

REMOTE WORK: THE NECESSITY OF TODAY

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Abstract. Global pandemic COVID-19 has increased the level of digitalization which allows public and private sector organizations in the world to employ people remotely outside office premises and crossing borders of the world. Remote work is one of the new employment forms caused by the impact of digitalization, which keeps conquering and strengthening the positions on our daily professional lives. It means extended use of different new employment forms, including the digital transition of administration processes and business management, improvement of digital skills and competences, contributing to development of areas of services and products with higher benefit (Breugh, Farabee, 2012). Research aims to study basic principles and tendencies of remote work organization based on theoretical aspects, draw conclusions and elaborate proposals for improvement of remote work. In order to achieve the goal, the tasks are as follows: 1) provide the explanation of remote work organization; 2) describe secondary data from a conducted survey by Milasi, S., Fernandez – Macias, E., Gonzalez-Vazquez, I. 2020, European Commission; 3) conduct survey about remote work.

Keywords: *public and private sector organizations, employee, remote work.*

JEL code: D24, M54

Introduction

Remote work is part of a modernising trend in public and private sector organizations, which focuses on result-based management and objective-driven performance to increase efficiency of operations. It allows greater flexibility for work organisation and a better work-life balance of employee by increasing autonomy and making better use of new information technology (IT). Remote working is a method of organising and executing work outside the workplace with help of information and communication technologies (ICT). It aims to help companies to achieve a more productive, result-oriented working environment, which is conducive to a positive work-life balance (Felsted, Henseke, 2017). Additionally, it has a beneficial impact on the environment by limiting commuting and improves the continuity of public and private sector organizations.

Literature Review

Although, remote work (also known as telework) was foreseen as early as 1950 (Castillo-Frick, 2017), it did not become possible until the entrance of personal computers and portable modems in the early 1970s (Nippert-Eng, 1996). In 1973, the term “working remotely” was introduced to emphasize that remote work could replace daily commute (Nilles, 1994). In the beginning, public and private sector organizations considered remote work as a way to make them less dependent on fuel and oil, especially during the fuel crisis in the early and mid-1970s (Tolbert, Simons, 1994). At the time, the number of remote work employees grew to more than ten-fold in a decade, to about 11.1 million (Shellenbarger, 1994).

Several factors have contributed to the emergence of remote work. First, numerous companies are trying to lower the costs of office space. Second, faced with increased competition, many companies adopt extended workdays and flexible work schedules to respond better to customer needs and to retain and attract skilled employees. Third, ICT are becoming increasingly affordable and cost-effective, which enables a strong penetration of ICT in public and private sector organizations (Brimsek Bender, 1995). Remote work has grown from its modest beginnings in the early 1970s to achieve an unprecedented level today.

The terms “remote work”, and working remotely are used interchangeably, and it is a quite accepted practice in this area of research. In 1975, Jack Nilles (1975) was the first scholar to coin the term “working remotely”. In 2002, Bailey and Kurland (2002) defined it as, “working outside the conventional workplace and communicating with it by way of telecommunications or computer-based technology”. Meta-analysis by Gajendran, Harrison, 2007 expand further definition where “remote” is defined as the substitution of communication technology for work-related travel, and can include paid work from home, a satellite office, a remote work centre or any other workstation outside of the main office for at least one day per working week (Verbeke, Schulz, Greidanus, Hambley, 2008).

New ICT have revolutionised everyday work and life in the 21st century. They enable people to connect with friends and family – as well as with colleagues and supervisors – at any point of time; however, they also facilitate the encroachment of paid work into the spaces and times normally reserved for personal life. The uncoupling of paid work from traditional office spaces has been a crucial factor in the development of

remote work. Today's office work is supported by Internet and can be executed from practically any location and at any time. This new spatial independence has transformed the role of technology in the work environment, offering both new opportunities and new challenges. (Messenger, Gschwind, 2016)

Remote work is a growing trend around the globe. Although a vast majority of research on employees utilizing flexible work arrangements has focused on those who work from home intermittently, it is not known how remote employees experience the work-life balance (Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk, Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009; Breugh, Farabee, 2012). The research indicate that employees prefer to work from home part-time rather than to work solely from home (Bailey, Kurland, 2002; Wight, Raley, 2009). There is a necessity of research that investigates the work-life balance of remote work employees and their management of work-life boundaries as well as the related effects to work-life conflict and stress.

