

Remote Work: New Fields and Challenges for Labor Activism

Work and Occupations
2023, Vol. 50(3) 445–451
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DOI: 10.1177/07308884231163135
journals.sagepub.com/home/wox



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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has altered how and when we work. Suddenly, organizations had to grant the possibility of working from home to all employees whose presence on-site was not necessary, independent of rank and job. In light of this experience, a return to permanent presence in the office for all has become unlikely. As remote work has both positive and negative implications for employees, their organizations, and workplace institutions, this contribution seeks to answer the following questions: First, what are the challenges for workplace equity and employee well-being that arise from the increased use of remote work? Second, what can be done to ensure that remote work actually benefits employees? Third, what are the implications of the increased use of remote work for the labor movement?

Keywords

remote work, gender, ideal worker, unions, works councils

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Remote Work: Benefits and Challenges for Worker Well-Being and Equitable Workplaces

Remote work is a double-edged sword for employee well-being and work-related inequalities. On the one hand, working remotely can increase workplace autonomy, facilitate the reconciliation of work and private life, and potentially make workplaces more equitable, because physical presence may no longer be considered a sign for productivity and commitment. On the other hand, the lack of appropriate office space and equipment at home can make employees less productive and happy with their work—or may even inhibit some groups of workers from taking advantage of the remote work option. The benefits to organizations of saving costs by providing fewer office spaces may be particularly detrimental for those who cannot (or prefer not) to work in their private homes. The lack of clear boundaries between work and leisure time may decrease employees' well-being, and new workplace inequalities may emerge. The existing literature on remote work provides empirical evidence for either perspective.

Survey studies repeatedly found that employees who work from home tend to be more satisfied with their work than employees who work on-site (e.g., Bloom et al., 2015). The reasons for increased job satisfaction are decreased work intensity, reduced strain from working under time pressures, and the option to alter work arrangements according to personal circumstances (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). In particular, the possibilities of improved work–family reconciliation, for example, by reducing commute time and being at home when children are sick, are clear advantages of remote work. As is the case with other flexible work arrangements, remote work allows employees with high family demands to spend more time in paid employment and to not drop out of high-status positions (Chung & van der Horst, 2018; Fuller & Hirsh, 2019).

In addition to reducing gender inequalities in the workplace by improving employees' work–family reconciliation, remote work may also decrease gender gaps in wages and promotions in more indirect ways—namely, by altering the image of the “ideal worker” (Williams et al., 2013). An “ideal worker” is commonly conceptualized as someone who prioritizes paid work above private matters. That is, someone who tends to always be at the workplace, works overtime, and therefore presumably is highly committed and productive. In return, such employees are given preference for promotion, receive higher wage increases, or enjoy other career advantages (Williams et al., 2013). By “normalizing” remote work and the physical absence from the workplace, employees who cannot spend long hours on-site due to care responsibilities (typically women) may no longer be disadvantaged when it comes to promotions and wage increases.

On the downside, however, there is also evidence that remote work may actually not benefit employee well-being and workplace equity. The absence of temporal and physical borders, for instance, can lead to more time-, strain-, and behavior-based conflicts between paid work and private life (Clark, 2000; Kossek et al., 2006). Digital technologies that facilitate work-related contact during leisure time can increase conflict between work and family life and employees who work from home tend to have difficulty creating borders between work and their private lives (Lott & Abendroth, 2020).

The increased reliance on remote work, moreover, may not necessarily benefit gender equality. Past research found gender differences in the usage and motives of remote work options. Male employees worked remotely more frequently than women, in particular during pre-pandemic times (Abendroth et al., 2022). This is not only because women tend to work in jobs that require being on-site and are more often not allowed to work from home; they also reported that remote work for them was stigmatized as being associated with lower productivity (Lott & Abendroth, 2020). As a result of gender differences in paid and unpaid work and motives to use remote work—catching up on work versus better-aligning work and family requirements (Yang et al., 2023)—men and women may also experience increased work from home differently. While women may engage in more multitasking (e.g., surveilling sick children while working remotely), men may rather use remote work to have quiet work surroundings and to combine work with leisure time activities. Even when men and women work from home for the very same reasons, their supervisors and colleagues may make different attributions as to why their male and female colleagues work from home. Both increased multitasking activities and different attributions of what male and female workers actually do when they work from home potentially jeopardize gender equality.

