Introduction

Telework and ICT-based mobile work (TICTM) is any type of work arrangement where workers work remotely, away from an employer’s premises or fixed location, using digital technologies such as networks, laptops, mobile phones and the internet. It offers workers unprecedented flexibility in where they work and when they work. TICTM has emerged in the context of developments in the world of work and the economy, including digitalisation, flexibilisation of the labour market, increasing labour market participation of women and global competition.

This report analyses the employment and working conditions of workers with TICTM arrangements. It focuses on how the work environment and work organisation associated with TICTM affect the work–life balance, health, performance and prospects of workers. Because work–life balance is both a goal and a challenge of TICTM, and a core concern of EU social policy, the report includes a chapter mapping EU regulations directly related to work–life balance and TICTM.

Policy context

The European framework agreement on telework (2002) is the main European text covering this issue and addresses some working conditions of TICTM. The Working Time Directive (2003/88/EC) is also relevant insofar as it limits weekly working hours and regulates minimum daily rest periods. Two new EU regulatory initiatives will also have an impact:

- the Work–Life Balance Directive (COM/2017/0253 final), which extends the existing right to request flexible working arrangements (including remote work arrangements and flexible work schedules) to all working parents and carers
- the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive (COM/2017/0797 final), which contains provisions related to place of work and work patterns

Both directives are part of the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights.

Flexible working using ICT has become an important issue in the social policy debates of many countries in Europe. Some have adopted provisions on the right to disconnect in order to protect workers against the negative effects of such arrangements.

Key findings

- TICTM arrangements are in many ways advantageous for workers compared to the traditional arrangement of being based in a single workplace outside the home. Workers with a TICTM arrangement report greater autonomy, better work–life balance, higher productivity and reduced commuting times. There can be disadvantages, however: it can lead to longer working hours, the overlapping of work and home life, and increased intensity of work. Workers generally experience better working conditions and outcomes when TICTM is occasional.

- TICTM offers workers more autonomy, which is an asset. Autonomy, however, can also lead to an intensification of work when combined with heavy workloads and work cultures dominated by competition, self-management or mechanisms to enforce performance. This is the ‘autonomy paradox’ of such arrangements.

- Depending on how it is implemented, TICTM can aid or undermine work–life balance. Within the highly mobile TICTM group, the share of workers with poor work–life balance is considerably larger among those who have children compared to those who do not. By contrast, poor work–life balance is more prevalent among regular home-based teleworkers without children than those with children.
TICTM poses some risks for the mental and physical well-being of workers. Not only are they more likely to report stress and other psychosocial and physical problems, they also are more likely to engage in a new phenomenon enabled by digitalisation: virtual presenteeism – that is, working from home when one is sick but not so sick as to preclude working.

Working remotely does not seem to limit participation in training, although remote workers may miss out on some types of informal workplace learning. In addition, workers with TICTM arrangements generally have better career prospects, due in part to the longer hours they work, their level of engagement, the support they receive from managers and their occupational level. This career dividend is mostly experienced by medium-skilled and high-skilled workers.

Not all workers benefit equally from TICTM. For example, while it can facilitate access to employment for vulnerable groups, there is a risk that regular home-based teleworkers are seen by colleagues and managers as having less commitment. This, combined with lack of visibility, could jeopardise their career development opportunities. From a broader perspective, roughly a quarter of workers with this type of arrangement are in precarious employment.

The implementation of regulations to improve work–life balance in the context of flexible working using ICT varies across Europe. Only a few countries have adopted legislation that addresses the right to disconnect.

Policy pointers

- There are differences in how TICTM takes place in practice, which should be taken into consideration in policymaking. Intensive TICTM should be limited, for instance, because it has a negative impact on workers. In addition, general policies dealing with minimum standards in working conditions should encompass TICTM and include workers with precarious employment under such arrangements.

- Improvements in work organisation are necessary to tackle the risks associated with TICTM, and workplace-level initiatives could facilitate this. Systems of monitoring and control have to be designed to give TICTM workers real autonomy, to ensure that data on them are used appropriately and to prevent working time patterns from damaging their health and well-being. Collective bargaining and social dialogue should play a role in the design and implementation of such initiatives.

- TICTM should be promoted as a way to improve work–life balance (for example, through the transposition of the Work–Life Balance Directive). This should be done on the understanding that any of these initiatives may have implications for gender equality, and should respect employee-friendly schedules and maximum working hour limits.

- The Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive should help to improve some of the conditions for workers with TICTM arrangements. However, there is also a need to assess whether the present Working Time Directive and the European framework agreement on telework are sufficient for the implementation of the provisions for these workers (and their protection), including measures to record, monitor and control their working time.

- The regulation of TICTM – like the right to disconnect – might be the only way to curb the trend towards a culture of work characterised by self-imposed work intensity, project-based and performance-paid work, and constant availability. These regulations would demand effective social dialogue at company and sectoral levels to ensure effective implementation and enforcement.

- The health impact of TICTM might be improved by clarifying the responsibilities of workers regarding the organisation of their work and workplace when they work remotely, and what is expected of them in terms of performance. Developing and implementing psychosocial risk assessments and management at company level is also an essential part of identifying and mitigating possible health risks for remote workers. Next to traditional concerns, like high stress levels, new phenomena like virtual presenteeism should be considered.

Further information

The report *Telework and ICT-based mobile work: Flexible working in the digital age* is available at http://eurofound.link/ef19032

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