

**TELECOMMUTING DURING COVID 19 PANDEMIC: ANALYSIS OF ITS  
BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS**

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***Abstract:** The article analyze the benefits and drawbacks of teleworking in the context of Covid 19 pandemic. Telecommuting offers the opportunity for a more flexible schedule for workers and the freedom to work from an alternative location, away from the premise of the employer. One of the most significant challenges telecommuting employees are facing during the pandemic is the work-life conflict they are experiencing due to blurred boundaries between work and personal life. Blurring of the boundary between paid work-personal life is always an issue with teleworking, even in the best of times, but it seems to be particularly problematic due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic. A conceptual approach was used to analysis the benefits and drawbacks of telecommuting during Covid 19. Socio-technical system (STS) theory was adopted which examines the relationships between people, technology, and the work environment, to design work in a way that enhances job satisfaction and increases productivity. The study therefore, recommended thattelecommuters, should be able to separate their work from their personal lives, and must be capable of overcoming the threats posed by working in isolation.*

***Keywords:** Telecommuting, Job autonomy, Work life balance, Covid 19*

### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Telecommuting has been accelerated by recent developments in information technology (IT). Telecommuting has attracted attention both from academics and policymakers

(Rodgers 2000). Jack Nilles, "the father of telework" (Vega, 2003), introduced the concept (telecommuting) as a way of substituting transportation for telecommunications in a series of telecommunications-transportation trade-off projects for the government under the name "telecommuting". Telework is a work positioning that allows employees to execute their regular task at a site, instead of workplace with the use of technological connections (Martiner, 2004). Telecommuting has potential benefits to employees working in both public and private organisations; it better personal, family, and work life balance (Ng, 2006), Higher quality of work, Flexibility in the organisation of work hours and leisure activities and Increase in productivity. Teleworking in practice can be applied both in a full-time extent where the employee works from remote places five days per week, or as a part-time arrangement where the employee only teleworks one to a few days per week (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

The emergence of COVID-19 has given rise to telecommuting where diverse individuals utilize computers and other forms of ICTs to work at home on a regular basis for a significant part of their working time. Between January and March 2020, as the COVID-19 infections swept the globe, one by one country instructed employers to close operations, and if possible, to introduce full-time teleworking for their workers, with very little time to prepare on both the employer's and the worker's side. Something that was planned as a temporary, short-term solution has been now going on for months. As a result of the government-issued stay-home orders, almost 4 in 10 employees in Europe started teleworking (Eurofound, 2020). The most significant increase in teleworking took place in countries that were most affected by the virus, and where teleworking was well developed before the pandemic. In Finland, close to 60 percent of employees switched to working from home. In Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark, over 50 percent, in Ireland, Austria, Italy, and Sweden, around 40 percent of employees were teleworking. In these countries, fewer workers had their working time reduced. The study, therefore, examines the benefits and drawbacks of telecommuting during Covid 19 pandemic.

## 2.1 Conceptual and theoretical issues

The concept of telecommuting has been around since the seventies when the terms "telecommuting" and "telework" were coined (Nilles, 1975) and has been studied extensively, this work arrangement is not yet fully understood by either researchers or practitioners (Allen et al., 2015) and there is no "standard transnational definition" (Perez et al., 2003). There is no universally accepted definition of telework, it can be described as a type of work and/or provision of services done remotely, at a distance, and online using computer and telematics technologies. Telecommuting involves working outside the conventional workplace, for example, at home, and communicating with it by way of computer-based technology (Nilles, 1994). Organizations and employees can reap many benefits from telecommuting, including, but not limited to, lower absenteeism, better morale, reduced overhead, attraction of a wider talent pool, more schedule flexibility, and fewer distractions (Kurland & Bailey, 1999). Kugelmass, et. al. (1995) defines telecommuting as employees working at home using communications technology to work or any other place that is convenient for them ". Another term widely used to replace the term telecommuting are mobile workers, telework, work at home, flexi place, and remote office. Mejia et. al. (2004) described telecommuting as a work plan that allows employees to work in a place other than the office usually in the home, small office, or on the road by using electronic technology such as telephone, fax, or email. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), telework is defined as the use of information and communications technologies (ICTs), such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and/or desktop computers, for work that is performed outside the employer's premises. In other words, telework implies work achieved with the help of ICTs and conducted outside the employer's location. Harrington and Santiago (2006) advocated that trust, role clarity, formalized procedures, and fairly distributed, outcomes-based rewards improve work-life attitudes for telecommuters. Telework has four different dimensions according to Kurland & Baily (2000): home-based telecommuting, satellite offices, neighborhood work centers, and mobile working.

