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Teleworking in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic: enabling conditions for a successful transition

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Policy implications

- Policymakers should address the risk of the gradual disappearance of the physical workplace, and with it of the notion of choice in relation to remote working.

- As segments of the workforce return to the workplace, employers should ensure the continuity of countermeasures to buffer isolation.

- It will be essential for employers to introduce initiatives to prevent large segments of workers becoming at risk of physical and emotional exhaustion, and for governments to adapt occupational health and safety regulations accordingly.

- The benefits of telework depend entirely on the degree of autonomy given to the worker and presuppose a culture of trust and compassion, two key traits for leaders to develop.

- Ensuring equal access to ICT and that workers possess the education and skills needed to use them are fundamental challenges that policymakers need to address to prevent a 'teleworkability' divide.

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Introduction

Until recently, teleworking has been slower to take hold than many predicted when remote working technology first emerged. This inertia probably reflects intransigent work cultures, as well as a lack of interest on the part of employers in investing in the technology and management practices necessary to operate a tele-workforce. Telework has suddenly experienced an upswing, however, because of the measures implemented to protect people from the Covid-19 virus. Within a year, the percentage of employees working at least occasionally from home rose from 11 to 48 per cent (Eurostat 2019; Eurofound 2020). These figures seem to indicate that large numbers of workers and employers alike are, in all probability, facing new challenges in dealing with the sudden shift to telework.

There is a growing consensus that telework is unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels after the pandemic is behind us, but is expected rather to become established. If telework is here to stay, it is essential that companies and policymakers understand the challenges associated with this modern way of organising work.

The four components of a successful transition

The implementation of a teleworking system requires that employers take a number of precautions to avoid negative outcomes, especially in terms of occupational health and safety. Following Baruch and Nicholson's framework (1997), the successful implementation of telework requires that four categories of factors be aligned (see Figure 1). First, there are individual differences in workers' ability and desire to adapt to teleworking, mainly explained by degree of self-discipline, personality traits and motivation to engage in remote work. Second, the feasibility and effectiveness of telework is determined by the type of job. In Europe, it is estimated that only 37 per cent of jobs can be efficiently carried out remotely (Joint Research Centre 2020). These are either jobs with a very low level of autonomy and easy to control remotely or, conversely, jobs with high autonomy and discretionary features that allow some form of self-management. The third category of factors is related to the particular household and covers a wide range of considerations, such as the availability of physical space, the absence of distractions, or the presence of young children. Finally, a critical determinant of successful teleworking is the employing organisation itself. In this regard, the academic literature stresses the importance of a supportive culture, appropriate systems and a trust-based work environment. In sum, teleworking is not a quick fix or a one-size fits all solution, but requires that many factors be aligned, some of them with little room for manoeuvre. Only when conditions related to these four dimensions are met simultaneously will teleworking fit as a feasible solution to benefit both employers and employees. Conversely, any substantial deviation from the optimal fit is likely to result in added strain for the worker.

Figure 1   **Four aspects of successful telework implementation**
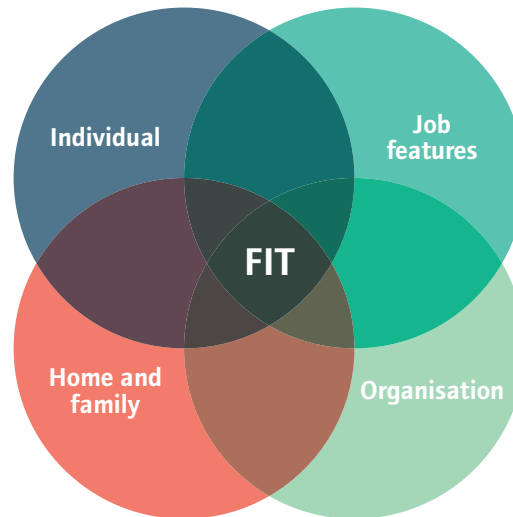
Source: adapted from Baruch and Nicholson (1997).

