

THE TELEWORK, A FLEXIBLE WAY TO WORK IN A CHANGING WORKPLACE

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Abstract: *When asked about the working hours, most Romanians will respond: five days a week, 8 hours a day, between 8:00 and 16:00 or between 9:00 and 17:00. But, worldwide, more and more companies choose to modify this traditional work program. The flexible work schedules appear as a reliable alternative, which, with the help of advanced technologies, eliminates the spatial barriers imposed by the traditional manner of work. The aim of our paper is to approach the telework as a version of the flexible program of work. To achieve this purpose, we have made a literature review to see how the telework is used nowadays in organizations. In this approach, we started from the conceptual definition of this term. We continued with the presentation of the implementation state of this manner of work in different countries and with the study of the factors that transform the telework into a widely-agreed way of working. Following the analysis, a number of advantages and limits of using the telework have been revealed, leading to the conclusion that, when it used correctly and consistently, this manner of flexible working meets the needs of the employees, but also of the employers, both actors being considered winners.*

Key words: work/life balance; flexible work; telework; work relations; benefits.

JEL Classification Codes: J24, J28.

1. INTRODUCTION

The reconciliation of work responsibilities and family ones has become a stringent topic lately, having both social valences, with reference to gender equality and to the quality of life, as well as an economic dimension, taking into account the fact that a poor balance between the professional life and the personal one makes the participation to the labour market difficult or even impedes it (Eurofound, 2017, p. 1).

The European Union's labour is decreasing, as the population tends to age. At European Union level also, women continue to be under-represented in the labour market, the gender inequality at the employment level leading to quite severe economic losses. Even though, according to statistics, women are increasingly qualified, the number of women who graduate from a university in Europe exceeding the number of men, many of these women leave the labour market due to familial responsibilities (European Commission, 2017, p. 2).

The flexible working methods emerge as an ideal solution for the prevention and resolution of such inequitable situations, which are also a means of adaption to the working conditions of persons with physical disabilities, facilitating their maintenance in the labour field (Centre National de la Fonction Publique Territoriale, 2013, p. 5).

Work organization has been experiencing a remarkable change in recent years, as a result the widespread use of information technologies which allow for a superior and faster



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development of lucrative activities, providing new flexible work opportunities which, if used efficiently, ensure a balance between professional commitments and familial ones, this leaving behind traditional work models (Evangelisti, 2005, p. 2).

2. TELEWORK – AS AN ALTERNATIVE FOR A WORKPLACE IN CHANGE

The flexibility work implies a fundamental re-thinking of the manner, time and place where the employee can carry out his or her activity, including various working methods (Society for Human Resource Management, 2017, p. 13):

- Part-time work, which implies working fewer hours than the normal working hours, the possibility to work fewer days each week (according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 20 million Americans choosing part-time work, not necessarily because they can't find a full time job, but due to the fact that they can benefit from a balance between their professional and private life (Landrum, 2015);
- Flexi-time, which implies establishing a certain period of work;
- Annualised hours: the hours worked during one year (setting shift by mutual agreement with the employee in a different manner, not regularly, depending in their needs);
- Compressed workweeks (the flexible organization of the workweek enables employees to allocate the hours corresponding to the 5 traditional days, working 4 days a week).
- Hours distributed differently, which imply different beginning, break and finishing working hours for the employees in the same company. Time management options reflect the extent to which employees may exercise their option related to the moment when the work and the manner of using working time;
- Telework.

2.1 TELEWORK – WHAT DOES IT MEANS

Jack Nilles (1975) was the first author who used the word "telecommuting", long before the mobile phone, laptops and wireless internet became part of the normal workplace landscape. Nevertheless, telework was not given a clear definition yet.

The framework agreement on telework signed by the European social partners in 2002 defines telework as being " a form of organizing and/or performing work, using information technology, where work, which could also be performed at the employers premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis.". (European Social Partners, 2006, p. 4)

Telework, as defined in Telework Enhancement Act of 2010 (Civic Impulse, 2017), "refers to a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work".

In conclusion, telework emerges as a new manner of accomplishing professional tasks, which, by disconnecting employees from their physical presence in the office, allows them to carry out work for a longer period of time in a place other than the traditional workplace and allows them to decide in relation to the ways, hours and workplaces (Evangelisti, 2005, p. 2.).

