

LABOUR AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

THE FUTURE OF OFFICE WORK IN EUROPE

Results of a Survey on Consequences
of the Covid-19 Crisis

Sarah Proust
March 2023



The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about fundamental changes in working life.



The results of a representative survey in six EU countries show that the office remains significant as a collective workplace, but other forms of work organisation such as teleworking or mobile working have gained in importance.



These new forms of work organisation are now largely perceived as social achievements, but complaints about a negative impact are to be heard, and these have received too little attention to date.

THE FUTURE OF OFFICE WORK IN EUROPE

Results of a Survey on Consequences of the Covid-19 Crisis



All over Europe, the Covid-19 pandemic has dramatically changed people's lives. This also applies to working life. Among the many visions of the »world after« that emerged during the pandemic was the idea that the days of the traditional office as a common place of work were numbered; the future belonged to teleworking or mobile working.



The results of a representative survey conducted in six EU countries shows, however, that contrary to premature proclamations about an »end to the office«, this form of organisation remains important as a collective workplace. New forms of work organisation are gaining currency at an accelerating pace, however. Similar developments in this direction can be witnessed throughout Europe, which suggests that an incipient uniform European model of work organisation could be emerging.



These new forms of work organisation have come into use at a dizzying pace and have met with broad acceptance. They are now widely regarded as a social achievement, making a return to the status quo ante appear highly unlikely. In spite of all this, the negative effects associated with this trend have received too little attention to date.

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Content

	INTRODUCTION	2
1	THE OFFICE IS NOT DEAD, LONG LIVE THE OFFICE?	4
1.1	Where is office work being done these days?	4
1.2	The work environment is changing	4
1.3	Hybrid working arrangements are in high demand	6
2	TOWARDS A EUROPEAN MODEL OF WORK ORGANISATION	8
2.1	How is teleworking regulated in Europe?	8
2.2	Teleworking: popular among teleworkers ... and others	9
2.3	Teleworking: regularly and in moderation	9
2.4	Codetermination: all employees want the same thing	12
3	WHAT TELEWORKING TELLS US ABOUT WORK	14
3.1	Status of activities that are feasible for teleworking	14
3.2	Individualisation of work: a social advance without social confrontation	15
3.3	Teleworking is regarded as an improvement in living conditions rather than an improvement in working conditions	15
3.4	Workers' expectations of employers concern work materials and equipment rather than management	18
4	CONCLUSION	21

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed people's lives all over Europe, both in general and with regard to work in particular. In a few short weeks stark dividing lines were drawn between different groups of workers. While so-called key workers were preoccupied with health care, food and transport – in other words with ensuring basic needs – other groups of workers were compelled to carry out their work, sometimes under difficult circumstances, at home (referred to as »home office« working), while others, especially in countries without much of a welfare state, slipped into precarious living conditions or even poverty.

During this period marked by a multitude of expectations and acrimony, we all tried to assuage our anxieties by imagining what the world would be like »when it is all over«. Indeed, the world of work was a particular area for projecting ideas about how things would be »when it is all over«. In France, as in other European countries, system-critical workers finally emerged (temporarily) from the shadows into the limelight. We were forced to realise that key workers – health care employees, store checkout staff, teachers – were for the most part paid below average wages, while it became apparent that office staff in particular were perfectly capable of doing their work at home.¹ Finally, it was predicted that the days of the traditional office as a common place of work were numbered.

The question arose whether the traditional office really made sense any more as a workplace. Two phenomena in particular brought this question onto the agenda, which only 15 years earlier would have been inconceivable. On one hand, there is the development of new technologies that have fragmented our workplaces. While the office had been the sole place of work for salaried employees since the early nineteenth century, with the coming of the internet it became possible to work in a range of different places: at home, on public transport, in a café or even on holiday. On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic, which for months on end forced many workers to work from home, called into question the exclusivity of the office as a workplace. In just a few days what had previously seemed impossible had come to pass, namely that workers – albeit under very different conditions – could set about their work, perform their tasks

or organise work processes without seeing one another or being physically at the same location. Instead, the internet became people's common workplace.

These reflections on the fragmentation of the workplace and on the significance of the office as a work location have given rise to far-reaching deliberations among companies and public authorities, among other things regarding the re-organisation of workplaces, workers' ideas and expectations regarding employers, and the social dialogue as well.²

Besides these issues arising from changes in office work, we also thought it would be interesting to ask whether a uniform European model of work organisation was beginning to take shape against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences. We are well aware that our working cultures are largely shaped by our national cultures. People do not work the same way in Spain, Germany, France or Sweden. On the other hand, the Covid-19 pandemic imposed more or less the same rules, rhythms and conditions on office workers everywhere. And because teleworking everywhere appears to be embedded in organisational practice, the question arises as to whether a uniform European model of work organisation is crystallising and whether perhaps employees' expectations are converging in Europe. It was with all this in mind that the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES), the Fondation Jean-Jaurès (FJJ) and consultancy firm Selkis commissioned a survey on new organisational forms of office work in Europe. This will provide experts and social partners in Europe with new information that will enable them to analyse and anticipate ongoing changes in work organisation. The survey was conducted in six EU countries – Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Sweden – with a representative panel of 6,027 respondents. Some questions were put to the whole panel, others only to the 3,388 office workers in the full panel (56 per cent).

In the analysis of the results, a deep dive is to be performed over the coming months in dialogue with social actors from the six countries included and interpreted in the context of

¹ This study is concerned mainly with office staff.

