

Chapter 1

Some reflections on the experience of telework during the Covid-19 pandemic: a paradigm shift and its implications for the world of work

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*'Time and space are not conditions of existence,
time and space is a model for thinking'*
Albert Einstein

1. Introduction

When considering remote working via information and communications technologies (ICTs) – that is, telework – time and space do indeed provide a model for thinking. Time and space represent two of its most important aspects. Telework has important effects on both the temporal and the spatial dimensions of the world of work, and these can be positive or negative depending upon how it is practised. Indeed, it changes these two dimensions in ways that have the ability fundamentally to alter the nature of work itself. In particular, telework, if exercised correctly, allows workers to have a substantial degree of choice over when, where and how they work.

1.1 Definition

Telework is defined as the use of ICTs such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers to work from outside an employer's premises; that is, to work remotely. In other words, telework denotes work achieved with the help of ICTs and conducted outside the employer's physical place of work.¹ The use of telework is not new, having existed since the 1970s in some parts of the world, particularly in California where it was invented and first implemented on an experimental basis (Nilles 1975). It was expected to grow substantially as the costs of ICTs and broadband communications became cheaper but, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, its regular use was limited to certain occupations, particularly managers, senior professionals and technical staff; and certain economic sectors, such as IT and finance.

1.2 The Covid-19 pandemic experience and lessons learned

In 2020, the pandemic changed this situation dramatically. In an attempt to limit the spread of the Covid-19 virus, keep workers employed and reduce the negative economic

1. In the context of this chapter, most self-employed workers working from their own homes are not considered to be teleworkers; they are working from an employer's premises.

consequences of the pandemic, policymakers promoted, and employers aggressively implemented, telework. Almost overnight, the world entered into a kind of ‘natural experiment’ with mass teleworking as the vast majority of those workers who were capable of doing their jobs remotely began working from home. For an in-depth review and analysis of the use of home-based telework as a pandemic crisis response measure, see the section on home-based teleworking (home offices) in *Working Time and Work-Life Balance Around the World* (ILO 2022).

However, while the availability of ICTs allowed for the widespread use of telework in many countries around the world – including all of the G20 countries – this experiment highlighted not only the opportunities but also the threats of this type of flexible work arrangement. Early evidence confirms that the mandatory, full-time nature of pandemic teleworking exacerbated the disadvantages, such as the potential for social isolation and detachment from colleagues and the organisation itself, as well as the ergonomic issues. Existing gender inequalities and challenges for women also appear to have been aggravated by mandatory, full-time teleworking, especially in the context of the closures of schools and childcare facilities.

The full impact of Covid-19 on labour markets still remains to be determined. However, it is very likely that the rates of telework in many countries and industries with large numbers of ‘teleworkable’ jobs will remain significantly higher than they were prior to the onset of the pandemic. Indeed, some early evidence from Europe during the post-pandemic period confirms that higher rates of teleworking are almost certainly here to stay (Eurofound 2022).

2. Telework and hybrid work in the post-pandemic world

Early stage research and surveys have found that a substantially larger percentage of workers would like to telework more frequently than they did prior to the pandemic (see e.g. Eurofound 2022). More workers have realised that their jobs can be done outside of traditional office spaces and they have also gained experience with the necessary technology. Additionally, many business leaders who were previously resistant to their teams working from home because they did not know if it was going to be effective have now found that it can be done successfully and are thus supportive of workers teleworking more frequently.

However, if these aspirations are to be realised, it requires ensuring that the necessary digital infrastructure is in place. In addition, the ‘teleworkability’ of jobs is strongly related to occupational structure, encompassing a variety of factors such as the skills of the workforce and implying that possession of the appropriate skills is critical to making telework a viable option for a substantial portion of the labour force.

Post-pandemic, teleworking may well return to its voluntary and partial or occasional nature – and, if so, that is in some respects a very positive development. Beforehand, telework was under-developed regarding both law/regulation and policy (at national and organisational levels). In countries outside of the EU, there were often no laws or

regulations of any kind on telework; and there were even fewer on the right to disconnect, which is extremely important for ensuring proper rest periods for teleworkers. As laws, regulations and policies further develop to catch up in practice with the pandemic-induced paradigm change, developing such frameworks should help to improve the working conditions of teleworkers even if, and when, mandatory full-time telework is used in other crisis situations.

