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# Telework, work organisation and job quality during the COVID-19 crisis

*A qualitative study*

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# Telework, work organisation and job quality during the COVID-19 crisis: a qualitative study

Marta Fana, Santo Milasi, Joanna Napierała, Enrique Fernandez-Macías,  
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## Abstract

This study aims at better understanding how the massive shift to telework following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 affected workers' jobs and lives. In particular, we shed light on how this exogenous change had an impact on tasks content and work organisation dimensions like teamwork, routine, workers' autonomy and types and extent of supervisory control methods. Moreover, we explored both subjective and objective dimensions of job quality such as job satisfaction, motivation, changes in working time and pay, together with issues related to physical and mental health and more generally to work-life balance. In each of selected countries, 25 teleworking employees with different job profiles, family compositions, and personal characteristics were interviewed during the lockdown of spring 2020. The picture that emerges is quite multifaceted largely depending on workers' occupation and family composition, although some general patterns can be observed. After an initial period in which workers could gain more autonomy and decisional power at almost of levels of the hierarchy, during a stabilization period new forms of remote supervisory control have been put in place and contributed to a standardization of working routines. For some, working from home increased satisfaction and productivity, and allowed to better reconcile work-family duties. In contrast, others felt teleworking, and the ensuing communication through digital platforms, challenged the possibility to receive meaningful feedback and exchange ideas with co-workers and supervisors. At times, for workers with children in school age, the negative impact was aggravated by school closure and the general lockdown. Yet, and despite the many challenges of adapting to the sudden, obligatory and high-intensity telework, most of the respondents agreed that teleworking has upsides, and would be willing to continue to work remotely in the future, at least occasionally. Before that, however, workers would like to seek greater clarity around their working conditions as teleworkers

**Keywords:** Teleworking, remote work, tasks, work organisation, job quality, COVID-19

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**Milasi, S., González Vázquez, I., Fernández Macías, E. (2020),** [Telework in the EU before and after the COVID-19: where we were, where we head to](#), JRC Science for Policy Brief.

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## Introduction

The debate on telework dates back to the Seventies at the time of the first wave of ICT adoption within organisations, when the implementation of new technological possibilities at a massive scale allowed for new forms of work. Despite incessant technological upgrade and its adoption during the following decades, home-based teleworking and, remote work more generally, did not spread at the same pace. The situation remained broadly unchanged at least until spring 2020, with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, when economic lock-down and social distancing measures forced a shift toward massive telework in most EU Member States. Eurofound (2020) estimates that close to 40% of employees in the EU started teleworking full time in April 2020. This is in line with findings in a recent JRC-Eurofound study suggesting that more than one third of employees in the EU is in occupations that can be carried-out entirely remotely (Sostero et al. 2020).

Therefore, the onset of the pandemic clearly showed that the number of people who can work remotely is much greater than pre-outbreak figures. In fact, according to another recent JRC study, before the outbreak the prevalence of teleworking in the EU was rather modest, although with large differences across countries (Milasi et al., 2020). In 2019 only 11% of dependent employees were working from home at least some of the time, and less than one third of them were doing so on a regular basis. Wide differences in the diffusion of teleworking emerge across countries even within the same economic sector and, more importantly, across occupations within the same country. Based on EU-LFS data, Sostero et al. (2020) show that teleworking is traditionally more common in high-skilled, high paid, white-collar occupations, such as managers and professionals. However, the same authors show that telework is also technically feasible for many mid- and low-skilled administrative and clerical occupations which rarely teleworked before the COVID-19 crisis but which have probably started working from home in large numbers afterwards (Sostero et al. 2020).

Among the three countries covered in this study (France, Spain and Italy), the fraction of employees regularly or occasionally teleworking before the crisis was highest in France – at 18% in 2019, the sixth highest rate in the EU. Conversely, the pre-outbreak prevalence of telework was rather low in Spain (4%) and even lower in Italy (2.5%) – the third lowest percentage in the EU. However, the enforced closures of workplaces have resulted in many new teleworkers, especially amongst low and mid-level clerical and administrative workers who previously had limited access to telework. According to Eurofound (2020) around 40% of employees in both Italy and France, and 30% in Spain, were working from home in April 2020.

It appears that the outbreak-induced necessity to work from home has removed or modified, at least temporarily, many of the barriers that had limited the adoption of telework over the past decades – e.g. employers' and managers' reluctance to extend unsupervised autonomy. In this sense, the sudden expansion of teleworking might have fostered firms' cultural and organisational changes, as well as investments in ICT infrastructures, which may have prepared the ground for a greater adoption of telework in the future. This finds confirmation in some recent surveys among US employers admitting that their plan is to increase significantly the number of people working remotely after the end of the pandemic (Survey of Business Uncertainty 2020).

Yet, a semester after the beginning of the pandemic, flows in and out of teleworking show that remote work arrangements are far from being established as a “new normality” or paradigm. Instead, they appear to remain considered mostly a short-term response to social distancing and lockdown measures. In fact, as these measures were relaxed or removed in the summer of 2020, workers were in some cases asked to go back to firms' premises so long as it was safe (Financial Times, 2020) – a change that reverted in the early autumn of 2020 when governments in many countries re-introduced stricter lockdown measures, recommending (or requiring) telework whenever possible.

Against this background, it remains difficult to predict to what extent organisations and workers will want to embrace remote work arrangements once the pandemic passes. However, observing telework patterns in recent months, and more generally the (slow) pace of telework adoption during the last decades, what seems clear is that the diffusion of remote working does not only depend on its technological feasibility. A broader set of explanations is necessary, capturing at the same time technical, institutional and social factors as well as workers' and organisations' preferences.

Teleworking in and of itself does not only concern the place of work. It also has significant implications for work organisation and power relations in the workplace. Among all, direct control and supervision, «Bosses' need to boss» as stated by Cal Newport on the New York Times, has been one of the major concerns delaying the spread of telework according to the specialised literature (Dimitrova, 2003; Felstead et al, 2003; Olson, 1988). For example, a study among employers in Flanders, Belgium, shows that these fears are particularly pronounced in small and medium-sized companies and among managers who themselves have not had any experience with telework (Walrave and De Bie 2005).

At the same time, firms' decisions and workers' reaction to scale-up telework in the longer-term will also depend on the effect that working from home has on workers' productivity, job quality, and work-life balance as well as on their overall well-being. Evidence from pre-outbreak studies suggests that, despite a number of non-negligible challenges, working from home can be beneficial for certain workers in a number of dimensions, such as job satisfaction, work-life balance and well-being (Charalampous et al., 2019). In particular, a previous study show that individuals who feel supported from their organisation, both from supervisors and co-workers, are more likely to assess working from home in a positive way, while also being less likely to feel psychological strain, and social isolation (Bentley et al., 2016). This suggests that organisational culture and environment may play a crucial role in shaping remote workers' perceptions about personal and career outcomes.

However, what we know about the impact of telework from pre-outbreak evidence may not fully apply to the post-outbreak exceptional teleworking conditions. For instance, the closure of schools and the transition to "distance learning" for students has forced most working parents to support their children during office hours. Many workers lacked a private room specifically designed for work, and/or did not have adequate digital devices or internet connection. On top of that, many of those who started teleworking since April 2020 did so for the first time, and on a full-time basis, with related challenges in terms of adaptation to a new working mode for them and their employers. Adapting to remote work has likely been particularly challenging for workers in small- and medium-sized firms, which may lack the knowledge and financial resources to support greater investments in technologies and workplace innovation (OECD, 2020). Under these difficult circumstances, it is unclear whether or not teleworkers experienced decreasing levels of well-being and job quality, and how changes in work organisation affected their work routine and job content.

Against this background, this study aims to better understand how workers adjusted to the sudden shift to a work-from-home arrangement during the first months of the COVID crisis, and the impact this had on a number of life and work outcomes. For this purpose, a number of qualitative interviews were conducted among teleworkers in France, Italy and Spain during the period of the outbreak-induced lockdown or immediately after.

In each of the three countries studied in this paper, 25 teleworking employees with different job profiles, family compositions, and personal characteristics were interviewed. Interviews touched upon a wide range of dimensions of workers' life and professional domains. First, we investigated if and to what extent remote working changed the tasks performed by employees and the way the labour process is organized. In addition, we tried to shed light on how organisations reacted to the sudden transition to telework, and what this entailed for workers in terms of autonomy and communication with co-workers and supervisors. We also explored whether workers across

different occupations and economic sectors experienced changes in the way their work is monitored and controlled. If, as seen in recent literature, work organisation and especially control has been one of the major obstacles for the adoption of telework, we can now study how these practices evolve when remote working is not an option but an inescapable reality, as has been the case in the period analysed.

