

Working From Home: Can the Benefits Outweigh the Risks?

Article by Pierre Bérastégui
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As countries increasingly take steps to reopen their economies, many experts predict a real turning point in the way we work. But as the pandemic has shown, this revolution is not without risks to workers' health. As remote working seems here to stay, Pierre Bérastégui argues that urgent action is required to strengthen the legal framework around it, to ensure that the rights of workers are protected.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began, many employers were forced to put in place remote working arrangements overnight, without any previous experience. Of those working from home across Europe today, nearly half suddenly found themselves doing so for the first time. The transition was far from smooth; inadequate equipment, unrealistic expectations, and a lack of support from management were common concerns for remote workers during the pandemic.

In the meantime, working from home has becoming increasingly attractive for European employers, with 80 per cent saying they plan to continue the practice after Covid-19 restrictions are lifted, both as a means of cutting costs as well as combating absenteeism. The European Commission shares this ambition, announcing in May 2021 a reduction in its office space by 25 to 30 per cent over the coming years. We are clearly at a turning point. The question now is how we can learn from the dysfunctional rollout of remote working, and rethink it, not as a temporary solution, but as a permanent evolution of the way we work.

A voluntary approach

If the pandemic has revealed one thing, it is that working from home is not a panacea. It is not a miracle solution applicable to all working arrangements. Several conditions must be met for remote work to favour both productivity as well as workers' quality of life. The first and likely most obvious condition is that remote work should remain voluntary, an option that employees choose. Working from home presents the greatest psychosocial risks to workers when it is no longer a choice.

Similarly, working from home is not suited to all professional activities. Only 37 per cent of jobs in Europe can be effectively carried out remotely. This is the case for occupations where the worker's autonomy is restricted and therefore easily controllable, or on the contrary for occupations that require a significant level of self-management.

Another criterion is the worker's environment at home. Noisy neighbours, the presence of small children, and inadequate working spaces are all sources of stress that can weigh on those working remotely. Last but not least, the benefits of working from home depend on

the way it is organised by the employer. Research in this area highlights the importance of an organisational culture that favours autonomy and trust over constant supervision.

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Only if these four criteria are satisfied can working from home be beneficial for workers, and thus for their employers. Under these conditions, remote work leads to positive outcomes, including increased job satisfaction, greater inclination to remain with their employer, less stress, improved work-family balance, and higher performance ratings by supervisors. But the fewer of these conditions are met, the more damaging remote working will be for the worker. Working from home will no longer be seen as a resource but instead will become a constraint, compounding the other difficulties that workers face.

The balance between these factors was clearly far from ideal during the health crisis. During the first lockdown, more than a quarter of French workers saw remote work as a constraint, and of these 72 per cent experienced psychological distress. Much of this dysfunction can be attributed to the crisis itself, as most employers would not have implemented remote working so rapidly and on such a large scale in the absence of government restrictions.

The real risk of this large-scale experiment is that a model of remote working which has proved dysfunctional – and which remains the sole point of reference for many employers – becomes entrenched and widespread. Working from home now requires increased regulation to avoid the damaging effects that, according to several surveys, many workers experienced during the pandemic.

Towards a European legislative framework

Among EU countries, many of the recent initiatives have been directed towards preventing the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life through restricting access to work systems outside of office hours. However, the right to disconnect is not explicitly stipulated in EU law and the situation in member countries varies widely. Belgium, France, Italy, and Spain rely on a “balanced promote-protect” approach emphasising both the benefits and risks of working from home, notably by introducing a legal framework for the right to disconnect.

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The second type of approach focuses solely on the benefits without specifically dealing with any negative consequences, and has been adopted in Czechia, Lithuania, Poland, and Portugal. In 13 other EU countries, there is only general legislation regulating the possibility

of remote working with no direct mention of work-life balance issues. The remaining six members have no specific legislation governing remote working at all.

These categories illustrate the different degrees of maturity among the initiatives deployed by EU countries to facilitate a healthy work-life balance. Recognising both the benefits and risks of flexible and remote working is of paramount importance, yet the risks associated with constant connectivity have prompted only four member states to legislate on the right to disconnect.

That said, the work-life balance situation of those working from home has been far from ideal during the pandemic, even in countries following the balanced approach. This raises not only the issue of the acknowledgement of the right to disconnect, but also of whether the concept is adequate to tackle the issues facing workers, and how it can be enforced. Guaranteeing this right must involve profound changes in company culture so workers feel they can disconnect from work without facing negative repercussions. This presupposes the need to address the causes of over-connectedness, including excessive workload, lack of training, or unsuitable management, and workplace practices.

Collective action on a European level is one lever that may encourage employers to reconsider their remote working policies. The European framework agreement on telework, signed by the social partners in 2002, was a step in the right direction. But due to its non-binding nature, the agreement proved to be no more than a set of guidelines for good practice that could easily be circumvented. This is why we need binding regulation at the European level on all remote work issues.

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Earlier this year, the European Parliament called for legislation that would give workers the right to disconnect from their work-related digital tools outside working hours. While this represents a step in the right direction, there's still a long way to go. Regulating workloads, guaranteeing voluntariness, ensuring that employers cover the costs of working from home, and integrating the risks of remote working into the prevention process are all essential initiatives for a socially just transition to the new world of remote work.

The European Trade Union Confederation is working towards a more comprehensive approach, including the adoption of a directive dedicated to psychosocial risks. Such a directive would represent major progress for those working from home, as they are primarily exposed to risks of a psychosocial nature. It would also help to combat the spike in stress that affects all workplaces.

Recently, the European Commission released the long-awaited action plan of the European Pillar of Social Rights, both recognising the central role of remote work in the post-pandemic reality and the need for an update to the occupational safety and health strategic framework.

However, the EU strategic framework on health and safety at work 2021-2027 still falls short of addressing psychosocial risks and work organisation. Such efforts are particularly

vital in the light of the current pandemic, which has thrown these issues into sharp relief, in the wake of rapid transformations to the way we work and the impact of new digital technologies on our lives.



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