Recent evidence shows that the abrupt shift to telework has happened without much consideration of the aforementioned factors (Eurofound 2020). A fair proportion of these mismatches can be attributed to the extraordinary nature of the crisis as most companies would otherwise not have implemented teleworking practices in such a massive and premature way. The question arises as to whether remote technologies will become the preferred way of organising work in the near future, however. According to a recent survey, 80 per cent of European employers require or are considering requiring more employees to work remotely (Littler Mendelson 2020). With more widespread adoption of structural telework across the globe, the relative flexibility conferred on employers in dealing with these exceptional circumstances is in danger of being taken for granted. We have therefore reached a pivotal period. In this policy brief, the challenges that policymakers need to address will be discussed, and the kind of measures that might affect each of the four factors of telework to ensure positive worker outcomes will be highlighted.

Individual level: framing telework as a discretionary option

Recent news stories abound with company announcements of extended work-from-home policies, with some even deciding to allow employees to work from home permanently. The world's largest work-from-home experiment, namely Covid-19, may therefore initiate – or rather accelerate – the transition to a new era of remote-only companies.

With major digital businesses and platform work leading the way, the risk is the gradual disappearance of the physical workplace, and with it of the notion of choice concerning remote working. In this regard, research shows that the implementation of full-time teleworking arrangements is not necessarily in line with employees' preferences. During the lockdown, only 13 per cent of European workers were willing to work from home each day if there were no Covid-19

restrictions (Eurofound 2020). Another recent study highlights that 27 per cent of teleworkers see remote work as a constraint, of whom 72 per cent are in a state of psychological distress as a result (Empreinte Humaine 2020). These figures underline the potential for harm embodied in remote-only jobs, and further emphasise the paramount importance of framing telework as a discretionary and complementary option made available to the worker.

The European Framework Agreement on Telework already covers the voluntary character of telework arrangements but is of limited legal importance when it comes to regulating companies willing to go remote-only. The text stipulates that teleworking may be resorted to subsequently as a voluntary arrangement or may be required as part of a worker's initial job description. Considering the latter case, all it takes for companies to enforce permanent telework is not to renew current temporary employment contracts and gradually to update job descriptions. For permanent contracts, it may require going through a proper restructuring process, involving changes to the terms and conditions of employment contracts. Following the Collective Redundancies Directive (98/59/EC) and the European Framework Directive on Information and Consultation (2002/14/EC), a minimum level of information and consultation is required on decisions likely to lead to 'substantial changes in work organisation or in contractual relations'. Neither instrument is particularly sensitive to occupational health and safety concerns, however. Considering the potential risk of psychosocial harm associated with remote-only jobs, the legal framework should cover means to evaluate the legitimacy of these arrangements and specify additional measures employers should take to prevent psychosocial risks. In keeping with Council Directive 89/391/EEC and the 'duty of care' principle, management strategies should clearly reflect the prioritisation of occupational health and safety no less than financial returns. Otherwise, the risk is that switching to remote-only will be used as a cost reduction strategy under the guise of innovation and at the expense of occupational health and safety.

That said, when implemented as a complementary and discretionary practice, telework has the potential to serve as a resource for workers, leading to increased job satisfaction and better work–life balance. In work contexts where it is feasible, all employees should therefore be allowed to request telework arrangements and should be provided with clear reasons in case of refusal. In line with the Employment Equality Directive (2000/78/EC) and the Gender Equality Directive (2006/54/EC), equal opportunities should apply to agency workers or workers on short-term contracts. Although there is no explicit legal provision to consider telework requests and to justify any refusals, these two Directives imply that rejecting such requests without an equality impact assessment would result in decisions that are discriminatory, and therefore unjustifiable. Equally important is to ensure that teleworkers enjoy all the same rights as other workers, including the right to contact and join a union, the right to training and lifelong learning, the possibility to be promoted and the benefits of collective agreements. Although most of these requirements are already included in the European Framework Agreement on Telework, enforcing them may be even more challenging as workplaces become increasingly virtual.

Regardless of the practicalities of these arrangements, teleworkers should enjoy the same level of protection regarding health and safety. Considering that teleworking brings risks that are similar to those in the workplace but also risks of its own, the general principles of prevention of Directive 89/391/EEC apply. The employer has a legal duty to assess the physical and psychosocial risks that teleworking represents, and to take appropriate measures to eliminate or reduce them. Regardless of the teleworking agreement bargained in the company, it is of paramount importance to involve health and safety representatives in the process, with the obligation of consultation, information and training.