² Cf. IFOP / FJJ / Selkis (2021): *Le bureau fragmenté, où allons-nous travailler demain?* [The fragmented office – where will we work tomorrow?], survey of May 2021; Proust, Sarah (2021): *Télétravail: la fin du bureau?* [Teleworking : the end of the office?], Éditions de l'Aube, Paris.

the relevant work culture. Three important results can already be identified: (i) contrary to premature announcements at the start of the pandemic, the office remains significant as a collective workplace; (ii) the results clearly indicate that a European work model is forming and beginning to establish itself; and (iii) employees' perceptions of teleworking provide insight into the value attached to work and their expectations of it.

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1

THE OFFICE IS NOT DEAD, LONG LIVE THE OFFICE?

1.1 WHERE IS OFFICE WORK BEING DONE THESE DAYS?

The office,³ as we know it today, emerged from the efforts of the state to assert its power by better organising administrative processes. In France, the origins of bureaucratisation date back to the reign of Louis XIV and were consolidated in the course of the French Revolution and under the First Empire in the form of a strongly centralised pyramidal state structure, codified law and large-scale public infrastructure projects.⁴ This was followed by a long period in which office routine was characterised by paper pushing, dust, boredom, uniformity, sociability and division of labour, as well as a workplace designed to enable direct control by superiors.

But what is office work like today? In our survey 38 per cent of office workers work in an individual office, 35 per cent in multi-person offices, 21 per cent in an open-plan office, 9 per cent in flex-office and 5 per cent exclusively in home office.⁵

Looking at the results, the following aspects stand out (Figure 1):

First of all, it is notable that the office in the sense of a space occupied by one or more people remains the most important workplace.

Furthermore, working in open-plan offices has increased not inconsiderably, although this does not account for more than around a quarter of employees. This kind of workplace organisation is most widespread in Sweden (28 per cent) and Finland (27 per cent).

It is worth looking at company size in this respect (Figure 2). In all the countries included in the survey, as a rule the larger the company, the more likely it is to use open-plan offices. The only exception is Sweden, where open-plan offices are found most often in medium-sized companies.⁶

Another interesting point arises in connection with flex offices. This is not so much a form of organising work space as it is a way of organising work, which in turn has consequences for workplace organisation (for example, when companies try to reduce their office space). The distribution of office space is a bone of contention among employees because it is associated with the notion that one has to get to the office very early to make sure one gets a desk or a seat. This is because companies no longer provide a full-fledged workplace for all employees, but only between 0.6 and 0.8 of a workplace per employee.

Working in flex offices is thus unpopular, although according to the survey it is still not widespread in any of the countries (Figure 3). The uncertainty inherent in this form of working, i.e. what situation you find when you get to work, is noted in all the countries. In actual practice, however, a regulated flex office is developing, where workers use meeting rooms, reservation apps, etc., so that they can always find a workspace.

Although office organisation in general, as well as working in open-plan offices and flex offices in particular, is often criticised, the vast majority of respondents stated that they were satisfied with the changes that have taken place in workplace organisation since the pandemic (Figure 4).

1.2 THE WORK ENVIRONMENT IS CHANGING

The survey next enquired about the reorganisation of the work environment since the Covid-19 pandemic. Some 71 per cent of respondents replied in the affirmative (Figure 5) to the question »Has your company/authority/organisa-

³ According to the *Le Robert* dictionary the term *bureau* originated in the thirteenth century and derives from the word *bure*, which was a kind of thick brown woollen cloth. This was laid on the table to muffle the sound when money was being counted. Over the following centuries, the term *bureau* was also used in French to refer to the item of furniture on which copies were made and documents drawn up.

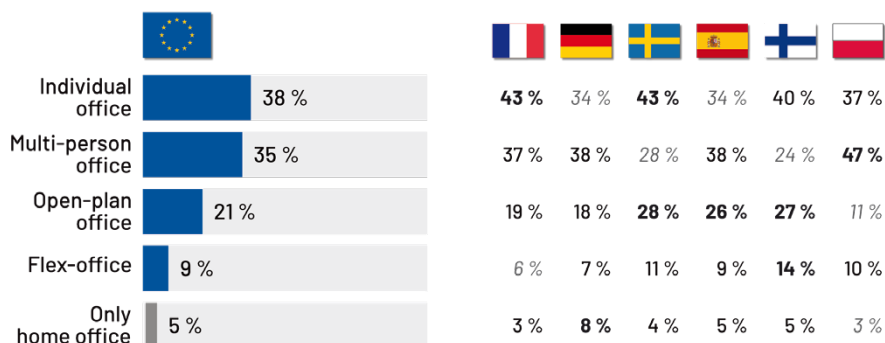
⁴ Cf. Dibie, Pascal (2020): *Ethnologie du bureau. Brève histoire d'une humanité assise* [Ethnology of the office. A brief history of a seated humanity], Paris, Métailié.

⁵ The total exceeds 100 per cent because several answers were possible.

⁶ The following EU definitions are used for company sizes: micro-enterprise = fewer than 10 persons employed; small enterprise = 10–49 persons; medium-sized enterprise (M) = 50–249 persons; SME = 1–249 persons; large enterprise (L) = 250 persons or more.