Over time, telework has gone through several defining stages. While in the 1960s, when technological innovations were not quite widespread, telework seemed utopic, from the 1970s, it emerges and develops in the information industry in California. In the 1980s, the interest in teleworking was increasing, and there was a proliferation of academic activities in this field, but mobile work based on information technology appeared later, when wireless devices (laptops, mobile phones) allowed employees to work both from homes and from any other place they had to. While in those days, it was expected that in the future, all people would practice telework,

and even that information technology revolutionised work, telework has not become a general practice yet, its adoption being slower than foretold (Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017, p 3.).

The development of telework seems to be unavoidable, if we take into account several factors, among which (Centre National de la Fonction Publique Territoriale, 2013, p. 3):

- The massive introduction of information technology in work practice;
- The increasing challenge related to the quality of life at the workplace, the development of physiological and social risks at the workplace (stress, deadline pressure);
- The stronger demand for reconciliation between the professional and the private life;
- The economic and environmental requirements faced by authorities.

We will present below the main forms of telework, taking into account the place where the employee carries out his activity (figure no. 1).

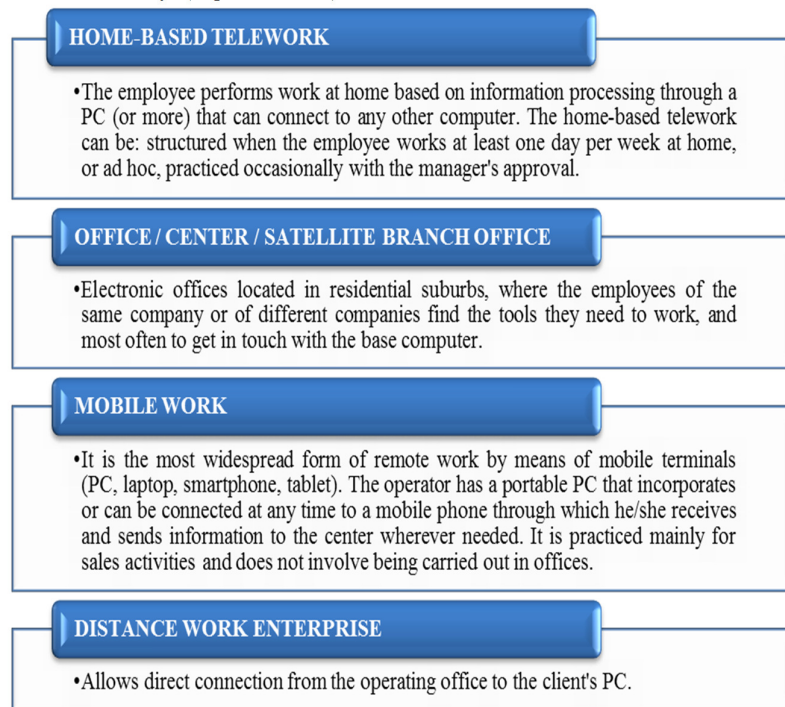


Figure no. 1 Forms of teleworking

Source: Evangelisti, 2005, Cășuneanu, 2013

In conclusion, telework cannot be viewed as a new profession, because it represents a different and innovative manner of carrying out work activities, possible by the fundamental contribution of information technologies (Evangelisti, 2005, p. 3).

2.2 TELEWORK – BETWEEN PROS AND CONS

The advantages and disadvantages of introducing telework can be differentiated, depending on the main stakeholders involved: company, employee and community.

Among the benefits the company can enjoy, as a result if using telework, are differentiated due to the fact that they allow for the possibility to increase productivity and efficiency, reducing management costs and being able to reduce personnel's abandonment.

From the perspective of the employees, telework provides benefits related first of all to the capacity to manage working hours much more flexibly, selecting the rhythm and place of work

with more freedom and having more spare time, due to the elimination or reduction of the time required to reach the workplace.

The impact of telework on the community is generally a positive one, being substantiated in a smaller urban congestion, the reduction of carbon emissions and bigger rural area development opportunities.

In table no. 1, we are synthetically presenting several advantages identified as a result of using telework.