It now appears that teleworking is likely to involve a hybrid or blended form of teleworking – working part of the time in the office and part of the time remotely. In fact, this ‘hybrid model’ of teleworking was shown some time ago to be the best approach to maximising its benefits and minimising its drawbacks (see e.g. Eurofound and ILO 2017). The mandatory, full-time pandemic form of teleworking should really be used only in exceptional circumstances (e.g. in epidemics or other pandemics), and possibly also for natural disasters (e.g. the 2011 Sendai earthquake and tsunami in Japan).

In order to ensure that telework arrangements provide decent working conditions, it is essential to realise that some of these are – due to the nature of telework – very different from those experienced at an employer’s premises.² Perhaps one of the most dramatic differences in the working conditions of teleworkers compared with onsite workers concerns working time.

3. The working time of teleworkers: time porosity and the risk of working longer hours

Certainly, the interest in analysing telework arrangements precedes the pandemic. In 2019, the edited volume *Telework in the 21st Century* (Messenger 2019) collected research studies from 15 different countries, all of which reported the same basic working time pattern: longer total hours of work combined with much greater discretion for workers regarding the organisation of their working time (i.e. work schedules), often referred to as ‘time sovereignty’. The former is one of the most important potential disadvantages of telework, while time sovereignty is perhaps the most sought-after benefit for workers. Telework evidently allows workers to have the flexibility to structure their working days in accordance with their individual needs. For example, they can take their children to school and pick them up afterwards, run errands and handle other personal business (for example, attend medical appointments) during normal business hours and then work at other times that are more convenient for them. All of these factors dramatically change the nature of teleworkers’ working time, both in terms of working hours and work schedules.

As noted above, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 dramatically increased the use of telework in order to prevent the spread of the virus. The available research regarding the use of telework in response highlights some key issues and provides important insights into what may be needed as part of any attempt to develop a balanced legal/regulatory and policy framework for employers and workers to manage

2. Of course, hybrid workers work both remotely and in the office.

telework in the future. With regard to working time and rest, the research from this period indicates that many of the concerns expressed by workers who teleworked prior to 2020 were also felt by those forced into telework by the pandemic. Studies conducted during 2020 in different countries around the world found that many teleworkers had longer working hours, but what was most notable was the consistency of those findings: a study of the 27 Member States of the European Union found that around 35 per cent of teleworkers reported an increase in working hours (Eurofound 2021; Eurofound 2020); working hours for teleworkers in Israel went up 47 minutes per day on average (The Economist 2020); and a study conducted by Harvard Business School of 16 cities in North America, Europe and the middle east, of 3.1 million people who were teleworking, found that the average working day increased by 48.5 minutes (DeFilippis et al. 2020). These findings seem particularly ironic given that, at least prior to the pandemic, many managers were worried that teleworkers would ‘slack off’ without regular, in-person supervision (see e.g. Messenger 2019).

When considering the working time of teleworkers, it is essential to mention that telework provides workers with substantial time savings due to reductions in commuting to and from the workplace. Indeed, the original impetus for the development of telework in California back in the 1970s was the desire to reduce or even eliminate long and stressful commutes to the workplace which is why its inventor, Jack Nilles, referred to it as ‘telecommuting’ – that is, commuting to work by means of telecommunications. This point seems rather obvious. The more difficult question to answer is the extent to which the time savings from reductions in commuting are eaten up by an increase in the total hours of work discussed in the previous paragraph. For example, in a study in the United States, while 65 per cent of workers surveyed enjoyed a net increase in their disposable time due to telework, 35 per cent of them indicated that all of the time saved from the commute was devoted to additional working time in their primary job (Bloom et al. 2020).

An important factor to bear in mind regarding the research studies that have been produced on Covid-related telework is that, in many countries and many organisations, both public and private, the imposition of telework came very quickly, but often without a management or regulatory framework as to how telework could be done – or, for that matter, any training for the workers and managers involved. This near-total absence of structure and preparation help to explain the factors that have led to some of the negative outcomes of pandemic teleworking, including longer working hours, while understanding them should provide policymakers and social actors with information and insights on how they might be addressed. In these circumstances, pandemic teleworking should have been a complete disaster; that it functioned as well as it did is something akin to a miracle.

In addition to its effect on the length or volume of working hours, telework also has an impact on the organisation or arrangement of working time, mainly because of the employee-oriented working time flexibility, or ‘time sovereignty’, that is inherent in most telework arrangements.

