RESEARCH REPORT

Eurofound

ILO

Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work

Joint ILO–Eurofound report

Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work

Eurofound

European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions

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Abbreviations used in the report

ATUS	American Time Use Survey
CTT	Centre for Telework and Teleinformation (Argentina)
EU-LFS	European Labour Force Survey
EWCS	European Working Conditions Survey
FEVS	Federal Employee Viewpoint Survey (US)
GSS	General Social Survey (US)
HRM	Human resource management
ICT	Information and communications technologies
JILPT	Japanese Institute of Labour Policy and Training
METI	Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (Japan)
MHLW	Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (Japan)
MIC	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (Japan)
MLIT	Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (Japan)
MNC	Multinational companies
OSH	Occupational safety and health
TEA	Telework Enhancement Act (US)
T/ICTM	Telework/ICT-mobile work
TPR	Teleworking Population Research (Japan)
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Introduction

New information and communications technologies (ICT) have revolutionised everyday work and life in the 21st century. They enable people to connect with friends and family – as well as with work colleagues and supervisors – at any point in time; however, they also facilitate the encroachment of paid work into the spaces and times normally reserved for personal life. The uncoupling of paid work from traditional office spaces has been a crucial factor in this development. Today's office work and, more broadly, knowledge work, is supported by the internet, and can be carried out from practically any location and at any time. This new spatial independence has transformed the role of technology in the work environment, offering both new opportunities and new challenges.

This report considers the impact of telework/ICT-mobile work (T/ICTM) on the world of work. T/ICTM can be defined as the use of ICT – such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers – for the purposes of work outside the employer's premises. The report synthesises research carried out by Eurofound's network of European correspondents in 10 EU Member States – Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK – and by ILO country experts in Argentina, Brazil, India, Japan and the US. These contributors were asked to review and summarise the findings of data and research literature on the subject of T/ICTM in their respective countries.

The report classifies T/ICTM employees in relation to their place of work (home, office or another location) and the intensity and frequency of their work using ICT outside the employer's premises. The following groups were identified: regular home-based teleworkers; occasional T/ICTM workers, with mid-to-low mobility and frequency of work outside the employer's premises; and high mobile T/ICTM, with high frequency of working in various places, including working from home.

The extent of the adoption of T/ICTM across different countries, and its effects on working time, performance, work–life balance, and health and well-being are analysed using information from the national studies, supplemented by data from the sixth European Working Conditions Survey. The report also reviews policy initiatives by governments, social partners and companies in relation to T/ICTM. The findings can contribute to the development of effective policies in the areas of digitalisation, fair working conditions and decent work in Europe and other regions of the world.

Key findings

The incidence of T/ICTM is related not only to technological developments in different countries but also to existing economic structures and cultures of work. The countries analysed in this report with high shares of T/ICTM include Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden and the US. Overall, the incidence of T/ICTM varies substantially, from 2% to 40% of employees, depending on the country, occupation, sector and the frequency with which employees engage in this type of work. Across the EU28, an average of about 17% of employees are engaged in T/ICTM. In most countries, larger proportions of workers carry out T/ICTM occasionally rather than on a regular basis. T/ICTM is more common among professionals and managers, but is also significant among clerical support and sales workers. In relation to gender, in general men are more likely to perform T/ICTM than women. However, women carry out more regular home-based telework than men. This suggests that country-specific gender roles and models of work and family life play a role in shaping T/ICTM.

Regarding the positive effects of T/ICTM, workers report a reduction in commuting time, greater working time autonomy leading to more flexibility in terms of working time organisation, better overall work–life balance, and higher productivity. Companies benefit from the improvement in work–life balance, which can lead to increased motivation and reduced turnover as well as enhanced productivity and efficiency, and from a reduction in the need for office space and associated costs. The disadvantages of T/ICTM are the tendency to lead to longer working hours, to create an overlap between paid work and personal life (work–home interference), and to result in work intensification. Home-based teleworkers seem to report better work–life balance, while 'high-mobile' workers are more at risk of negative health and well-being outcomes. Partial and occasional forms of T/ICTM appear to result in a more positive balance between the benefits and drawbacks. From a gender perspective, women doing T/ICTM tend to work shorter hours than men, and women seem to achieve slightly better work–life balance effects.

The findings on the effects of T/ICTM are therefore highly ambiguous and are related to the interaction between ICT use, place of work in specific work environments, blurring of work–life boundaries, and the characteristics of different occupations. Moreover, whether T/ICTM substitutes for work in the office or instead supplements it appears to be an important factor in determining whether the reported outcomes are positive or negative.

The European Framework Agreement on Telework (2002) addresses, to some extent, the potential gains and risks of T/ICTM in EU Member States, but such a framework does not exist outside the EU. Some countries have launched initiatives that address the working conditions of T/ICTM workers. However, most of the examples relate to formal, home-based telework. Only very recently have initiatives from governments, social partners and companies begun to look into other forms of T/ICTM, such as working informal, supplemental hours, through measures limiting such work beyond normal business hours.

Policy pointers

- Because the use of ICT outside the employer's premises has benefits for both employees and companies, policymakers should aim to accentuate the positive effects and reduce the negative ones: for example, by promoting part-time T/ICTM, while restricting informal, supplemental T/ICTM, or high-mobile T/ICTM involving long working hours.
- In practical terms, the organisation of working time is changing and working time regulations need to reflect this reality. It is particularly important to address the issue of supplemental T/ICTM, which could be viewed as unpaid overtime, and to ensure that minimum rest periods are respected.
- A major challenge to applying OSH prevention principles and health and safety legislation to T/ICTM is the difficulty in supervising working environments outside the employer's premises. A project by the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) – *Foresight on new and emerging risks in occupational safety and health associated with ICT and work location by 2025* – will help policymakers address these challenges.
- To fully harness the potential of T/ICTM and improve the working conditions of the workers involved, training and awareness initiatives are needed for both employees and managers on the effective use of ICT for working remotely, as well as the potential risks, and how to effectively manage the flexibility provided by this arrangement.
- T/ICTM can play a part in policies that aim to promote inclusive labour markets and societies, as some country examples indicate that it increases the labour market participation of certain groups, such as older workers, young women with children and people with disabilities.
- Governmental initiatives and national or sectoral collective agreements are important for providing the overall framework for a T/ICTM strategy. This framework needs to provide sufficient space for developing specific arrangements that serve the needs and preferences of both workers and employers.
- The findings regarding differences in the working conditions of those engaged in different types of T/ICTM – for example home-based telework or high mobile work, need to be considered. Policy measures should tackle the reasons underlying the negative effects on working conditions identified by the study.

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