Due to the high flexibility and autonomy associated with working from home, an employee can control where, when, and how work is executed and the management of work-life balance demands is believed to be facilitated (Bailey, Kurland, 2002). A meta-analysis of 46 studies by Gajendran and Harrison (2007) demonstrated that working from home lowers work-life conflict and that the benefits increase for those who work from home more frequently. Research also show that most remote work from home going on an average of 1 to 3 days per week (Raghuram, Wiesenfeld, 2004; Golden, Veiga, Simsek, 2006; Gajendran, Harrison, 2007). Scholars have lamented over the little theory on the effects of remote work and the lack of empirical research exploring this phenomenon (Bailey, Kurland, 2002; Gajendran, Harrison, 2007; Kossek, Kalliath, 2012).

Boundary theory captures how individuals create and maintain boundaries between work and life balance so as to simplify and order the world around them (Ashforth et al., 2000; Dumas, Sanchez-Burks, 2015). It describes how individuals erect "mental fences" around work and life balance to construct boundaries between these roles and the consequences of these "mental fences" for boundary management (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Kreiner et al., 2009). In turn, boundary management is characterized as a tool that assists in the handling of work and life responsibilities and helps to shape workplace identity and relationships (Eddleston, Mulki, 2015). The most important skills a successful remote worker should master include the following: time management, organizational skills, communication, self-discipline. The growth in remote working seen during COVID - 19 global pandemic has been strongly skewed towards highly paid employment, raising concerns about the emergence of a new division between those who can work remotely and those who cannot. Nonetheless, enforced closures of economic activities due to confinement measures resulted in many new remote employees amongst low and mid-level and administrative employees who previously had limited access to this working arrangement. Remote work is growing faster than ever before and shows no sign of slowing down. (Gish, 2020). Remote work enthusiasts argue that working remotely is "the future of work," with benefits for both employer and employee. Nevertheless, some businesses remain sceptical, worrying that remote work employees will be more easily distracted and less able to participate in the public and private sector organizations culture (Breugh, Farabee, 2012).

Research results and discussion

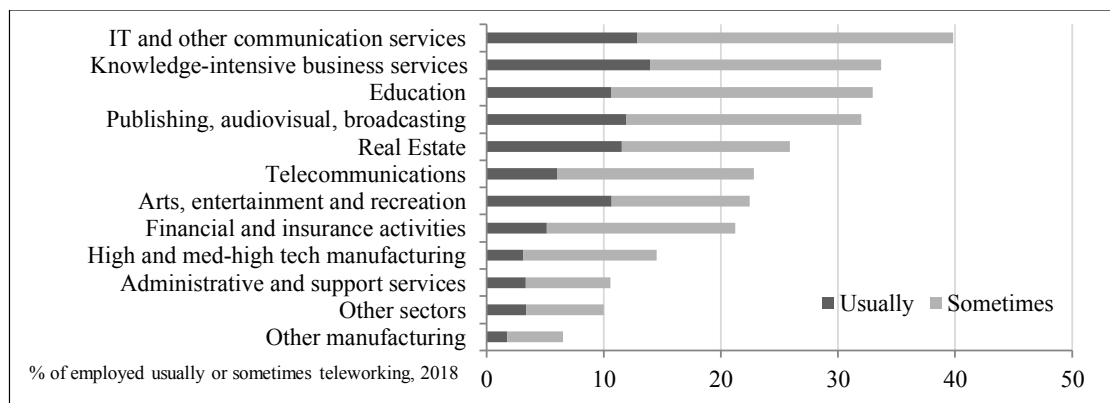
Remote work has reached a tipping point as more and more public and private sector organisations have introduced this work arrangement in an effort to keep their employees safe, while ensuring the continued delivery of critical services. Yet, differences in prior remote work experience and other factors make the transition more challenging for some employees and employers. Taking stock of pre-outbreak trends, the remote work had already been increasing over the past decade, (Gish, 2020). Albeit at a slow pace and mostly as an occasional work pattern except for the self-employed.

Milasi et al. (2020) found a higher prevalence in knowledge - and ICT-intensive services, whereas much fewer remote work employees were found in administrative and support services, or in sectors that require physical interaction such as manufacturing or face-to-face interaction with the public (Milasi et al. 2020). High-skilled professionals and managers in knowledge-intensive activities were already quite used to working from home, as they do most of their work on computers and enjoy high degrees of autonomy.