Socio-technical system (STS) theory explains the interaction between social and technological factors. It examines the relationships between people, technology, and the

work environment, in order to design work in a way that enhances job satisfaction and increases productivity (Torraco, 2005). Trist and Bainforth (1951) express that STS was originally developed to explain the paradox of improved technology but decreased productivity, the theory was also applied to the design of remote work. The key elements of the STS approach include combining the human elements and the technical systems together to enable new possibilities for work and pave the way for technological change. Socio-Technical approach theory recognises technology and people to ensure work systems are highly efficient and contain better characteristics which lead to higher job satisfaction for employees, resulting in a sense of fulfillment to improving quality of work and exceeding expectations.

## **2.2 Literature review**

Statistics revealed that in early 2020, several governments recommended that companies facilitate teleworking to prevent employees' congestion. For instance, the Spanish Health Minister, Mr. Illa, implored companies to support telework as a measure to combat coronavirus in Spain in March 2020, and many protocols were established to help companies in their implementation of telework. According to Gallup's annual Work and Education poll, only 9% of US teleworkers worked from home using a computer in 1995, but by 2015, the number had increased to 37% (Gallup, 2015). The average number of teleworkers in the European Union (EU) Member States is considerably lower, amounting to 17% in 2015, and ranges from 7% in Italy to 37% in Denmark (Eurofound, 2017). Also, in Central and Eastern European countries, the corresponding telework figure is lower than the EU average at 14%. The rate of teleworking in Lithuania is 13%, and this is similar to the average of other post-soviet countries. The U.S. has a low percentage of teleworkers at 9%, although there is some legislation to encourage and mandate teleworking. Europe is also low at 9% teleworkers, compared to emerging markets: Asia-Pacific, 24%; Latin America, 25%; Africa and the Middle East, 27% each. The highest percentage reported in India with 82% teleworking at least once a week, and 57% are frequent teleworkers, some as outsourced jobs (Reaney, 2012). Some differences of teleworkers certainly relate to job opportunities and cultural norms. In Western Europe, Brewster et al. (1994) estimate that less than 1% of organizations use

teleworking practices while Korte et al. (1994) estimate that teleworkers comprise less than 1% of the workforces in European Community member states, and only up to 7% in the most industrialized states. In Australia, estimates from official statistics suggest that about 1% of the workforce is engaged in non-trivial telework (McLennan, 1996). Employees working in home offices reported more positive views about family and personal life (i.e., management of home chores, eldercare, and childcare) than employees working in a traditional office (Hill, Ferris, and Martinson, 2003). Some studies reported that teleworkers with small children had difficulty balancing childcare and work responsibilities (Olson, and Primps, 1984; McCloskey and Igbaria, 1998). Despite the appropriate technological development of information technologies in these countries, telework adoption is slower than expected due to organizational factors, such as lower trust of managers and people's needs to meet other people face-to-face (Eurofound, 2017; Vilhelmson and Thulin, 2016).

Between January and March 2020, as the COVID-19 infections swept the globe, one by one countries instructed employers to close operations, and if possible, to introduce full-time teleworking for their workers, with very little time to prepare on both the employer's and the worker's side. Amid Covid-19 and workplace shutdowns, many businesses recognized that this pandemic increased creativity and innovation among their employees and have chosen to extend remote work options permanently (Maurer, 2020, Lavelle and Gartner, 2020). This finding is supported by a study of Flemish employees' telework perceptions during the Covid-19 crisis (Baert et al 2020). It found that workers mainly had a positive outlook on remote work, stating that they were more efficient and less exhausted. However, some people expressed fears that telework would diminish their promotion opportunities and weaken ties with their co-workers and employers. The number of people teleworking part-time or on a full-time basis has been gradually increasing over the years (Eurostat, 2018), the pandemic has certainly fast-tracked the adoption of teleworking modalities by employers. In a scenario such as the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking has proven itself an important aspect of ensuring business continuity, whereas under normal circumstances its benefits include reduced commuting

time, increased opportunity for workers to focus on their work tasks away from the distractions of the office, as well as an opportunity for better work-life balance.

