworking is still to be reached. Furthermore, the introduction of new technologies in the work processes, additionally accelerated by labour shortages and competitive pressures, will enlarge the possibilities for teleworking.

² All data in this article are based on a recent Eurofound research (Available at: <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/>).

If the technical possibilities are available, it will be interesting to see what the interest of the involved parties – the employers and the workers, is. There are many objective reasons for the employers to maintain the possibilities to telework. A clear advantage, discovered by the ICT sector before the pandemic, is that teleworking allows recruiting globally, without any geographic limitations. This is particularly important for professions suffering from a lasting and deep structural shortage of qualified staff. Hiring globally was accessible only for large companies. Now even start-ups can attract talents online, without the necessity for their workers to relocate. This brings the competition for filling open positions to a new level. However, global recruitment may solve individual corporate human resources problems but does not ease the global problem with the labour shortages (Sostero et al., 2020).

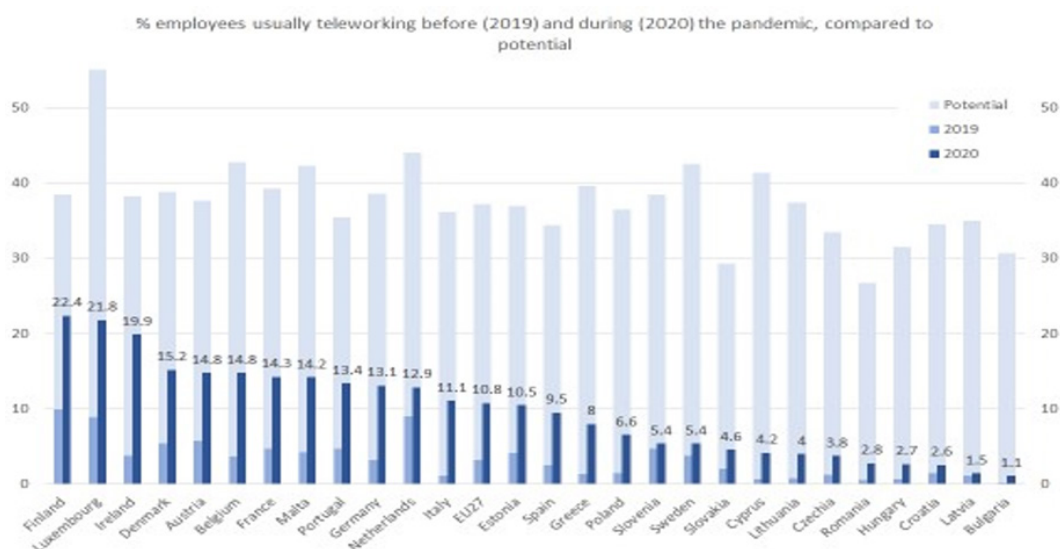


Chart 1. Teleworking: actual and potential

Source: LFS, Eurofound/European Commission JRC, 2021

Another reason for the employers to opt for teleworking is the optimisation of the fixed costs and in particular the costs related to office maintenance. Many companies in the ICT and other sectors and some administrations as the European Commission, already announced measures to decrease the office spaces they use. This influences the corporate expenses but also the CO2 emissions' impact as the use of energy also goes down.

Many employers are stimulated to increase the share of teleworking due to the preference of their staff. Allowing a better work-life balance is an important element of the motivation and the efficiency of staff at work. This is recognised by many employers.

Despite the positive effects of teleworking, many employers still prefer a return to office policy. The reasons for that might be various. Certainly, the habit and the traditional perspective on the office work play a considerable role. What can also be detected after

the long pandemic and the related stress is the desire of both employers and workers to return to more intense social contacts and rebuilding the corporate commitment. Indeed, without having at this early stage the results of any comprehensive study, we have anecdotal examples of managers reporting that during the lockdown the commitments of staff required to telework was very high, probably due to the insecurities related to the lockdowns, while when this policy becomes permanent, the motivation and the interest towards wider corporate issues decrease. Clearly the motivation of the workers and the pro-active and innovative engagement in the conditions of a permanent teleworking or hybrid working are to be further studied. An additional reason for some employers to return to the traditional office work is the existing legislative insecurities and in particular the unclear responsibilities of the employer in the telework mode.

On the workers' side, there is also a broad support for teleworking. Eurofound's research clearly shows that 80% of those that experienced teleworking during the lockdowns prefer to keep it fully or partially as hybrid work. (See Chart 2).

