HEALTHY WORKPLACES SUMMIT 2025

Safe and healthy work in the digital age

Telework and psychosocial risks: emerging challenges and regulatory responses
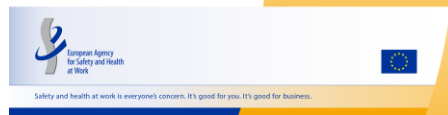
Pablo Sanz de Miguel. Lecturer in Sociology. University of Zaragoza.

1. Telework and OSH

Telework and health risks in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: evidence from the field and policy implications

Report

Regulating telework in a pos-covid-19 Europe

Report

DISCUSSION

PAPER

EXPLORING THE GENDER DIMENSION OF TELEWORK: IMPLICATIONS FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

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Safety and health at work is everyone's concern. It's good for you. It's good for business.

Authors: Maria Caprile, Juan Arasanz, Jordi Potrony and Rachel Palmén (Notus):Pablo Sanz de Miguel (University of Zaragoza) in collaboration with Feliciano Iudicone (FGB) and Frédéric Turlan (IR Share) for the fieldwork and Märt Masso (Praxis) for the peer-review.
Project management: Maurizio Curtarelli and Lorenzo Munar(EUOSHA)

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1. Teleworking patterns

- The experience of extended and prolonged telework during the pandemic has improved the perceptions of telework of both employers and employees

- Generalised preference for "hybrid work" arrangements (combination of telework and on-site work) among employers and employees may lead to increased diversification of teleworkers profiles, notably medium-skilled occupations

- **Gender gap** in the prevalence of telework. It is explained because:
    - More men than women work in non-teleworkable jobs, mainly in manufacturing and construction (EIGE 2022a).
    - There is a higher propensity of women to combine work with domestic and/or caregiving responsibilities (gender norms + gender pay gap)

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2. Psychosocial risks: state-of-the art

- Telework often related to informal overtime or working on irregular hours to cope with high workload or to manage expectations of constant availability for attending job requests, leading to stress and work-life conflict

- Intense telework involves the risk of isolation and detachment from the organisation. Recent (in 2021) attention has been placed on risks stemming from intense virtual team collaboration (information overload, non-verbal overload, poor team collaboration and performance)

- Work-life conflict is more prevalent among workers with care responsibilities and tends to be gendered. Women with care responsibilities are more likely to report positive implications for work-life balance, but they are also more exposed to work-family conflict

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3. Psychosocial risks: main findings

Work intensification

- Increased workload and irregular working time patterns were mostly concentrated in the initial stages of the pandemic due to the need of adapting to the new situation.

- In addition, working from home entails clear risks of working time extension and increased difficulties to switch-off from work, often associated to perceptions of having to be constantly available.

- The reduction of commuting times has had ambivalent effects on working time patterns. Time formerly spent in commuting is often transformed (completely or partially) into working time.

- Issues related with availability beyond regular hours result from different factors:
  - Direct forms of intrusive control, although they were rather exceptional and limited to the initial stages of the pandemic
  - Other management practices (such as sending emails out of working hours) are more usual and lead to implicit expectations of extended availability
  - Employees may feel compelled to be more visible and "always on" to show responsiveness towards work
  - Difficulties for setting limits with clients (external or internal) or service users in jobs involving high level of social interaction

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3. Psychosocial risks: main findings

Changes in job content

- Mandatory telework has been particularly challenging for employees in jobs requiring high levels of social interaction and emotional demands (namely teachers and social workers, but also employees in commercial jobs)

- Telework entailed significant changes in the content and purpose of these jobs. In most cases, companies and employees were particularly ill-prepared for a sudden shift to telework. It often resulted in increased workload and stress, namely in the initial stages of the pandemic

- However, employees also reported persistent frustration related with poor results of their job or the sense that they were not performing "at their best"

- Keeping face-to-face interaction remains essential. However, most employees would not waive the opportunity to work from home on-demand basis. The experience of enforced telework has shown that some tasks can be performed remotely in a more comfortable and productive way.

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3. Psychosocial risks: main findings

Isolation and intense virtual collaboration

- Team coordination is generally perceived as more time-consuming and may entail a multiplication of virtual meetings and information overload, slowing the pace of work and potentially affecting knowledge transfer within working teams and organisations.

- Intense virtual collaboration leads to loss of quality of interpersonal communication and missing of non-verbal cues which are crucial for contextualising information and avoiding misunderstandings.

- Effects are associated to feelings of isolation, fatigue (non-verbal overload) and insecurities about being misunderstood in the absence of informal interactions that are often missed in virtual meetings, which tend to be more job-focused and leave no room for more informal exchanges.

- Feelings of isolation have been particularly acute among employees in jobs involving high social interaction and among new employees

- In contrast, teleworkers in medium skilled jobs who felt isolated before the pandemic perceived increased recognition and support in the context of extended telework.