Meanwhile, we also analysed how the sudden transition to telework affected both objective aspects of work (e.g. pay, working time), as well as subjective characteristics of employment that have been proven to have a direct effect on workers' well-being (e.g. job satisfaction, motivation, perceived career prospects, physical and mental health).

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. We first present the methodology adopted for the semi-structured interviews, the sampling strategy and the guidelines used for interviewing respondents. The following section presents and discusses results on the impact of telework on tasks' content and work organisation with a particular focus on autonomy, direct and bureaucratic control across occupations and sectors. We then discuss the main findings on several job quality dimensions as well as employees' future prospects about teleworking arrangements.

It is worth noting that this report summarises the main findings from three country-specific reports which discuss in greater detail how the massive shift to telework following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020 affected workers' jobs and lives in France, Italy, and Spain respectively. These have been published as separate [JRC working papers and can be found here](#).



## Methodology

This report draws on findings from in-depth interviews conducted during the months of April and May 2020 in France, Italy and Spain. A total of 25 interviews was done in each country. The interviews were carried among dependent employees who were working from home (hereafter also referred as teleworkers) because of the Covid-19 outbreak, and who may or may not have had experience of telework before. Yet, employees who were in a permanent telework arrangement before the COVID-19 crisis were not eligible to participate in this study. In order to get a comprehensive understanding of workers' experiences with teleworking during the confinement we aimed at some heterogeneity both in terms of socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. gender, age, household's composition) and in terms of the characteristics of jobs (i.e. sectors of employment, individuals' skills level, occupation and contractual arrangements). Table 1 shows the final composition of the sample of interviewees by country. Respondents were reached through multiple channels (personal contacts, snowball, social networks, contacts from previous field work).

The semi-standardised set of questions was first prepared in English and then translated by researchers conducting the fieldwork into the native languages of respondents. The interviews covered three broad thematic areas:

- **work organisation and labour relations** (e.g. transition to telework, negotiation of the transition, relation with colleagues and teamwork, autonomy, control mechanisms, tasks and coordination);
- **job quality** (e.g. intrinsic quality of work, wage and contractual issues, working time, social, economic and psychological risks, health and safety);
- **work-life balance** (e.g. clash of telework and family life, mechanisms of adjustment).

The interviews were conducted remotely, through video conferencing tools such as Skype, Whatsapp or Zoom. Some interviews were conducted by phone in case the internet connection was insufficient or when this was requested by the interviewees.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by socio-demographic and job profile characteristics.

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VARIABLE	CATEGORIES	Spain	Italy	France
<b>Gender</b>	Male	13	12	11
	Female	12	13	14
<b>Age</b>	<=45	13	15	17
	>45	12	10	8
<b>Type of household</b>	Couple with children	15	12	13
	Couple without children	3	6	6
	Single person	5	1	4
	Other	2	6	2
<b>Private/public employee</b>	Private	21	18	18
	Public	4	7	7
<b>Occupational level</b>	High	21	11	12
	Medium-Low	4	14	13
<b>Type of contract</b>	Permanent	22	17	18
	Temporary	3	8	7
<b>Working time</b>	Full time	23	23	24
	Part time	2	2	1
<b>Contact with clients/other people</b>	Yes	16	12	15
	No	9	13	10

## **Task content and work organisational aspects of telework during the Covid-19 lock-down.**

### Summary of key findings

The shift to mass telework after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted both on workers' tasks and on several dimensions of work organisation. The heterogeneous change of tasks' content across jobs mostly depends on the type of economic activity and the sector in which they take place.

A more multifaceted effect across occupations is found when analysing work organisation dimensions: workers' autonomy and direct hierarchical control, routine/standardisation (bureaucratic control) and teamwork.

Overall, at the very beginning of the transition to telework the net effect of the mass transition to telework on autonomy was positive (for medium skilled and clerks) or remained unaltered (for high and low skilled workers). In this initial period workers often gained decision-making power over their daily work routines and even over the definition of priorities. During the same period, attempts to increase direct control by the employer or the management mostly took the form of a boost in personal communication via digital platforms and phone calls.

However, the progressive stabilisation of remote work restored managerial control in both decision-making and definition of deadlines and production goals. Moreover, control and supervision appeared to change qualitatively from direct to bureaucratic type, with an increase in procedural standardisation. The more procedural content of working activities has mostly affected those working in direct (albeit remote) contact with the public, although with some heterogeneity among them. Moreover, this process mostly applied to occupations which were not so standardised before the transition. For instance, for low -skilled clerical workers and medium-skilled professionals, whose work was already highly standardised in terms of codified and pre-established procedures to be followed using ICT devices, the impact of telework has been negligible in terms of changes in standardisation and work procedures.

Since the first wave of ICT adoption within organisations in the 1970s, homeworking or other remote working arrangements have been analysed under different perspectives: from the possibility to reduce pollution (Nilles, 1976) to the reconfiguration of urban spaces. Within the economic, organisational and sociological debates different strands of literature grounded on a variety of theoretical approaches emerged. But a deterministic relationship between the diffusion of ICT, since the Third Industrial Revolution, and the implementation of telework has been widely rejected by the empirical evidence. As mentioned in the introduction, according to Milasi et al. (2020), in 2019 only the 11% of European dependent employees were working from home at least some of the time; while those often working remotely did not exceed 3.2% (at the EU-27 level) since 2008. However, looking at the technical feasibility of telework, new empirical evidence suggests that with existing technologies one employee out of three could perform his/her tasks outside the premises of the firm (Sostero et al., 2020; Cetrulo et al. 2020).

While differences across countries on the technical feasibility of telework rest upon differences in both employment structures and country sectoral specialization, the gap between theoretical the potential and actual operationalization of this form of work is hard to be explained by the heterogeneity in the adoption of enabling technologies.

In broad terms, working outside the premises of the firms is one way in which new forms of work may occur, involving all dimensions of the labour process: what, when, where and how production takes place. While the what is produced mainly concerns the structure of demand, mediated at the micro-firm level by the technical possibility frontier, all other aspects are grounded on social relations which are historically and institutionally contingent. Telework on its own concerns just the place of work, but it has significant implications for work organisation and power relations in the workplace. The reason is partly technical: for most work processes, it is easier to coordinate and control when all workers are concentrated in a central space, under the direct supervision of managers. In contrast, while working from home necessarily involves a certain degree of freedom because the worker is not even visible to the employer. It is important to note that a change in technology can alter this: if digital communications evolve in such a way that it becomes feasible to have the same degree of coordination and control with a decentralised organisation (for instance, via mechanisms of remote surveillance or management), then telework can become at least as attractive to employers as centralised physical work.

During the last decades, two main views have emerged in the economic and sociological literature on the effects of telework on work organisation and job quality and the extent to which telework affects hierarchical and bureaucratic control, workers' autonomy and the quality of teamwork. As summarized by Dimitrova (2003), these compelling arguments can be summarised around the Post-Fordist and the Neo-Fordist standpoints. According to the Post-Fordist argument, telework disrupts the primary mechanism of workers' control (the physical boundaries of the workplace), and thus brings more democratic control procedures mostly based on reciprocal trust and self-control (Zuboff, 1988; Vallas, 1999). According to the neo-Fordist argument, some empirical studies show that the transition to telework went hand in hand with the increase of digitally-mediated forms of managerial control, like phone calls, virtual meetings and frequent activity reports (Olson, 1988). In particular, changes in types of managerial control differently affect clerks and professionals, with the former being subject to more stringent supervision and even an intensification of work (Korte and Wynne, 1996; Olson and Primps, 1984). Similar findings are shown by Dimitrova (2003) investigating control practices across the occupational structure. More interestingly, the author finds that control practices remain similar between traditional and remote working for professionals and high-level clerks, while they intensify under telework for sales workers. As expected these tighter forms are characterized by both more frequent interpersonal interactions and formally encoded procedures.

These arguments can help formulate hypothesis to be tested to understand why telework did not take off despite increasing technical feasibility during the past decades. At the same time, they serve as conceptual framework to study the implementation of telework regime at a mass scale. In this sense, the global pandemic

induced by the spread of the covid-19 acts as an exogenous shock against which governments adopted stringent policies to control the spread of the virus, forcing organisations to adopt telework as a daily and common form of work along the whole occupational structure. Despite several differences in terms of social confinement and economic lockdown measures in place, the three countries studied in this paper imposed telework for civil servants in all administrative levels, while recommending it to private firms whenever possible. What feasibility actually means in reality is not straightforward, as previously discussed.