Gschwind and Vargas (2019: 49) provide a vivid illustration of this phenomenon, noting that:

...[T]he planning of a workday looks very different in comparison to a regular eight-hour office day. Almost half of the teleworkers (45 per cent) run little errands in between, gear the working hours to family needs or do odd jobs or domestic chores when having a break. Just a minority of the home-based teleworkers (9 per cent) keep to the timetable of the office, whereas others start working earlier or later or quit working earlier or later (36 per cent). Thus, while the working day of teleworkers is typically longer than those of office workers, it is also more 'porous'.

As a result of the time porosity of a typical teleworking day, teleworkers are more likely than their office-based colleagues to work during the evenings and sometimes on the weekends as well. For example, teleworkers in several European countries, including Belgium, Finland, Spain and the Netherlands, are more likely to work during the evenings and on Sundays than their colleagues who always work at the employer's premises (Gschwind and Vargas 2019). Similarly, there is also evidence of teleworkers in Japan and in India also being more likely to work during the evenings and at weekends than their office-based counterparts (Sato 2019; Noronha and D'Cruz 2019).

Thus, it appears that telework does provide individuals with the opportunity better to organise their work schedules in line with their own needs and preferences as well as with reductions in the time they need to spend commuting. However, it also results in longer working hours extending into their personal time. As a result of this situation, the boundary between paid work and personal life has the potential to become very blurred and this, in turn, can lead to increased work-family conflict and other negative outcomes. Consequently, it is important for remote workers to establish boundaries between their paid work and their personal lives, particularly if they work from home. Furthermore, such boundaries need to be both physical and temporal. One example of a physical boundary is a home office or other space dedicated to carrying out paid work; an example of a temporal boundary is the right to disconnect from paid work during those periods reserved for rest and/or personal life, such as evenings and weekends.

In addition to telework's effects on working time, it can also – and perhaps not surprisingly – have a profound effect on the localities where work is done; thus it affects not only the spatial organisation of work and personal life but also the broader spatial patterns of society as a whole.

4. The spatial dimension of telework and hybrid work

As we have seen, telework had a spatial dimension from its earliest development (Nilles 1975). At that time, futurists waxed poetic regarding the potential of technology to enable remote working; for example, Alvin Toffler envisioned something he called 'the electronic cottage': a home-based electronic production system (Toffler 1980).

While telework never came close to achieving this utopian vision, nevertheless it has always had the potential to help promote a reconfiguration of the spatial distribution

of work and, as a result, of personal lives as well. The dramatic expansion of telework during the pandemic provided employees who had the capability to telework with the opportunity to experience the advantages and disadvantages of this first hand which, as mentioned earlier, were magnified by the conditions of the pandemic, particularly government-mandated lockdowns and social distancing.

Nevertheless, research studies and company examples, developed in the relatively brief post-pandemic period, do report that most employees would prefer to work remotely for at least some of the time. This preference has already led to widespread experimentation with working from alternative locations including, but not limited to, working from home.³ Many companies (e.g. Google and Dell) are offering – or sometimes even requiring – their employees to work from locations other than the employer’s premises. Obviously, this is a cost-saving measure for those companies but, at the same time, many others are requiring employees to come into the office again on a regular basis, or even full-time, in spite of these potential cost savings. The appeal is, it seems, far from universal.

The point is, however, that if employees are able to choose the location of their workplace, it seems likely that there would be some movement from highly urbanised areas into less populated ones, not to mention fewer commutes to and from the office. The transportation literature is filled with examples of the potential of regular teleworking to reduce the use of personal vehicles and increase the use of public transport, leading to the reduction of CO₂ emissions (see e.g. Akgüç et al., this volume). Therefore, in addition to the savings in commuting time and in the accompanying stress for workers, telework has the potential to offer broader benefits to society as well.

5. Some opportunities and challenges of telework for trade unions

An appropriate legal and regulatory framework is absolutely essential to help ensure that telework arrangements offer decent working conditions and social protection for workers, including the right to disconnect from work during specified periods of time reserved for rest and personal life (e.g. between work shifts and on weekly rest days). A closely-related but often neglected point regarding this legal and regulatory framework is that the ability to telework on a regular basis is regarded by many workers as an important benefit – even more so in the wake of the experience of the pandemic.

However, this overall framework needs to be sufficiently flexible to permit telework arrangements to be customised to the needs of workers and employers in particular economic sectors and different organisations, both public and private. The need for such adaptation offers opportunities for trade unions to take an assertive approach to forging collective agreements with employers at all levels (see Dedden et al., this volume).