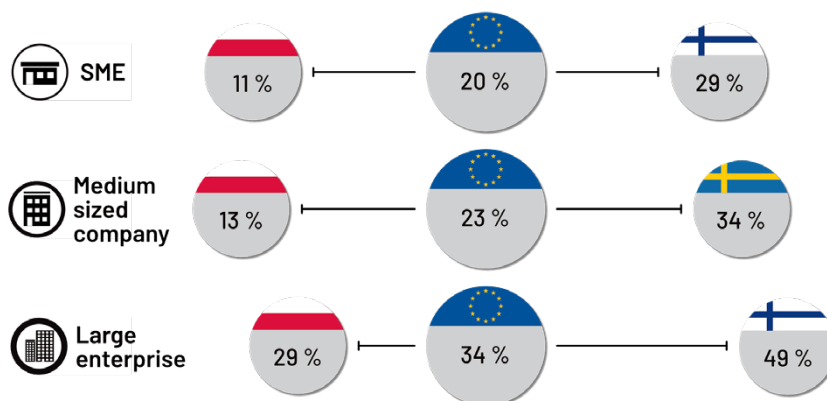
Workplaces

1



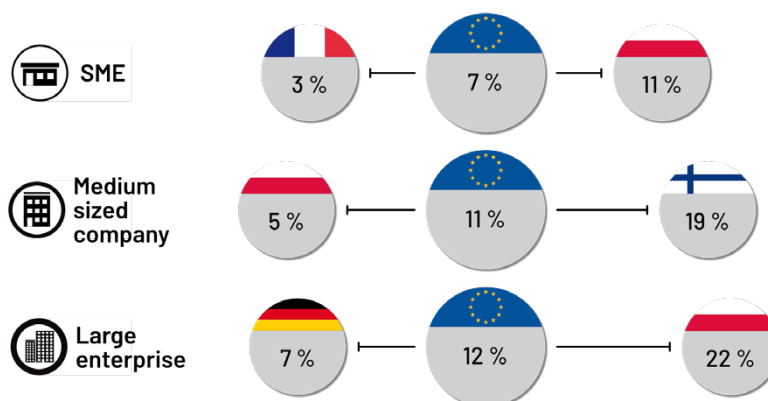
Proportion of employees in open-plan offices by company size (as a %)

2



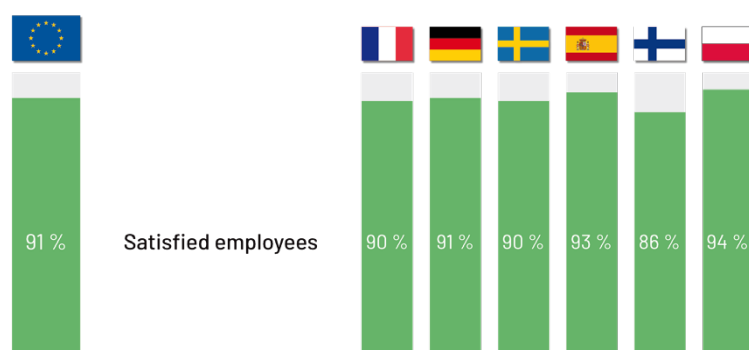
Employees working in flex-offices by company size (as a %)

3



Satisfaction with work organisation

4



tion permanently changed the organisation of your work environment since the pandemic?»

It is notable that the work environment has permanently changed for at least two-thirds of employees in all the countries surveyed. Furthermore, the responses show that all possible options have been tried: more individual offices, more flex-offices, more third locations and more open-plan offices, and all of them more or less to the same extent. In other words, no model appears to be dominant as work organisation continues to develop. Rather there is a variety of workplace types corresponding to different working arrangements. The results reveal a tendency towards a spatial redistribution of activities in the main workplace (Figure 6).

A number of interesting findings arise from this. First, throughout Europe, workers would prefer to work at least half the time in the office and the other half in home office. The proportions are similar for all countries. This underlines how much the office is still regarded as the central workplace.

Not only that, but teleworking appears to be less a flight from the office and rather a wish to work more from home. In fact, our survey confirms that working in third locations or in coworking spaces is not very attractive for employees in Europe at present.

Finally, and in our view this is the most important point, the results confirm that a European model of work organisation is forming.

1.3 HYBRID WORKING ARRANGEMENTS ARE IN HIGH DEMAND

Various surveys, studies, press articles and interviews show that both employees and company managements prefer hybrid work arrangements: 73 per cent of respondents would like to spend at least half of their working time in an office. This finding is confirmed for all the countries in the survey (Figure 7).