### **2.3 Advantages of telecommuting**

Studies highlighted the advantages of telecommuting

**Reduction of operational costs:** Companies can save a lot of money on rent, utilities, renovations, meals, office supplies, and other variable and overhead costs. Employers can hold interviews, training, meetings, and conferences in a virtual setting through the internet and video. This provides drastic savings for businesses by cutting back on travel expenses. According to flexjobs.com, 77% of employers think that the telecommuting policy can lead to a substantial decrease in operational costs (Irene, 2020). Lupu (2017) mentions the reduced expenses of organisations, such as "rent, maintenance, computers, telephones, offices, utilities, equipment, etc. Telecommute employees save money by not having to drive to work, buy lunch, and pay other out-of-pocket expenses associated with traveling to the office.

**Better employee retention:** involves strategic actions to keep employees motivated and focused so they elect to remain employed and fully productive for the benefit of the organization. A major issue in the pre-COVID era was employee turnover. Especially for people who always wanted to work from home, leaving a position to chase remote work opportunities was commonplace. Working from home can provide parents with childcare responsibilities flexibility, while other workers can enjoy an enhanced work-life balance that will help your business to see an improvement in employee retention. Telecommuting helps employees be more relaxed, less stressed, and more content about their jobs. Telecommuting is one way in which a business may be able to continue to utilize the services of an otherwise unavailable worker. It is also touted as a tool that permits workers to minimize the use of "personal days" in instances where they have to stay home and care for a sick child, etc

**Rise in employee productivity:** According to research by Gartner.com, 88% of businesses have supported employees that prefer to work from home during the Covid19outbreak. Telecommuting takes off the table long hours in traffic, procrastinating talks with colleagues on projects, and sources of office distractions. Baruch & Nicholson, (1997); Belanger, (1999) advocated higher productivity when working at home. Bailey and Kurland (2000) reported that increased hours when working at home raises the possibility of improved productivity with an increase in the absolute amount of work performed.

**Better work-life balance:** Maintaining a healthy work-life balance is not only important for health and relationships, but it can also improve your employee's productivity, and ultimately performance. Kurland's (2002) review, women are more likely than men to see family benefits as a reason for telework. A few studies supported the claim that telecommuting has helped employees to balance work and family responsibilities, particularly among dual-career couples. Balanced employees tend to feel more motivated and less stressed out at work, which thereby increases company productivity and reduces the number of conflicts among coworkers and management. Companies that gain a reputation for encouraging work-life balance have become very attractive to workers and will draw a valuable pool of candidates for new job openings. These companies also tend to enjoy higher employee retention rates, which results in less time-consuming training, more loyalty, and a higher degree of in-house expertise.

**Higher autonomy:** is allowing people to work the way that is most conducive to their own best performance. Promoting autonomy at work means empowering employees to be self-starters, giving them stewardship over their work and their environment, and providing support instead of exerting control. Granting employees, the flexibility they need can help them feel valued and accountable for the tasks for which they are put in charge. Lupu (2017) states that flexible scheduling enables employees to have a certain autonomy in planning their daily lives, including both employee and family activities according to their needs, such as taking their children to school or go to the doctor.

**Higher job satisfaction:** Bailey and Kurland (2002) concluded that there was little clear evidence of an increase in overall job satisfaction among teleworkers in the studies they reviewed. Golden and Veiga's study of technical professionals (2005) showed a curvilinear relationship between the extent of telecommuting and job satisfaction, with the highest satisfaction level at about 15 hours per week. Telecommuting empowers employees to have the flexibility of choosing the time slot for work. This gives the employee an ample amount of time to connect with their friends and families. DuBrin (1991) observes that work satisfaction may be increased when persons have the flexibility for dealing with household and family responsibilities

#### **2.4 Drawbacks to telecommuting**

**Blurring work-life boundaries:** The blurring of boundaries can create considerable challenges for work-life balance, especially when employees have so much else on their plate at the moment. The blurring of boundaries between work and home time may create family conflict or erode rest time. The blurring of the boundary between paid work-personal life is always an issue with teleworking, even in the best of times, but it seems to be particularly problematic due to the unique circumstances of the pandemic. Blurring boundaries between work and personal life can negatively impact people's sense of well-being and lead to burnout and exhaustion. Employees who did not maintain clear boundaries between work and free time were less likely to participate in activities that could help them relax. They were, therefore, more exhausted and experienced a lower sense of balance and well-being in the different key aspects of their lives.