Since the outbreak of the COVID -19 working from home has become the norm (Gish, 2020) for millions of employees in the EU and worldwide. Early estimates from Eurofound (2020) suggest that close to 40% of those currently working in the EU began to remote work fulltime as a result of the pandemic. A recent Joint Research Centre study provides a rough estimation of around 25% of employment in remote work able sectors in the EU as a whole. Considering that before the outbreak just 15% of the employed in the EU had ever remote worked, large numbers of employees and employers alike are, in all probability, facing challenges in dealing with the sudden shift to remote work. The extent of these difficulties, however, is likely to vary considerably, depending among other factors on the level of prior experience with remote work. (Fernández-Macías, Fana, Tolan, Torrejón, Brancati, 2020)

Remote work “home-office” turned out to be a necessary practice for many companies and employees during the first lockdown period of the COVID-19 crisis in spring 2020. During that time, societies have undergone a large scale “forced experiment” where sectors, companies and employees have continued to operate while being physically separated, provided they had the necessary technological, legal, and digital security conditions. Remote work has potentially large impacts on businesses of all kinds, whether they had embraced remote working in the past or not (OECD, 2020). It should also be kept in mind that, while remote work allowed some companies and employees to better ‘weather the storm’, especially those who used remote work before, the ability to remote work during the crisis was not open to all and differential access to remote work may well have exacerbated existing inequalities. For instance, many employees – especially young, less educated employees at the bottom of the wage distribution – during pandemic COVID-19 work in jobs requiring physical presence (Brussevich, Dabla-Norris, Khalid, 2020). In fact, as of 2019, only 5.4% of employed in the EU-27 usually worked from home – a share that remained rather constant since 2009. (Milasi, Fernandez – Macias, Gonzalez-Vazquez, 2020)

However, over the same period, the share of employed working at least sometimes from their homes increased from 5.2% in 2009 to 9% in 2019. (Eurostat, 2020) Working from home was considerably more common among the self-employed than dependent employees, although it increased in a similar way for both categories over the past decade. In 2019, almost 36% of self-employed was sometimes or usually working from home in the EU-27, up from 30% in 2009. (Milasi, Fernandez – Macias, Gonzalez-Vazquez, 2020). The prevalence of remote work among dependent employees was just above 11% in 2019, up from 7.5% in 2009 (Eurostat LFS, 2020). Prevalence of remote work by sector can be seen in Figure 1.



Source: authors, based on Milasi, Fernandez – Macias, Gonzalez-Vazquez, 2020

Notes: The group “Knowledge-intensive business services” includes the following sectors: Legal and Accounting Activities - Activities of Head Offices; Management Consultancy Activities - Architectural and Engineering Activities; Technical Testing and Analysis - Scientific Research and Development - Advertising and Market Research - Other Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities. The group IT and other communication services include the following: Computer Programming, Consultancy and Related Activities - Information Service Activities.

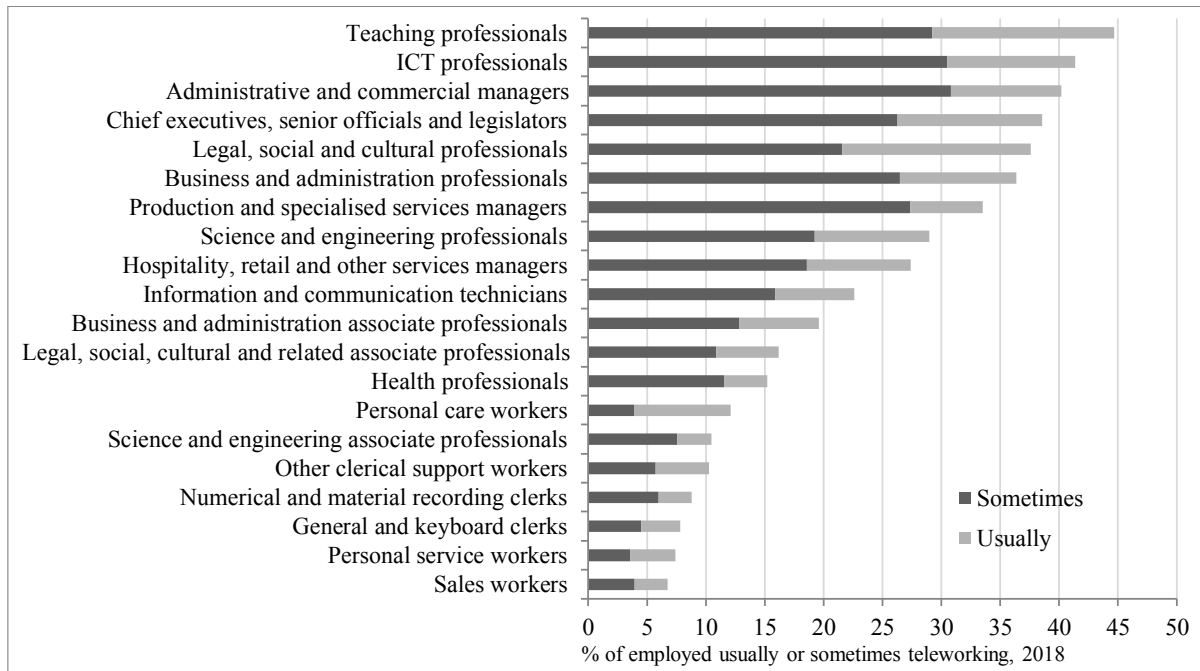
Fig. 1. Prevalence of remote work by sector, EU-27