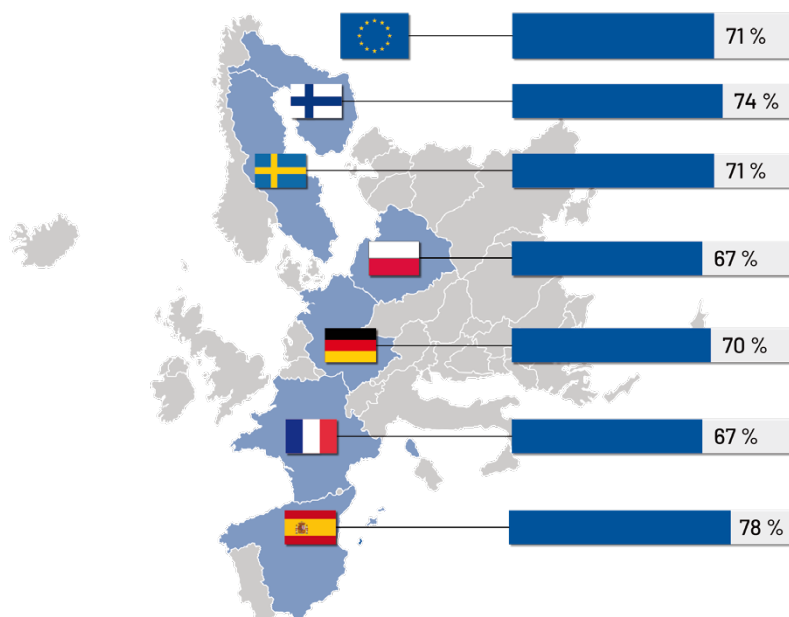
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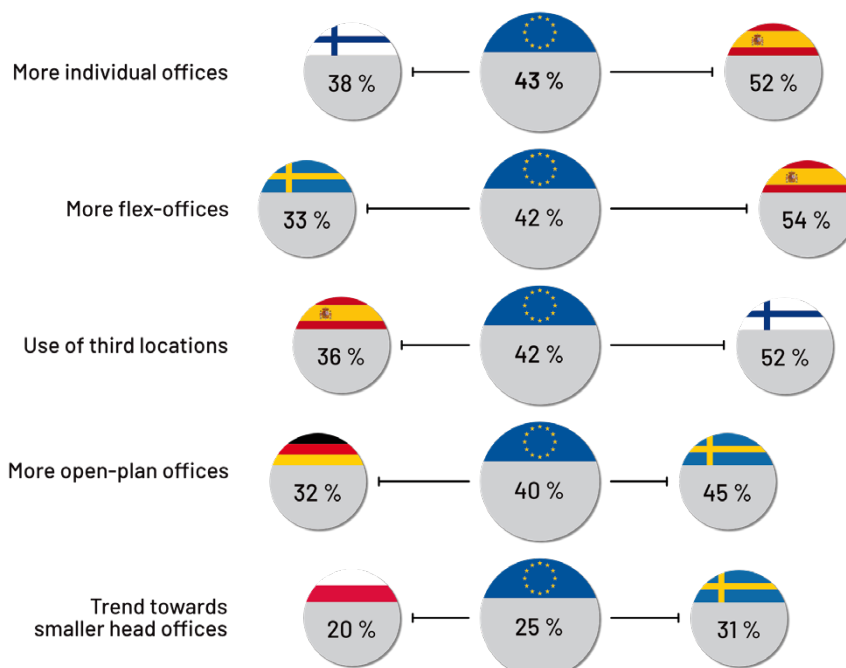
Changes to workplaces since the Covid-19 pandemic

5



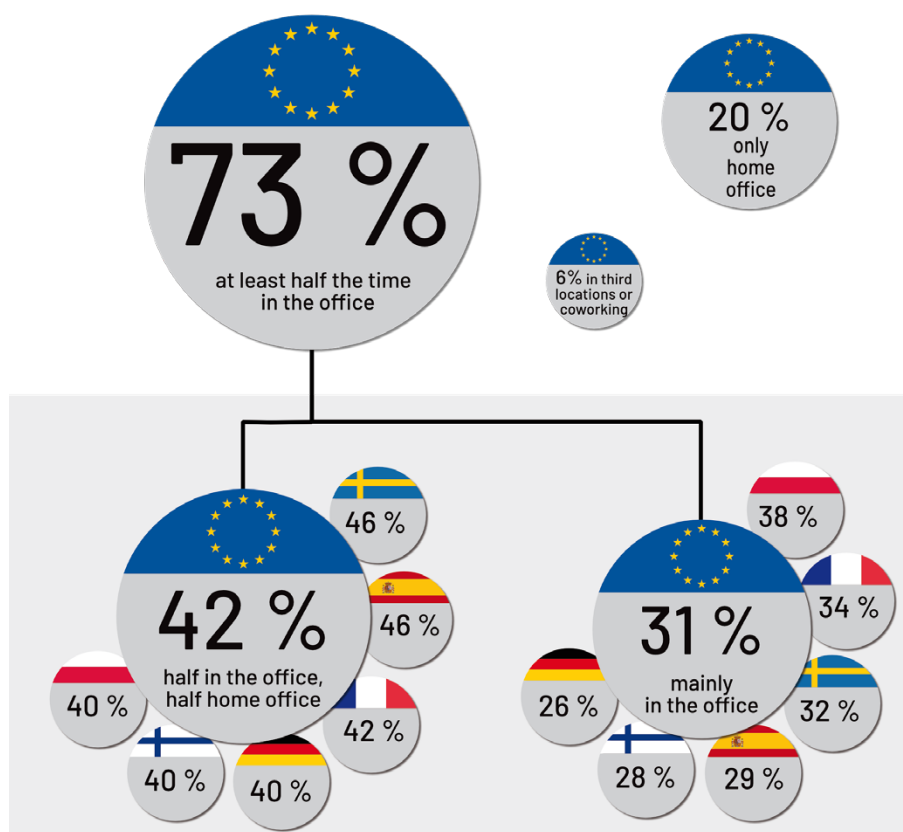
Type of workplace modification since the Covid-19 pandemic

6



Where would employees like to work?

7



2

TOWARDS A EUROPEAN MODEL OF WORK ORGANISATION

2.1 HOW IS TELEWORKING REGULATED IN EUROPE?

In 2002, the European social partners – the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC), the Union of Industrial and Employers' Confederations (UNICE) and the European Centre of Employers and Enterprises (CEEP) – signed a European framework agreement. This provided in particular for teleworkers to enjoy the same rights as other workers, namely as regards health and safety, work organisation, respect for private life, training and collective rights. This non-binding agreement left it to the Member States to regulate its practical application through legislation. It should be noted that whereas 20 years ago this framework agreement was aimed at protecting teleworkers from the encroachment of new technologies, today teleworking is regarded more as a right that benefits employees.

When teleworking was used during the Covid-19 pandemic as a way of ensuring continued employment for workers, on 21 January 2021 the European Parliament passed a resolution on protection and recognition of the right to disconnect outside working time.

