Teleworking during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

A Practical Guide
Introduction

- On 11 March, WHO characterized the Covid-19 outbreak as a pandemic and urged governments to adopt drastic measures to keep it from spreading, including nationwide “lockdowns”
- Many governments adopted such “lockdowns” (stay-at-home measures), and many also urged organizations to introduce telework for their workers if possible given their functions
- Teleworking is the use of information and communications technologies to work from outside the employer’s premises
  - It does not include those working in the platform or “gig” economy
- The Purpose of this Guide is to:
  - Provide practical and actionable recommendations for effective teleworking that are applicable to a wide range of actors
  - To support policymakers in updating existing teleworking policies, and
  - To provide a flexible framework through which both private enterprises and public sector organizations can develop/update policies & practices
- The Guide may be used during a pandemic or natural disaster, but can just as well be applied to teleworking in general

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Entering a new era of Teleworking

- Before the pandemic, only a small part of the workforce was working from home or another location outside the employer’s premises, mostly part-time or on an occasional basis.
- Between January and March 2020, as Covid-19 infections swept the globe, countries instructed employers to close up operations and introduce *full-time, mandatory telework* for their workers.
- This form of teleworking—a dramatic change from previous practices—was introduced as a temporary, short-term solution to allow organizations to continue operations and preserve jobs.
- This “temporary, short term solution” has been continuing for almost one year! Although some workers in some countries are beginning to return to the office, many others are continuing to telework full-time for the foreseeable future.
- As a result, *we are now engaged in an unprecedented, large-scale experiment in mass teleworking*, and it seems likely that this expanded use of telework will not end with the pandemic.
Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Working time and work organization

- Even when employees are teleworking, key aspects of the work organization still need to be respected. For example, the workload, performance standards, and legal protections should remain the same as for workers at the employers’ premises.

- One key difference is that teleworkers should be responsible for managing the organization of their own working time.

- This “time sovereignty” provides workers with the opportunity to organize their working hours in line with their personal needs
  - E.g., workers with dependents requiring care may need to start working very early, work in the evening, or break up the workday into smaller segments.

- However, there is also a risk that teleworkers will end up working longer hours and a potential for blurring of boundaries between paid work activities and personal life.

- This is a very challenging situation (esp. for organizations not familiar with telework); it requires a different way of organizing work and managing workers based on results.
Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Performance management

- To be effective, teleworking needs to be based on dialogue and cooperation between management and workers
  - This becomes even more important when teleworking is mandatory and occurs on a full-time basis

- Studies indicate that the most effective method for managing teleworkers is through a process called Managing by Results
  - This process includes identifying objectives, tasks, and milestones in a teleworking workplan and monitoring and discussing progress
  - This allows workers to have the flexibility and autonomy to organize their work without managers having to constantly check on their progress

- It is essential to be very clear about the expected results!
  - Ask yourself: “How would I recognize a fully satisfactory end product if I saw it? What are the completion criteria”?

- Also, provide timely, regular, descriptive feedback to workers
  - Describe what the workers did, and focus on those changes that will result in the most significant improvement in the task/product
  - Do not forget to provide positive feedback for a job that is done well
Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Digitalization

- Digitalization refers to the use of tools for converting analog information into digital (computerized) information
  - In the context of work and the workplace, it refers to the use of cloud computing, scheduling tools, and web-based apps

- However, digitalization is unevenly spread across the globe: some areas are struggling with a lack of broadband, reliable Internet connections, and ICT tools to enable teleworking
  - In countries where regular power cuts and weak Internet service makes even sending an e-mail a challenge, telework is almost impossible

- Mass teleworking, coupled with digitalization, offers many opportunities, but also entails some risks. For example:
  - Workers should not incur additional costs when working from their homes
  - Employers need to provide them with equipment & tools that allow them to work as if they were in their regular workplace; sub-par equipment & tools leads to a loss of productivity, frustration, and ultimately disengagement
  - Tools that track and monitor the activity of workers (e.g., keyboard strokes, mouse movements) have an intrusive nature and are not recommended

- A continuous dialogue regarding technology & tools is essential
Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Communication