The prevalence of remote work varies strongly across sectors and occupations. It was particularly high in ICT and knowledge- and -intensive business services. Indeed, as shown in Figure 1 more than 40% of employees in IT and other communication services were already working from home regularly or at least with some frequency in 2018 in the EU-27. The share of regular or frequent remote employees was above 30% in a range of knowledge-intensive business services, as well as in education and publishing activities. It was also high – around 20% - in telecommunications, finance, and insurance. Conversely, the share of remote employees was rather low in administrative and support services, as well as in the sectors that involve the physical manipulation of materials and/or objects, such as manufacturing.

Until the COVID-19 outbreak, remote work had mostly been used by high-skilled employees who do most of their work on computers, enjoy high degrees of autonomy, and are employed in knowledge-intensive activities. Within this group, the highest prevalence of remote work was found among teachers (43%) – largely reflecting the occasional time spent at home preparing for face-to-face classes and coursework. ICT professionals, managers and professionals working in legal, business, administration, and science also showed similarly high rates of remote working (see Fig. 2).

Beyond the nature of their work, high rates of remote working before the pandemic among some professionals may also reflect the extent to which they performed informal overtime work at home, as well as the fact that some of them are more likely to work as self-employed. This is particularly the case for professionals (e.g. lawyers) who can more easily determine their own work schedules and pace of work. More generally, differences in rates of remote work across professions reflect the fact, that depending on the work content, some tasks can be performed easily from home (e.g. write a prescription), while others not or with more difficulty (e.g. visit a patient).

For many other people remote work is an almost new experience. The confinement has likely induced a spread of remote work among employees who, despite working intensively with ICT, so far had only limited experience with this form of work organisation. For instance, in 2018, less than 20% of ICT technicians and 10% of general keyboard employees and other support employees had experienced some form of remote work. Prevalence of remote work by occupation can be seen in Figure 2.



Source: Milasi, Fernandez – Macias, Gonzalez-Vazquez, 2020

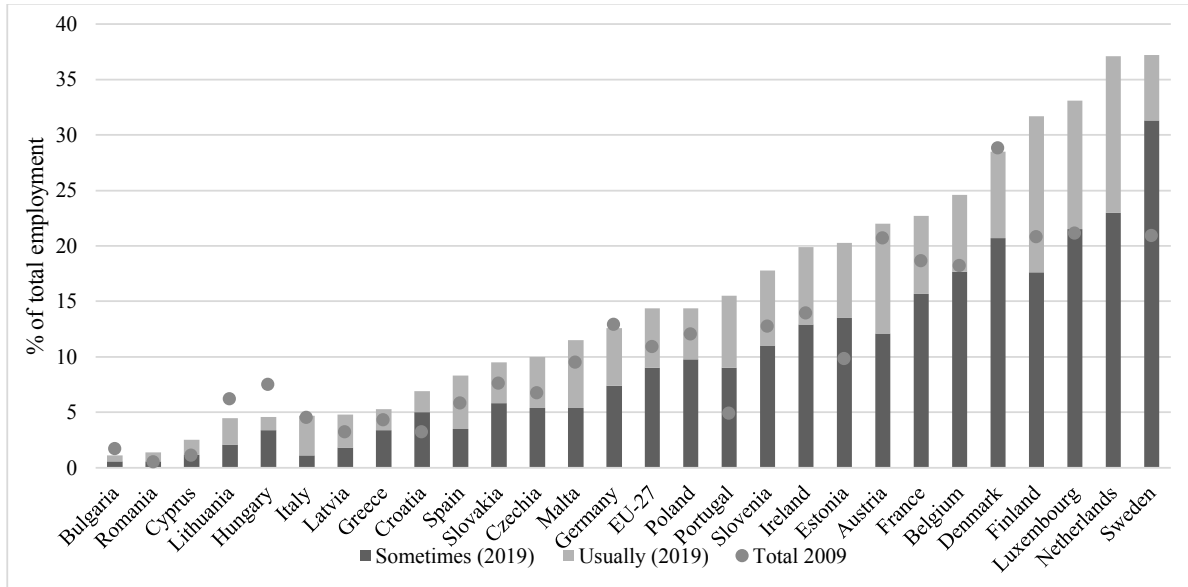
Fig. 2. Prevalence of remote work by occupation, EU-27

For example, many companies, lacking the right ICT infrastructures, may have found difficult to reorganise their work from home in the immediate aftermath of the outbreak. Furthermore, the fact that in several EU countries more than a half of those who are currently remote working had no prior experience arguably makes the transition even more difficult. This has important implications on employment, companies’ work effort, and employees’ well-being, at least in the short - to medium - term.