France

In 2005, a national cross-sectoral agreement adopted the basic regulations laid down in the European framework agreement on teleworking. In 2012, the so-called Warsmann Act – inter alia – incorporated teleworking into labour law. A number of principles were established or reaffirmed, including voluntariness, the obligation to enter into a contractual agreement, and reversibility. In 2017, labour law was reformed through President Macron's ordinances. In particular the legal framework for teleworking was simplified to promote its development.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic a new cross-sectoral agreement on regular teleworking was adopted at the end of 2020. This lays down what counts as teleworking, as well as its areas of application, and introduces the basic principle of mutual voluntariness. It also stipulates that employers are to bear the costs associated with such work, including the provision of IT equipment. Finally, in July 2021 a framework agreement was adopted on introducing teleworking in public services, which laid down how this process was to

take place. Besides the classic principles of voluntariness and reversibility, this agreement grants public service employees the option of mobile working for up to three days a week.

Germany

There is no separate law on teleworking in Germany. Instead, it is governed by general labour law, which has been extended and amended over the years. The difference between home office and mobile working is important in Germany. While home office is an extension of office work, and thus regulated by general norms establishing occupational health and safety standards for employees in their home office workplace, mobile working encompasses every possible space outside the office (while travelling, in a café and so on) and thus is not subject to the stricter legal provisions applying to workplaces. The Occupational Health and Safety Act provides that employers are to guarantee employees' health and safety when they work in their home office and either provide them with office supplies or defray their costs. It also establishes that a weekly working time must be agreed with employees. In the meantime numerous sectoral collective agreements have been adopted that set out a framework for the negotiation of company agreements on a wide range of matters: availability of teleworking, organisation of working time, right to disconnect, occupational health, data protection, the employer bearing the costs of office supplies and so on).

Spain

It was already possible to engage in teleworking in Spain before the Covid-19 pandemic, but there was very little interest. As a result of negotiations between the government and the trade unions, the Teleworking Act adopted in October 2020 introduced a series of basic principles regulating this new form of work organisation. First of all, the law quantifies and specifies the threshold beyond which an employee is counted as a teleworker. This applies when, over a three-month period, someone works more than 30 per cent of their normal daily working time outside their normal workplace. The law also specifies that the company is responsible for direct and indirect costs of work equipment and materials necessary to perform the work. The practical aspects are then laid down in a collective agreement or an agreement between the company and employees. Finally, the law makes possible or confirms further legal rights for employees, especially the

right to training, occupational further training, flexible working time and the right to disconnect.

Sweden

Teleworking was already common in the Nordic countries and very few changes were made to labour law as a result of the pandemic. In most cases occasional or regular teleworking are regulated by individual and informal agreements at company level. Nevertheless, a few things specific to Sweden and Finland and should be highlighted. Since 2005, Sweden has had a legal framework on teleworking stipulating that employers and employees must reach an agreement on how teleworking should be implemented. However, even though teleworking was already fairly widespread in Sweden before the pandemic, the public authorities sought to introduce a new teleworking strategy, which was outlined in a report published in spring 2021. According to this report, a number of aspects need to be taken into account when implementing teleworking: the home, office equipment, family situation and individual IT knowledge. It was also agreed that the employer needs to pay for any technical equipment needed for teleworking.

Finland

After publication of the European Framework Agreement on Teleworking in 2002, the Finnish government adopted a series of measures to make it easier to introduce teleworking. In 2007, the Finnish Ministry of Labour published guidelines on teleworking to help companies set up this form of working. A law of January 2020 (that is, before the pandemic) grants full-time employees the right to decide for themselves where and when they want to work for up to half of their working hours. Certain expenses arising from teleworking can also be set off against tax.

Poland

Poland enshrined the possibility of teleworking in law in 2007. In actual practice, very little use was made of this option before the pandemic. In the wake of the pandemic, however, the Polish parliament enacted a number of temporary solutions for teleworking aimed at protecting workers. Furthermore, a new chapter of the Labour Code is under discussion that would provide a framework for teleworking. For example, »occasional teleworking« would initially be set at fewer than 24 hours per year and the employer is supposed to bear the costs of electricity and telecommunications.

It should be noted that, even in crises such as the pandemic, how a country acts is shaped by its normative culture, which in some cases is based more on legislation and in others more on contractual arrangements. But it is also interesting that certain common principles are laid down, despite very different circumstances, including voluntariness, free choice of workplace and the employer bearing the cost of setting up the »tele-workplace«.

2.2 TELEWORKING: POPULAR AMONG TELEWORKERS ... AND OTHERS

A large majority of respondents to our survey replied affirmatively when asked whether, in their estimation, introducing teleworking is good for employees and for work organisation. Looking at the answers of those respondents whose company has already introduced teleworking, the results are even more positive. Even more clear-cut are the findings among respondents at whose company teleworking is already a regular fixture (that is, more than two days a week). In other words, the more teleworking is practiced, the more positively it is perceived (Figure 8).

2.3 TELEWORKING: REGULARLY AND IN MODERATION

Looking at what employees want and how these wishes are handled in practice, we should stress at the outset that teleworking is already widespread, organised primarily on a weekly basis and usually takes place at least two days a week.

Teleworking is establishing itself

To the question »Has your company/authority made teleworking available and in what rhythm?«, the predominant share of respondents, 78 per cent, answered »yes« and 37 per cent stated that teleworking is practiced »regularly« (Figure 9).

Looking at Eurostat data on the development of teleworking from 2019 shows that before the pandemic there were marked differences between countries: less than 5 per cent of employees in Spain teleworked regularly, as opposed to 10 per cent in Finland; in Spain once again less than 5 per cent were engaged in occasional teleworking, compared with 20 per cent of employees in Sweden. While the initial situation before the Covid-19 pandemic was very diverse, in 2022 all countries found themselves in a similar situation. The proportions of teleworkers in Sweden and Spain are now almost the same.

Breaking down the results by company size, we can say for Europe as a whole that, the bigger the company, the more likely it is that it uses teleworking (Figure 10).