We can therefore highlight two mirror issues: first, how firms tried to maintain their existing forms of work organisation along the dimensions of autonomy, standardisation and teamwork across different occupations and economic sectors. Second, how workers responded, in many cases adapting and reshaping their firms' systems for the remote organisation of work. It is important to emphasize this point, which we will illustrate with examples from the interviews. When faced with a change in work organisation, workers are never passive, but tend to respond in ways that can significantly alter the work organisation in practice (even if not in theory). The actual organisation of work is always a mix of the management plans and policies and the workers' creative responses to those plans, which involves a significant amount of self-organisation.

Our study shows that organisations are evolving entities that adapt their structure to external events such as the COVID crisis: while adapting to the shock they tend to renew the same relation of power, unless such an opportunity is seized by subaltern/outsider actors. In response to the national measures and the health risks during the COVID crisis, employers massively adopted telework introducing ex-novo this practice or extending it to most of their workforce, not only those who already experienced it in the past and under normal circumstances. The process of adaptation to the new context was not linear. Indeed, although activity was often not compromised in the organisations that shifted to telework, the immediate reaction to the shock in terms of work organisation was not always under full control of the management.

In the present chapter we will therefore analyse this evolution across all dimensions of work organisation and their interaction with the tools (mostly ICT) used for maintaining and coordinating the labour process in the new context, discussing how these changes varied across the whole spectrum of jobs covered in the interviews. Box 1 conceptualises the different dimensions covered in the chapter.

### **Box 1: Telework, tasks content and work organisation**

In the present chapter we will focus on the impact of telework on tasks content and three main dimensions related to work organisation: workers' autonomy and direct control, routine/standardisation and teamwork (Fernández-Macías and Bisello, 2020). Finally, we discuss the effect on both internal and external communication.

First, **workers' autonomy, and specularly management control**, can be seen as one of the main constraints to more frequent adoption of telework. Indeed, when work is carried out from

outside the workplace the traditional office-based mechanisms to monitor working time and quality of work may not be available, especially for those jobs where output quality and quantity is intrinsically more difficult to measure. This may explain why some occupations which are similar in terms of telework technical feasibility had very different prevalence until the COVID crisis.

According to this view, Felstead et al. (2003) show that there exists consensus among managers that physical presence acts as a form of self-discipline for workers, as well as surveillance by others (not necessarily the hierarchy). At the same time, remote workers were concerned about their inability to show their honesty and productivity (in other words, workers themselves may interiorise norms of discipline at the workplace that make remote work problematic).

Second, **the degree of routine/standardisation** of the labour process, that is the extent to which tasks procedures and outputs are encoded in a formalised system, should facilitate the adoption of telework since it allows to substitute direct and physical control with bureaucratic control. This hypothesis has been tested by Pouliakas and Branka (2020) showing that the job content of EU remote workers is often characterised by standardised tasks. Similarly, according to Neirotti et al (2013) the increase in adoption of telework within Italian SMEs follows the routinisation of their core business processes.

Third, **teamwork**, as a form of horizontal cooperation within the organisation, is a necessary ingredient to work that may reduce the scope for telework. Although ICT tools like collaborative platforms, video-conferencing and phone calls make remote interaction with colleagues possible, often they can still not perfectly substitute direct face-to-face interaction in the workplace.

## Tasks content

Tasks content and work procedures underwent in most of the analysed cases a process of adaptation and redefinition during the transition to mass telework. However, these changes were not necessarily due to the transition to telework, but more often the result of the contingent situation created by the social and economic lock-down introduced by the governments. This is because, according to our findings, **changes in tasks content were explained more by the type of economic activity than by occupations**. Occupational hierarchy still determined to a large extent the level of autonomy and/or negotiation of tasks under the new regime.

For example, in Italy two main drivers of change in task contents can be detected. First, for those sectors declared non-essential by national decrees (Fana et al., 2020), that is the economic activities that were suspended between March and May 2020, the production processes of tangible goods were directly affected and workload drastically reduced. Second, for those sectors characterized by the production of intangible goods, the contingency reshaped objectives and priorities, modifying as well task contents:

*“Since the end of April, the activity has intensified considerably. [...] Now we need to disburse the loans guaranteed by the state. Someone else was supposed to manage the paperwork and we just had to lend; instead I am managing these practices in all phases: proposal, demand, tests and delivery.”* [Bank branch manager – Male]

On the other hand, **changes in tasks from the content point of view have been stressed especially by workers usually operating in direct contact with customers/clients and more generally the public**. While in some cases workers autonomously changed their work tasks

to some extent, in others these were imposed unilaterally by the employer. Sometimes this led to the full job content being altered during the telework period, as in the case of a tourist guide appointed during telework to the communication office as she could not perform her ordinary tasks.

### **Internal and external communication**

**Communication is not *per se* an aspect of work organisation. Communication is a more general type of human activity, which can be part of many types of tasks.** On the one hand, communication is obviously an important part of information processing tasks. On the other hand, it is a very significant component of social tasks because social interaction is to a large extent about communicating with other people. In particular, external communication is an important component of serving-attending, caring, teaching and training people, selling goods and services activities. However, communication as a social task can also be internal to the organisation, for example when one's job involves the management and supervision of others' work or when work activity has to be coordinated with other members of a team.

**As for external communication, our study shows that the impact of remote working on one's work performance varied depending on the types of social tasks and jobs involved.**

The importance of emotional and interactional aspect of the job makes a difference in how remote working is perceived by workers. There is consensus among those performing teaching and caring but also coaching activities (school teacher, social worker, dance teacher, psychiatrist, trade union officer) that telework reduced both the effectiveness and the efficiency as well as the purposefulness of their work. The perceived deterioration in the quality of their work due to remote communication relates to the importance of interpersonal and interactive face-to-face dimensions which cannot be easily reproduced under telework:

*"During the video lessons I don't really realize how much people are following me. I am not 100% sure that they are following the lesson and are not doing anything else. [...] And then obviously it is very difficult to create a personal relationship. Last year, for example, I talked to students during breaks, we had a chat, I offered them coffee... This year during the break, we all unplug the microphone and it ends there."* [University lecturer – Male]

In order to overcome these problems, interviewees reacted by putting in place, autonomously or through cooperation with their coworkers, original strategies and practices, which in some cases led to a visible increase in effort and time spent with "clients".

**The shift between conventional and remote work had a different impact on interviewees whose main social task is to sell goods and services.** According to most of them, the reduction in direct contact with customers improved their work as they could get rid of physical interactions like visits to customers' premises or physical meetings which are perceived as redundant and mainly in the priorities of the management (e.g. statistics on the number of visits, occupation of the market). Shifting from telephone to email contact was also positively perceived by clerical workers in a temporary work agency as well as a clerk in an outsourced hospital accounting branch:

*"Customers call us on the phone line but the most loyal customers prefer reaching us via email, which is easier to manage: they do not have to wait online before we can take the call and it is also better for us because the email summarises clearly the issue, we can read it when we want and we keep a trace and finally it is easier to transfer the request, if necessary."* [Commercial Middle Manager in a Temp Work Company – Female]

Finally, **the quality of the digital tools available was an important aspect of the success of telework in replacing face-to-face interactions on both sides of the relationship.** Not surprisingly, teachers lamented the unequal distribution of ICT tools across families which worsened both teaching and learning activities. Similarly, a bank branch manager underlined the difficulties related to the low degree of digital skills of their public:

*“There were difficulties, for example with people who did not know how to use bank applications correctly and we had to explain them by phone how to download the application, how to use it, how to deal with the secure call or how to use the token.”*  
[Commercial assistant to a financial advisor – Female]

While the quality of external communication mainly depends on the type of social task performed, the **impact of the transition to telework for internal communications depended strongly on the importance of teamwork and the workers’ role in the professional hierarchy.** For medium and high-skilled workers for which the need of internal communication and teamwork is relatively high, the transition to indirect (mediated) internal communication had a negative impact mostly because of the excessive increase of such interactions (number of calls, mail, messages received and sent daily).

This is particularly true **for online meetings, which were often perceived as less effective and less efficient for the purpose of the working activity.** More importantly, according to workers, continuous online meetings appear to have been a way for the management to keep control over the labour process, worried about the *“inadequacy of coordination among their subordinates or even about their lack of moral support”*. At the same time, it could reflect a sense of emptiness of managerial tasks while in telework: their presence in the firm’s premises is already part of the social content of tasks performed by managers and supervisors in general:

*“Since teleworking has started, every day at 2pm we have a meeting with our supervisor. This meeting is a waste of time, it’s useless: the supervisor is not our psychologist! I understand the idea of the team, but doing it every day... it would be enough to do it twice a week. The supervisor occasionally and implicitly checks if we are there, for example he says: “What do you think of these things?”, and you have to stand there and answer.”* [Service designer in an automotive firm – Female]

Human agency and cooperation among colleagues emerged during the transition phase as **workers reacted to the new way of communicating by horizontally organising, adopting or reinforcing their own channels of communication, often excluding managers and supervisors.** Therefore, the dialectics of control and resistance, formal organisation and informal coordination that have always characterised social relations in the labour process could also be observed under remote working in the context of the COVID crisis.