Customer services employees, keyboard employees, and junior professionals had much lower access to remote work than most managers and senior professionals, despite often showing similarly intensive use of computers at work. This can be partially explained by the fact that these employees are more often subject to close monitoring and supervision of their performance, and therefore have less autonomy over their working time and place.

As COVID-19 exacerbates the divide between those who can easily transition to working from home and those who cannot, inequality is set to increase, starting from an already high level. The median monthly earnings of managers and professionals – people who are now mostly working from home – are on average more than twice those of employees, such as assemblers, plant and machine operators, who mostly have to work on-site (Eurostat LFS, 2020).

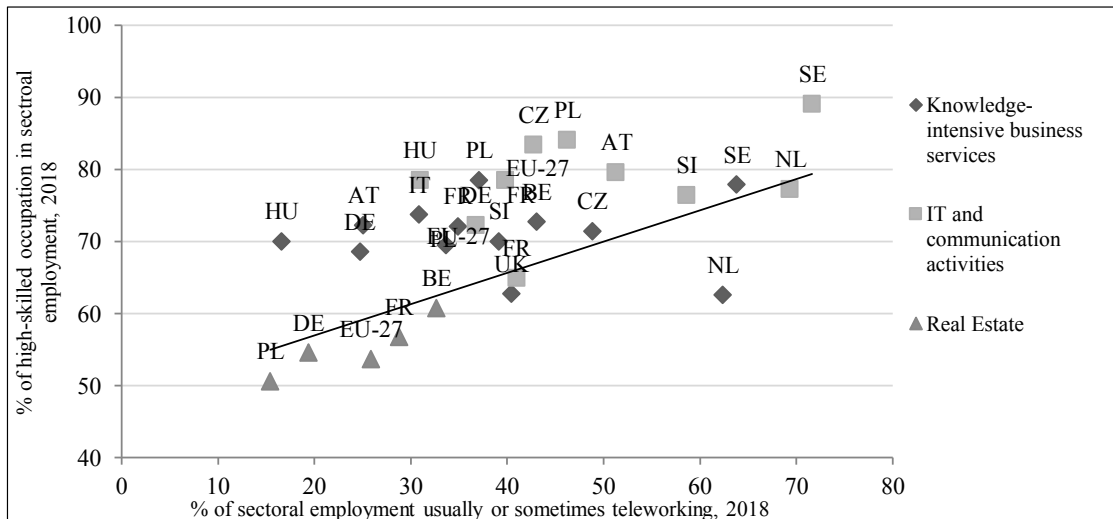
Previous experience (Felsted, Henseke, 2017) can support the current large-scale transition to remote work triggered by COVID-19. For instance, since the pandemic began, countries where remote work was already more widespread have seen smaller drops in the number of online job advertisements. Unfortunately, some of countries most affected by the pandemic had a very low prevalence of remote work before the crisis. As of 2019, the share of employed working from home regularly or at least sometimes was above 30% in a handful of countries, including Sweden, Finland, and the Netherlands, whereas it was below 10% in half of EU Member States (Figure 3). Between these two extremes, there were countries such as Belgium, France, and Portugal where the share of remote work ranged from 15 to 24%. Countries in Northern Europe showed the largest growth in the prevalence of remote work over the past decade, albeit sizable increases also took place in other Member States, notably in Portugal, Estonia, and Slovenia. (Milasi, Fernandez – Macias, Gonzalez-Vazquez, 2020)



Source: Eurostat, LFS, 2020

Fig. 3. Prevalence of remote work across EU Member States

Differences within sectors: The occupational composition of sectors (see Figure 4), can be very different across EU Member States. For example, survey data shows, that the shares of high-skilled occupations in ICT and communication was close to 90% in Sweden, whereas this fraction was around 65% in France. As a result, the portion of employees in this sector who occasionally or regularly worked remotely in 2018 was as high as 70% in Sweden and only around 40% in France (see Figure 3.). However, even within the same professional occupation, the prevalence of remote work can vary considerably across countries. For instance, while more than 60% of ICT professionals in the Netherlands was regularly or occasionally working from home in 2018, only 32 and 11% were doing so in Germany and Italy, respectively. This suggests that employees in a given occupation can have more access to remote work in some countries than in others depending on management and supervisory styles, the organization of work, and country-specific policies regarding aspects such as work flexibility. Figure 4 shows Occupational mix and remote work by sector.



