

Telework in Portugal and the potential impacts of its “normalization”

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Introduction

In view of the COVID-19 pandemic, telework proved to be a central measure supporting social distancing in order to prevent contagion and promote public health. In this context, thousands of companies and workers migrated their activity to remote forms of work, supporting organizational communication through digital technologies.

At CoLABOR – Collaborative Laboratory for Work, Employment and Social Protection, we have studied the experiences of Portuguese workers and their attitudes towards telework, through a national wide representative survey, through case studies in different organisations, as well as by assessing the potential ‘teleworkability’ of different occupations and their distribution across different sectors of the economy.

Teleworkability and the unequal access to telework

Preliminary results show that telework, through its obligatory character under lockdown emergency measures, reached about one third of the working population (35%). This was clearly a novelty for most, as only 6% had had a prior experience of telework. As such, while telework was used as a public health measure, it is clear it was at the same time a test of a new form of organization of work, technologically mediated, and, hence, of its inherent virtues and risks.

Nevertheless, when we delve further into the detailed data, the first striking result is that, despite the social alarm that characterized the first wave of the pandemic, with the fear ingrained by the lack of knowledge of the epidemiologic traits of the new disease, and the obligation to telework to all those who could, this was still not the predominant situation among the working population in Portugal during the first lockdown. There is, thus, a strong asymmetry dividing those whose occupations, and work tasks, allow them to easily move while maintaining their work schedule – simplifying, who can work from anywhere –, and those whose job requires them to be on location.

At the same time as I am writing this note at my home office (which I was already fortunate to have, prior to the pandemic), and you might equally be reading it at home, construction workers are outside my window doing maintenance of the building. While the main occupational risk of the construction worker outside might not be directly related to the pandemic, he still has to commute between home and work, increasing his vulnerability to infection. From a public health perspective, which was the starting point of our recent research project on telework, there are relevant differences between the two groups. The perceived risk of Covid-19 is significantly different from those in teleworkable occupations, to those in non-teleworkable occupations.

We know that while we proudly greeted essential health workers for their service during the pandemic, a large number of other workers, whose contribution to our personal wellbeing and to our economic wellbeing were nonetheless important, maintaining the economic activity. Our data also shows this clearly. For example, during the lockdown,

while 75% of scientists and technical consultants were teleworking, 87% of those in the construction sector were not. The distribution of economic activity across sectors reflects also the type of work that is developed and that distinguishes workers in their access to telework. It is not just a distinction between intellectual work vs physical work, but this differential access is also influenced by the dematerialization of work, the digital content, the social interaction required or the local mobility (sedentarism dominates in the service sector). But while this access to telework across sectors reflects the economic structure, there is a significantly more marked inequality that the ability to telework – we can call it, teleworkability – highlights between individual workers, and not just whole sectors or firms. From those occupations performed by low qualified workers only less than 5% (between 0% and 5%) were being performed remotely, during the lockdown period (according to the results of our survey), which compares to the 67% of the scientific and intellectual occupations, the 60% of clerical work, or the 44% of the intermediate professions. This is, as expected, highly dependent on the workers level of education, with workers with higher education training being in occupations with a much higher level of teleworkability.

We can thus clearly conclude that teleworkability is unequally accessible by workers, and that their qualification is a strong predeterminant. This is important to take into account when we consider that the use of telework as a mode of work is expected to increase significantly in the near future. While there are clear implications here for labour markets, there are also important implications regarding social benefits which telework may facilitate which are accessible only to some. If we consider the regulation of telework simply from the point of view of the relation between employer and the teleworker, we may also be neglecting conditions of those, the majority, who do not have access to the benefits of telework.

It is interesting here to recall also recent work which has looked at the potential impact of automation on job losses. While we have all heard about the more catastrophic projections regarding the expected job loss in the very near future, further work, namely by the OECD and Eurofound, acknowledged that workers risk of job loss was better reflected by looking at their tasks rather than simply considering their full occupations. From the demand side, the decisions do not depend simply on the availability of a substitute technology for a particular job, but rather from a wider investment decision. Both points are also important for our understanding of telework. We pursued these differently.

Firstly, we are applying a similar methodology to assess the teleworkability of different occupations, based on their task composition. This is of particular importance here, not only because occupations are, indeed, made up of tasks, but also because telework is not necessarily a mode of work that is implemented in full-time. So, an occupation might be ‘teleworkable’ even if some of the corresponding tasks are not. Equally, telework might have benefits and costs that organisations and individual workers may weigh in their decision-making. So, the flexibility is important.

From teleworkability to ‘normalisation’ of telework?

Secondly, we pursued the different experiences of workers and organisations through pilot case studies. Again, the flexibility is of particular importance for the workers.