Organisational level: reorganising work processes and activities

Given the speed at which the Covid-19 virus hit and the number of people affected, organisations had very little time to put together a work-from-home plan. Inadequate equipment, lack of organisational support, and unrealistic expectations with regard to performance and productivity have been common concerns for workers during the lockdown (Eurofound 2020). Overall, only half of European workers have been satisfied with the quantity of work they have managed to accomplish, while 65 per cent have reported being satisfied with the quality of their work. Moreover, poor productivity resulting from dysfunctional telework practices is likely to lead to longer working hours and added strain for the workers. During the lockdown, 33 per cent of European workers have reported working during their free time to meet work demands, and 24 per cent have felt emotionally drained by work. These figures underline that remote work entails a reorganisation of work processes to make it more efficient and sustainable for workers. With companies increasingly recognising the potential of these arrangements, it will be essential for employers to introduce initiatives to prevent physical and emotional exhaustion, and for governments to adapt OSH regulations accordingly. The European Framework Agreement on Teleworking of 2002 emphasises the notion of 'time sovereignty', whereby teleworkers manage the organisation of their working time. Additionally, both employers and managers should play a pivotal role in promoting employees' wellness and avoiding overwork. These objectives can be achieved by effectively communicating realistic expectations and achievable deadlines, prioritising work and re-deploying under-stretched workers to overstretched teams. Besides, companies need to be aware of the increase in work demands on managers themselves, which can result from managing remote teams. Organisations should deploy an 'early warning system' to detect the risk of burnout by encouraging workers to share when they are feeling overloaded.

Covid-19 has increased the volume of data that organisations hold, as companies have had to fast-track the digital transformation of their operations. A recent survey shows that 53 per cent of junior employees are not entirely confident that management abides by the relevant laws, codes of conduct and industry regulations (Ernst and Young 2020). In this context, it is more important than ever to ensure that companies are provided with clear guidelines on how

to prevent cybersecurity threats while workers are working from home, as well as on how they can comply with data protection and privacy regulations.

The lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues represents another main concern of teleworkers during the pandemic. The massive application of telework has created a kind of 'a trouble shared is a trouble halved' effect, making the phenomenon not limited to a few but applicable to thousands of workers who have had to use technologies to reduce the sense of social isolation during the pandemic (Hwang et al. 2020). Virtual coffee breaks, team video calls and individual well-being check-ins have been commonplace and have allowed workers to see each other despite physical distance. Figures are therefore less alarming in this regard, with 12 per cent of European workers feeling isolated while working and 16 per cent reporting a lack of support from colleagues (Eurofound 2020). With some segments of the workforce returning to their employer's premises and others pursuing telework arrangements, there is a risk that these countermeasures will fade away and expose the remaining teleworkers to greater professional isolation. Employers' policies should address the continuity of these measures and, more generally, ensure that every effort is being made to help teleworkers stay connected with supervisors, colleagues, and the organisation as a whole. Communication should not be limited to content, but also include the social aspects of work by creating opportunities for connecting outside of work obligations or continuing established office traditions. It is important to strike a balance and contain social interactions within working hours, however, in order not to further blur the line between working and private time.

Finally, involving workers in the design and implementation of teleworking, in accordance with the guidelines set out above, is of paramount importance. In addition to being a legal obligation (89/391/ECC), discussing and achieving consensus on solutions will set the tone and foster confidence before a structural teleworking programme begins.

Home and family level: ensuring a good work–life interface

The abrupt rise in telework has also highlighted the blurring of lines between work and private life (Eurofound 2020). During the lockdown, 21 per cent of European workers considered that their job prevents them from giving as much time as they want to their family and 29 per cent felt too tired after work to do certain household jobs. Elevated levels of stress are another consequence of blurred boundaries, with 27 per cent of European workers reporting being worried about work when they are not working. Many of the recent initiatives for dealing with blurred boundaries have been directed towards restricting access to work systems outside of office hours, such as anchoring the right to disconnect in national policies. These figures demonstrate that the work–life balance situation of teleworkers during the lockdown has been far from ideal. While it can be partly explained by the additional challenges brought by the crisis, such as the closure of childcare facilities and schools, this also raises the issue of the level of enforcement of the right to disconnect and its sufficiency.