Source: authors, based on JRC calculations from Eurostat, ad-hoc extractions of EU-LFS data, 2020

Fig. 4. Occupational mix and remote work by sector

The distribution of employment by company size: Larger companies are typically more likely to adopt remote work than smaller ones. For instance, countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and Finland, where companies with 50+ employees accounted for a larger share of total employment in knowledge-intensive business services, showed before the pandemic a larger share of remote employees in that sector than countries like Italy and Croatia, where medium-large companies employed less than 15 per cent of employees in that sector. As the pandemic evolves, the adoption of remote work could be more difficult in countries and sectors where small companies account for larger shares of employment.

Employees’ digital skills: employees with strong digital skills are arguably better positioned to respond to the demands of remote work during COVID-19. Employees’ level of digital skills, however, vary considerably across EU countries, tending to be lower in countries that had limited prevalence of remote work. For example, see Figure 5, in 2019, the share of employees in non-manual occupations with low or no digital skills ranged from 10% in the Netherlands to 40% in Bulgaria – against an average of 20 % in the EU-27 as a whole (Milasi, Fernandez-Macias, Gonzalez-Vazquez, 2020).

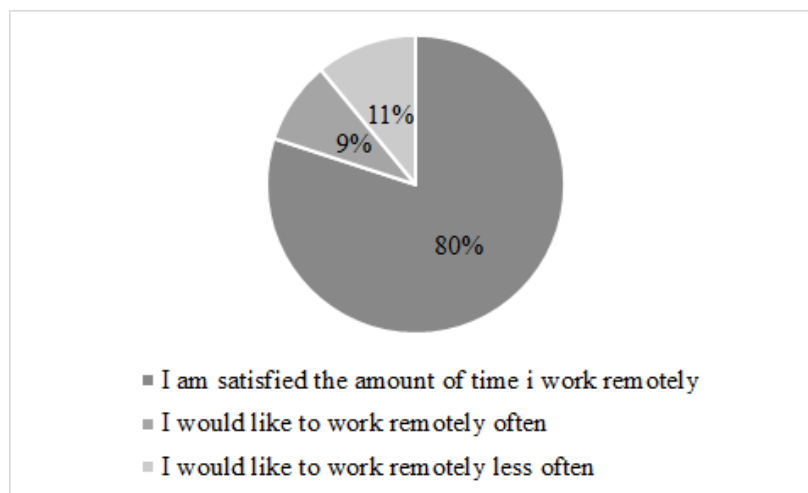
Remote work in the longer-term will depend on a broad range of factors, including its effect on work effort and working conditions, as well as its contribution to broader policy objectives such as Europe’s digital and green transitions. Evidence suggests that in normally people working from home can sustain, or even enhance, their work effort, while enjoying a better work-life balance (Felsted, Henseke, 2017).

Yet, under the current exceptional circumstances work effort, working conditions, or both, may be deteriorating for many employees due to, among other problems, lack of childcare, unsuitable working spaces, and ICT tools.

Public policies and co-operation among social partners are crucial to ensure that new, efficient, and welfare-improving working methods, emerging during COVID-19, are maintained, and developed once physical distancing is over (OECD, 2020).

From September 1st to 30th, 2020, the authors executed a research which aimed to detect the attitude of employees towards remote work. 395 inhabitants/respondents of Latvia took part in the survey. The respondents of this survey have worked remotely for different periods of time. Answering the question regarding the amount of time they worked remotely, the most popular response was “one year to four years” with 42 % of respondents selecting it, followed by “more than four years” with 34 % of respondents, then “less than six months” with 13 % of respondents, and “six months to eleven months” with 11 % of respondents. The survey participants were also asked regarding their work areas. 21% of the respondents pointed out that their job was related to IT. Other industries represented were: Retail (9 %); Marketing (9%); Other (7 %); Financial Services (9%); Media and Publishing (11 %); Education (14%); E-commerce (6 %); Medical and Healthcare (2 %); Consumer products (5 %); Travel and Tourism (2 %); Non-profit organisations (1 %); Government organisations (2 %); Legal Services (2 %). In the framework of research authors identified professional spheres, according to the respondents’ opinions, whether it would be acceptable to execute work remotely. Answers are categorised in the following way: 14 % Engineering, 25 % Marketing and Advertising. Other remote work options are: Finances (1 %), Human Resources (3%); Data (9 %), Sales (4 %); Other (5%); Customer Support (6 %); Product management (8%); Operations (7%); Design (7%); Management (11%).

