Introduction

New information and communications technologies (ICT) have revolutionised everyday work and life in the 21st century. They enable people to connect with friends and family – as well as with work colleagues and supervisors – at any point in time; however, they also facilitate the encroachment of paid work into the spaces and times normally reserved for personal life. The uncoupling of paid work from traditional office spaces has been a crucial factor in this development. Today’s office work and, more broadly, knowledge work, is supported by the internet, and can be carried out from practically any location and at any time. This new spatial independence has transformed the role of technology in the work environment, offering both new opportunities and new challenges.

This report considers the impact of telework/ICT-mobile work (T/ICTM) on the world of work. T/ICTM can be defined as the use of ICT – such as smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktop computers – for the purposes of work outside the employer’s premises. The report synthesises research carried out by Eurofound’s network of European correspondents in 10 EU Member States – Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK – and by ILO country experts in Argentina, Brazil, India, Japan and the US. These contributors were asked to review and summarise the findings of data and research literature on the subject of T/ICTM in their respective countries.

The report classifies T/ICTM employees in relation to their place of work (home, office or another location) and the intensity and frequency of their work using ICT outside the employer’s premises. The following groups were identified: regular home-based teleworkers; occasional T/ICTM workers, with mid-to-low mobility and frequency of work outside the employer’s premises; and high mobile T/ICTM, with high frequency of working in various places, including working from home.

The extent of the adoption of T/ICTM across different countries, and its effects on working time, performance, work–life balance, and health and well-being are analysed using information from the national studies, supplemented by data from the sixth European Working Conditions Survey. The report also reviews policy initiatives by governments, social partners and companies in relation to T/ICTM. The findings can contribute to the development of effective policies in the areas of digitalisation, fair working conditions and decent work in Europe and other regions of the world.

Key findings

The incidence of T/ICTM is related not only to technological developments in different countries but also to existing economic structures and cultures of work. The countries analysed in this report with high shares of T/ICTM include Finland, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden and the US. Overall, the incidence of T/ICTM varies substantially, from 2% to 40% of employees, depending on the country, occupation, sector and the frequency with which employees engage in this type of work. Across the EU28, an average of about 17% of employees are engaged in T/ICTM. In most countries, larger proportions of workers carry out T/ICTM occasionally rather than on a regular basis. T/ICTM is more common among professionals and managers, but is also significant among clerical support and sales workers. In relation to gender, in general men are more likely to perform T/ICTM than women. However, women carry out more regular home-based telework than men. This suggests that country-specific gender roles and models of work and family life play a role in shaping T/ICTM.

Regarding the positive effects of T/ICTM, workers report a reduction in commuting time, greater working time autonomy leading to more flexibility in terms of working time organisation, better overall work–life balance, and higher productivity. Companies benefit from the improvement in work–life balance, which can lead to increased motivation and reduced turnover as well as enhanced productivity and efficiency, and from a reduction in the need for office space and associated costs. The disadvantages of T/ICTM are the tendency to lead to longer working hours, to create an overlap between paid work and personal life (work–home interference), and to result in work intensification. Home-based teleworkers seem to
report better work–life balance, while ‘high-mobile’
workers are more at risk of negative health and well-being
outcomes. Partial and occasional forms of T/ICTM appear
to result in a more positive balance between the benefits
and drawbacks. From a gender perspective, women doing
T/ICTM tend to work shorter hours than men, and women
seem to achieve slightly better work–life balance effects.

The findings on the effects of T/ICTM are therefore highly
ambiguous and are related to the interaction between ICT
use, place of work in specific work environments, blurring
of work–life boundaries, and the characteristics of different
occupations. Moreover, whether T/ICTM substitutes for
work in the office or instead supplements it appears to be
an important factor in determining whether the reported
outcomes are positive or negative.

The European Framework Agreement on Telework (2002)
addresses, to some extent, the potential gains and risks of
T/ICTM in EU Member States, but such a framework does
not exist outside the EU. Some countries have launched
initiatives that address the working conditions of T/ICTM
workers. However, most of the examples relate to formal,
home-based telework. Only very recently have initiatives
from governments, social partners and companies begun
to look into other forms of T/ICTM, such as working
informal, supplemental hours, through measures limiting
such work beyond normal business hours.

Policy pointers

- Because the use of ICT outside the employer’s
  premises has benefits for both employees and
  companies, policymakers should aim to accentuate
  the positive effects and reduce the negative ones: for
  example, by promoting part-time T/ICTM, while
  restricting informal, supplemental T/ICTM, or high-
  mobile T/ICTM involving long working hours.

- In practical terms, the organisation of working time is
  changing and working time regulations need to reflect
  this reality. It is particularly important to address the
  issue of supplemental T/ICTM, which could be viewed
  as unpaid overtime, and to ensure that minimum rest
  periods are respected.

- A major challenge to applying OSH prevention
  principles and health and safety legislation to T/ICTM
  is the difficulty in supervising working environments
  outside the employer’s premises. A project by the
  European Agency for Safety and Health at Work
  (EU-OSHA) – Foresight on new and emerging risks in
  occupational safety and health associated with ICT and
  work location by 2025 – will help policymakers address
  these challenges.

- To fully harness the potential of T/ICTM and improve
  the working conditions of the workers involved,
  training and awareness initiatives are needed for both
  employees and managers on the effective use of ICT
  for working remotely, as well as the potential risks,
  and how to effectively manage the flexibility provided by
  this arrangement.

- T/ICTM can play a part in policies that aim to promote
  inclusive labour markets and societies, as some
  country examples indicate that it increases the labour
  market participation of certain groups, such as older
  workers, young women with children and people with
  disabilities.

- Governmental initiatives and national or sectoral
  collective agreements are important for providing the
  overall framework for a T/ICTM strategy. This
  framework needs to provide sufficient space for
  developing specific arrangements that serve the needs
  and preferences of both workers and employers.

- The findings regarding differences in the working
  conditions of those engaged in different types of
  T/ICTM – for example home-based telework or high
  mobile work, need to be considered. Policy measures
  should tackle the reasons underlying the negative
  effects on working conditions identified by the study.

Further information

The report Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of
work is available at www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications.

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