Teleworking is thus establishing itself. To the question of what they want for the future, a majority of respondents answered: »regular teleworking«, and this is especially the case if they work at a company that already provides regular teleworking (Figure 11).

Most often a rhythm of two teleworking days a week is preferred, by 29 per cent of respondents. In contrast, apart from in Spain and Finland, 100 per cent teleworking is much less popular than no teleworking at all. Demand for 100 per cent teleworking is thus not particularly pronounced.

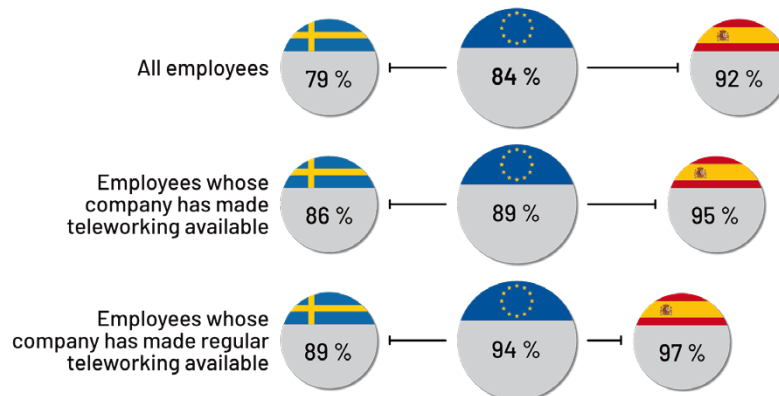
Looking at the results by age groups shows that the group 25–39 years of age prefers two days a week teleworking (between 29 per cent in Spain and 38 per cent in Germany) with the exception of Sweden, where a rhythm of below two days a week is preferred (37 per cent). In Germany, Spain and Poland 40–49 year-olds prefer two days a week teleworking, in Finland more than two days and in France and Sweden fewer than two days.

Among those over 50 years of age, it is only employees in France and Germany who want to do more than two days a week teleworking, while employees in Spain and Finland prefer two days and employees in Poland fewer than two days.

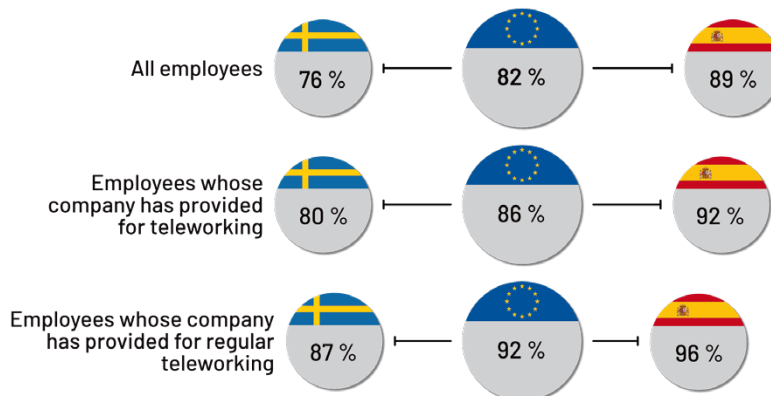
Breaking the results down by gender indicates that, in relation to respondents in all countries, 28 per cent of women and 29 per cent of men prefer two days a week teleworking.

Teleworking is good for employees

8

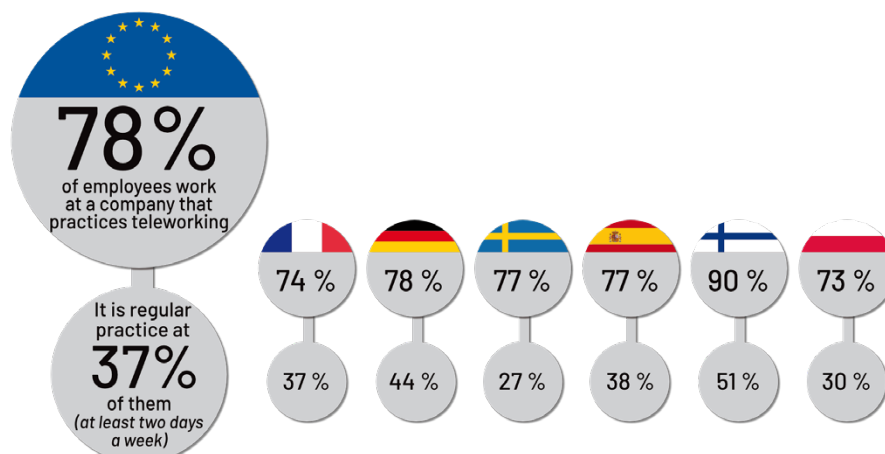


Teleworking is good for the company



Plans for teleworking in the near future

9



This finding is largely consistent with results by country, except for France where women (27 per cent) as well as men (28 per cent) prefer a rhythm of fewer than two days a week; the same applies to Sweden, where 39 per cent of men and 32 per cent of women would like to do fewer than two working days of teleworking.

Teleworking set on a weekly basis (only at the beginning?)