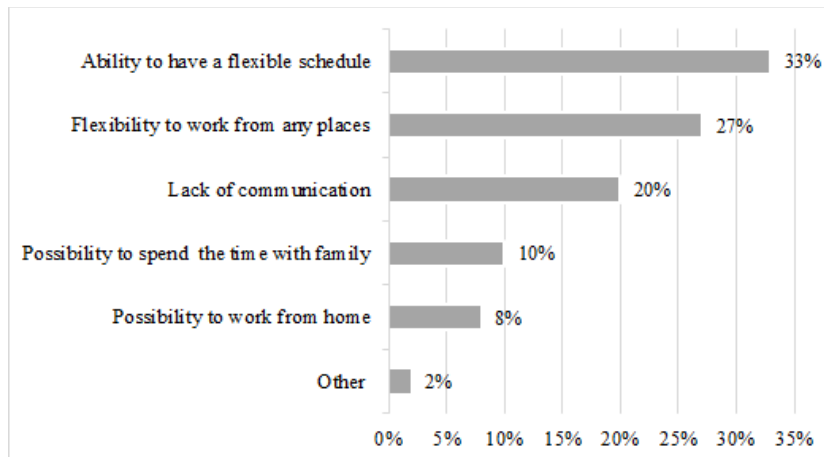
The answer to the following question “Would you like to work remotely for at least some time?” were, that 98 % or 387 respondents provided a positive answer, meaning that they would like to work remotely, and only 2 % answered negatively. Since the respondents’ attitude to remote work is mostly positive, 97% would also recommend others to work remotely. Figure 5 depicts the time respondents spent working remotely.



Source: authors, based on survey results

Fig. 5. Satisfaction with remote work

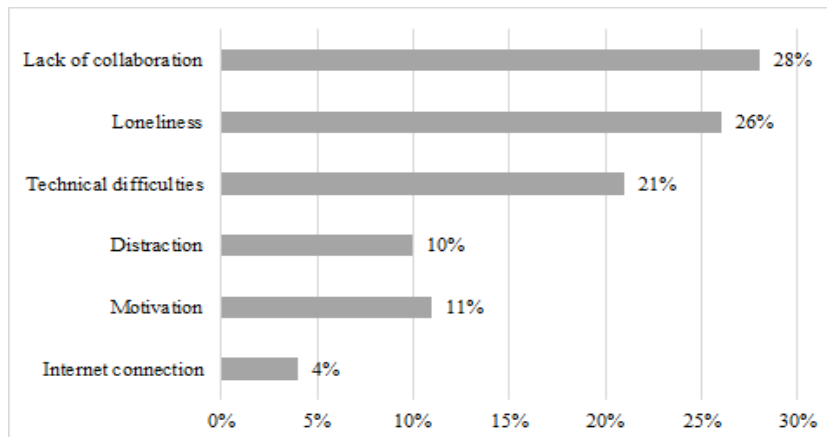
There are challenges that come with remote work, though they vary from person to person. In this context, challenges are difficulties in collaboration and the feeling of loneliness. 80 % or 316 respondents pointed out that they were confident with the amount of time they are currently working remotely, 9 % or 36 respondents would like to work remotely more often, and 11 % or 43 respondents would like to work remotely less often. Respondents answers to the question: “What is the benefit of remote work”? are shown in Fig. 6.



Source: authors, based on survey results

Fig. 6. The benefit of remote work

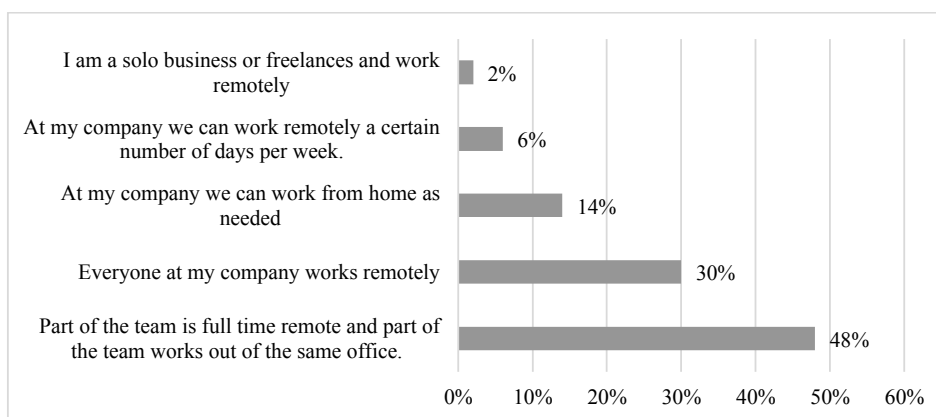
The primary benefit of remote work in this survey is flexibility. Concerning the challenge of the remote work, data is shown in Figure 7.