As could be expected, **low and medium-skilled workers (accounting and administrative clerks, secretaries, editors) whose degree of direct interdependence with colleagues and supervisors is lower did not report any negative impact of telework for internal communication.** For those categories of workers, the degree of standardisation of work is higher and the need of internal communication lower (although in most cases), and thus telework has less of an impact on work performance. For instance, these categories of workers were less affected from a functionalist point of view, but from a subjective standpoint their experience of work (and their performance) could have suffered from the lack of communication, especially from immediate informal communication with colleagues.



## Autonomy and direct hierarchical control

Workers' autonomy is a central dimension of work organisation, capturing how tasks are organized and the degree to which workers can decide upon their priorities, working time (*latitude*) and the extent to which their work is constantly monitored by supervisors or clients (*control*).

In the interviews carried out for this study, we could **observe two distinct phases with respect to autonomy in the transition to telework**. During the first phase, in the immediate aftermath of the transition to telework, there was a generalised increase in worker's autonomy. This was partly explained by the disrupted context which in some cases produced a sense of abandonment from hierarchy and management. The second phase started when new work practices consolidated and managerial control was to some extent restored.

There were also **distinct situations depending on the degree of autonomy enjoyed prior to the shift to telework, which is strongly associated with workers' position within the occupational hierarchy**.

For those already experiencing a high degree of autonomy in performing their tasks, the new work context did not imply much significant change. Focusing on the possibility to autonomously modify the organisation of tasks performed and the definition of production objectives, the degree of autonomy did not change for those workers already accustomed to telework (mainly managers and professionals). At the other extreme, for medium and low-skilled workers with more or less standardised work methods, the transition to telework meant few practical changes in terms of autonomy in defining work contents or even schedules. However, these latter categories enjoyed an increase in their latitude related to working procedures.

*"There is no more freedom in our work, the system has remained the same transported at home... with the same work schedule and the same time for breaks."* [Call centre operator in a telemarketing company – Female]

**Overall, the net effect on autonomy has been positive (medium-skilled and clerks) or unaltered (high and low-skilled workers) at least for what concerns latitude in work methods.** More interestingly, while keeping deadlines fixed, workers needed to adapt their working procedures to the new situation which increased the need for horizontal coordination between workers. Not only did workers autonomously introduce online collaborative tools into the labour process, but in some case at least during the early stage of telework, the emergency situation has allowed some groups of workers to gain decision-making power over the definition of priorities, sometimes to the point of temporarily appropriating the prerogatives usually attributed to the management. In some cases, this increase in latitude actually filled a gap when managers were not able to timely react to the new situation, letting workers feel frustrated:

*"Since the beginning of the quarantine even the supervisors have not known how to handle it. So we have all had to organize ourselves a little. That is, you have to try to give yourself deadlines and an organization of time in order to understand what is your priority. [...] In the first period, therefore, I found myself replacing the supervisor, not in a hierarchical perspective, but trying to propose work organization tools, tables, documents, etc. At a time when there was general chaos, it is as if we had taken over, in the self-management of time, that part of activity that should actually be purely managerial."* [Service designer in an automotive firm – Female]

What has emerged so far is that early attempts from the management to keep strict control over workers, in the form of more frequent virtual meetings and/or other forms of interactions, have been more formally than practically affecting medium-skilled workers. Indeed, in the operational execution of tasks those workers could coordinate themselves redefining priorities and to some extent working procedures. However, the progressive stabilisation of remote work restored the management's power in both decision-making and definition of deadlines and production goals.

**Control in the form of monitoring from supervisors, colleagues or clients has been characterised by both qualitative and quantitative changes.** Some workers mainly employed in small organisations and who are often in contact with their supervisors reported an increase in direct control often exerted via personal communications (i.e. phone calls, WhatsApp messages). This is also the case for dancing teacher, low skilled but not standardized worker, reporting that:

*"Since the beginning of distant classes, the administrator started monitoring my virtual classes. [...] They check it out, the woman from the school administration comes in and participates in the session, she watches!"* [Dance teacher in a school – Female]

Low-skilled workers (call center operators both in telemarketing and insurance companies) also reported a substantial increase in supervisors' control which very often take the form of recording and listening their activity:

*"We are monitored to very often, at least twice a day... normally we are listened to twice a month, it was different, and we had two mail checks per month..."*. [Call centre operator in a telemarketing company – Female]

What is more interesting for the sake of our analysis is that the increase in direct control applied also to some high-skilled workers for which the introduction of communication tools like Skype has been perceived as a mechanism of remote personal control and "disciplinary power":

*"The mechanism by which the boss controls us is our availability status on Skype. [...] Everything is based on showing your status on Skype green."* [Tax consultant officer in a telecom firm – Male]

Other forms of control seem to have been implemented during the lockdown. For example, through VPN which while allowing remote connection to corporate networks, it is also used as control system. In other cases, employees have been asked to install remote control software, such as TeamViewer or AnyDesk. The two options have been adopted differently among firms. The first solution mainly characterizes big firms, accustomed to IT systems and their implementation (like call centers). The adoption of remote control software which does not require any particular IT infrastructure has been found in small firms.

Finally, concerning bureaucratic control, in some cases and within a very wide spectrum of professions, **supervisors have tried to counterbalance the absence of direct supervision by activating new bureaucratic procedures** that workers have to follow in order to self-certify their work (written reports detailing the activity carried out or the hours worked):

*"As for the control, what was there before is also in smart-working now, but now the supervisor has asked us to make a report of our weekly activities: how many registrations, how many calls etc..."* [Employee in an employment centre – Male]

## **Standardisation**

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The last dimension of work organisation covered in this study is standardisation, capturing the extent to which working activities, as of procedures and goals, are codified in formalised systems. Standardisation is then one aspect of the routinisation of work, which in turn relates to the way work is organized (Fernández-Macías and Bisello, 2020).

**According to our findings, the increased procedural content of working activities has mostly affected those working in direct contact with the public although with some heterogeneity among them.** Moreover, although higher standardisation of work is a secular trend in advanced economies, the transition to teleworking may have contributed to accelerating it. For instance, according to a clerk in an employment center, in the transition to telework during the COVID crisis the management introduced detailed guidelines on how to perform work and the communication tools to be used with customers and/or clients. Other forms of bureaucratic control, as seen before, actually replaced direct and personal supervision by the hierarchy. In particular, in the case of employees of the private sector the autonomy gained in the short term after the introduction of telework was subsequently offset during the stabilization period when managers restored their decision making power as well as production targets. Yet, under teleworking this re-standardisation process required the introduction of new and specific codified procedures.

**On the other hand, for many low-skilled clerical workers and medium-skilled professionals, whose work was already highly standardised** in terms of codified and pre-established procedures to be followed using ICT devices, **the degree of standardisation did not change during telework:**

*“I follow the same protocol that I followed before. [...] The procedures are standardised: when I have to prepare documents, make electronic filings, etc. The tasks that are assigned to us by the lawyers by e-mail are already standardized too.” [Secretary in a law firm – Female]*

Beside the degree of standardisation, there are also some organisational factors that play a significant role, such as the dimension of the organisations and the degree of implementation of telework before the lockdown.

## **Job quality and telework during the COVID-19 lockdown.**

### **Summary of key findings**

According to our study employees' perceptions of how telework impacted the quality of their job are quite multifaceted. Particularly polarised are workers' views on the effect of telework on job satisfaction and motivation. Call-centre and clerical workers, and more generally those working in close contact with clients, often felt more satisfied working from home than in the regular office. Teleworking allowed them to filter-out office-based distractions and strict control from supervisors, which increased their concentration and perceived productivity.

There is however the other face of the medal: telework has challenged the possibility to receive meaningful feedback, exchange ideas, and seek information and guidance from supervisors or colleagues. This weighted negatively on the job satisfaction and motivation of some high-skilled workers who at times felt "futile" or "invisible" during telework.

Contrary to the expectations, very few respondents felt telework in and of itself could harm their career prospects, while only few others reported working longer hours and greater work intensity due to working from home.

Regardless of the occupation, workers' assessment of the transition to telework was clearly influenced by their family composition. Respondents with children often felt less productive and satisfied while teleworking because of frequent "interruptions" to their work, and constant blurring of family-work boundaries. Yet, for some of them the benefits of living with their family offset these challenges. This seems more relevant for women who, despite often reporting greater levels of stress, appear to value more than men the flexibility granted from telework and the reduction of work-family conflicts. This, however, probably reflects the fact that the unequal gender division of domestic work persisted even during the lockdown.