3. Many teleworkers are actually mobile workers, moving from one work location to another or working while travelling on business.

Probably the most notable example of such an agreement is the European Union Framework Agreement on Telework (2002), negotiated by the European-level social partners. This Agreement establishes a general framework for the rules regarding telework with the aim of promoting it but also ensuring that this work arrangement meets the needs of workers as well as employers. It highlights the important principle that teleworkers should retain the same legal protections as employees working at an employer's physical premises. It also identifies the critical features that are specific to remote working, requiring adaptation on issues such as employment conditions, data protection, privacy, equipment, health and safety, the organisation of work, training and collective rights. This Agreement, applicable to all Member States of the European Union, has resulted in national-level regulations on telework in all but two EU Member States⁴ (Eurofound 2022). More recently, in the wake of the pandemic, the European-level social partners have decided to begin negotiations to review and update it to reflect the profoundly new circumstances of the post-pandemic world (Eurofound 2022).

In addition to collective bargaining and actively influencing government laws and policies on telework, the dramatic expansion of telework also offers other opportunities for trade unions. For example, one of the most important disadvantages of telework is the potential for social isolation, particularly with full-time telework. However, this disadvantage offers a potential opportunity for trade unions by serving as a vehicle for promoting interaction, communication and socialisation among workers who are geographically dispersed.

This spatial dispersion inherent in telework can potentially make it more difficult for trade unions to organise employees than would be the case in more traditional, physical workplaces. Unions need actively to seek technological solutions to transcend this barrier and ensure that workers remain connected with each other (see also Vandaele and Piasna, this volume). Regular meetings and other events, ideally in person ones, can also help foster and maintain a collective identity and shared objectives.

6. The way forward: ensuring equal treatment and opportunities for teleworkers

During 2020, the necessity of deploying teleworking arrangements during the Covid-19 pandemic to promote social distancing, while keeping organisations operating and workers employed, dramatically increased the use of telework almost overnight in both private enterprises and public sector organisations. While the pandemic has now mostly passed, the ultimate result of this massive deployment of telework as a crisis response measure amounts to nothing less than a paradigm shift in the way in which paid work is carried out. The proverbial horse is now not only out of the stables but has already bolted down the road and, at this stage, it's going to be nearly impossible to get it back. Workers have seen both the upsides and the downsides of telework in the worst possible circumstances and yet they must have concluded that the former outweigh

4. These two being Cyprus and Ireland.

the latter because their demands to work remotely on a regular basis as a condition of employment are rising.

Therefore, as a result of this ‘natural experiment’, it will be necessary to work out how to promote decent and productive telework for a much larger portion of the workforce than used this work arrangement prior to the pandemic. During the next, highly uncertain period, workers, employers and governments will need to adapt to this new way of living and working which will require new behaviours and new norms. The ILO’s telework guide, *Teleworking during the Covid-19 Pandemic and Beyond: A Practical Guide*, offers specific, practical recommendations regarding effective teleworking practices focused on eight key areas that affect workers’ well-being as well as the performance of individuals and teams:

- working time and work organisation
- performance management
- digitalisation
- communication
- occupational safety and health
- legal and contractual implications
- training
- work-life balance (ILO 2020).

Fully implementing the practical recommendations in this Guide will help make the remote working experience as similar as possible to the office experience which, in turn, will help to promote equal treatment and opportunities for both remote workers and onsite ones. In fact, the nature of hybrid work itself helps to promote equal treatment and opportunities because it involves the same people working in both modes.

Many possible approaches to hybrid work are possible, both regarding the number of days of remote working per week or per month and workers’ ability to choose which days are best suited to their individual needs. Additionally, in examining which particular model of telework is best suited to them, organisations should seek employees’ inputs regarding the design of telework arrangements and work collaboratively with them to implement and then manage them. Such an approach will not only result in telework arrangements that are well-adapted to these needs, but will also build the trust that is essential to making them work effectively, ultimately leading to beneficial results for both workers and employers.

Last, but certainly not least, it is essential to ensure that the social partners play a central role in drawing out the lessons learned from this enforced experiment and applying them to revise existing laws, regulations and policies or, if necessary, to develop new ones. This can help make teleworking a ‘win-win’ arrangement benefiting both workers and employers in private enterprises as well as in public sector organisations.

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