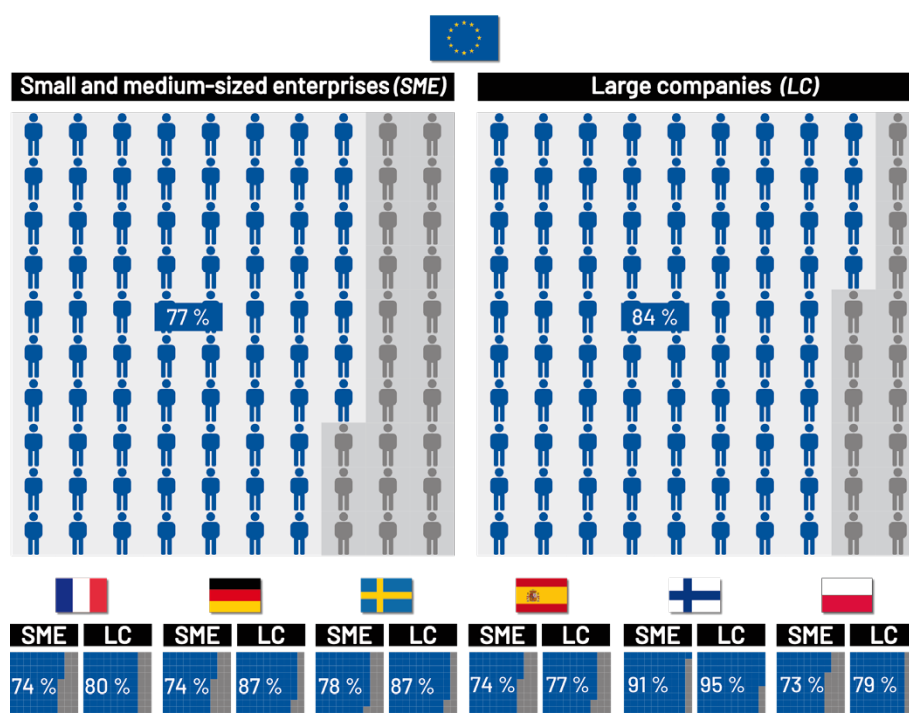
In organisations the proportion of teleworking is usually set on a weekly basis. Only in Finland (45 per cent) and Poland

(46 per cent) are the proportions below 50 per cent. A weekly basis for calculating teleworking time is most widespread in France (58 per cent) and Germany (57 per cent) (Figure 12).

Many companies are currently considering whether to set the number of teleworking days on a monthly or an annual basis. As already mentioned, teleworking is more strongly established in larger organisations; and the larger the enterprise the more likely it is that teleworking is set on a monthly or annual basis. Across all the countries in the study, however,

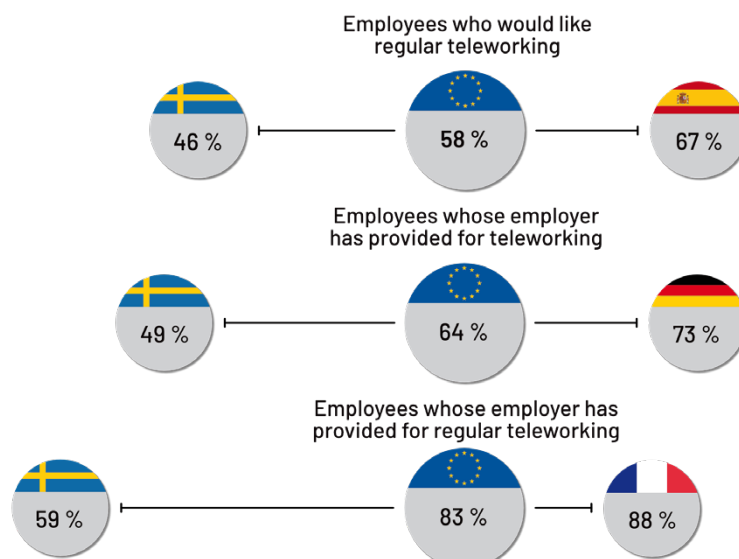
Proportion of employees affected by teleworking by company size

10



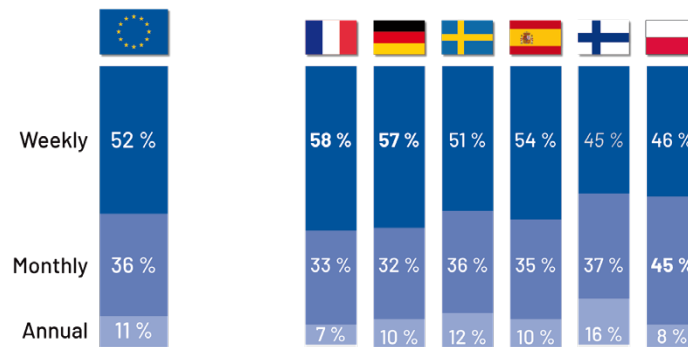
In what kind of rhythm would you like to telework?

11

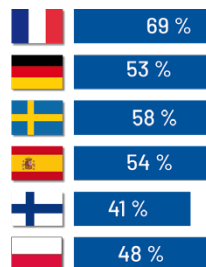


Is the upper limit on teleworking days expressed in weekly, monthly or annual terms?

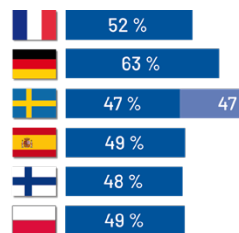
12



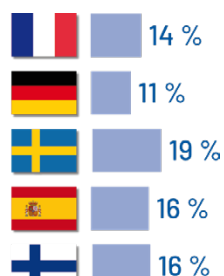
small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) prefer to set the proportion of teleworking on a weekly basis.



This also applies to medium-sized companies with the exception of Sweden, where regulation on a weekly and a monthly basis is equally widespread.



Setting the proportion of teleworking on an annual basis is rarer. This happens mainly in large organisations.



What people want is hybrid working at an amenable rhythm

»When we combine data on the number of days European employees would like to telework with the locations in which they would like to work, we can see how much preference is given to the hybridization of locations and rhythms. »Employees want neither 100 per cent teleworking nor the opposite. Rather, quite reasonably it seems, they would prefer to enjoy the benefits of both.