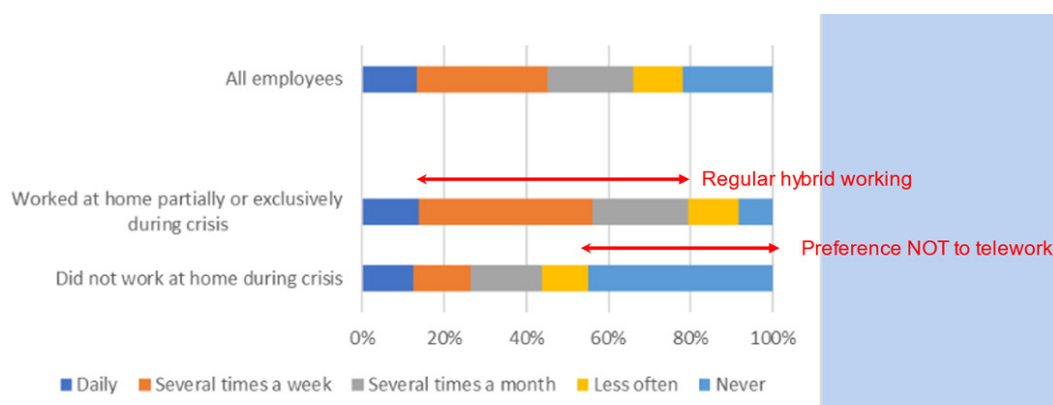


Chart 2. Preference to work from home if not COVID restrictions

Source: Eurofound Living, working and COVID19 survey (Second wave, July, 2020)

The explanation for the popularity of telework lies in the possibilities of the workers to better plan their working time, not to spend time on commuting, incur less expenditures, etc. These are valid arguments. The possibility to work outside of the company premises can revolutionise the traditional work-life balance. It also requires a new attitude to work, where satisfaction, meaningfulness, engagement gain additional importance. The possibility to organise their own time, to fulfil the obligations to the family and at the same time to be successful at an exciting and motivating job is a clear preference for every worker.

As we can clearly see, telework is a preferred option for both employers and workers. Furthermore, the recent lockdowns proved that it is a possible and viable form of work. Hence, we have all the reasons to believe that telework is here to stay. Either fully or in a hybrid form, where working from the premises and teleworking are alternating on a regular basis.

The only factor that could slow the expansion of telework is the speed of the change. After the pandemic we see that despite the obvious advantages of telework, there are many employers, especially in the public administration, that require the workers to resume full time schedules of working from office. This is provoked in most cases by unwillingness to adapt to the changes and inability to create a trusted working environment outside the premises.

Teleworking: drawbacks and challenges

Besides its many positive features, teleworking has also its setbacks (Predotova and Vargas, 2021). Dealing with them would allow to unleash the potential of telework to create attractive workplaces. Before considering the challenges of telework for the directly involved parties – employers and workers, we should mention a societal phenomenon: teleworking creates further divisions in the world of work. It is more accessible for people with higher education, for women, for inhabitants of larger cities and creates more stress among young workers, especially those who have children or housing problems (see Chart 3). Creating new divisions and deepening the existing ones in the world of work has negative effect on the coherence of the society and on its ability to develop at a high and sustainable pace.

