

Gender and generation matter when teleworking in Covid-19 times

Teleworking during Covid-19 has offered people new opportunities for integrating work and home. There are also many obstacles that young families and sandwich generation are experiencing. In addition, conditions and traditions for teleworking are still quite different in European countries.

Time4Help project organized a free webinar in mid-November for sharing experiences and research results concerning integrating work and home in the Covid-19 times in Belgium, Poland, Spain and Finland. The webinar was chaired by the Finnish partner South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences Small Business Center.

Challenging times for young families and sandwich generation

Belgian researcher and lecturer Miet Timmers working for University College Odisee and Center for Family Studies in Flanders has been doing research on phenomena related to family issues in Covid-19 times. Timmers started research in April 2020 to find out what consequences the first lockdown period had had. Research was done from the perspectives of an individual, gender, generation and working places.

While working from home in pre-corona times was seen as a way to facilitate the combination of family and work, during the corona crisis teleworkers experienced more conflict between family and work on several factors than non-teleworkers. People teleworking during the first lockdown period experienced that their work was constantly interrupted, they felt that it was harder for them to concentrate, they believed telework had effects on their everyday family functions and more conflicts were occurring between work and family life. 36,6 % of women and 26,4 % of the men feel emotionally exhausted after (home) work. Especially parents of toddlers (39%) and parents of children under the age of 11 experienced emotional exhaustion. They worried about issues related to work also during their spare time, they felt too tired to do household work and they were afraid that work was taking too much time away from their family time. "When there are children under 11 years in the family, women feel more guilt when teleworking home than men do", Timmers summons up.

Not only the young families experienced difficult times. Generational differences were reinforced during the COVID-19 period. Older age groups had less difficulty in reconciling family and work and in most cases have better mental well-being than young people. Still, research from Anglo-Saxon countries showed that some 27% of 'sandwich carers' showed symptoms of mental ill-health while caring for both sick, disabled or older relatives and children. Approximately 1/3 of the sandwich generation is said to have it mentally very difficult and also to be very worried about finances. The research shows that the main concerns are the well-being of the oldest generation to be cared for and a lack of physical contact with the grandchildren. For many people of the sandwich generation, teleworking was also a greater challenge than for the younger generations. Their digital skills had to be improved in a short period of time and the learning curve was steep.

"The sandwich generation is facing a situation where older generations stay longer at home and younger generations stay longer in the parental nest and they have to work to a higher age. The positive phenomenon is that young grandparents want to play a role in their grandchildren's lives."

The webinar was a part of the **Time4Help Finland**: Service Business, Women Entrepreneurs and Leaders project which is implemented by the Xamk Small Business Center and co-financed by the European Social Fund and the South Savo Centre for Economic -Development, Transport and the Environment. **Time4Help** project is implemented in an international collaboration with Dobre Kadry, Fundación Acción Contra and El Hambre and Odisee University College.



According to researchers, employers could ease those tensions if supervisors would be willing to listen to people teleworking and if employees could share freely their thoughts of their current family situation. In addition, it is essential to find balance between the needs of an individual, the team and the organization.

Differences on European level

In Europe telework has been most common in Finland, the Netherlands, Luxemburg and Belgium. People face most obstacles for teleworking in Romania, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland and Spain.

The Belgian researchers compared circumstances in countries taking part in Time4Help project. In general, people felt that teleworking becomes easier if they can work in a flexible and independent way.

According to statistics this is typical for the Finnish working life. The Polish people feel that their working life is hierarchic, work time is intense and there is little flexibility. In Spain people felt that lacking social interaction hinders their best performance at work.

Researcher Beata Pachnowska from the Polish research center Dobre Kadry says that in her home country working home is an option only for 47% of SMEs, part of teleworkers are well prepared but in some cases the lack of equipment such as computers and laptops makes teleworking difficult. People are sharing their home computers for working purposes with other family members and there are difficulties with security issues. In addition, there are not spaces for working available at homes.

"However, people teleworking have experienced that there has been a better balance between home and work, time has been spared from commuting and it has been possible to combine work and taking care of children", Pachnowska says. The Polish Time4Help project concentrates in helping vulnerable groups, such as women over 50 years and vulnerable groups with challenges in working life. The European Time4Help network is coordinated by Dobre Kadry based in Wroclaw.

Since 2013 the Spanish NGO Fundación Acción Contra el Hambre has focused on fighting against exclusion with offering opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship for vulnerable people. During Covid-19 times the NGO has increased personal and also psychological support online for their target group as well as donated cash. The Madrid-based NGO contacts people half a year after they have left the support programme to find out how they are doing.

"During Covid-19 almost one third of the women felt that helping others had diminished their working capacity when the same figure for men was 15 %. In addition, 44 % of mothers thought that helping others limited their chances to work. It is worrying that every fifth mother says that they have no access to electronic tools that they would need", Alicia García-Madrid Colado summarizes.

Finland has been an exception to the other countries taking part in Time4Help project. Finns started working at homes quickly and trust in government during the corona crisis has been high. According to research Finnish women like teleworking more than men and half of Finns would like to telework when it is possible.

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“Of course there is talk about corona stress that includes financial worries, loneliness and coping with little children. However, a research by Finnish Institute of Occupational Health this spring stated that long-term stress has decreased and parents of little children feel that their work performance has improved. Almost half of those who did more teleworking during the corona spring felt that they had had a chance to make more decisions and work more independently. Many also think that they have learnt new working methods”, researcher Mervi Rajahonka from Xamk Small Business Center says.

The University of Turku completed a research on Finnish families with small children and according to the results conflicts related to household tasks have increased. Another study by the University of Jyväskylä stated that over 70 % felt that corona crisis had had positive effects on the relations between parents and children even if in the same time over half regarded the corona situation hopeless. In Finland the corona situation seems to have had both positive and negative effects on families and companies.

Time4Help project in Finland concentrates on tackling the challenges that women in the age group 45-65 years face by empowering small groups of woman entrepreneurs and professionals who wish to network and work together. The Finnish project is coordinated by South-Eastern Finland University of Applied Sciences Small Business Center.

Tips for teleworking better

Miet Timmers recommends that people teleworking could benefit if they could manage their own expectations, create a dedicated workspace for themselves at home, take breaks on a regular basis and find a way to establish transition times to switch from work mode to home mode. It is also important that the person teleworking overcommunicates what he or she needs to make teleworking successful at home. It is also important to schedule time for family and social life.

“Otherwise there is a risk that the boundaries between home and work disappear, people start to isolate socially and family members become co-workers.”

Timmers emphasizes that trust is needed to make teleworking successful.

“The person teleworking needs to rely on the support from family and supervisor. Teleworking is here to stay. People have already developed models for balancing and integrating teleworking and family life. We are starting to talk about a so called lockdown generation.”

Webinar on sandwich generation in January

There will be another free webinar organized by Time4Help project coordinator and Polish partner institution Dobre Kadry with the focus on sandwich generation issues in January.

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