Finally, telework clearly raises concerns around physical and mental safety, with many workers experiencing the emergence of musculoskeletal issues and a greater range of negative emotions.

**Research conducted before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that telework can have both positive and negative impacts on job quality**, depending on which dimension of job quality is considered, as well as on teleworkers' job profile, family composition, personal preferences, and the type of support received from their employer (Charalampous et al., 2019). Evidence suggests that telework can enhance job quality by for instance: i) Improving job satisfaction and motivation (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007; Charalampous et al., 2019); ii) Increasing workers' organisational commitment and loyalty to their employer (Harker Martin and MacDonnell, 2012); iii) Improving work-life balance or reducing work-life conflicts (Fonner and Roloff, 2010; Golden, 2006). However, there is also evidence that telework can have potential

negative effects on job quality by: i) Worsening communication and knowledge flows between colleagues; ii) Inducing managerial oversight (Bonet and Salvadora, 2017); iii) Worsening actual or perceived career prospects (Redman 2009); iv) Causing mental stress and feelings of social and/or professional isolation (Vander Elst et al., 2017).

**What we know about the impact of telework on job quality from pre-outbreak evidence may not apply to the peculiar crisis situation.** Teleworkers analysed by previous studies typically have a dedicated home office, proper digital devices, and internet connection. Even if they were teleworking regularly, they could still go to the office to do those tasks that could not be done efficiently from home. And, in most of the cases, they did not have to take care of their children during office hours. Instead, most people who started teleworking in March or April 2020 faced very different conditions from the ones described above. The closure of schools and the transition to “distance learning” for students forced most working parents to support their children during office hours. Many workers lacked a private room specifically designed for work, did not have adequate digital devices or internet connection, and/or had to share digital devices with other family members. On top of that, the large majority of those who started teleworking in spring 2020 did so for the first time, and on a full-time basis.

**Whether the worker looks favorably upon working from home in the future mainly depends on how telework affected the *quality of her job*.** There are reasons to believe that the outbreak is accelerating the trend toward teleworking, possibly for the long term (Bloom, 2020). To what extent this may materialise partly depends on workers’ views on telework and its impact on the *quality* of their job (see Box 2). What follows presents the main findings of our study on how the transition to telework affected both objective and perceived aspects of job quality across workers in the three countries, labour market profiles, jobs’ characteristics and households’ situations.

**Box 2: The dimensions of job quality.**

The quality of jobs people hold is one of the most important factors determining workers’ well-being. By job quality we refer to a range of features, including both objective aspects of work (e.g. pay, working time), as well as subjective characteristics of employment that have been proven to have a direct effect on workers’ well-being (e.g. job satisfaction, motivation, perceived career prospects, physical and mental health).

In order to assess the impact of telework on job quality in this study, we asked workers how telework influenced their working life in a range of relevant dimensions. In particular, borrowing Eurofound’s (2012) approach, our questions focused on five key dimensions of job quality:

1. Income (e.g. pay, bonuses, expenses)
2. Intrinsic job quality (e.g. job satisfaction, motivation, social environment, physical and emotional health).
3. Career prospects (e.g. job security, career progression, access to training)
4. Physical and mental health risks (e.g. musculoskeletal problems, solitude, anxiety)
5. Working time quality (e.g. duration, scheduling, intensity, flexibility, work-life balance).

The analysis of all of these dimensions combined allows to gain a more complete picture of the

benefits and drawbacks of telework experienced by workers.

Of course, in addition to the job itself, it is important to keep in mind that workers' views on telework also depends on a number of mediating factors, such as gender, age, family composition, and personal attitudes.

## Impact on Income

**The large majority of workers interviewed did not experience a fall in earnings.** This is true across different workers' job profiles in the three countries analysed. However, many of respondents were concerned about their income prospects due to the overall negative economic situation and the potential repercussions on their employers. This was particularly the case for employees with fixed-term contracts, both in the private (especially in small companies) and in the public sectors.

**Some respondents were supported in setting up their home office, but most had to cover for themselves the additional expenses associated to working from home.** Regarding the provision of digital devices, employers provided teleworkers with such tools in the majority of cases. In few other instances, employers contributed to the internet subscription during the lockdown, or they offered to participate to the purchase of non-digital tools (such as chairs or ink for printers). However, almost all teleworkers interviewed had to pay for extra expenses associated to working from home – from higher bills for utilities, phone and internet connection – while few others faced larger expenses to buy office equipment. On the other hand, several of the teleworkers interviewed mentioned savings from not having to commute everyday as one important upside of telework.

**Some workers saw their income decreasing because of companies' cuts to bonuses and benefits.** Across the three countries many respondents reported that the variable part of their income decreased because of companies' cuts to benefits and bonuses, such as travel expenses, food checks, and participation in profit sharing schemes. Meanwhile some workers mentioned that their expected income decreased because companies froze wage increases and promotions.

*“Every year we get a profit-sharing on the company revenue. It is a sum of money that we receive, and we were made to understand that next year there would be none as this profit-sharing is proportional to the financial turnover, and this year that's a disaster...”* [Subtitler for a broadcasting company – Female]

**Requesting workers to anticipate their paid annual leaves was another mechanism companies used to contain current and expected costs.** For employers this was a way to adjust to the slowing down of their activity and, in the longer term, avoid that workers could schedule their holidays all together once the lockdown lifted and the company's activity restored. There are examples of this situation especially in France, where some of the workers interviewed complained about the employer's unilateral decision to anticipate their annual leaves.

**Partial unemployment schemes shielded many of the respondents from income losses, although not always entirely.** For the few who instead saw a reduction in their income already in the month of April 2020, this fall was largely explained by the reduced business activity

following the COVID-19 crisis that forced some companies to cease their businesses or to reduce working time. In most of these cases, workers were however able to benefit from partial unemployment benefits, or other kinds of government-provided bonuses, that offset most of the wage losses.

### **Impact on job satisfaction, motivation, and productivity**

**Workers who see social interactions at the core of their occupation are those who suffered the most in the transition to telework.** They all emphasize a sense of frustration associated to the fact of being deprived of face-to-face social interactions. The interviewed teachers<sup>1</sup> are by far those who felt these negative feelings the most. In addition to the lack of direct exchanges with students, teachers experienced decreasing levels of job satisfaction because online classes reduced the possibility to transmit knowledge and tailor classes to the different students' needs:

*“Sometimes a sense of frustration emerges when I realize during video lessons that some students have more difficulties than others. [...] I feel a sense of frustration that I feel less when I'm in the classroom, because then it is possible to intervene on that gap between the students, while now I feel that my work is more levelled and undifferentiated. An important prerequisite of our work is also in differentiation, the perspective of being able to reach everyone. And instead I feel this frustration regarding this particular aspect.”* [High school teacher – Male]

*“Undoubtedly teaching from home is not rewarding. It is not gratifying because teaching is based on interaction and right now the interaction is severely invalidated.”* [High school teacher – Male]

**Some other workers, mostly high-skilled professionals, also reported decreasing levels of job satisfaction and motivation since the start of teleworking.** The specific reasons behind this feeling are plural, but they are all to some extent connected to the deterioration of social interactions and professional recognition. Many workers claimed that telework made more difficult to receive meaningful feedback, exchange ideas, and seek information, opinions and guidance from supervisors or colleagues – all aspects that are usually important for individuals' job satisfaction and job performance. Some workers felt “futile” or “invisible” to the business process and/or their supervisors. Many others missed informal and friendly social interactions with colleagues, a feeling possibly exacerbated by the fact of living alone during the period of lockdown:

*“In fact, in a period of lockdown, I found it more difficult ... because we have a rupture of social bond, we only have a virtual social bond and over a long period of time it weighs on us ... and as a result these hard to bear ... you still want to go out, I missed not seeing colleagues and friends. Now with the end of the lockdown it's true that we still work at*

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<sup>1</sup> The JRC is conducting another qualitative study on the implications of the covid-19 lockdown for remote learning which will complement these findings from the education point of view (Carretero Gomez et al., 2020).

