

# The future of telework and hybrid work

## Introduction

Telework is not new, but before the pandemic who would have predicted that 48% of employees would be working from home in July 2020 (Eurofound's *Living, working and COVID-19* e-survey)? Of course, these circumstances were extraordinary, but two years later a significant share of employees in the EU were still engaged in hybrid forms of work. While companies continue to experiment, there is uncertainty about how this mode of work will develop and whether policy action is required. Using a foresight approach, this report presents four scenarios to stimulate dialogue on various key issues, such as job quality, organisational practices and workers health and wellbeing.

## Policy context

The pandemic triggered revisions to national-level regulations to address challenges and uncertainties around telework. While the 2002 EU social partners' Framework Agreement on Telework already covered many aspects, national initiatives introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic provided more clarity and better protection for those implementing and making use of telework arrangements. Furthermore, in its 2021 conclusions on telework, the Council of the European Union invited social partners to better address the challenges and opportunities of telework. EU social partners have agreed to negotiate an update to the 2002 Framework Agreement on Telework.

## Key findings

The four scenarios presented in this report outline the alternative directions that telework and hybrid work might take under different conditions. Some of these conditions may be under the control of policymakers and organisations, while others, such as external events and crises, are not. Foresight analysis can help policymakers ensure that the necessary conditions are introduced now so that this form of work develops to suit the needs of organisations and employees in the future.

The expansion of telework and hybrid work raises issues regarding how they are implemented and who has access to them (for example, some groups of employees have access to telework while others do not). Ensuring fairness in the workplace is vital. The division between those who can and cannot work remotely may become a new source of inequality. Without careful planning, changing work arrangements may disrupt workplace dynamics and accentuate gender imbalances.

When an organisation introduces or expands hybrid work or telework, a review of organisational practices is required, with employees' tasks being redesigned if necessary. Managers need to consider which tasks can be performed remotely, and teams should agree on tasks to be done synchronously (with the team working at the same time) and asynchronously (with team members working at different times). It is essential to ensure that hybrid teams have work autonomy.

Success is not guaranteed when transitioning to telework and hybrid work; line managers play a critical role. Their skills need to be upgraded with a focus on managing work autonomy and dispersed teams, ensuring good communication, safeguarding employees' well-being and organisational learning, and responding to crises.

Given the patchwork of regulations, there are concerns about how telework and hybrid work are regulated. Issues relating to the frequency of telework, cross-border telework, employee monitoring and gender equality must be properly addressed. National debates have progressed recently – for instance, on the right to request telework and the right to disconnect – indicating the need for minimum standards at EU level to ensure a level playing field.

Physical and psychosocial risks, monitoring working time and work-life balance are some of the job quality challenges posed by the expansion of telework. When implementing arrangements, managers, employees and their representatives, as well as regulators, should be aware of the risks of blurring the lines between paid and unpaid work and between work and private life.

In designing telework and hybrid work arrangements, companies benefit from consulting with employees. There are multiple ways in which these work arrangements are implemented, for instance one employee works two days from home while another works all afternoons in the office, and their appeal varies among different groups of employees. Employees with different sociodemographic characteristics, care responsibilities, types of contract, levels of seniority and so on, may have different preferences. Some companies allow individual teams to make their own decisions about such arrangements, while others have company agreements.

## Policy pointers

- **Supporting organisations to implement telework and hybrid work arrangements that are beneficial to businesses and employees:** Initiatives by employer organisations, in cooperation with training providers, could support organisational practices that promote work autonomy, cater for the workforce's diversity and preferences, and take into account job quality. In addition, organisations would benefit from re-examining their health and safety risk assessment practices, including in relation to psychosocial risks. They should also seek to create a culture of trust. Attention should be paid to advanced technologies, such as holograms, the internet of things and digital twins, that could affect the remote management of tasks in the future.
- **Training line managers:** Organisations should invest in training to ensure that line managers are well equipped to manage hybrid work. Training strategies could include guidelines on topics such as communication, fairness and inclusion, and recommendations on, for example, operational efficiency and promoting employee engagement in hybrid environments.
- **Reflecting on policies and regulation:** Policymakers at national level could consider appropriate ways of setting minimum standards regarding, for example, the right to disconnect, equipment costs, communication, energy costs, health and safety, mental health, and equal treatment of teleworkers and those working only at the employer's premises. These standards could be shaped with the support of social partners.
- **Social dialogue at national level:** Given the uncertainty around how the situation will develop, national-level social partners may prefer to regulate some aspects through collective agreements. These include health and safety, working time, the right to disconnect, surveillance and dispute resolution processes. There should be ample opportunities to set standards at sectoral level and norms of conduct at company level.
- **Social dialogue at EU level:** Social partners may wish to promote common standards for the treatment of teleworkers across Europe. They could consider creating an evidence base, for example monitoring reports of well-being concerns and collecting gender-disaggregated data. This can be achieved by monitoring developments in and experiences of telework and hybrid work across Europe. EU-level social partners could jointly analyse factors affecting the situation, such as work organisation, management training and technology absorption, and take follow-up actions. The recent social partner initiative to update the 2002 Framework Agreement on Telework could stimulate further actions.
- **Monitoring at EU level:** The issue of cross-border telework and hybrid work, including the tax and social security implications, is important as it could cause distortions in the labour market. Furthermore, relevant EU-level initiatives, for instance in relation to digitalisation and upskilling, should take into consideration the prevalence of this form of work. Finally, the future of urban and suburban workspaces could be further explored through the New European Bauhaus initiative.
- **Providing support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs):** SMEs may have limited ability to introduce organisational changes and assess how best to transition to a digital work environment. SME associations could support companies on issues such as training on cybersecurity, skills development (communication, time management and so on), and setting targets and monitoring performance while respecting worker autonomy.

### Further information

The report *The future of telework and hybrid work* is available at <https://eurofound.link/ef22028>

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