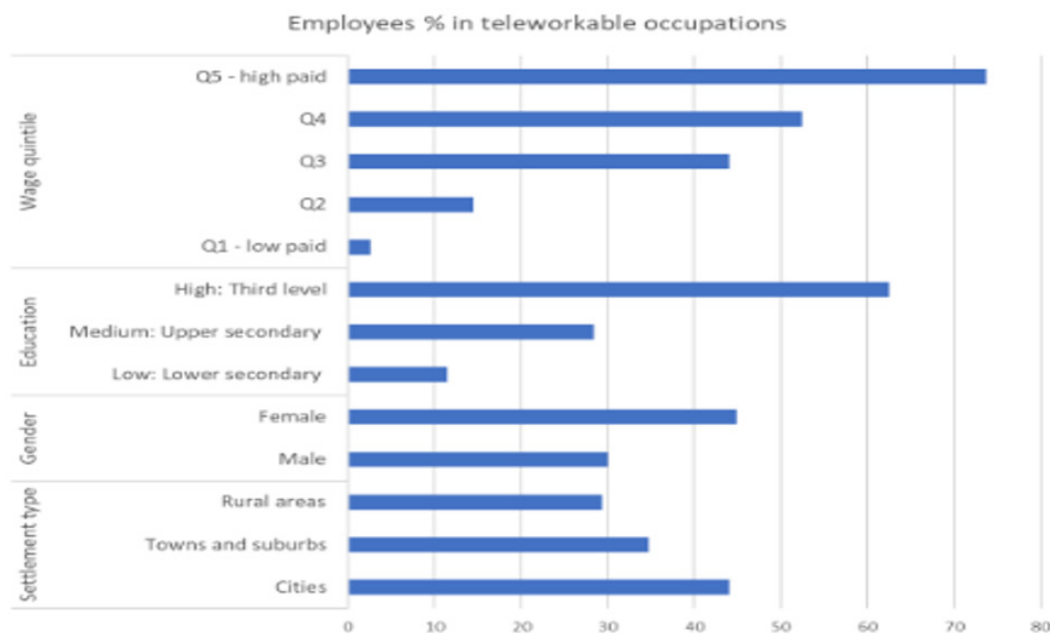


Chart 3. Profile of occupants of teleworkable jobs

Source: Eurofound / European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2020

What are the challenges that telework creates to employers and workers? First, teleworking is a strong factor for long working hours. 37% of those practicing telework report that they work longer hours, compared to 19% of those, working on premises (Ahrendt et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant for those working from home. The possibility to check the mail, to complete a task or to reply to the manager after the working hours may have some positive sides but is time-consuming and prevents from proper rest. Furthermore, we see the phenomenon of increased intensity of work if performed from home. In cases where the workers could previously concentrate and prepare for the next meeting, while commuting or even allowing a dedicated time slot, in case of telework these gaps are often impossible. The frequency of the online meetings is higher, the time to prepare is shorter and even worse – the online work allows multitasking, where the worker performs several tasks at the same time – taking part in a meeting, reading or editing a document, drafting a text, etc. The longer working hours and the increased intensity at work result in increased stress levels, mental health risks and burnouts (Predotova and Vargas, 2021).

A possibility to address the long working hours and the increased work intensity is to enforce the established working time and monitor the workload of the workers. Normal working time is fixed at 40 hours weekly in most of the EU member states. A certain degree of flexibility is allowed on daily basis, still observing the weekly maximum and the required rest periods. Working on premises usually limits the working time by restricting access after work hours and requiring presence during core hours. In the case of telework, access cannot be anymore restricted but also often the core hours impede the optimal planning of the work-life balance. Some workers could tend to dedicate the time needed for their children, for example, and work until late instead. Hence, the working hours can be scattered throughout the day. That makes the control and the application over the working time difficult even for the worker. In order to address this problem, in most of the EU member states there is a discussion and even some regulations on the “right to disconnect” (Vargas, 2022).

This is not an additional limitation of the working time as working time is heavily regulated and subject to firm agreements between the social partners. The right to disconnect is rather a tool to discipline the hours of work and increase the discretion of the workers. In fact, the right to disconnect regulations appeared independently of telework. The first legislation was adopted in France in 2016, followed by Italy, Belgium and Spain in 2017 and 2019. The purpose was to protect workers from their managers asking them to work during the times for rest – after hours, on the weekends and during holidays. The rapid development of telework made the legislation on the right to disconnect even more necessary (Weber and Vargas, 2021). During the COVID-19 lockdowns it appeared in different forms in the public debates of most of the EU member states (see Fig. 1).