*home but it's true that there's a feeling of being able to go out more freely... it's a general state of mind that's different, not in the context of work but of life in general."* [Rail Expert in transport public authority – Male]

**On the contrary, for workers who usually find little professional recognition in the workplace, the transition to telework seemed to have a positive impact on their satisfaction, commitment and in turn productivity.** This was particularly the case of clerical workers, but more generally of workers who have frequent direct contact with clients or users. Used to work in crowded or noisy workplaces, these workers described telework as a more peaceful experience, allowing them to “filter-out” office distractions and gain in concentration and job satisfaction. Being less subject to supervisors’ surveillance or co-workers’ social control was also mentioned as important reasons why certain workers had a positive opinion of the transition to telework:

*“Normally I have to go faster because I can't take longer to get things done, because if they check how much stuff I have done, I risk being exposed to someone who criticises me saying: "In four and a half hours you only did this!". [...] All this because staying longer at the office was inappropriate: the colleagues would ask me why I was staying and they would dissuade me. Now I am calm because I can do things in the right way and I feel better!”* [Accounting clerk in a small businesses association – Female]

*“When I'm not bothered by noise, I think that some things I can do faster, because I have fewer interruptions from colleagues. For example, if I'm proofreading papers and I get an email I'm not going to interrupt what I'm doing to answer the email, whereas if there's a colleague coming into your office... When I'm working at home, I'll put my laptop on mute: I'd rather see after if someone has tried to reach me than be interrupted. I find that at home we are more in control of the eventualities... we have a routine in which we can cut out what we are going to do during the day, and I organize myself so as not to be disturbed... I have the impression that I have almost gained in productivity, but then it's just an impression, it's something difficult to measure”.* [Editorial Secretary in a research institute – Female]

**Depending on the job profile, full-time teleworking might prove counterproductive.** Our study suggest that teleworking was often less gratifying exactly for those who are more used to work remotely. This could reflect the fact that this type of workers was already more accustomed to the benefits of working from home, at least for part of the working week, and they did not find full-time teleworking beneficial. As claimed by some of our respondents, some teleworkers may have in fact suffered from ‘excessive’ teleworking during the lockdown period due to the lack of personal interactions and constant blurring of work-life boundaries.

**From this point of view our findings support previous studies suggesting that telework improves job quality mostly when it takes place as a part-time work arrangement, where face-to-face interactions are maintained at least to some extent** (Caillier, 2012; Golden and Veiga, 2005). Of course, the optimal frequency of telework may well vary across different types of workers (OECD, 2020). Insight from our study suggests that workers who rely little on feedback and face-to-face interaction, and have little tasks interdependence, might prefer working from home more frequently.



**Regardless of the type of occupation, respondents with young children often felt less productive while teleworking.** During the lockdown, some workers suddenly had to combine working from home with taking care of the children due to the closure of schools and childcare facilities. In some cases, they also had to take care of dependent parents. Most of the workers found this was a very challenging combination. Some mentioned they felt less productive specifically because of frequent “interruptions” to their work, and constant requests due to blurring family-work boundaries. For this reason, the availability of a separate room dedicated to home working was a key factor enabling workers to isolate and concentrate on work duties. This aspect was particularly stressed by men.

*“Instead of the 10 hours that I usually work at the office, I actually manage to devote 6 hours a day to work, so I can't even do 8 hours, because as soon as I can I go and see if my wife actually needs me. Hence, even though I isolate myself, I often go and check if I am needed. Because what school and kindergarten used to do, now must be done entirely by my wife [...]. And this means that out of the 10 hours that I normally devote to work, I manage to only do 6 and those 6 do not have the same effectiveness that they would have had at the office. So if I had to say a percentage, I would say that I am at 30% of my productivity.”* [Product manager in an automotive firm – Male]

*“I'm not 100%, it's impossible. I don't know from what age of the children this can be different. But as far as my experience is concerned, the older one is 6 years old, the younger one is 3 years old, they still can't understand that I'm in a meeting and they don't have to talk to me for the next few minutes. And therefore it is a continuous, permanent solicitation. [...] It is difficult to talk about it in the company because you are saying that you are not working well, but it is the truth: I'm not working well. Or at an immense emotional cost, because it generates continuous anger because I cannot isolate myself.”* [Mobility specialist in an automotive firm – Female]

**Yet, the experience of telework during the lockdown appeared to be more beneficial to women's levels of job satisfaction compared to men's.** Some of the women with children interviewed claimed that, despite the great challenges, working from home allowed them to strike a better balance between work, family responsibilities and domestic work. This is in line with previous research showing that women are more satisfied when working from home, as they feel they can better balance work and family responsibilities (Caillier, 2012).

*“I feel more confident in this period of teleworking because, on the one hand, I feel that I'm working more but, on the other hand, I can manage my time differently and be in contact with my family without being stressed, running in the car to pick up my daughters... When we are in the agency there is a lot of work, we want to finish it and sometimes we leave much later and then thus I have to drive fast on the road, but now I do not have this kind of stress. For me it's much more beneficial to be at home but I wouldn't like to be there every day either.”* [Commercial Middle Manager in a Temp Work Company – Female]

However, **conclusions on the effect of telework for women vis-à-vis men should be drawn with caution, especially during the period of lockdown.** Because of the unequal division of domestic and caring work (despite some rebalancing during the lockdown period), women, more often than men, feel the demands for stemming from the family environment interfere with their work activities. As in general in Europe women tend to have more childcare responsibilities and also more work interruptions due to childcare reasons (Eurostat, 2019a; 2019b), one may expect that

**the confinement situation may have reinforced gender patterns in the division of caring and domestic, weighting negatively on women's career outcomes.** However, it is worth noting that many of respondents in our study, and particularly those living in couples where both partners were teleworking, claimed that the distribution of chores was quite well balanced.

### **Impact on career prospects**

**Most of the workers interviewed were not worried that telework in itself could have negative effects on their career prospects.** Workers were explicitly asked whether they felt that the sudden shift to telework could have negative consequences for their career. This question was included to better understand the impact of telework on the perceived career prospects of workers with fixed-term contracts. Most of them were, however, not worried that telework in itself could impair the possibility of a contract renewal, or more generally their career opportunities. If anything, their concerns were mostly directed to the overall economic situation, and in particular to the risk of losing their job as a result of the economic recession. Many workers with open-ended contract expressed this concern. However, some respondents, especially those in commercial activities, stressed the limits of telework in maintaining contacts with clients and the negative repercussions this could have on their career in the longer term. Other respondents instead pointed out that teleworking is offering learning opportunities, notably of digital tools they were not used to work with before.

*"I don't have any immediate fears due to telecommuting... it's more the evolution of our profession that is bound to have an impact... automation... artificial intelligence..."* [Call centre operator in an insurance company – Male]

The fact that most of the respondents were not worried that working from home could in itself impair their career development is at odds with results from many pre-outbreak studies suggesting that remote work is negatively associated with perceived career prospects (McDonald et al., 2008; Redman et al., 2009). However, most of these studies refer to contexts where telework was the exception rather than the norm. When only few workers in a given company work remotely, teleworkers may fear to appear less committed than their office-based counterparts to the eyes of their employers and/or supervisors. This may in turn impair teleworkers' perceptions about their career and development opportunities vis-à-vis their office-based colleagues. **These fears originating from comparisons with office-based colleagues, are less likely to have emerged during the period of lockdown-induced telework**, when virtually all the employees who could telework in a given company were doing so. Yet, this type of comparisons might play an important role in shaping workers' preferences to return to the usual workplace in the post-pandemic context.

Of course, it is important to keep in mind that this portrays individuals' perceptions about their career prospects, and not the views of their supervisors or their actual opportunities. Findings from pre-outbreak surveys among supervisors suggest that all employees had the same amount of opportunities for career advancement (McCloskey and Igbaria, 2003), although other studies on actual promotion rates of call-center workers suggests that teleworkers can have lower chances of career progression than office-based counterparts (Bloom et al., 2015).

### **Physical and mental health**

**The majority of respondents reported a negative impact of telework on their physical conditions.** Having physical pain, at their back and neck especially, and sight problems were among the issues mentioned by workers in our study across the three countries. As claimed by some respondents, this can be mostly linked to the lack of ergonomic chairs and proper office facilities, as well as to the greater sedentary lifestyle during the period of the lockdown.

**Telework often affected negatively the emotional well-being of workers.** The feeling of isolation was reported by many respondents (especially those living alone), together with difficulties to concentrate or impossibility to stop working at the end of the day. Living with family or a partner helped avoiding the risk of isolation, although at times it generated greater stress, especially for women. As shown in 4.5, having to cope simultaneously with work and the care of young children was in fact a significant source of stress for some of the workers interviewed, especially women:

*“What the confinement is costing me is having to do too many things simultaneously, is being needed on all fronts and not having the natural transition between work and home. There is no transition and there is a permanent demand, a permanent solicitation. So there is a lot of stress which results in irritability and above all in the feeling of never getting there.”* [Mobility specialist in an automotive firm – Female]

**Tendencies to workaholism seems to have been experienced mostly in the first phase of the transition,** and especially by younger workers living alone. Some respondents reported difficulties to “switch-off” from work especially during the initial period of telework. In some cases, interviewees managed to deal with the initial workaholism tendencies by reducing their workload and adopting more stable routines and schedules, sometimes similar to those of ordinary office work.

