

The rise in telework: Impact on working conditions and regulations

Introduction

Even after the end of COVID-19 restrictions across EU Member States, many workers continue to telework in some form. Employers and employees have adapted to telework arrangements, which is mainly due to the reduction of cultural, technological and social barriers. Telework is now well established and affects overall work organisation and working conditions, as well as employees' work-life balance and well-being. New regulations on telework across EU Member States, together with agreements between workers and employers as well as company level practices, are shaping the future of remote working.

This report explores recent trends in the prevalence of telework, the working conditions of employees who were teleworking during the pandemic and telework regulations in the EU. It also identifies challenges and opportunities for the future.

The report is mainly based on contributions from the Network of Eurofound Correspondents, and analyses of the EU Labour Force Survey 2020 and the European Working Conditions Telephone Survey (EWCTS) 2021. These are complemented by literature reviews and findings from Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey.

Policy context

The implementation of the 2002 EU social partners' Framework Agreement on Telework resulted in national-level regulation in all EU Member States except Ireland and Cyprus. However, the escalation of telework during the pandemic led some countries to adopt new telework regulations and kickstarted debates on how to best to deal with both the challenges and opportunities of telework.

At EU level, the European Parliament approved a resolution on the right to disconnect on 21 January 2021; the Council of the European Union published conclusions on telework on 3 June 2021 inviting the social partners, while fully respecting their role and autonomy, to continue to engage

in social dialogue, at all levels, on the future of work, and on digitalisation and telework in particular. In parallel to these initiatives, discussions were held by the EU social partners that resulted in a decision to start negotiations to review and update the 2002 Framework Agreement on Telework with a view to it being adopted as a legally binding agreement in the form of an EU directive.

Key findings

- The pandemic and the increase in telework have resulted in altering working conditions and practices, leading to the introduction or revision of telework regulations and practices. Technological developments, a net increase in teleworkable jobs and employees' and employers' preferences make it likely that the prevalence of telework, despite a stabilisation at the beginning of 2022, will further increase in the long term.
- The pandemic unveiled the enormous potential of telework. During this time, there was an upsurge in telework, incorporating groups of workers who previously had scarcely carried out this form of work. As a result, telework became very widespread in some countries, for example in Ireland. However, overall, the categories of employees with the highest share of teleworking remain the same and include highly skilled workers, slightly more women than men, workers from mainly urban areas and those who work in the service sectors.
- The working conditions of teleworking employees have only partially changed. It has been shown that telework can increase pressure on workers to be 'permanently' available or to work during their free time. Some teleworkers have experienced isolation and work-life balance conflicts linked to the blurring of boundaries between work and private life. However, overall, telework improves work-life balance as it can help workers to juggle childcare, significantly reduce commuting time and result in an increase in work autonomy and better use of working time.

- Telework prevalence is not necessarily influenced by gender. However, there are gender differences in terms of work–life balance. Women generally found it more difficult than men to balance telework with their private life during the pandemic because, as a result of pre-existing inequalities and gender roles, they were more likely to bear the brunt of additional unpaid work (caring, housework and home-schooling).
- Employees, and to some extent employers, prefer the hybrid model of telework (partial telework or part-time telework). It has been proven that hybrid work saves on commuting time, improves work-life balance, reduces feelings of isolation, and ensures more efficient time management. However, there are some drawbacks: teleworking employees reported working during their free time in an ‘always on’ work culture, which can impact on their health and well-being, including in relation to preventing stress, anxiety and burnout. In addition, some managers have reported difficulties in communicating with employees, carrying out management tasks and supporting their employees.
- Occasional telework, which refers to working from home ‘rarely’ or ‘sometimes’, was reported less frequently from employees than regular telework (full-time and hybrid telework). However, occasional telework can also enhance working conditions and is attractive to both employees and employers.
- Just under half of EU Member States made regulatory changes related to telework during the pandemic; some of these changes affect all aspects of telework while others are more narrowly focused. Company-level agreements and policies are more common in countries where social dialogue plays an important role, such as France. In countries with weak social dialogue, such as Bulgaria, company-level agreements are extremely rare or non-existent.
- Despite some general patterns, differences between countries exist in all areas studied in the report: prevalence of teleworking, working conditions and telework regulations. It is expected that these differences will prevail in the future.
- In order to protect workers, while also ensuring that telework is beneficial for companies, future EU legislation should facilitate the development of appropriate telework regulations at national level, while acknowledging existing country differences in relation to the prevalence of telework, the impact on working conditions, industrial relation systems and broader work cultures.
- Given its potential for improving work–life balance, telework can be used as a tool to increase the participation of women in the workforce. At the same time, policymakers need to address the social, economic and cultural inequalities that result in women benefiting less from telework than men.
- Most new regulations on telework include ‘full-time telework’ and ‘partial telework’ (including hybrid work) when addressing the challenges that arise from this new working arrangement. However, occasional telework can also improve gender equality, work–life balance and well-being, and it can encourage the participation of employees of working age who are at risk of leaving the labour market.
- Efforts to promote telework should also seek to address potential problematic areas, such as working during free time and permanent connectivity, while ensuring that all teleworking employees have the right equipment and that their well being is protected, notably in relation to psychosocial risks. Appropriate organisation and management of telework is necessary to avoid such risks.
- The expansion of telework may lead to further inequalities in the European workforce. Already, for various reasons, only some workers have access to telework. From a structural perspective, workers with teleworkable jobs are more likely to have ‘good jobs’, that is jobs that are well paid and have higher job security. From a micro perspective, this will create greater differences in work–life balance and quality of work. Therefore, policymakers should ensure a level playing field between teleworking employees and employees who are unable to telework.

Policy pointers

- Telework is a key component of the world of work in the 21st century. While taking into account national practices and respecting the role and autonomy of social partners, regulatory frameworks in EU Member States should be adapted to ensure they address the outstanding issues that this new way of working brings, including in relation to the right to request telework, right to disconnect, geographical location of teleworking, teleworking costs coverage and psychosocial risks.

Further information

The report *The rise in telework: Impact on working conditions and regulations* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef22005>

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