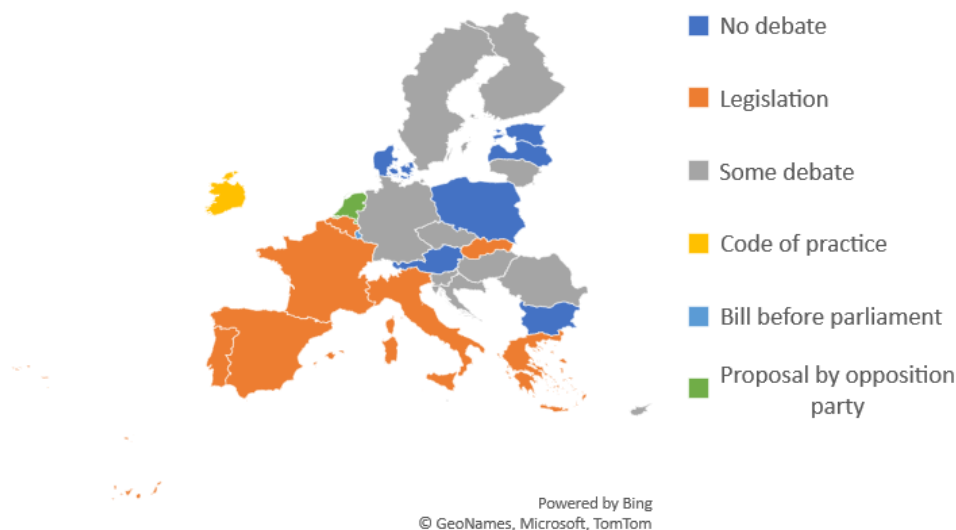


Figure 1. Right to disconnect in the EU member states

Source: Eurofound / European Commission Joint Research Centre, 2020

In a nutshell, the regulations of the right to disconnect vary from legislation to codes of practice and everywhere include the decisive role of the social partners. They are supposed to agree at sectoral or company level on the times and the modalities of implementation of the restrictions on engaging the worker during their rest hours. However, the regulations do not limit the right of the worker to work during these hours.

The increased intensity of work while teleworking is only one of the factors leading to additional stress and burnout. The level of stress related to telework is clearly increasing when the workers have small children or elderly parents to care for, when young employees feel insecure about their performance and future place in the company, etc. Hence, this surge is not equal across the different groups of workers (see Chart 5). This is the second setback of teleworking.

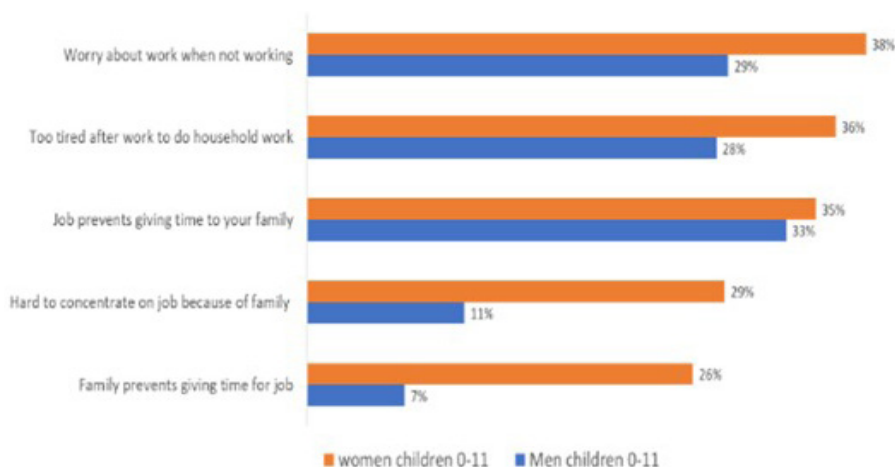


Chart 5. Insecurities in the work-life balance when teleworking

Source: Eurofound Living, working and COVID19 survey, 2020

Families with small children are particularly affected as the need to combine the care with the duties at work creates additional complications. Indeed, this result to a certain extent is due to the fact that during the COVID-19 lockdowns, when parents had to work from home, the public services for childcare were also closed and they had to provide care at home. But also in “normal” times, strong motivation for teleworking is related to the desire to dedicate more time to the small children, hence, reopening of crèches, kindergartens and schools will diminish but not take away the need of parents to spend more time with their children. As expected, the Eurofound research shows that stress levels with telework increase disproportionately among younger workers and women, where the care for children and the insecurities related to access to housing are higher (See Chart 6).