**Added family-work conflict:** occurs when experiences and commitments at work interfere with family life, such as extensive, irregular, or inflexible work hours, work overload, and other forms of job stress and interpersonal conflict at work (Avassani & Movahedi, Kayvan et al 2014). Work-family conflict has been associated with increased occupational burnout, job stress, decreased health, and issues pertaining to organizational commitment and job performance. Shockley and Allen (2007) showed that when persons have more family responsibilities, space and time flexibility generates positive results on the family-work balance, but when there is a low level of responsibility, the results are

negative. Employees with greater responsibilities have experienced high levels of conflict between work and family, and telework helps them get reorganized, but those with a low level of responsibility tend to become disorganized.

**Social and professional isolation:** Some employees experience isolation with working from home, which can have a negative impact on their well-being and performance. One fear employees expressed was that being out of sight would limit opportunities for promotion and organizational rewards (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Professional and social isolation is a commonly cited obstacle to telecommuting. Studies have examined the attitudes of both employees and managers, and have compared telecommuters' and non-telecommuters' perceptions of various aspects of their work, such as visibility (McCloskey and Igbaria, 1998). Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 1996 cited in Cheuk, (2006) reported that career opportunities, sense of belonging to an organization, and interaction with colleagues on work-related matters, were the negative changes related to personal and professional life.

**Limited accessibility of employees:** "another drawback of telecommuting is managing and monitoring teleworker performance" (Greer et al. 2014). One of the reasons creating this problem is the "limited accessibility of employees" by the organisation (Lupu 2017). Even when the employees are accessed by their colleagues and supervisors, "lack of face-to-face communication and the benefits associated with face-to-face communication" creates a drawback for the employees (Greer et al. 2014). Efficient communication is especially important for working from home practices as the team members are interdependent on each other and it is a challenge for the supervisors to coordinate them, as each of them is physically in different places.

**Security issues:** The remote access needs of telecommuters and other mobile staff create a hole in security walls with every connection," home offices are relatively open to security abuses: casual use of un-attended computer equipment by children or friends, or by other un-authorized persons, leading to deliberate or casual unauthorised access to organizational information. When you use business equipment outside of your

organization's IT security parameters, it can create a weak link in your organization's overall IT infrastructure. It is important to protect mobile devices, as well as any sensitive information and data whether at rest or in transit. Threats can potentially jeopardize the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of the information. Periodically updated password protection and informing employees concerning the need for remote access security" need to be implemented to allow employee access while keeping out unwanted intruders.

**Legal vulnerability.** Some analysts have expressed concern that some employer liability issues regarding telecommuting practices have yet to be completely settled. They cite issues such as employer liability for home-office accidents under common law; applicability of the employer's insurance coverage when they work at home; and responsibility for equipment located in the home as particular concerns.

### **3.1 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations**

The progress of technology has helped accommodate the telework option. Wireless devices, web applications, and collaboration tools, such as online meeting software, make it easier to interact with managers and colleagues when you're not in the office. Also teleworking is an essential part of any business continuity plan in the case of an unforeseen event (extreme weather, terrorism, pandemic) that prevents employees from taking up work at their regular offices or workplace, the possibility of teleworking allows them to perform work offsite and to keep the organization operational. The expanded use of telework may not end with the pandemic but could become part of the "new and better normal" for years to come, supported by digitalization, advanced communication, and cloud technologies. Employers need to take into account the perspectives of workers in relation to the challenges and opportunities of teleworking for them (family and living situation, type of role, skills...). Business owners and managers need to recognize that some employees are better suited than others to thrive in a telecommuting program. Prospective workers should be self-motivated; self-disciplined and possess good problem-solving skills and communication skills (both written and verbal). They should also have a home environment that will enable them to maintain or exceed the levels of

productivity they attain in an office setting. Telecommuters should be able to separate their work from their personal lives and must be capable of overcoming the threats posed by working in isolation. 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. To avoid negative impacts from telecommuting, companies must set out clear guidelines and policies on productivity, security, and workers' compensation.

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