

# Organising telecommuting in an inclusive manner

Lower barriers to flexible work arrangements

## 1. Organisator

The Centre for Family Studies Odisee University of Applied Sciences is preparing a project 'Organising telecommuting in an inclusive manner' and is looking for partner organisations in Flanders and in Europe. In this preparatory phase, this project is financially supported by the European Social Fund and the Flemish Government. In the period September - December 2020, a final project proposal will be prepared together with partners.

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## 3. Project objective

There are inequalities between workers in terms of gender, family composition, socio-economic and ethno-cultural diversity in access to and management of telework. This project aims to identify the visible and invisible barriers and develop tools to enable a more inclusive policy on telework. By making teleworking more accessible to employees who experience barriers, their employability will increase.

## 4. Project framework and description

### 4.1. Differences in access to and control of telework

During the sudden and massive introduction of teleworking during the corona lockdown in early 2020, it became clear that there were many differences in the way teleworking was organised and supported by the employer. Some teleworkers, especially in organisations where teleworking had been strongly introduced before the crisis, were given all the facilities and support and a high degree of independence and flexibility to carry out their work. Others had to deal with insufficient support, a lack of flexibility and trust from the employer or manager (Timmers, Van Puyenbroeck, & Emmery, 2020). This often happened in organisations with little experience in the organisation of teleworking (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020).

After the full lockdown, teleworking remains an option for many occupations and employers seem to be organising themselves better and better for a permanent option of (part-time) teleworking for their employees. However, the question is who is allowed to telework under which conditions. After all, international research (see below), both before and during corona periods, shows that not everyone has equal access to telecommuting or that the conditions under which telecommuting can be carried out are not the same. Not only the nature of the job and the digital skills of the employees are relevant; the corporate culture, leadership style and characteristics of the teleworkers themselves such as gender, socio-economic and ethno-cultural background and family composition also contribute.

#### **4.2. The nature of the job**

Access to teleworking is obviously very much related to the nature of the job. For jobs that require a hands-on approach, such as blue-collar workers, shop assistants or care professions, teleworking is usually not possible. In Belgium, about 40% of jobs can be done from home. Belgium ranks at about the same level as Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and the US, but less than, for example, Sweden (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). OECD research is even more positive: Flanders has the highest number of jobs that can be done from home, both for highly and low skilled workers and in total up to about 47% (Espinoza & Reznikova, 2020).

During the corona crisis, a number of professions switched to a new way of working. Teachers and care workers shifted to online work that had not been in use before, or was much less so. The nature of the jobs is changing, allowing increased access to telecommuting. The European Commission recently launched an initiative to examine in detail which professions can be done from home and to draw up an index of teleworkability across professional titles (The European Commission's science and knowledge service, 2020).

Professionals often estimate their opportunities for teleworking higher than figures from job classification research indicate. For example, a German study using self-reporting data indicates a higher proportion of jobs that could be done from home; in Germany, for example, 56% of jobs could be performed from home (Alipour, Falck, & Schüller, 2020).

#### **4.3. Digital skills**

One of the obstacles to teleworking is limited understanding of, or uncertainty in, dealing with online work processes on the part of the employee. Research into telework during the covid crisis confirms this: people report uncertainty and the lack of training (Timmers, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2020).

Nearly 40% of Belgians have no or weak digital skills, Belgium is certainly not among the best pupils in the European class (Brotcorne & Mariën, 2020; Fuller, 2020). Digital inequality often goes hand in hand with inequalities in other areas such as level of education, ethnic-cultural diversity factors and socio-economic vulnerability (Robinson et al., 2020). Gender differences in digital skills are best documented. On a global scale, women have less access to ICT than men. In Belgium, the difference is more nuanced and age plays a major role: young women aged 16 to 24 have more digital skills than young men. For 25 to 54 year olds, the gender difference is minimal. Among 55-75 year olds, women are significantly less skilled than men (Brotcorne & Mariën, 2020).