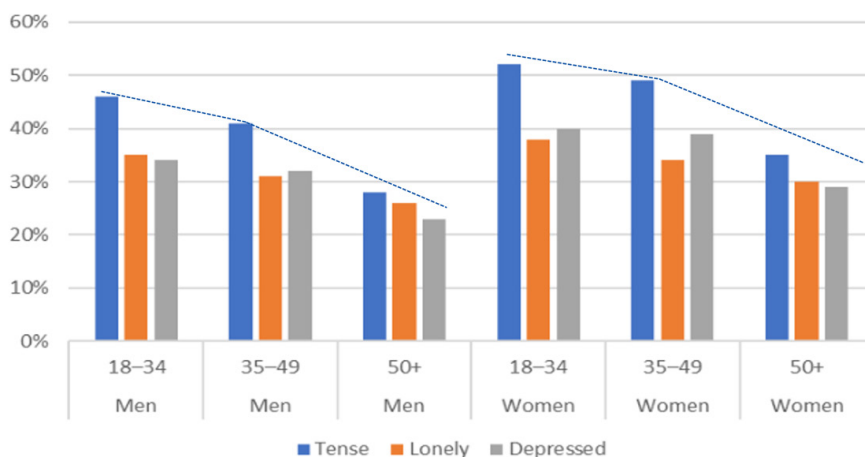


Chart 6. Stress while teleworking by age group and gender

Source: Eurofound Living, working and COVID19 survey, 2020

A third factor for the increased stress levels is the lack of informal social contacts with the colleagues. This is particularly relevant for younger workers. Not having the possibility to interact with their colleagues and managers, starting a new job and spending months and years seeing colleagues on screen only creates a sense of insecurity. The alienation accompanying telework affects negatively the commitment of the worker towards the values and the goals of his employer. Employers report that teleworkers tend to focus closely on their personal obligations, lose contact with the employer's goals, demonstrate lower levels of innovation and commitment.

Dealing with stress and commitment at work is not straightforward. It is difficult to solve it with the traditional instruments of better regulation or social dialogue. It requires a deep change of the management style, related to the regulation of the workload and the motivation of staff. The management need to become more human centric. These issues very often require additional training for managers. Terms like meaningful work, staff engagement, corporate culture and values, fairness and rules-based management need to be brought higher on the list of priorities for the managers. Insufficient efforts in this direction would eventually cause loss of qualified and motivated workforce. Whatever excellence in the managerial approach is achieved, here will be cases, where workers cannot adapt and maintain their productivity while teleworking. This can contradict to their preference to do so. In the cases where the worker is willing but apparently not able to perform well when teleworking, that could be addressed using the standard managerial methods or with the involvement of the staff representatives where possible.

Speaking of management style, we need to also mention the importance and the limitations of the control and surveillance methods. Admittedly, when the work is on premises, the control, being physical, digital or other is easier. Technically, control and surveillance are also possible in the case of telework. There is software and hardware that can make sure that the worker sits in front of the screen and works on their tasks (Vargas et al., 2020). Any deviation can be detected. But here the sensitive line of the private personal space should not be crossed. Overdoing with surveillance can often be considered as bullying and this is not acceptable. There is current research by Eurofound on employers' surveillance and bullying but obviously the general advice should be that teleworking should involve a higher level of trust between managers and workers.

A fourth challenge with teleworking stems from the difficulty to apply the provisions regarding health and safety (Predotova and Vargas, 2021). As a rule, the employer is responsible for ensuring the observation of health and safety requirements at the workplace. If telework is performed from a public place like a library or a shared office, the employer and the labour inspection services could certainly control the work environment. But in the cases of home office, the employer's role usually consists in providing the necessary equipment like PC, screens, laptops, chairs, etc. Neither the employer nor the labour inspectors could enter the homes of a worker without explicit consent to check the levels of noise, or light for example, or the air quality and the presence of substances as

asbestos. This issue needs to be addressed as the existing legislation cannot be applied, leaving a regulatory gap.

Conclusion

It could be stated with a high level of certainty that teleworking has a future. It is going to increase in medium to long term as the benefits are clear for the parties concerned and for the society as a whole. At the same time evidence shows that teleworking moves from a necessity during the lockdowns into a privilege. That means that the employers will tend to increase the jobs open to teleworking by making additional investments. This process, on the other hand, will trigger a negative reaction related to the increase of the gap between “wanted” and unattractive jobs and further deepening the sectoral labour shortage. Both employers and workers will tend to maximize the opportunities created by telework to save costs, establish a better work-life balance and attract talents across borders and geographic distances. At the same time related problems like overtime, increased stress levels, motivation and safety and health need to be addressed. The experience in the EU in the last years shows that these issues need to find a place in the legislation, while the actors responsible to give a sustainable and well adapted solution are the social partners. Where industrial dialogue is not existent, i.e. in the small companies, the management has to assume these obligations. And together with teleworking, we need to be prepared to see a much more intensive use of ICT, digital devices, algorithms and platforms. Work is changing for good.

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