*“In the first period, there was a heavy workload. And isolation certainly did not allow me to face things with a psychological serenity that I would have had if things had been different.”* [Social worker in a social cooperative – Female]

*“There have been risks of overworking, but I managed to establish my routine early enough and it helped me a lot. The fact of giving myself hours and schedules made me live this moment in a more relaxed way.”* [Primary school teacher – Female]

**Yet, there are also workers who perceived a general improvement of their physical and mental health since they started teleworking.** These workers felt more concentrated and motivated. Having more time for themselves and being able to avoid “toxic” social interactions with co-workers with negative attitudes have been mentioned as the main reasons underlying these positive feelings.

#### 4.5 Working time and work-life balance

**Telework may blur the boundaries between work and private life and can impose challenges for work-life balance.** The balance between work and family life – here understood as one’s possibility to strike a satisfactory arrangement between work and non-work responsibilities and activities – has been importantly affected during the period of lockdown following the COVID-19 outbreak. This was in fact an exceptional period as most of people had limited control over fundamental spheres of their life e.g. the way they worked, the way they

socialised, the way they shopped, or even how their children learnt. Previous studies show that the feeling of permanent presence at work together with blurring lines between work and private life next to the lack of direct contact with co-workers were among the most commonly mentioned negative consequences of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dolot 2020). Our study integrates these findings, showing that the perceived effect of telework on work-life balance largely depended largely on household composition and gender.

**The sudden transition to telework did not translate into longer working hours or increased work intensity for most of those interviewed.** With the exception of the initial period of teleworking, when some of the workers interviewed worked longer hours to adapt to the new situation, most of the people interviewed did not experience an increase in their workload that could be directly connected to telework. Workers in managerial position were somehow an exception, as they claimed an increase in the workloads. This was also true for respondents working in essential sectors, who experienced a greater workload due to the increased activity of their employer. Conversely, workers employed in sectors hard-hit by the lockdown saw their working time decreasing. **Respondents expressed enjoying greater autonomy if any and flexibility in adjusting their work schedule.** This however was not case for workers in call centers who claimed that work schedules and breaks were strictly defined and could not be circumvented because of control through digital devices.

**Lack of access to caring services and facilities during confinement influenced the work-life balance of teleworkers, especially women.** Although many workers managed to strike a better work-life balance while teleworking during the confinement, respondents living in families with children or dependent members were less positive about this experience. The confinement situation was unique in the sense that some teleworkers had to reconcile work and caring responsibilities at a moment when many of the institutions offering caring services were closed. As a result, families lost access to care services on which they strongly relied on – in 2018 around 40 % of employed parents used professional care services in EU.

*“Generalizing is complicated, it depends on the circumstances and the days. But in general I would say that it has been complicated. I have not been able to work as much as I would have liked. It is all about the housework and the children, and we are left without outside help” [Financial analyst – Female]*

*“Before the confinement situation, my mother used to go to a day care centre and I went to work. Therefore, while I was working I did not have to worry about the care of my mother. But as a result of the new situation, the day care centres closed and literally left me with my mother situation without any solution. This has been a problem and I have had to cope with my dependent mother, sometimes in a bad way. Of course, this situation has not facilitated my telework experience” [Clerical administrative clerk – Female]*

**The presence of remotely learning children during the confinement affected the work-life balance of teleworking parents.** During the confinement across EU Member States, with some exceptions, most of the schools organized education remotely. Particularly, remote learning was the rule in the three countries covered in our study. Interviewed parents report to have been able to save much time that they usually spend accompanying their children to school in rush hours or to allow them to attend other extra-curricular activities organised after formal education. However, at the same time they were admitting spending more hours on provision of support to

children during their remote learning, which in case of very small children was indispensable. Similar results could be found in recent surveys showing more difficulties in concentrating on the job during the confinement among respondents living with children below 12 years old (Eurofound 2020).

As the organisation of online synchronous learning is quite rigid in itself, it can hardly be combined with an equally rigid work schedule. This became problematic also for some families in which the same equipment was shared between household members for purpose of learning and for performing the working tasks. For that reason, some employers decided to grant larger degree of autonomy to teleworking respondents to allow them to organise their working time more flexibly to accommodate for conflicting schedules. This was especially well perceived by female teleworkers. Nevertheless, it is also worth mentioning that in some cases even the workers could telework during the confinement the caring responsibilities has made them to take decision to stop doing it.

*“The management of the days was calmer because I did not have the everyday worries related to getting the children ready, to the risk of queues on the road etc. and the initial part of the day is much more relaxed: I just have to get ready and sit at the desk in my room. As for the rest, there are all the problems related to the fact of having two primary school age children at home to follow: it was and it is very tiring.” [Editor in a publishing house – Female]*

**The forced lockdown situation required intensified responsibilities for domestic work.**

This happened especially within households where prior to confinement this work, as for example cleaning or ironing, was outsourced. As restaurants or canteens were mostly closed, grocery shopping and the preparation of meals were additional activities households had to face, often during their working time, which contributed to blurring the lines between work and private life.

**Autonomy is useful for workers to better adapt to the new situation.** The ILO practical guide on teleworking during the Covid time recommends employers, as the most useful way to help teleworkers with their work-life balance, to manage them by results and not by numbers of hours or the particular schedules (ILO 2020). **Interviewed teleworkers in our study reported having better work-life balance when they had higher degree of flexibility in deciding about their work schedule during confinement.** Nevertheless, some of respondents questioned the possibility of following the usual work time schedule under these specific circumstances:

*“In smart-work we are asked to respect the exact same schedule that we follow at the office. This is a problem, particularly in this lock-down situation, because it doesn't allow me to run errands, it doesn't allow me to go to the post office at noon during the lunch break because I can't. And it is something that requires a total dedication to work in the hours of the day when we have also to look after the children who no longer go to school. [...] telework in the eyes of the company is the same, however the reality is that working from home with school-age children is absolutely impossible. It can't be done.” [Mobility specialist in an automotive firm – Female]*

**Time saved from commuting from home to work helped people having better work-life balance.** There are some estimations showing that one out of five workers in Europe spend more than 90 minutes commuting each day (Giménez-Nadal et al. 2020). In the debate on the potential benefits from telework the impact of saved hours from commuting of workers is discussed in relation to potential positive environmental outcomes coming from the reduction of air pollution

(Giovanis 2018). During the confinement the time saved on commuting, apart from financial benefits stemmed from savings in travel expenses, was reported as positive for respondents also in other contexts, mostly related to an improvement in terms of their work-life balance. For example, respondents mentioned using it for resting longer hours and “taking things more calm”, preparation of healthier meals, spending more time with kids and family, or devoting more time for hobbies like sport activities, yoga, reading, gardening etc.

## Future prospects

### Summary of key findings

One important aim of this study was to better understand how the experience of teleworking during the outbreak-induced lockdown period could ultimately shape workers’ willingness to continue teleworking in the future, even after the Covid-19 pandemic passes. Notwithstanding the many challenges due to the sudden, obligatory and high intensity telework discussed in previous sections, it appears that the majority of our respondents would be open and willing to telework in the future, at least to some extent. Many have expressed the preference to work remotely only part of the workweek, which would allow them to maintain social ties with co-workers, and the workplace more generally. Others have stressed the limits of telework in maintaining contacts with clients and the negative repercussions this could have on their careers in the longer term. Some other respondents claimed that, despite their preferences for part-time teleworking, their employers may eventually require them to go back to the office as soon as it is possible and safe. Finally, were they called to continue teleworking in the longer term, our respondents would like to seek greater clarity over their working conditions and rights during telework.

**All in all, most of our respondents positively assessed their experience with telework, and would be willing to work remotely in the future.** As most of the respondents in our study were at the first meaningful experience with teleworking, we have asked how they would feel about working remotely in the future, at least to some extent. In general, interviewees were quite positive about the teleworking experience and for that reason considered it as a viable alternative they are looking forward to. This is in line with evidence from Eurofound (2020) showing that over three-quarters of employees would like to continue working from home at least occasionally, even without COVID-19 restrictions.