Table no. 1 The advantages of using telework

IN RECRUITMENT	Given that the demand for the flexibility of the workplace keeps growing, telework could prove to me a viable incentive for the attraction of potential highly qualified employees, wherever they might live. It also facilitates the access to workplaces that are far from home for persons with disabilities.
IN RETENTION	Telework, in addition to the fact that it can attract talents, also ensures keeping valuable employees, who could either find another job, or are getting closer to retirement.
IN PERFORMANCE	Telework can prove to generate increased performance, contributing to productivity increase, innovation, by supporting employees' needs.
IN RELATION TO IMPROVING EMPLOYEES' ATTITUDE	Telework can have a positive effect on employees' attitude, given that, after financial security, ensuring a work-life balance is the best contributor to the satisfaction at the workplace, also leading to the reduction of absenteeism. Moreover, the access to flexibility can provide the feeling of <i>empowerment</i> and autonomy, as well as the perception of support from the company.
IN RELATION TO COST REDUCTION	Telework can support the efforts of reducing costs, by providing an alternative workplace for the employees who would otherwise would be at the office, as well as the costs of utilities, such as water and electricity. Employees also save the money they would have spent on gas, public transport or lunch.
IN RELATION TO THE REDUCTION OF THE COMMUNITY CARBON EMISSIONS	Telework proves to have a significant impact on this factor, reducing home-workplace trips. A survey carried out by Centre National de la Fonction Publique Territoriale shows that, on average, on telework day, 7400 km are saved and 1.1 tonnes of CO ₂ are reduced, and the volume of household emissions by teleworkers is three times smaller than the production of energy of the trip from home to the workplace.
IN RELATION TO EMPLOYEES' HEALTH	Telework can reduce tiredness and other symptoms that could lead to disturbances of the employees' health. According to a survey commissioned by Regus, more than half of the Romanian employees (55%) who suffer from claustrophobic symptoms find comfort when they change their work environment.

Source: United States Office Of Personnel Management, *Status of Telework in the Federal Government Report to Congress Fiscal Years 2014 – 2015*, 2016, pp. 21- 26; Centre National de la Fonction Publique Territoriale, *Les pratiques des collectivités territoriales en matière de développement du télétravail pour leurs agents*, Etude I Decembre 2013 p. 5; http://www.webpr.ro/stiri-banci_finante-21746644-aproape-jum-tate-dintre-angaja-spun-munca-distan-stimuleaz-concentrarea.htm

According to a survey carried out in the company Ctrip, hiring employees from call centers in telework determined a productivity increase by 13% (four out of five days, they were working at home). 9% of the improvement was due to more minutes worked per day (less breaks and sick leaves), and 4% came from more calls per minute (attributed to a quieter and more favourable work environment). When the survey was expanded to the entire community, a 22% productivity increase was found (Matos, 2015, p. 56).

The main limitations and disadvantages of telework identified were related by (Centre National de la Fonction Publique Territoriale, 2013 pp. 12-13; Le reseau Anact-Aract, 2015, pp. 9-10):

- The incapacity to provide the continuity of the organization of the activities in the entity;
- The incapacity to assure the quality of the work carried out and to limit risks coming from non-worked time. Companies can be in difficulty when it comes to developing new employee appraisal and monitoring tools;
- Losing visibility in the company, the teleworker's "exclusion" from the work team and risk of isolation (according to a poll organized worldwide by Regus on 44000 respondents, 38% of the employees working from home eventually feel lonely due to this work environment, whilst 64% said they miss the interaction with other professionals in the area, which is specific to the classic work environment (Tudor, 2015);
- Incapacity to separate the personal life from the professional one, which leads to the risk that work "invades" the employee's personal life, which could lead, in the long term, to psychosocial problems (32% of the interviewees in the Regus survey are worried in relation to the physical condition that seems to be affected by the home environment);
- Risks related to information security;
- High costs related to the provision of teleworkers with information and communication equipment. Office relocation by means of telework necessarily involves costs related to investments in hardware and software, and training courses.

In a survey carried out by US Office of Personnel Management, the most common barrier highlighted by respondents was the requirement to be present at the workplace (31%), followed by the technical problems that might appear (5) and by that of not receiving approval for telework, despite the fact that they have a suitable workplace (20%) (United States Office Of Personnel Management, 2016, p. 30).

Despite the benefits for companies, employees and community, the limitations of adopting telework lead to a lot of resistance against this phenomenon.

3. TELEWORK – A WIDESPREAD MANNER OF WORK?

According to a SHRM survey carried out on a sample of 900 companies in the USA, with more than 50 employees, the number of persons choosing to work from home occasionally grew between 2012 and 2016, and that of respondents choosing to work regularly from home fluctuated, being on an uptrend lately (Figure no. 2).