Source: authors, based on survey results

Fig. 7. Remote work challenges

The figure above shows that the most frequent answer was “lack of collaboration” (28% or 111 respondents). 26% or 103 respondents pointed out loneliness as problem of remote work. 21% or 83 respondents were not able to switch and get concentrated on full time job. For 10% of the respondents it was a problem to due to distraction, 11% mentioned difficulty to stay motivated, and 4% do not have internet connection.



Source: authors, based on survey results

Fig. 8. The workplaces stance on remote work or respondents

Authors identified “why collaboration is a struggle when there are many collaboration tools”, “why do some people not recommend remote work to others?”, “how often do people would prefer to work remotely?”. 53% of the respondents work remotely 100 % of their work time. 17 % work remotely from 76 % until 99 % of their work time. It turns out that a vast majority of respondents work remotely most of the time. When it comes to splitting work between remote work and office-based, the challenge of effective communication remains as an issue. It requires for the in

digital collaboration tools across the organization. Remote work employees are happier when they spend more than 76% of their time working remotely.

Authors concluded that the more time respondents spend working remotely, the more they tend to be confident about it. The less time they spend working remotely, the less they are satisfied with it. Remote work allows to work from anywhere, thus, employees have the chance to travel while performing their work duties. The benefits of remote work are more than just convenience and work-life balance. Remote work is changing the future of work, it changes the future of global society actions.

Nowadays there are a lot of digital products and tools to solve the problem of remote work collaboration. The availability of endless tools helps remote work employees to better collaborate; these tools might primarily aim to support remote work teams. Many people are starting to work remotely while their company remains office based. In case not all employees are collaborating in the same way, it might be a challenge. Collaboration are still the core issue as it affects every employee.

In the survey, authors asked questions about specific remote work-related expenses that companies might cover for their remote employees. The expenses are such as household internet bills, drinks or food, and mobile phone bills. Over 70 % of respondents have consistently selected “No” (their companies do not cover the expenses). Authors included an open-ended question asking respondents to share other expenses that their companies cover. Different answers were received, that fell into the categories such as: computers, office equipment, and software. It seems that companies are more likely to pay for the one-time expenses involved in remote work, like setting up a home office, and less likely to pay for recurring monthly bills like household internet, mobile phone.

The lack of affinities with digital tools and knowledge both in companies and among employees’ and prior experience with remote work arrangements may limit its uptake and productivity. There is a danger that organisations respond to this challenge by using intrusive digital tools to monitor employees’ work productivity, which has troubling implications in terms of job quality, privacy, and autonomy.

Companies often want to support their remote work employees but are unsure of what to provide and how to manage remote work specific policy. Even simple benefits like high-speed internet and equipment, which create the environment for work and engagement, are often difficult to implement. Recommendation to remote work employees in this situation is to communicate their needs to employers. Most employers are quite receptive but may lack the contextual information to make the employee perform at their best.

Conclusion, recommendations

1. Working remotely, monitoring work productivity is much more difficult and, thus, requires a higher level of trust. In this sense, the expansion of remote working could shift cultural and organizational norms, expanding levels of work autonomy, and making more accessible what so far has often been a privilege associated with high professional status.
2. The lack of companies and employees’ affinities with digital tools and prior experience with remote working arrangements may limit its uptake and effectiveness. There is also a danger that organisations respond to this challenge by using intrusive digital tools which have troubling implications in terms of job quality, privacy, and autonomy.
3. Decisions concerning the introduction or implementation of remote work should be made in a transparent way, respecting the existing information and consultation structures and procedures. Remote work should be designed so that it is favourable both, for the company and for the employee.
4. Recognizing that the company has the right to issue guidelines on the proper use of its equipment and communication facilities, a remote worker has the same right as other employees in the company to communicate with his/her colleagues, using this equipment and facilities. This right must include communicating about matters relating to work, to which the remote worker belongs or with other bona fide personnel representatives.
5. As a rule, systems of compensation should be defined for costs generated by remote working. They should also cover insurance to cover damage to the equipment and any damage that may be caused to third parties or to the premises where the remote work is being carried out.
6. To maximise a welfare profit, characteristic for the use of wider remote work, management would have to invest into the remote work process organisation as well as solve possible problems connected with employees wellbeing in the context of long term remote work.

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