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3. Psychosocial risks: main findings

Work-life conflict

- Work-life conflict was especially acute during lockdown and school closures and was clearly gendered, affecting most notably working mothers with school-age children

- In some cases, work-life conflict leads to anxiety and stress for not being able to perform as usual. In other cases, it leads to feelings of guilt for being too focused on the job and not meeting care responsibilities

- Evidence gathered during lockdown and school closures may not be generalizable since most employees report to have adapted to the new situation and the incidence of work-life conflict is moderated by other job characteristics and socio-economic status

- Nevertheless, gendered patterns persist in relation to telework and work-life balance. Furthermore, the lack of a suitable space for working at home clearly exacerbates the risk of work-life conflict for both women and men.

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3. Psychosocial risks: main findings

- Higher gender gap in terms of **psychosocial risks** among teleworkers (2022 EU-OSHA OSH Pulse survey):
- Workload (risks of increasing workload because of the use of technologies): 3.9 pp. of gender gap
- Severe time pressure or overload: 11.8 p.p of gender gap

Drivers/explanatory factors identified in the literature
- Unequal distribution of unpaid working time (women's 'time poverty' and higher work-life conflict)
- Por quality of working time (long working hours and unsocial hours)
- Inequalities in terms of working time company policies: women are less likely to enjoy a certain autonomy over their working time;
- Prevalence of work cultures at company levels associated to the 'ideal worker model'
- National institutional factors related to welfare policies which result in low defamiliarization level, work-life balance policies and the regulation of telework

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4. Moderating factors: main findings

Autonomy

- Employees in highly demanding occupations with high autonomy have not seen their working conditions fundamentally altered by working from home. They are notably employees with management responsibilities who were already used to cope with high workload and whose job functions involve availability for dealing with job requests beyond regular hours

- Employees with some degree of autonomy over their working time and organisation of tasks are those who more frequently report increased autonomy when working from home. This, in addition to commuting time savings, has meant increased flexibility in adapting the distribution of working time according to their preferences, including working on irregular hours. In most cases, telework leads to positive effects in terms of self-perceived performance, job satisfaction and work-life balance

- Employees working in highly standardised work processes, with very limited autonomy over working schedules and pace of work, have not experienced major changes when working from home

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4. Moderating factors: main findings

Control and organisational support

- The experience of telework during pandemic has had a significant impact on overcoming management distrust and reluctance towards telework. This is generally acknowledged by both employers and employees. Interestingly, both report that control and monitoring mechanisms have not been substantially changed

- The massive transition to telework has implied certain discussion on OSH risks and prevention measures in most companies. There is coincidence among employers that the main risks are isolation and lack of proper working conditions at home.

- Support was mostly focused on the provision of laptops and software. The provision of ergonomic equipment and the compensation of costs associated to telework have been more limited. Furthermore, risk assessment of the home workstation was completely absent during the pandemic

- Concerning psychosocial risks, only a few companies have developed comprehensive prevention policies. They are companies with intense experience of telework before the outbreak of the pandemic or companies already planning to extend telework significantly

- Issues related to expectations of availability beyond regular working schedules are far from solved. The right to disconnect was formally recognised only in one large company, whilst some HRM practices were identified in others

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4. Moderating factors: main findings

Social dialogue and collective bargaining at company level

- In spite of the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 crisis, social dialogue and collective bargaining has played a significant role in the regulation of telework when trade unions and workers' representatives are present

- Collective agreements have been instrumental for facilitating the transition to extended telework or regulating aspects such as the jobs which are considered teleworkable, the intensity of telework, the rules for rotation between home-based work and on-site work and the provision of financial support

- Small companies also provide some examples of consultation with workers representatives or more direct participatory mechanisms

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5. Regulatory responses

- EU Member States regulate telework either through statutory legislation or by social dialogue and collective bargaining. In most countries, both types of regulation are used and complement each other.

- National regulation of telework differs widely.

  o Occasional telework (meaning less than 20% of working time and/or not following a specific pattern): either included in the general regulation of telework or regulated through specific provisions

  o Right to disconnect: agreement on the distribution of working hours, limitation of availability and breaks

  o Right to telework: maintaining the voluntariness principle, right to ask for telework or special treatment to some employees for supporting work-life balance

  o Specific OSH provisions: inclusion of psychosocial risks; procedures for risk assessment; employer' liability for work accidents

- In most countries the experience of extensive and prolonged telework has fuelled changes in legislation in four main aspects: (1) the statutory definition of telework (including the distinction between regular and occasional telework), (2) the right to disconnect, (3) the right to telework and (4) OSH provisions. Issues related to equipment and compensation of telework costs are also gaining relevance.

- Gender aspects are not included in the regulation of telework focused on OSH

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