- Research suggests that teams working remotely have more significant communications challenges than in-person teams
  - These challenges multiply with time: when team members spend more time working apart, the degree of separation and professional isolation increases
  - Collaboration within teams can erode with time: when communicating via electronic means, workers tend to share less information with colleagues and may have difficulty interpreting and understanding the info received

- Also, there is a serious risk of social isolation from constantly working alone, especially with full-time teleworking

- Therefore, workers and managers need to invest extra efforts to ensure that communication is effective and messages are clear!
  - These should also include informal opportunities for workers to connect

- Some approaches for ensuring effective communication among teleworking teams include:
  - Establishing specific communication norms (e.g., the length and detail of messages, expected response times, etc.)
  - Setting up a centralized repository of all important changes and updates to internal policies and procedures
Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)

- According to most national laws and collective agreements re: OSH, the employer is responsible for protection of the health and safety of workers; this typically applies to teleworkers too.
- In terms of OSH, the two most commonly recognized challenges for teleworkers are (1) psychosocial risks, and (2) ergonomics.
- Full-time teleworking under crisis conditions of the pandemic is provoking higher levels of OSH problems. Specific risks include:
  - Technostress and technology addiction and overload, which increases fatigue, irritability, and inability to switch off from work and rest properly.
  - Depression, stress, low mood, irritability, insomnia, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, anger, and emotional exhaustion as a result of isolation.
  - Prolonged sedentary behaviour and working in one position without moving increases the risk of musculoskeletal disorders, visual fatigue, obesity, etc.
  - Ergonomics of home furniture may be suboptimal for prolonged teleworking.
- Many organizations have set up global pandemic task forces on worker well-being to update existing OSH policies and provide training and information re: actions to address key OSH risks.

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Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Legal and contractual implications

- It is crucial to clarify conditions of teleworking arrangements
  - Key issues include the teleworking location, reimbursement of teleworking-related costs, any contractual changes, and notification procedures in case of impediments to perform work, illness, or work-related accident.

- In principle, terms and conditions of employment should be the same as when workers are working at the employer’s premises.

- Employers should clarify any changes to terms and conditions of employment while teleworking.
  - E.g., adjustment of some worker benefits (e.g., transport vouchers), legal implications regarding equipment and software used while teleworking.

- Teleworkers need to be made aware of the liability for different assets that they are using while teleworking, which may belong either to themselves or to their employer.
  - Workers should be exempt from financial liability unless found negligent.

- Another key legal issue is inspection of the work environment of teleworkers to identify and correct risk factors that can lead to illness or injury; this may involve a virtual site check if needed.

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Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Training

- It is essential to acknowledge that, for both workers and their managers, this new situation requires reassessing old working habits and learning new skills to manage the situation better.

- Organizations have taken various approaches to ensure that employees are well-equipped to perform effectively when teleworking regularly and managers are capable of effectively managing a remote team using a results-based approach.

- Actions that organizations have taken include:
  - Conducting regular surveys on the challenges and needs of teleworkers and specifically targeting those needs with online training, webinars and workshops, and coaching sessions.
  - Prioritizing the types of training from their existing catalogues that are most relevant for teleworkers, e.g., leadership skills, time management skills, communications skills.
  - Managers may benefit from training specifically aimed at developing leadership skills in managing remote teams, effective communication with a remote team, leading teams through a crisis, coaching, and mentoring.
Ensuring worker well-being and productivity: Work-Life Balance (WLB)

- The most useful tool for supporting workers with maintaining their work-life balance is to manage teleworkers by results, and **not by focusing on the hours or schedules that they work**
- By keeping workload manageable and setting clear, realistic expectations regarding specific results, workers are better equipped to organize their own time and tasks, in order to effectively balance their paid work and personal lives
- One of the most significant challenges is work-life conflict due to blurred boundaries between paid work and personal life
  - This is always an issue with teleworking, but it seems to be particularly problematic due to the unique circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic
- Actions organizations may consider to improve WLB include:
  - Supporting work-life boundary management by setting clear expectations about outputs and offering workers flexibility to manage work schedules
  - *Ensuring that workers feel empowered to disconnect from work* at specific times reserved for rest and personal life *without negative repercussions*
  - Providing targeted measures supporting workers with small children or other care responsibilities (e.g., special parental leave schemes)
The gender dimension of teleworking during the Covid-19 pandemic

- Existing social and economic gender inequalities and challenges are aggravated by the Covid-19 crisis; this requires enterprises and other organizations to become more gender-responsive in their actions to tackle the crisis, including teleworking.

