

# Telework: Before and after COVID-19

Subjects: [Computer Science](#), [Information Systems](#)

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Telework is, today, a voluntary form of work organization in which the employee is located outside the employer's premises, at home or elsewhere, under a telework contract, uses information and communication technologies (ICT) and works according to a predetermined schedule on the basis of an agreed supervisory mechanism and an online reporting system on the work undertaken.

teleworking evolution

COVID-19

work legislation

work-life balance

During the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking became the "new normal," changing people's lives and affecting working relationships. More than ever, it has inspired researchers from different fields of activity: economic, sociology, medical, ethical, etc. Reviewing the literature, this entry rediscovered the concept of "teleworking" and how it evolved in the context of socio-economic development from 2000 to 2019. In the context of the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, this entry looked for answers regarding the changes produced by teleworking, one of the main forms of adapting employment to social distancing. What changes have been made to the legal and contractual regulations? How was the work schedule organized and the working time recorded? How was the training provided and performance management carried out? What measures have been taken regarding the socio-fiscal protection, occupational safety, and work health of employees? What were the effects of digitalization? How has the work-life balance changed? In terms of results, there is clear evidence that telework leads to increased professional satisfaction, higher productivity, and reduced administrative costs, representing a viable future option.

Telework is a compound term originated by joining two components, "telou" (distance) from the Greek language and the word "tripalliare" (work) of Latin origin <sup>[1]</sup>. The term can also be found in the specialized literature under the appellation of remote work <sup>[2]</sup>, working at a distance <sup>[3]</sup>, teleworking <sup>[4]</sup>, telecommuting <sup>[5]</sup>, working from home (WFH) <sup>[6]</sup>, mobile work <sup>[7]</sup>, remote e-working <sup>[8]</sup>, and work from anywhere <sup>[9]</sup>. It is worth noting that the term "telecommuting" appears almost exclusively in articles published in the North American media, while in European publications, the preferred term seems to be "telework."

The premises for the emergence of telework were created during the Industrial Revolution in telecommunications in the early nineteenth century. Once the federal postal service, telegraphs, photographs, and telephones were introduced, it generated the transition from a society based on voice communication, art, and writings (letters, newspapers, and books) to an industrialized one, marked by the development of the social division of labor, emergence of new branches of production, new industrial, commercial and transport centers, and expansion of economic, commercial, and communication relations.

Over time, researchers have tried to provide a unitary and well-accepted definition for telework, but with little success. A definition that covers the essence of telework and differentiates it from other forms of work in the context of changes over time seems an impossible endeavor.

In the 1980s, Grant et al. (1985) <sup>[10]</sup> characterized teleworking as "one kind of remote working, or doing normal work activities while away from one's normal workplace." Other researchers have issued narrow definitions, such as: "working away from the central office" <sup>[11]</sup>, "for employees to work out of their homes" <sup>[12]</sup>, and "working at home" <sup>[13]</sup>. If computer and communications technology are considered <sup>[14]</sup>, the definition of remote work is expanded to include aspects of the processes required to organize work outside the normal organizational boundaries of space and time.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the digital revolution, through the integration of digital computers and communication technologies, gradually allowed the transition from mechanical and analog electronic technology to digital electronics. The advent of the Internet, the introduction of the home computer, the invention of the World Wide Web, the provision of the first online services by its members, the transition to digital television, the use of mobile phones, online social networks, and the increase in the number of users have marked the beginning of an era of information and communication technologies in the production process, machines gradually diminishing the need for human intervention. In this context of the digital economy, the interest in teleworking has increased and international institutions, and contemporary researchers have developed new modern approaches to this concept.

In 1996, the International Labor Organization (ILO) saw work from home as a form of work organization in which the employee is located at a distance from the organization's headquarters or production units and cannot have personal contact with co-workers <sup>[15]</sup>. In 2020, the same organization expands the definition of telework, saying that it represents work performed outside the employer's headquarters, at the employee's home, or elsewhere by using information and communication technologies (ICT), such as smartphones, tablets, laptops, and desktop computers, etc., and carried out

based on a voluntary agreement between the employer and the employee, based on some previously established hours/schedule, agreed on surveillance mechanism, and some arrangements for reporting the work undertaken [16].

In addition to the above, in 2008, the European Commission proposed several recommendations on teleworking, such as voluntary choice of teleworking, the right to return to work at the organization's headquarters, the guarantee of maintaining the status of the employee, providing equal treatment, the employer's obligation to inform, train and evaluate the teleworker, coverage of the costs of teleworking arrangements by the employer, ensuring the protection of all teleworkers in the field of occupational safety and health (OSH), concluding insurance and confidentiality contracts with teleworkers, respecting the rights and obligations of teleworkers, and facilitating access to telework [17].

In the context of the European Employment Strategy, negotiated agreements between the European Council and several social partners for the modernization of the labor organization led to the issuance of Directives 91/533/EEC [18] and 2019/1152 [19], which regulated new teleworking-specific information, such as a telework employment agreement, telework voluntariness and reversibility, telework working instruments, equal treatment and non-discrimination of teleworkers, the privacy of teleworkers, and vulnerable groups of workers.

Some older studies present teleworking as a flexible way of working that involves the accomplishment of a wide range of remote work activities, electronic information processing, and using telecommunications to maintain the employer–employee relationship while performing full-time or part-time work [20][21]. Authors use terms such as “telework,” “telecommuting,” or “remote work,” which generally refer to lucrative activities or work tasks carried out outside the office, either at home or elsewhere, and relying on new technologies [22][23][24][25].

The aim of the entry is to analyze the evolution of telework as a flexible and modern way of working before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, but also the psycho-socio-economic implications generated on the activity of European enterprises.

The first objective of the entry is to identify several specific aspects of telework, also highlighting its evolutionary change and socio-economic implications until 2019. Following the change in the way we connect, communicate, and work, the second objective examines the changes in telework regarding legal and contractual regulations, work arrangements, working time, measures regarding socio-fiscal protection, work safety, the health of employees, digitalization, and work-life balance, all as a form of adapting to the sensitive socio-economic context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The third objective involves making a forecast of the evolution of the number of teleworkers between 2022 and 2025 in the EU (27 countries), which was made by using the Time Series Modeler procedure.

In the context of increasingly competitive and intensely digitized economies, this entry contributes to the literature by presenting the deepest transformations suffered by this voluntary form of work organization, from its appearance to the present.

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