Recognising and mitigating OSH during the Covid-19 pandemic: risks for teleworkers in the EU

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COVID-19 pandemic: a key driver of telework

- The pandemic and the public health measures implemented to respond to it have had a major impact on the incidence, regularity and location of telework.
- Incidence: the number of people working remotely increased massively almost overnight. Impact of the pandemic is greater than other drivers: ICT (supply), employee and employer demand for teleworking arrangements.
- Regularity and location: working from home regularly/all the time is currently the norm. Before the pandemic, there were a range of teleworking practices:
  a) Regular home-based teleworkers;
  b) Occasional teleworkers working away from the employer’s premises;
  c) Highly mobile teleworkers, working in various places, including working from home.
Overview of main OSH issues associated with teleworking

General risks:
- Temperature, lighting, noise, not being able to work undisturbed
- Dangers of slips, trips and falls due to electrical wiring and cables

Ergonomic issues:
- Eyestrain from glare from the screen, vibration of images, or inadequate contrast between the screen and the surrounding area
- Neck pain and tendon pain in the wrists and fingers, potentially leading to repetitive strain injury, as a result of inappropriate setting-up of the work station

Psychosocial risks:
- Isolation due to lack of contact with colleagues
- Blurring of the boundaries between work and private life: no spatial separation and long working hours
- Work intensification and working while unwell

- Not inconsequential: an ageing population and an ever faster-paced workplace risk exacerbating / accumulating health disadvantage over the life-course
Exaggeration of the main risks associated with teleworking:

- Longer periods of sitting down, reduced exercise, exacerbated by lockdowns
- Increased isolation and expansion of work into life, in the context of restrictions on movement during the pandemic - work can expand to fill the vacuum if normal social activities are not available
- Increased stress and anxiety due to trying to combine work and caring, in the context of home schooling
- Increased stress and anxiety, due to inability to plan, poor organisational management of teleworkers - compounded by unprecedented scale of teleworking arrangements

- Not inconsequential: health as a positive concept - having control over one’s own life
The role of the social partners

- The social partners have a crucial role to play in recognising and helping to mitigate the OSH risks of teleworking: they understand the requirements and needs of employers and teleworkers.

- At EU cross-sectoral level, the social partners negotiated a **Framework agreement on telework** in 2002, which is implemented by the social partners at Member State level. It contains:
  - A definition of telework
  - A general framework at EU level for teleworkers' working conditions
  - The general principle that teleworkers are afforded the general protection granted to workers based on the employer's premises

- Other Directives (workplace requirements; display screen equipment; working time) but no EU framework on **right to disconnect** – very topical during the pandemic.

- Recent (Jan 2021) European Parliament Resolution calls on the Commission to address this gap, and Member States and employers to ensure that workers are able to disconnect.

- Right to disconnect typically negotiated by social partners at **sectoral or company level**.
Right to disconnect in focus: pre-pandemic

- **Company-level agreement on the right to disconnect at Volkswagen, Germany, 2011**
  - The works council felt that smart communication devices carry risks relating to constant accessibility and an expansion of working hours and therefore was keen to negotiate an agreement with management.
  - The agreement covers all workers and is therefore relevant to teleworkers. For non-managerial and non-technical workers, the connection between the server and the smart phone is disabled between 18:15 and 7:00. Workers can use the phone function but cannot receive emails, text messages or video calls.
  - The works council preferred a **hard shut down** to avoid workers worrying that if they requested the right to disconnect they may be considered to be unambitious.

- **Teleworking agreement at Orange, France, 2016**
  - This agreement, signed by management and 3 trade unions, advocates a less top-down approach in favour of a more collaborative and trust-based one, in order to reduce pressure and stress.
  - It aims to improve work-life balance by protecting employees from out-of-work hours communication (emails, messages, etc) and establishing **automatic mechanisms**, such as stopping servers, creating pop-ups to remind employees about work-life balance, and training employees to respect colleagues.
Covid-related agreements on OSH and telework

Agreements found in our research relate to work organisation, organisational culture, work-life balance, equipment and ergonomics, and gender equity – the right to disconnect features highly.

- **Remote working in the Spanish banking sector, September 2020**
  - Concluded between employers and trade unions at sectoral level.
  - The **right to digitally disconnect** at the end of working hours and to be disconnected between 7pm – 8am.
  - For those who telework more than 30% of their overall time, the employer will provide a computer, mobile phone and an ergonomic chair. Employees are also given €130 to **buy equipment** not provided by the company and €55 to cover **overheads** related to teleworking.

- **Teleworking during the pandemic at Credito Cooperativo Bank (Italy), September 2020**
  - Signed by management and trade unions, the agreement acknowledges the importance of work-life balance and the right to disconnect.
  - The agreement commits the company to provide employees with all the **equipment** necessary to perform work remotely.
  - It also guarantees **training** on safety and behavioural risks and covers **insurance** for occupational health and safety, notably accidents at work. **Costs** are covered by the company, including any malfunctioning and equipment maintenance, and loss or theft.
What works in promoting and protecting OSH of teleworkers

- The first step is to **carry out a risk assessment**
- Practical measures: check the workstation and work equipment of teleworkers. Enable the use of ergonomic equipment wherever possible
- Adapt workstations to accommodation any existing physical conditions of workers
- Monitoring and inspection is vital: inspections of home workstations can be organised
- Liaise and communicate with workers and their representatives. Set up clear channels for issues to be reported
Mitigating psychosocial risks

- Encourage regular team meetings and informal group chat channels
- Provide good IT support
- Provide training and support for line managers so that they can provide adequate support to their workers
- Give clear guidance on working hours and work organisation, which may include measures around the right to disconnect
- Involve worker representatives fully in measures designed to mitigate the psychosocial risks of telework
- Put into place structures and systems that can prevent and minimise stress, such as creating mental health champions or using external confidential counselling services
- Work towards creating an organisational culture in which the admission of stress is not seen as a weakness, for all employees, not just teleworkers
Remaining challenges

- **Risk assessment challenges**
  - Specific and targeted risk assessment systems for teleworkers

- **Securing the necessary financial resources to implement change**
  - Important to set out the business case for good OSH for teleworkers

- **Changing organisational culture**
  - Important to build a medium- and long-term vision
  - Senior management engagement is key

- **Developing a culture of trust**
  - Convincing middle management
  - Line manager training

- **Reducing stigma around stress and mental health issues**
  - Importance of confidentiality
  - Provision of support, possibly external
The post-COVID future

- The world of work is likely to change significantly after the pandemic: there is likely to be a permanent increase in teleworking.

- Companies will need to redesign office spaces: more hot desks and meeting spaces. OSH considerations in the design of these new spaces.

- Employers will also need to consider how to ensure that job quality as a whole and OSH in particular, is not compromised for teleworkers.

- Once teleworking is no longer a crisis response, employers will need to make strategic choices about work organisation, involving factors such as employee preference, potential effects on productivity, job quality, work-life balance and psychosocial risks.

- Although the Covid pandemic has caused much suffering and damage, it can also be seen as an opportunity to reorganise working life to build on the advantages of more widespread teleworking while mitigating OSH risks.
Thank you