

The future of (remote) work after Covid-19

Reflections about the challenges and possibilities connected to remote-work practices

A one-day workshop organized by ETUI

19 November 2021

In the course of the last year and a half, the world of work has developed a love and hate relationship with the concept of telework, and remote work more generally. As the dust of mandatory teleworking begins to settle, it is timely and appropriate to have a more sober and introspective assessment of the promises, perils, and potential of remote work in the post-pandemic world.

It is fair to say that, in the early days of the pandemic, those (few millions of) workers who were lucky enough to be able to perform their jobs remotely immediately grasped both the opportunities and the challenges that telework presented. They felt relieved from the daily grind of long commutes, the toxicity of certain office environments and some of the drudgery of the nine-to-five routine. Working from home, or remotely, offered at least the prospect of a better work-life balance, of greater flexibility, and an unprecedented degree of autonomy. Unsurprisingly, in spite of a long winter of seemingly endless Zoom meetings, blistering ‘home schooling’ sessions and worrying levels of social isolation, early surveys suggest many are unwilling to contemplate a full return to the office in the post-pandemic world. Employers are also increasingly ambivalent: some see home working as ‘an aberration’ to be rectified as soon as possible but others are tempted by the cost-saving associated with reduction of office space. Some early calls for a return to the office have been delayed and postponed with talks about the ‘Great Wait’ becoming ubiquitous.

More recent studies have focused on largely unforeseen, but clearly emerging, risks associated with remote working—teleworking in particular. Rising gender inequalities and growing psychosocial risks are increasingly documented as among the associated hazards.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that protracted social distancing may lead to new forms of ‘contractual distancing’ between the firm and its ‘remote’ workforce. A 2021 study by the consultancy firm McKinsey noted that businesses have been ‘rewiring their organizational policies ... to better leverage a flexible workforce and use independent workers’ skills to help adapt to a post-pandemic world’. Of 800 executives it surveyed, ‘70 percent report an intent to hire more on-site independent workers and freelancers after Covid-19’. Another CEO writing on the Washington Post in May 2021 clearly expressed the view that ‘If the employee is rarely around ... management has a strong incentive to change their status to “contractor”. This may well be managerial saber-rattling, but it would be a mistake to simply ignore it.

A central hypothesis of this workshop is that not all businesses will rush to reclassify their workers as self-employed contractors working remotely. A first group of workers, whose size would vary by business and sector, will likely be able to enjoy the benefits of remote working—perhaps even from the safety of ‘employer-sponsored home offices’—while retaining contractual security and labour rights. These would probably be the employees with highly-desirable, hard-to-find, firm-specific, ‘core’ skills. Their employers will want to keep them close to their chest in terms of contractual arrangements, granting them a modicum of trust, autonomy and freedom in the manner and location from which their work is performed—albeit in exchange for greater intrusion on the content and output of their work (including through digital surveillance and monitoring) and some expectations of exclusivity in terms of their services.

But a second group of workers, perceived as less highly-skilled (though not necessarily unskilled or peripheral) and more readily available in the labour ‘market’, could quickly be on the receiving end of restructuring and contractual variations which could see them working remotely, on a more or less regular basis, as freelancers or independent contractors.

There is a third group whose labour risks being restructured as needed on to an intermittent or on-demand basis and could readily be shifted to platform intermediation, including via offshoring. Algorithmic management has abundantly proved its capabilities *vis-à-vis* ‘chopping up a multipart work into its smallest components and submitting each of them to always available and geographically dispersed “legions” of workers’.



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There could be a blurring between this and the previous group, whose members could also be pushed into performing ‘gigs’. These groups will arguably suffer the harshest of trade-offs between the advantages of physical distancing and the disadvantages of contractual distancing and precarisation. Some (overt or covert) ‘fire and rehire’ would inevitably underpin these processes.

Finally, as predicted by Joseph Stiglitz in the early days of the pandemic and confirmed by McKinsey, some workers who perform low-skill and repetitive tasks are likely to be increasingly substituted with bots and artificial intelligence. Human labour may still remain a feature, but a hidden one, of these processes of ‘heteromation’.