Contrary to what the initial experience with telework might have suggested, there will be no ‘normalisation’ of telework. Telework will not be the new normal, as less than 10% of those surveyed declare the wish to remain permanently in telework in the post-pandemic. This is not only the result from our national wide survey, but also reflected in our detailed case study interviews. On the contrary, over 40% of those surveyed declare not wishing to take up telework at all, with a high share reflecting their inability to do so, as the lockdown period demonstrated by maintaining them at work on location.

This is not to say that telework will not be more frequently used. A hybrid model, with occasional weekly work from home is the preferred choice for 30% of the workers surveyed. The autonomy, the work discipline, the mitigation of travel time, the flexibility in the management of time, both workwise as well as in the articulation of work with personal needs, are some of the issues that have been very clearly indicated as positive in the telework experience.

Hybrid telework and the challenges to workers’ benefits

But the hybrid model also highlights that this new experience may bring some additional challenging issues to consider. The traditional legislative approach to telework was typically based on a permanent mode of employment: employers and workers agreed, through consensus, that the work would be performed remotely. While this may become more frequently implemented – and there may be more conditions under which to consider it acceptable through the simple decision of the worker, now that organisations have experienced it successfully – there are new questions raised through a hybrid model, as the following issues exemplify.

Location of work varies, and not only between office and home: does remote mean a particular location or can I go to my local café, or spend a week in the country side, and still be protected under my work health insurance? The equipment necessary to support remote work needs to be provided by the employer. While during the lockdown the emergency situation suspended certain obligations, it was also clear that employers would easily make arrangements to provide for the transport of computer hardware, when required. But employers would be much less inclined, if at all, to allow for the home use of a proper working chair from the office, which would provide more appropriate working conditions at home, which clearly reflects how the definition of the necessary work equipment might differ between workers and employers. Under telework, working times may be more flexible, to adapt to family support: how can I guarantee, nonetheless, that my working time maintains some protection of my family life and I exercise my right to disconnect? The experience of telework has been such that new ways of work control had to be devised, from a more material control of time to a more immaterial control of results. But if my work is highly controlled what are the limits to my domestic privacy, under telework, while guaranteeing the rights of the employer to oversee their workers? While during the pandemic gender inequalities emerged out of the family support that fell disproportionately on the shoulders of women, will the ‘normalisation’ of telework provide a more equitable distribution of responsibility among parents, men and women, as they opt for telework to better articulate work and family life? And how can we guarantee that telework does not become the site of a different form of gender inequality, whereby the support from employers to a more

flexible work arrangement that eventually women might prefer may lead to barriers in career progression resulting from the distance from the office? Collective action and workers rights are guaranteed for teleworkers, but how can we overcome the real barriers existing for communication at a collective level, or even the differentiation between those at work and those at home?

These questions do not necessarily outweigh the positive experience that organizations and workers experienced with telework during the pandemic, but highlight that telework raises a number of issues that are not only related to the mode of provision of work, and the implications thereof to the organization of work and collective practices, but also to wider social protection policies.

Fragmentation of space, time and ties

As these issues exemplify, for those who experienced telework the tensions and ambiguities in the individual experiences of telework are particularly noteworthy. While having important benefits for workers, telework provides opportunities for further organizational fragmentation, dispersion across space and time, routinization of tasks and dissolution of occupational identities, with potential risks for the stability of labour relations and the individual experience of workers. Extending labour markets more clearly beyond the specific localization of the organisation, it may also bring the weakening of the employment relation ties, with potential implications for employers approach to the contractual decisions.

Therefore, it is important that future policies to respond to new modes of work that the ongoing digital transformation facilitates, such as telework, address these risks in order to create the conditions for telework to work for the workers as well as for the economy.

Data

Survey data result from a phone based survey, to a representative sample of 1509 respondents in Portugal, employed at the time of the survey (November-December 2020). Fieldwork was developed by GfK Metris. Values presented correspond to the mean of the 95% confidence intervals. Further analysis is ongoing.

Qualitative analysis based on interviews made to 25 employees from 5 firms in Portugal, including different levels of work responsibility. Analysis is ongoing.

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CoLABOR - Collaborative Laboratory for Labour, Employment and Social Protection (www.colabor.pt) was set up in 2019 by bringing together organisations from academia, private sector, public administration and the social and solidarity economy, with a view to gleaning a more in-depth understanding of the present and foreseeable problems in three central areas of activity: a) work and employment; b) social protection; and c) the social and solidarity economy. Among its main projects are DataLABOR (www.datalabor.pt), an innovative digital platform to systematize and visualize statistical and legal information, at international, national and local levels on work, employment and social protection, providing critical analysis and aggregating information which has been previously available through distinct sources. An additional product under development is a Toolkit to Assess the Impacts of Technology on Work and Labour Relations.