While allowing regulation of the excessive use of digital communication, enforcement of the right to disconnect should not deprive workers of some of the advantages of remote work. It is clear that there is no one-size-fits-all solution, as some workers feel the need to clearly demarcate their professional and personal lives, while others may find benefits in temporarily blurring these boundaries. Such benefits depend entirely on the specific management context, however, and the degree of autonomy given to the worker. In addition to the practices described earlier, telework arrangements should also involve flexibility in organising working time and space. Telework arrangements should entail an open discussion about work–life balance, and on how the two can work well together. By doing so, employees may reconcile family and work demands in a way that could not have been resolved otherwise. Examples include supporting employees with caregiving responsibilities, such as minor children or adult dependents for whom an employee provides services. Direct managers play a pivotal role and should be proactive in encouraging these discussions. Such a case-by-case approach is possible only by fostering a culture of trust and compassion, two key traits for leaders to develop.

A good work–life interface also presupposes that employees are provided with similar equipment to what is used in the office. The ergonomics of home furniture may not be optimal and give rise to musculoskeletal disorders. It is the employer's responsibility to prevent such risks by providing adequate equipment, and to inform workers about ergonomic issues via training or other types of preventive measures, paying particular attention to early signs and adjusting the work environment accordingly.

Job level: preventing the risk of a teleworkability divide

In a desperate attempt to mitigate the economic implications of an unprecedented crisis, flexible work arrangements have been expanded to other work roles and sectors than the usual suspects. During the lockdown, around a quarter of European employees reported at least partial telework in such diverse sectors as health care, transport and agriculture (Sostero et al. 2020). Once the dust has settled, a reality check is more than probable as governments and companies cannot but note that not all jobs are teleworkable. Teleworkability would not be problematic if this pandemic were only a stone in the shoe of humanity. However, there is a growing consensus among scientists that deforestation and our encroachment on diverse wildlife habitats is helping diseases to spread from animals to humans more frequently. We must therefore assume that this is not the last pandemic we are going to face.

This raises the possibility of a new divide between those who can telework and those who cannot. The teleworkability divide may result in segments of workers experiencing heightened job insecurity and financial uncertainties, impacting consequentially their mental health. Workers who have not the opportunity to telework are at increased risk of temporary layoff or furlough, and even permanent termination on economic grounds. This increased vulnerability

superimposes upon existing labour market inequalities, as most low-skilled and low-income occupations are not teleworkable (JRC 2020). Additionally, this new divide could tend to increase spatial and social separation between social classes. If an aristocracy of labour separates out to an upper sphere of virtual remotely provided labour, social distances will potentially become much larger and social cohesion more problematic.

Although ambitious actions have helped to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis, a more structural response is required to prevent a teleworking divide. First, workers in jobs that are not teleworkable should be provided with additional social safety nets in order to protect them from the financial uncertainties associated with pandemics and large-scale disasters. Second, ensuring equal access to ICT and that workers possess the education and skills they need to use them are fundamental challenges that policymakers need to address. Access to teleworking arrangements should be facilitated among younger and lower-qualified employees, as lifelong learning is becoming the main source of job security in the digital era. Policies also need to address older workers, in particular with regard to learning opportunities and to guarding against age discrimination in the workforce.

Conclusion

This analysis has aimed to shed light on some of the key challenges that teleworking policies need to address in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic. We briefly reviewed the four categories of factors affecting remote work effectiveness and teleworkers' well-being, with an emphasis on what lessons can be learned from the world's largest work-from-home experiment.

The guiding thread of this analysis is ensuring that telework serves as a resource for workers, which requires a fundamentally higher level of alignment between these four factors. As demonstrated in this brief, these challenges stem from the lack of specific regulations and the absence of a comprehensive overarching framework. Ensuring that work processes and activities accommodate the virtual environment, fostering the voluntary character of telework arrangements, reframing telework as a means to reconcile family and work demands, and preventing the risk of a teleworkability divide are key initiatives that will ensure a socially responsive transition to the new world of work.

Achieving a perfect fit between these four factors was illusory during the lockdown, but this pessimistic picture should not conceal the urgency of rethinking the regulatory framework for telework. Such reflection is particularly needed as we approach a turning point in the future of telework, with employers increasingly recognising the benefits of such arrangements.

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