The quest for decent remote work

The world of work has a long and proud tradition of defying the prophets of doom predicting its final demise. This could, and should, be one of those instances. As already noted by the International Labour Organization, there is nothing novel about ‘home working’. Yet this form of work has not historically been associated with decent or secure employment conditions. The ‘home’ connotes ‘private space’ which does not lend itself to regulatory action by the state, trade-union activity, or administrative inspection.

A societal shift in favour of remote and home working could nevertheless prove a historic opportunity for the labour movement, liberating millions of workers—at least those fortunate enough to be able to perform their work remotely—from the excesses of managerialism. It could give a new impetus to the much needed human-centred agenda for the future of work, and assist with the ‘just transition’ agenda.

This liberation is however not what most remote workers have experienced during the pandemic. Early evidence suggests many have suffered from a growing expectation to be available online on a near-constant basis—leading to longer hours, shorter breaks and burnout. This has often been coupled with remote surveillance and, especially for women, the shouldering of household and caring roles previously performed by others during working hours.

To have a truly liberating effect, future remote-work schemes must swiftly depart from these ‘lockdown work’ paradigms. And workers, unions and regulators will need to be aware of the pitfalls of contractual distancing. This one day (hybrid) workshop proposes to lay the foundations both to assess correctly the risks and potential for remote work schemes after the pandemic and to ensure a genuinely human centered approach to the future of telework, which is clearly emerging as a central component of the broader ‘Future of Work’ debate. The workshop is split in four sessions exploring separate angles of this increasingly complex and pressing debate.



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9.30 - 10.30

Session 1 – Telework and remote work during and beyond the pandemic

Chair: **Nicola Countouris**, Director of the Research Department, ETUI

Speakers:

- **Remote work and digital labour platforms: What trends do we see?**, **Uma Rani**, Senior Economist ILO
 - **The economics of remote work**, **Abi Adams**, Associate Professor & Senior Research Fellow, University of Oxford
 - **Telework and Gender**, **Kalina Arabadjieva**, Researcher ETUI and **Paula Franklin**, Senior Researcher ETUI
- Q&A

10.30 - 10.45 Coffee / Tea break

10.45 – 11.45

Session 2 – Regulating telework and remote work for decent work

Chair: **Zane Rasnača**, Senior Researcher ETUI

Speakers:

- **The respect of OSH principles as a fundamental basis to successful telework and remote work**, **Aude Cefaliello**, Researcher ETUI
- **Telework and the myth of autonomy**, **Silvia Rainone**, Researcher ETUI
- **The private international law aspects of telework and remote work**, **Ugljesa Grusic**, Associate Professor UCL Faculty of Laws

Q&A

11.45 - 12.00 Coffee / Tea break

12.00 – 13.00

Session 3 – Trade unions and telework

Chair: **Marcus Meyer**, Senior Researcher ETUI

Speakers:

- **Framework agreement on telework**, **Juliane Bir**, Head of Trade Union Policy ETUC
- **The impact of videoconferences on the work of the European Works Councils**, **Bruno Demaître**, EWC policy adviser, industriAll European Trade Union
- **Unionisation and remote work: some initial insights**, **Kurt Vandaele**, Senior Researcher ETUI

Q&A

13.00- 14.00 Lunch break



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14.00-15.00

Session 4 – Remote work and the future of work

Chair: **Aida Ponce Del Castillo**, Senior Researcher - Foresight, ETUI

Speakers:

- **Remote work and the redesigning of managerial prerogatives**, **Valerio De Stefano**, Professor of Labour Law, KU Leuven
- **Globalization meets the white-collar class: Job quality in a future of remote work**, **Janine Berg**, Senior Economist in the Inclusive Labour Markets, Labour Relations and Working Conditions Branch (INWORK) of the International Labour Office
- **The best of both worlds — for whom?**, **Hamid Ekbia**, Professor of Informatics, International Studies, and Cognitive Science and Director of the Center for Research on Mediated Interaction (CROMI) at Indiana University

Q&A



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