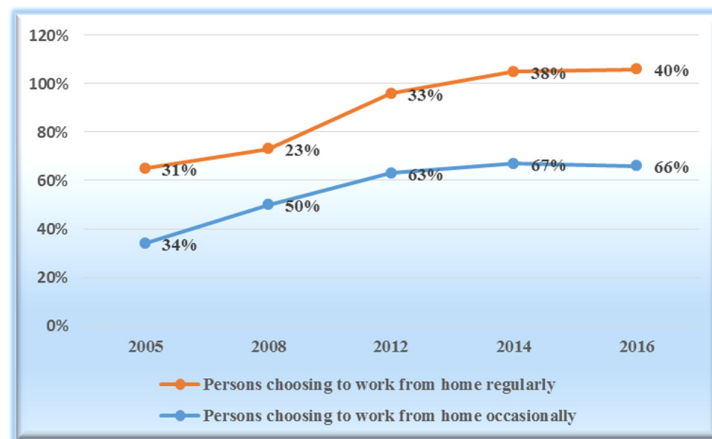


Figure no. 2 The percentage of persons choosing to work from home

Source: Society for Human Resource Management, *2016 National Study of Employers*, 2017, p. 19

In France, the legislative foundations of telework were laid in 2005, by signing the National Interprofessional Agreement on telework, and since then it has benefited from two minor legislative evolutions, by adopting two laws allowing for the formalization of this type of work organization in companies and in the public service (Centre National de la Fonction Publique Territoriale, 2013, p. 3): Warsmann Law of 22 Mars 2012, which clarifies the fundamental rights and obligations of employees and teleworkers; Law no. 2012-347 (Sauvadet Law) of 12 March, 2012, which opened the public servants' possibility to carry out telework. As a continuation of the legislative approach, in 2016, the preparation of a national plan for the implementation of telework in France as initiated.

The impact of telework in France was quantified in a survey carried out in 2012; the main figures being presented in figure no. 3.

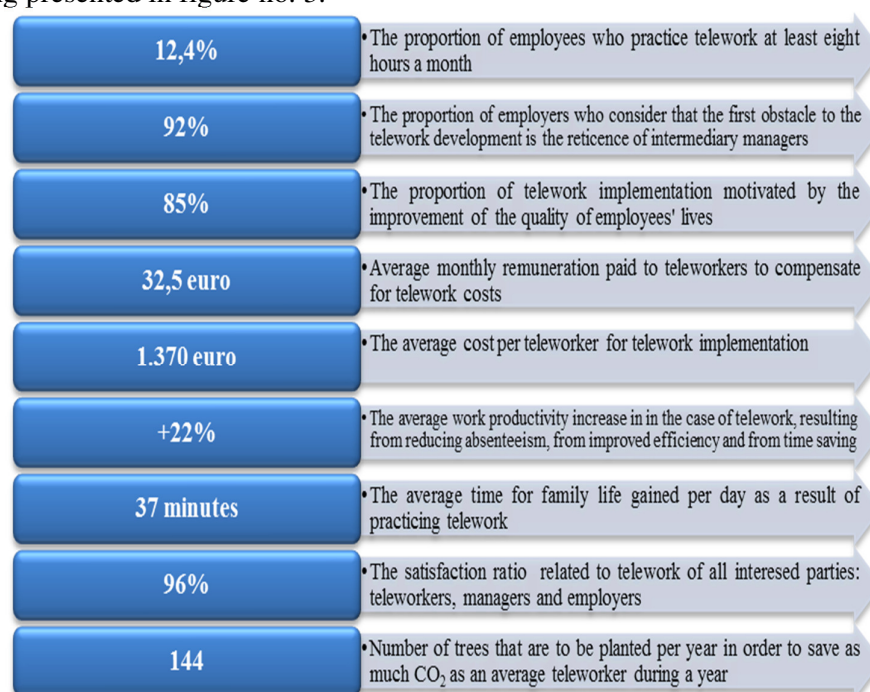


Figure no. 3 Impact of telework in France

Source: Greenworking SAS, *Le télétravail dans les grandes entreprises françaises. Comment la distance transforme nos modes de travail*, 2012, p. 7

According to a Randstad Awards survey carried out in 2016, almost two thirds (64%) of the French employees are in favour of telework. Out of them, 17% want to telework a fixed number of days per week, 35% want to telework occasionally, and 12% want to telework all working days (Randstad, 21.06.2016).