#### 4.4. Corporate culture and leadership style

A first element is the corporate culture. In many company cultures there is a mentality of 'work devotion' that strongly influences the psychological contract between employee and employer: a complete dedication of time, talent and energy to work will be financially rewarded and/or will result in career opportunities. Presence in the workplace is an important feature to check whether employees meet this 'ideal employee standard'. Employees who spend time, talent and energy in addition to work, for example on family care, risk a "flexibility stigma": their salary, career opportunities and status in the organisation are reduced. This "flexibility stigma" clings much more to women and people from lower wage categories (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013). Recent German research shows how strongly corporate culture and the 'ideal worker norm' influence employees' own choices. Although it was technically and fundamentally possible, women far less than men think that teleworking is an option for them. They fear negative effects on their careers and feel that their managers expect a lot of attendance in the workplace (Lott & Abendroth, 2020).

A second element is the style of leadership. According to most insights, teleworking differs fundamentally from working on-site. Telework is part of a different work organisation, moving away from more traditional 'command-and-control' structures and remuneration based on the number of hours worked. Teleworking is given a place within ideas such as working irrespective of place and time and a focus on results instead of hours worked (de Kok, 2016).

These aspects that are specific to telework are precisely the reasons why employers and managers can be very sceptical about permitting telework for their employees, for certain jobs or for employees with a certain profile. This scepticism arises from a particular vision of management in which control and coordination are central. In telework, this is more difficult to enforce (Peeters, Den Dulk, & De Ruijter, 2006). Managers have the perception that they no longer have control because they no longer see their employees. As a result, they are reluctant to allow telework.

During the corona crisis, this scepticism often translates into excessive control of the employee at home, often with a counterproductive effect on the employee's well-being (Timmers, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2020). If teleworking is to become more accessible to different functions and profiles of employees, the effects of corporate culture and management style must be included in research and change processes. It should be examined whether this controlling way of management counts for all employees, or whether there are differences according to e.g. educational level, gender, ethnic-cultural background. Do employers and managers place equal trust in everyone or do diversity characteristics also play a role in this?

#### 4.5. Barriers in access to teleworking

With the rise of teleworking in the early 2000s, there was some interest among researchers to study access to teleworking. Various studies showed that teleworking at that time was often regarded as a 'managerial prerogative': power and status within the organisation played a major role in access to teleworking and the conditions in which teleworking could be carried out (Pittard, 2005; van den Broek & Keating, 2011). Baily and Kurland noted that if jobs with a lower status were given access to telework, this would more often be at the expense of benefits and that their already lower autonomy at work would be even more restricted. For jobs with a higher status, teleworking is more often seen as a way of enriching jobs and increasing productivity, which further increases their autonomy, which is often already more extensive (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). Peeters and Den Dulk rather speak of teleworking as an 'idiosyncratic deal', an individualised and voluntary arrangement that employees negotiate with their employer. Telework is then considered a privilege for some employees (Peeters et al., 2006). As power and status determine whether and how telework is possible, this means that groups that are weaker in negotiating with the employer, such as people with diversity characteristics and women, will have less or different access to telework.

In recent years, researchers have lost interest in the question of who gets access to telework and which underlying ideas are responsible for this. The research focus was mainly on mapping out the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking in terms of the combination of family and work, the consequences for the well-being of the individual employee, the effects on teams and mobility. Gender differences were repeatedly documented.

The question of who had access to telework and under what conditions the telework could be carried out disappeared from attention. However, studies did reveal major differences. The level of education is an important variable. In Belgium, for example, 22% of workers with a higher education diploma can work from home compared to 12.5% of people with at most a secondary education diploma. But age is also a determining factor: the largest group can be found between the ages of 35 and 49. Middle managers and civil servants are best represented among the teleworkers (Polling, 2018). In Flanders, women and employees of non-EU origin as well as middle and lower educated people were significantly less likely to work from home. This is also the case for other flexible work arrangements: women, low-skilled and people of non-EU origin have less influence on their working hours and are less able to take a leave day at short notice (Doyen & Stuyck, 2018). As far as the gender aspect is concerned, research is less unambiguous. According to some studies, women have just more access to telework (see e.g. StatBel, 2020), according to others just less (see e.g. Doyen & Stuyck, 2018). European data show that in general, men have more access to telework than women (Messenger et al., 2017). Data on ethnic-cultural and socio-economic differences in access to telework are much less available at European level.