- Some of critical areas to pay attention to are as follows:
  - All data collected (e.g., employee surveys) should be gender-disaggregated, in order to understand how different factors affect men & women differently.
  - Employers may be confronted with the profound challenges that women are facing regarding balancing their paid work and care responsibilities; they shouldn’t penalise those workers who couldn’t work at full capacity because of personal challenges (e.g., home schooling their children).
  - Employers need to demonstrate empathy and creativity in supporting female workers and workers with care responsibilities, in order to avoid giving them no other option that to reduce their hours or quit their jobs.
  - Reports from many countries with lockdowns find that domestic violence increased substantially; thus, organizations need to share info with workers about where to report and seek help to combat it (e.g., national hotlines).
  - It is essential to consider the gender dimension in all Covid-19 responses.
Trust and organizational culture

- **Trust is the “glue” that holds all the aspects of teleworking together. Managers, teleworkers, and their colleagues need to trust each other. Teleworking cannot be effective without it.**

- Trust can be proactively built. Here are some steps to build confidence and trustful relationships within an organization:
  
  - Workers need to feel empowered to make decisions without fearing negative repercussions. If they feel trusted, they are more willing to solve problems or make decisions on their own, which translates into time efficiencies.
  
  - One of the fastest ways to build trust is for supervisors to be very clear about what is expected and by when, ideally involving workers in the discussion of goals & objectives. This reduces the need to micromanage.
  
  - The social relationships among teams need to be kept alive even when they are teleworking (e.g., virtual coffee breaks, lunches, or experience-sharing team activities); this will also have benefits for building trust.
  
  - Managers can play a key role in ensuring the psychological well-being of employees by regularly communicating about the current situation.
  
  - Finally, organizations need to refrain from using employee monitoring and surveillance tools and software, which can reduce trust in management and result in negative attitudes and counterproductive behaviours.
Policy responses for supporting employers and workers to achieve effective teleworking

- Scaling up teleworking for workers is a joint responsibility of relevant government departments, employers, trade unions, and professional bodies supporting employers.

- Key policy options to support employers and workers regarding teleworking include the following:
  - Providing up-to-date, reliable, and accessible information to all stakeholders concerning teleworking during the pandemic (e.g., providing concise info on OSH, including ergonomics).
  - Providing diverse forms of financial, fiscal, and other support for enterprises (e.g., providing financial support for SMEs for the purchase of IT equipment, offering tax and financial support measures linked to working from home).
  - Supporting teleworking employees by introducing new regulations regarding teleworking; reimbursing costs (all or part) of electricity, communications, heating and/or air conditioning and other related costs; offering teleworkers flexibility around working hours and control of work schedules.
  - Involving social partners in the design and implementation of teleworking, in accordance with the principles of ILO Collective Bargaining Convention, 1981 (No. 154) by e.g., consulting them on the rules and regulations that govern telework, using their extensive networks to share experiences, etc.
The future of teleworking post-Covid-19

- As some countries begin entering the next phase of managing the Covid-19 pandemic, employers are preparing for a return of their workforces to offices, factories, and shops.

- However, the uncertainty surrounding the development of a safe and effective vaccine and the lack of treatment options will hamper the return to normal in nearly all organizations.

- The Covid-19 pandemic has made both employers and workers realise that many more jobs can be performed outside of the traditional office than they thought, and the result is likely to be a dramatic reorganization of the workplace.

- The full impact of Covid-19 on labour markets has yet to be determined, but it appears likely that rates of teleworking will remain much higher than they were prior to the pandemic.

- It is essential to ensure that social partners play a central role in drawing out the lessons learned regarding teleworking and applying them to revise existing policies or initiate new ones.
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