

The impact of teleworking and digital work on workers and society

Special focus on surveillance and monitoring, as well as the mental health of workers

Background

Teleworking and digital work, although not new phenomena, grew exponentially during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions. The COVID-19 pandemic has pushed forward digitalisation and telework in areas where it was previously little used. According to Eurofound data, in the EU27, 36.5% of workers started to work from home in the wake of the pandemic, compared to 15.8% before the outbreak. Home teleworking has been extended to more sectors and occupations than in the pre-pandemic past. Even so, teleworking is used predominantly among white-collar, highly-educated workers with strong digital skills. With the return to post-COVID 'normality', the extensive use of teleworking is expected to continue, although not on a full-time basis as during lockdowns, with hybrid forms more likely to prevail. However, the extensive use of telework poses a number of challenges and demands a re-thinking of the way work is performed, co-ordinated, and regulated.

The [study](#)¹ analyses recent trends in the use of teleworking, its impacts on workers, companies, and society, and challenges for policy-



making, identifying possible policy actions to be taken at EU level. The study is based on the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data and information resulting from an extensive review of the literature, a web survey and interviews, and five case studies on EU countries with different use of and approaches to telework: Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy and Romania.

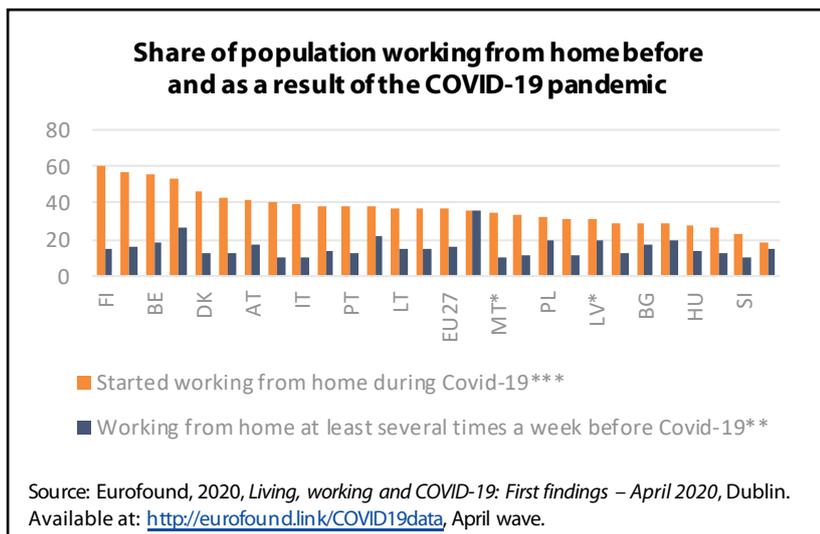
Check out the [original full study](#) by scanning this QR code!



Key findings

For workers, telework may mean greater time and place flexibility, enhanced job autonomy, improved work-life balance and reduced commuting time. Telework may also improve employment opportunities for persons with disabilities, older workers, women with care responsibilities and people living in rural or peripheral areas. However, the higher flexibility and autonomy associated with telework often results in greater work intensity and longer working hours, with negative effects on workers' work-life balance. Long working hours and the sense of isolation associated with telework from home, together with the increased use of online monitoring and surveillance methods, may also negatively affect the mental health of teleworkers, besides raising privacy issues. At the same time, lack of space and ergonomically sound equipment may increase the physical health risks for teleworkers.





At societal level, some potential positive effects of home teleworking are lower carbon emissions and more balanced spatial development. However, the energy saving impact is modest given possible rebound effects. In addition, teleworking may lead to greater fragmentation of the workforce, individualisation of the employment relationship and the shifting onto workers of the costs of working from home. It may also result in the emergence of new labour market and social inequalities between those who can telework and those who cannot, either because they work in non-teleworkable

sectors/occupations, or because they lack digital skills or equipment, or have no or limited access to broadband.

EU and national legislation, policies and collective agreements address some of the challenges of teleworking arrangements. Although at European level there are no specific legislative measures targeting telework and digital work, there is a robust legislation on working conditions that can be applied, e.g. the Working Time Directive, the Work-Life Balance Directive, the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive and the European Framework Directive on Safety and Health at Work. In addition, many EU initiatives and policies aim to address the digital divide, support equal opportunities in access to telework and tackle territorial inequalities. National approaches are quite varied. The majority of Member States have introduced legislation addressing telework while a few either leave its regulation to collective bargaining, or are adopting 'softer' measures, e.g. codes of conduct or guidelines. In most EU countries collective agreements and practices in large companies play a key role. In recent years, the right to disconnect has emerged as an issue in legislation, collective agreements and company practices.

Policy implications

The debate among EU stakeholders centres on whether there is a need for new EU regulations targeting these forms of work or whether it is sufficient to update (or better enforce) existing ones. According to some of the stakeholders interviewed, the implications for work intensity, work-life balance, and health and safety can be addressed by a revision and proper enforcement of the EU regulations and policy instruments already in place. Conversely, others point to the need for a more comprehensive European directive on telework, including minimum requirements for workers' health and safety, the right to disconnect, and the establishment of specific data protection and privacy rights for workers. Policy strategies and approaches are also needed to address the societal implications of extensive use of digital work and telework and enhance the opportunities offered by such forms of work for the labour market and social inclusion of currently marginalised groups and territories. EU institutions could play a key role in facilitating and supporting these developments. They could revise existing legal and policy instruments; support Member States and the social partners in their implementation, providing guidance and financial support. They could also improve knowledge on these forms of work and their effects and support mutual learning and capacity building among EU and national stakeholders, including companies (particularly SMEs) and social partners.

¹ Samek Lodovici, M, et al., 2021, *The impact of teleworking and digital work on workers and society*, Publication for the committee on Employment and Social Affairs, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, European Parliament, Luxembourg. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662904/IPOL_STU\(2021\)662904_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/662904/IPOL_STU(2021)662904_EN.pdf).

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