*“I would very much like to continue working from home after the end of this period, also because in the return to normal we hope that the reopening of schools will also be included and we would work from home without distractions. It would be ideal to avoid a long journey every day and save two hours of life and earn in peace of work. Hopefully my company, which was very reluctant, can draw some positive conclusions from this experience.”* [Bank branch manager – Female]

**Be physically present in the workplace, at least for part of the workweek, remains important for certain workers.** When asked about the telework possibilities after the COVID-19 crisis, some workers stated that it will not be a feasible option for them, mainly because their activities cannot be affectively performed in a remote way in a long-term perspective. This limitation was particularly stressed by respondents in commercial activities, where telework makes

maintaining contacts with clients arguably more difficult. For this reason, these workers fear the negative repercussions telework could have on their career prospects in the longer term. Some respondents also pointed at the possibility of requesting only few teleworking days in the future rather than working remotely the whole week, explaining that such a solution would allow them to keep up with their colleagues. Furthermore, the socialisation aspect of the workplace is a major issue when looking forward as it is more difficult to be substituted during remote working, particularly for teams that have to work closely together.

*“Telework is fine as long as it is combined with business travel. Virtually everything can be done remotely but (physical) customer visits are essential. Teleconferences work, but up to a certain point. You have more influence on customers being physically with them”* [Sales agent – Male]

*“I would not like to continue tele-working, despite everything I prefer the ordinary situation. Because there is the aspect of sociality that is missing and also that related to the livability of the home, because I am not used to live 24 hours a day with my parents. Even for personal well-being, going out to work is more life, this is a little less life. After all, it doesn't take me long to go to work and I can always get back home for lunch.”* [Commercial assistant to a financial advisor – Female]

**Some respondents identify their managers' fear of losing control over workers as an obstacle for allowing more people to work remotely.** Respondents who never had access to teleworking possibilities prior to the Covid-19 pandemic stressed their managers' reluctance to allow for the continuation of remote work arrangements, linking this to managers' preference for direct supervision of workers. These barriers to telework would not be new. As discussed in the introduction, fears of losing managerial control and the inability to closely monitor workers' productivity were important factors explaining the limited uptake of telework already before the outbreak. Whilst, it is still difficult to predict to what extent the forced experience of telework might have changed employers' and managers' views about telework, some recent surveys carried out after the first covid-19 lockdown suggest changes in the companies' appreciation of telework. For instance, the PWC CFO Pulse Survey suggests that 45% of the surveyed CFOs plan to introduce new ways of working (PWC CFO Pulse survey, June 2020).

*“It's not in the company's habits, not in their habits, normally you can't telework, because it's very complicated, and the management doesn't make any effort in this direction... you need to connect to the company's network and you have to go to a nearby office and you need a special box to telework, it's expensive and it's complicated, they say... it's a dumb logic... And then all of a sudden it changed! Now they've installed automatic software and it became simple... whereas before they said it wasn't possible...”* [Commercial Middle Manager in a Temp Work Company – Male]

**Yet, before continuing to telework in the future, many workers would like to re-discuss their working conditions.** Some workers mentioned the potential financial and social shortcomings of working from home, which would require having open discussion and re-negotiation of working conditions with their employers before continuing working remotely. This includes the issue of financial costs incurred by teleworkers. Some respondents expressed that they

would welcome their employers' participation to the expenses of telework if remote working were to be imposed permanently in the future.

## Conclusions

Telework and more generally remote work arrangements can be considered one of the most debated topics in social sciences during the pandemic because of its massive and unprecedented adoption. Policymakers across the world have also paid considerable attention to this phenomenon, in an effort to support the transition to telework during the crisis and assess its pros and cons with a view to inform future policy decisions in the post-pandemic context.

In the EU, telework is becoming a topical policy issue too. With this study, we conclude a research project aiming at providing evidence on the massive shift to telework as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in the EU, and its wide-ranging implications for workers, employers, and policy makers.

This report complements the quantitative information developed in the previous research strands on pre-outbreak trends in telework and teleworkability of occupations (Milasi et al., 2020; Sostero et al., 2020). We have focused in this case on qualitative information highlighting the multifaceted nature of remote work arrangements and the different ways in which it affected job quality during the COVID crisis. Our findings provide additional support to the hypothesis that telework is not only a matter of ICT adoption (and technical feasibility) but it concerns the entire spectrum of social relations embodied in work relationships.

Therefore, the impact of telework is not univocal and strongly depends on workers' occupations and hierarchical position within their organisations, as well as workers' decisions, which oftentimes depends on their household's composition. This evidence has been drawn from interviews conducted during the first months of the pandemic, April and May 2020, when Europeans had to cope with an unprecedented type of shock, which had a tremendous impact on their social and working lives. Therefore, some of the conclusions may not be easily generalised to other times or places, although in many cases our research has confirmed findings from previous, pre-outbreak, studies. At the same time, a sudden expansion of telework was an excellent opportunity to study the potential implications of a generalised expansion of this form of work in the future, and some of our findings are surely relevant in that respect.

More precisely, our findings suggest that teleworking on its own does not have to affect tasks content – what people do- but mostly how they perform their tasks -how people do what they do. Changes in tasks content during confinement mostly depended on whether the good/service produced was considered essential during the pandemic or not: those working in processes related to the production of essential goods did not see their tasks altered, while those doing non-essential activities saw much more change.

However, changes in work organisation occurred regardless the goods/services produced and varied significantly according to workers' occupation. In this respect, our study contributes to the argument that a need for direct control which is not feasible outside the firms' premises tends to mutate into new forms of remote control, which can be in the long run equally pervasive. However, workers' autonomy and the possibility to resist mechanisms of close remote control were strongly related to the levels of autonomy enjoyed prior to the shift to remote work. It was observed that during the Covid-19 pandemic the market of companies offering software which allows to track the productivity of remote staff was growing rapidly. These types of tools allow employers to monitor what their employees do all day and are believed to reduce "cyber-slacking" which is defined as the use of work computers and other resources during work hours for non-work-related purposes. Yet, the determinants of cyber-slacking are more complex. For example, it is observed that regular contacts with managers lead to more workers' engagement and more motivation and decreases



workers cyber-slacking (O'Neill et al. 2014). The implementation of monitoring tools raises concerns about employee rights of privacy and opens a policy discussion about ways to balance between workers' rights protection and allowing employers for monitoring of workers' productivity (Moussa 2015). The German case shows the higher shares of companies giving up control over working time and assessing worker performance solely based on their outputs among those who allowed for teleworking (OECD 2020).

We also investigated changes in job quality, looking at both subjective perceptions and objective outcomes. Particularly polarised were workers' views on the effect of telework on job satisfaction and motivation. Mid and low-skilled workers, and more generally those working in close contact with clients often felt more satisfied working from home than in the regular office. Teleworking allowed them to filter-out office-based distractions and strict direct control, which increased their concentration, perceived productivity and job quality. At the same time, using digital platforms for social interactions reduces the quality and even the quantity of exchanges of ideas and information. Beyond network connectivity and providing people with right equipment and necessary software, there are also soft aspects of work culture which become essential and sometimes may determine whether teleworking will be successful as a long-term solution for the company or not. Social networking and friendship formation typically occur in the workplace when workers are physically present. Past studies of teleworking show negatively impact upon work relationships between managers and colleagues, namely tele-work may lead to social disconnection between teleworkers and office-based staff (Collins et al. 2016) and sometimes even to a cultural divide (Collins, 2005; Golden, 2006, 2007). This lack of social interactions may also negatively impact worker well-being.

Contrary to expectations, very few respondents felt telework in and of itself could harm their career prospects, while only few others reported working longer hours and greater work intensity due to working from home (although many did report difficulties for disconnecting from work). In any case a transversal issue concerns physical and mental safety, with many workers experiencing the emergence of musculoskeletal and emotional problems.

With respect to the effects of telework during the COVID-19 crisis on work-life balance, they were strongly conditioned by the household composition. As it could be expected, workers with children, especially in school age, appear to be less satisfied with the new work arrangement: balancing work and family demands was complicated by the need to support the distance learning and caring needs of kids while in confinement. However, this effect was also conditioned on the economic possibilities of the household, as in some cases workers had to arrange limited endowments (e.g. computers, internet connection, spaces) according to the new and simultaneous needs. The intensification of domestic work often weighted negatively on the work-life balance of women and men alike – while it was possible to appreciate some gender rebalancing in the division of these duties within respondents' households. Yet, and despite the many challenges, interviewed women with children were more likely to be satisfied with working from home, as it allowed them to strike a better balance between work, family responsibilities and domestic work.

As previously mentioned, our qualitative study refers to the early stages of a global pandemic that generated a considerable anxiety and economic uncertainty, when a shift towards mass remote working was often mandatory and unexpected. Therefore, some of the findings might be specific to this very peculiar context, and not apply to more normal times. However, the wide spectrum of items under analysis relate to everyday work relationships and will continue being topics against which working conditions and workers' wellbeing will be evaluated. More importantly, as remote working is likely to stay at a larger scale than before, the same issues will become pivotal especially for industrial relations and the reshaping of social relations under the "new normality".

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