The COVID pandemic generated renewed interest in the effects of teleworking and the differences in access and experience between men and women, generations and people with socio-economic and ethno-cultural diversity characteristics. For instance, a Flemish study showed that during the COVID-lockdown, employees with a migration background experienced easier access to teleworking (Baert, Lippens, Moens, Sterkens, & Weytjens, 2020) and that teleworking is viewed positively by older generations (Timmers, Puyenbroeck, & Emmerly, 2020).

Other research shows that socio-economic differences lead to unequal access to telework during lockdown periods. Katsabian, for example, argues that there is a clear correlation between the level of education and access to telework. Workers with a high level of education are more likely to be found in the better socio-economic groups. Workers with a lower level of education have fewer technological skills and often lack the material conditions such as their own PC/laptop and a good internet connection, creating a form of e-exclusion (Katsabian, 2020).

A less explored diversity characteristic is the family composition. Research during the lockdown period showed that employees with young children not only perceive telework more negatively themselves, but also feel more barriers in accessing telework, both before and during the corona measures (Timmers, Van Puyenbroeck, et al., 2020).

#### **4.6. Telecommuting offers opportunities for inclusion**

Teleworking offers many opportunities for inclusion, for example for people with disabilities. The flexibility of a home office can bring a lot of opportunities here (Igeltjorn & Habib, 2020). The covid crisis made this even more obvious. A survey among the Flemish population showed that people with a migration background experienced the Covid teleworking period more positively than people without a migration background. Their relationship with employer and colleagues improved and they experienced fewer conflicts. One explanation could be that teleworking makes diversity characteristics less visible, which reduces discrimination by colleagues or managers (Baert et al., 2020).

#### **4.7. Conclusion**

Research before corona times shows that access to telework is not the same for all groups and that there are many visible and invisible barriers that sometimes prevent workers themselves from correctly assessing or using their opportunities for telework, and that managers and employers do not give all categories of workers equal opportunities for telework, although this would be practically and technically possible. Research shows that there are many indications that access to telework varies in terms of gender, level of education, socio-economic situation and ethno-cultural background.

The covid crisis meant a sudden and massive switch to telework all over the world and in a sudden way made the potential of telework much more visible (Belzunegui-Eraso & Erro-Garcés, 2020). There are many indications that teleworking will remain a constant even after coronation times (Zamfir & Aldea, 2020). In Flanders, for example, it is regarded as one of the changes in the organisation of work that, during and also after the covid pandemic, will provide opportunities for workable, healthy and safe working with a continued focus on a healthy balance between family and work (SERV, 2020).

The employability and employability of employees who do not have sufficient confidence in their own digital skills or who, due to gender, socio-economic or ethno-cultural background, feel visible or invisible barriers to make full use of the opportunities for teleworking will be reduced. In the highly digitised post-covid world, teleworking will be one of the most important resilience strategies (Zamfir & Aldea, 2020).

It is therefore important in this renewed society to re-examine the barriers to accessing teleworking, examining both the previously visible barriers (e.g. digital skills and material support) and certainly the invisible barriers (corporate culture, difference in trust towards employees with diversity characteristics, etc.) and developing tools to reduce these barriers.

## 5. Possible research questions for practice-based research

- 1) Which diversity characteristics (gender, socio-economic background, ethno-cultural background) play a role in access to teleworking for professions where this is technically possible?
- 2) What are possible strategies to reduce visible and invisible barriers to telework for employees with diversity characteristics?
- 3) How can these strategies be translated into a workable instrument?

## 6. Literature

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