

Smart workplace: Relativity of space and time

Digital technologies and new labour market demands are transforming the workplace. Smart work organisation solutions include flexible arrangements in working time, the location where work is done and the manner in which tasks are performed. Such workplace innovations entail both advantages and risks. The EU can legislate and issue recommendations in some areas related to working conditions, such as minimum standards of employment.

The digital economy and the labour market

Technological innovation and the need for increased flexibility in adapting to rapid changes on the market are reshaping the economy, including in employment relations. This creates not only new jobs and new skill requirements, but also impacts on work organisation and business models. With the support of modern technologies (such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, cloud computing and broadband connections) many workers can do their job anywhere, at any time. Smart workplaces offer a shift from traditional ways of working to patterns more aligned with the knowledge-based economy and information society.

[Workplace innovation](#) in the process of organising work includes flexible working schedules, telework, new types of performance-linked remuneration (such as profit-sharing or company shares), flat hierarchies and increased worker autonomy. A 2015 [report](#) of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) identified nine new forms of employment, including job-sharing, casual work, mobile work, crowd employment and collaborative employment. Some replace full-time fixed employment, while others constitute a change in work patterns within a fixed job. These new work organisation measures supported by digital technologies can stimulate employment and increase labour market participation of specific groups, such as parents of small children, the elderly and people with disabilities or mobility problems. Such solutions can also provide workers with a better [work-life balance](#), allowing reconciliation of work with family responsibilities and private life. For employers, they may bring higher efficiency in adjusting to business demands, employing skilled workers and maintaining competitiveness. However, they also entail some risks relating to workers' rights and protection, job security, health and safety, and increased work intensity.

In the EU, these developments are particularly important in the context of the [Europe 2020](#) strategy, with its goal of increasing employment levels to 75% by 2020, and fully tapping into the potential of the [Digital Single Market](#). The bulk of labour market policies are decided on national level, through collective bargaining and legislation. The EU may, however, intervene in the area of [working conditions](#) when it affects the internal market, e.g. setting minimum standards regarding weekly working hours and occupational safety. Examples of EU legislation include the directives on [individual working conditions](#), [parental leave](#) and [part-time work](#).

Flexible working time

Flexible working time [refers](#) to the duration (e.g. number of hours worked, part-time, full-time) and organisation of working time (e.g. night work, weekends or shift work; regularity and rest periods). According to the 2015 [European Working Conditions Survey](#), 64% of employees have a fixed work schedule, 10% can choose between different schedules determined by the company, while 26% of workers can adapt or determine their own schedule. Part-time work [amounted](#) to 19.6% of total employment in 2014. The [average](#) actual working week in the EU was 39.5 hours in 2014, with country variations ranging from 41 hours in Romania to 37.3 hours in Finland and France. Workers across Europe also [reported](#) a rise in unpaid overtime.

This note has been prepared for the [European Youth Event](#), taking place in Strasbourg in May 2016.



Flexible working time can be beneficial for employers, allowing them to respond to sudden changes in demand. It may also reduce absenteeism and worker turnover, as well as increase employer attractiveness. Workers can improve their work-life balance by adapting working time to specific life circumstances (e.g. caring responsibilities, old age). However, there is a risk of working conditions worsening, as employers may enforce unpredictable or non-standard schedules, and reduce social security protection. Moreover, part-time work is not always a preferred solution, since some workers may wish to work more, but work is unavailable.

EU Working Time Directive

The 2003 [Working Time Directive](#) sets a series of working-condition standards. These include the limit of 48 hours a week (including overtime), a minimum rest period of 24 uninterrupted hours per week, and paid annual leave of a minimum four weeks per year. In addition, special rules exist for workers in specific sectors, e.g. offshore workers and urban passenger transport workers. The directive is being [reviewed](#), with employers pushing for more flexibility, and workers' representatives for more effective protection.

Telework

Telework can be [defined](#) as a form of work organisation where employees perform work activities outside the employer's premises, usually using information and communication technology (ICT). Places of telework may vary, including working from home, a park or a cafe to special [co-working](#) spaces or while travelling. Telework can be occasional or regular, and it may stretch from a few hours a week to full-time telework.

The 2010 Eurofound [report](#) on telework in the EU qualifies regular telework as occurring 'at least a quarter of the time'. While the EU [average](#) of regular teleworkers is 11.7%, the rates of occasional telework tend to be higher. The 2012 [European Working Conditions Survey](#) found that about a quarter of European workers use ICT and work away from the employer's premises at least some of the time (with particularly high rates of over 30% in Scandinavia and the Netherlands). Telework often depends on the sector, with some types of jobs and tasks more suitable for telework than others. Mobile workers tend to be knowledge workers employed in the service sector, usually with higher qualifications and education levels.

Telework allows workers to adjust work activities to their lifestyle and responsibilities, helps overcome mobility issues (e.g. due to health or remoteness) and reduces commuting time. [Research](#) shows positive effects on employee well-being, job satisfaction and productivity. Employers gain the possibility to suit work activities to business needs and lower operational costs by reducing office space. Telework can also be beneficial for the environment, as it decreases traffic and pollution.

Possible risks of telework include isolation, lack of social contact and access to informal information-sharing. According to the 2015 Eurofound [report](#) on new forms of employment, ICT-based work may also entail the danger of work intensification (longer working hours), bad ergonomics, and blurring of the boundary between work and private life. A prerequisite for successful telework is a sufficient level of trust in the work culture and managers' ability to let go of some control, while workers are required to self-organise and self-manage.

European Framework Agreement on Telework

The European Framework Agreement on Telework was signed by the [social partners](#) in 2002. It established rules to improve protection of teleworkers and ensure that they enjoy the same rights as comparable workers at the employer's premises, for instance regarding workload and performance standards. The agreement also regulates employment conditions related to data protection, privacy, organisation of work, health and safety, training and career prospects. It has been [implemented](#) in the majority of EU Member States in accordance with national practices, such as collective agreements and changes in legislation.

The European Parliament (EP) in its 2010 [resolution](#) on 'Atypical contracts, secured professional paths and new forms of social dialogue' supported flexible working arrangements, especially for carers. However, it also called for ensuring the protection and equal treatment of workers in 'atypical' employment (i.e. 'part-time work, casual work, temporary work, work under fixed-term contracts, home working and teleworking'), as this can limit career opportunities, access to training and social protection. In its 2015 [resolution](#) on equality between women and men, the EP supported solutions for reconciling family life and work, such as parental leave for both parents and increased childcare facilities. A 2015 [resolution](#) on health and safety at work called for preventing occupational risks, introducing well-being policies and improving the working environment to reduce physical and psycho-social health risks. In its 2016 [resolution](#), 'Towards a Digital Single Market Act,' the EP highlighted the potential of the digital economy in terms of growth, job creation and competitiveness, but suggested assessing the effects of digitalisation on health and safety at work, including work-related stress and greater labour intensity.