From the employers' perspective, a survey from 2016 shows that almost 71% of the French companies allow their employees to telework to various extents, compared to almost 67% of the German companies, and 53% of the British companies. Moreover, 18.3% of the French companies allow their employees to work without restrictions from home, compared to only 11.7% of the German companies and 5.5% of the British companies. Only 26% of the French companies continue to forbid telework under all circumstances, compared to 32% of the Germans and 40% of the British (Gout, 2017).

In Belgium, a survey from 2014 shows that 56% of the teleworkers believe that they have a low flexibility or no flexibility in relation to the workplace and working hours. 3 respondents out of 10 may choose where they can work (more frequently men, employees older than 50,

managers), 31% may choose when they work (more frequently persons with higher education, managers) and only 17% have a say in relation to the place where they work and the moment when they work (especially men, people older than 50, and those with higher education) (Securex, 09.12.2014).

In Japan, telework is promoted mainly as a tool of combating labour erosion, due to a set of factors, such as: low birth rate, aging population and low employment rate among women (Eurofound and the International Labour Office, 2017, p. 11.).

Renault - when telework works

The company Renault can be considered a pioneer in teleworking, as it signed in 2007 an agreement on telework with trade unions, with the option of choosing between 2 and 4 work days a week from home. In 2010 an addendum was signed on the integration of telework starting from 1 day. In 2010, the company had 307 teleworkers, who were filling all types of positions in various fields, such as engineering and services (Tachot, 2010).

At the end of 2015, Renault had approximately 2.000 teleworkers, 18% more than in 2014, who had various occupations (e.g.: assistants, controllers, project managers, engineers, designers) and benefited from adapted IT solutions.

If we should make a Renault teleworker profile, he/she would be a person who practices this kind of work 1- 2 per week on average, in most cases a man (58% men, 42% women), filling the position of manager (half of the teleworkers are managers) and living near Paris, in order to reduce transport time.

The company has had secured access in place, and, if necessary, teleworkers can benefit from training by e-learning oriented towards the available technical equipment. Manager training also integrates the distance management aspects.

In relation to data protection and other responsibilities, the addendum to the labour contract details the teleworker's rules and duties, in close connection to the Group's IT tools use map.

As a result of applying telework, Renault reported the following benefits: more than 14 million kilometres saved in 2015 and saving 5,054 days of transport time (50 minutes a day on average, per teleworker). All these lead tiredness for teleworkers and a lower risk of accidents.

In Romania, until this year, work from home is regulated in the Labour Code rather summarily, basically stipulating that employees working from home have rights equal to those of the other employees, are entitled to set their own working hours, but can also be verified under the conditions agreed in the individual labour agreement and, moreover, the employer has the obligation to ensure the transport of "raw materials and materials" they use, and of the "finished products" they make to and from employees' home (Varachiu, 08.05.2017). The draft law on telework approved by the Government in 2017 supplements these regulations, stipulating other aspects related to the guarantees, rights and obligations specific to telework, and the possibility to work in a place other than the employee's "home".

4. CONCLUSIONS

Our society is evolving at a dizzying pace, and the world of work, as we know it today, will not be the same in 10 years, just as the office where we work today doesn't look the same as it did 30 years ago. In this context, the flexible work program in general and telework in particular, represents a fundamental change in the way people think and operate, and this changes the traditional legal, spatial and temporal boundaries of labour. (United States Office Of Personnel Management, 2016, p. 32)

In order to successfully implement telework, it is necessary to harmoniously combine all the perspectives of both the employer and the job seekers and the employees. From the employers' perspective, flexibility is viable insofar as it answers first of all actual needs to

increase work efficiency and serves as a manner of increasing employees' satisfaction. From the jobseekers' and employees' perspective, flexibility becomes a basic necessity for modern lifestyles, for a balance between work and personal life, not only from the point of view of those with family responsibilities, but especially from the point of view of younger generations (Y and Z) (Boteanu, 17.03.2017).

In conclusion, we can say that telework programs are a new resource to support business performance and improve employees' working and living conditions, and continue to expand and improve. Although, in Romania, the flexible working hours are not as developed as in the rest of the world, it is increasingly visible, given that there are now specific legal regulations and the employees who already work based on such a schedule, say they prefer it compared to the fixed working hours one.

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