Guiding Principles for Effectively Regulating Remote Work

Considering the ambivalences of remote work, the question arises of what governments, organizations, and unions can do to make remote work equitable and beneficial for employee well-being. To make remote work “work” for everyone, we suggest three guiding principles.

First, employers need to ensure that all employees who *want to* work from home are *technically equipped to do so*, which includes access to IT support, ensuring IT security and data protection, and resolving insurance-related

questions (e.g., is it a work or a private accident if an employee trips over toys and breaks a leg while working from home?). At the same time, employers still need to continue to provide *adequate office space* for those who prefer to work on-site for whatever reasons.

Second, and closely related, is the need to account for *the needs of different groups of workers*—even if these needs are contradictory. For instance, the legitimate wish for boundary-setting measures to fight an always-on, digital presence culture that benefits some groups should not lead to cutting back the greater time flexibility of remote work that other employee groups may value. Likewise, the need for increased visibility and recognition for those employees who do not work on-site and whose achievements can easily be overlooked should not be countered with productivity-tracking measures, which de facto are already implemented on a voluntary basis in some branches (e.g., the performance of software developers, for instance, is easily traceable as many of them share their code via GitHub.com; Hipp & Konrad, 2022). Such measures can easily lead to surveillance, increase pressure on employees, and jeopardize privacy.

The latter point closely relates to the third guiding regulation principle we suggest, regulations of remote work only function in the best interests of all if they rely on trust and account for the fact that existing stereotypes about the productivity and commitment of different groups of workers may be accelerated when jobs are no longer physically performed on-site.

Regulating Remote Work as a New Field of Activism for Unions and Collective Bargaining

The regulation of remote work, hence, is not easy and straightforward and puts unions and any other workplace institution into a catch-22 situation. Nonetheless—and perhaps even due to its ambivalences—remote work may boost collective bargaining and the labor movement. There are essentially three reasons why we expect that push, particularly in the European setting.

First, by advocating for the possibility of remote work and regulating its conditions, employee representatives are tapping into interests of white-collar employees, engineers, and academics—that is, groups of employees who have previously not been organized.

Second, the fact that unions and employee representatives can increasingly rely on digital technology to reach out to new groups of employees can also help with organizing. Setting up digital meetings and using new communication channels allows unions and worker representatives to reach out to those

with whom they have little contact—for example, temp workers, engineers, or developers. These new possibilities may offset the disadvantages that remote work brings with regard to opportunities for communication and encounters within the company; insufficient contact may undermine solidarity and reduce the awareness that different groups of workers face similar challenges (Krzywdzinski, 2022).

Third, employers have an incentive to engage in collective bargaining around the issue of remote work. This applies particularly to the European context, where national governments can deviate from the strict regulations regarding maximum work hours and rest times defined in the EU Working Time Directive. In Germany, for instance, deviations from the EU directive are possible if employer and employee representatives formulate alternatives in collective agreements. In order to achieve flexible working time solutions for remote work, employers have to engage in collective bargaining. Regulations on the national level, moreover, will also push employers to enter collective agreements. In Spain, for example, the national government requires companies to finance the costs of remote work (e.g., electricity and technical equipment) and to grant remotely working employees the chance to participate in training, but it does not specify how organizations should implement these legal requirements. All specifications need to be found within collective agreements on the sector or company level. Employers and employee representatives have to work out the rules for remote work, including the question of whether and how work performance will be monitored and how privacy and data protection will be ensured.

Outlook and Conclusions

The necessity to regulate remote work, which has been normalized dramatically around the globe for many groups of employees after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, comes not only with major opportunities but also with challenges to employee well-being and workplace equity. As the regulation of remote work is in the interest of both employers and employees and their representatives, we consider remote work to be a new field for labor activism. As of today, however, the regulation of remote work differs across organizations, collective agreements, and countries (Samek Lodovici, 2021) and the *quo vadis* question arises.

For EU countries, we observe several trends. First, existing regulations (by the state or via collective agreements) include that workers should only work remotely if they want to, and they should retain a right to a workplace in the company. Second, working hours must be fixed due to EU regulations, and employees have the right to digitally disconnect outside working hours.

Third, employers are required to assess the physical and psychological risks associated with remote work. However, many issues still linger about how remote work should best be regulated to make it beneficial to employees and their organizations and how to establish workplace equity. Even so, remote work has the potential to revitalize the labor movement.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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