2.4 CODETERMINATION: ALL EMPLOYEES WANT THE SAME THING

Once again the findings of the survey show that workers' interests are directed in particular towards these different forms of work organisation, but also that they would like a say in designing and structuring them. (Figure 13).

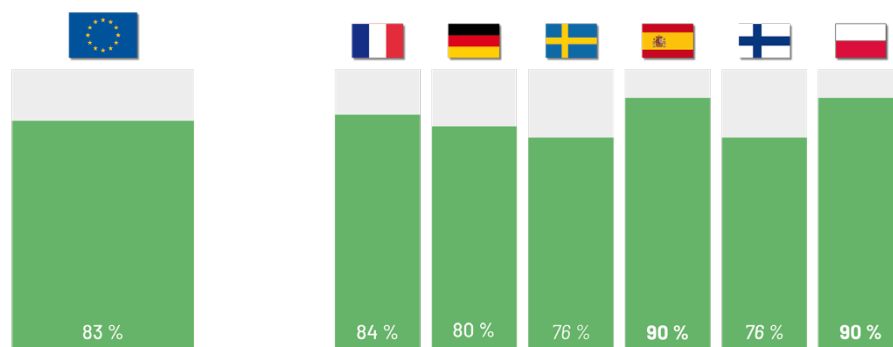
It turns out that demand for participation is lower in countries that already have a strong tradition of compromise and codetermination. Comparison of the data based on age group also shows that the younger the employee, the more they want to be involved (Figure 14).

Employees with participation or consultation

The survey asked to what extent workers were involved in new arrangements instituted since the pandemic, whether with regard to workplace reorganisation or introducing or extending teleworking (Figure 15).

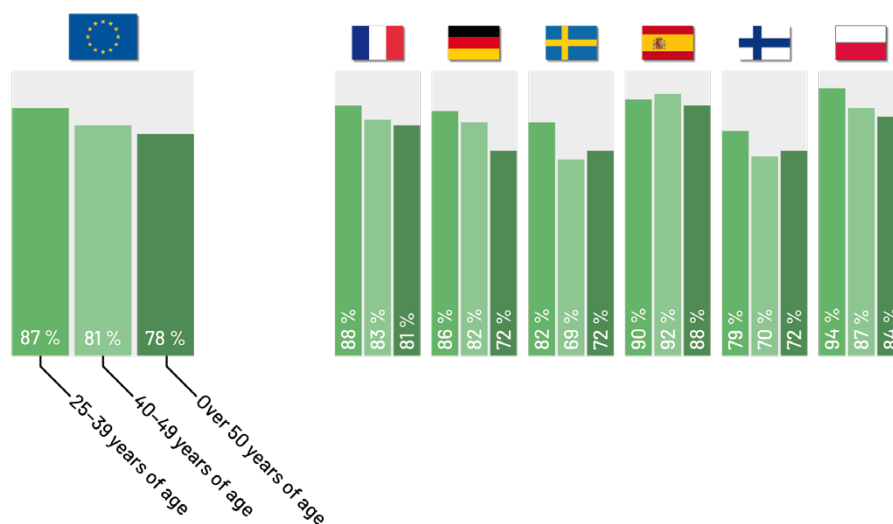
Proportion of employees seeking workers' participation

13



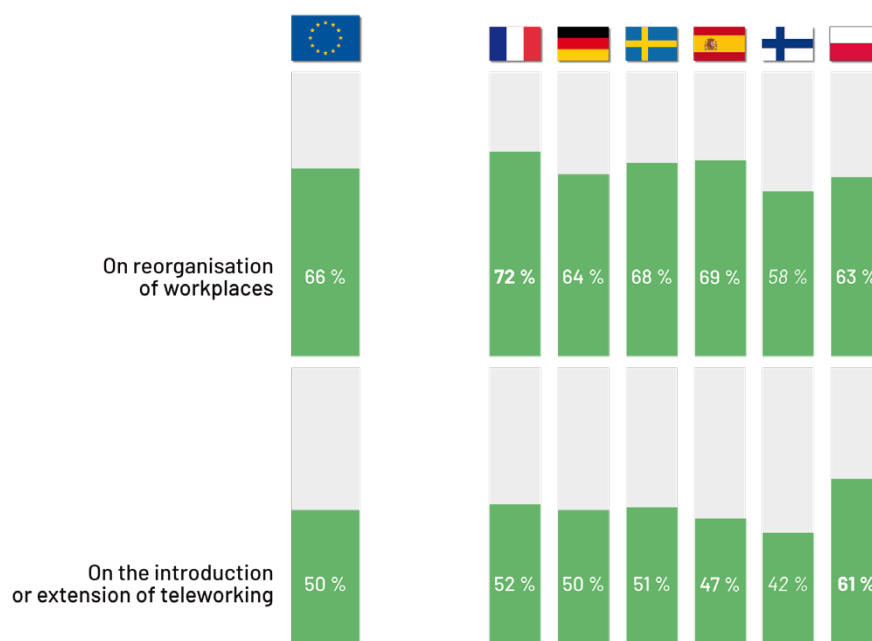
Proportion of employees who would like to be consulted (by age group)

14



Employee participation and consultation

15



3

WHAT TELEWORKING TELLS US ABOUT WORK

3.1 STATUS OF ACTIVITIES THAT ARE FEASIBLE FOR TELEWORKING

A lot has been said and written about how the rate of teleworking varies between occupational groups. While some make more use of teleworking and regard their presence in the office as mainly symbolic, the work of others is not so easy to accomplish through teleworking. Needless to say, there still would be real benefits from having to spend less time and money travelling to work or on food.

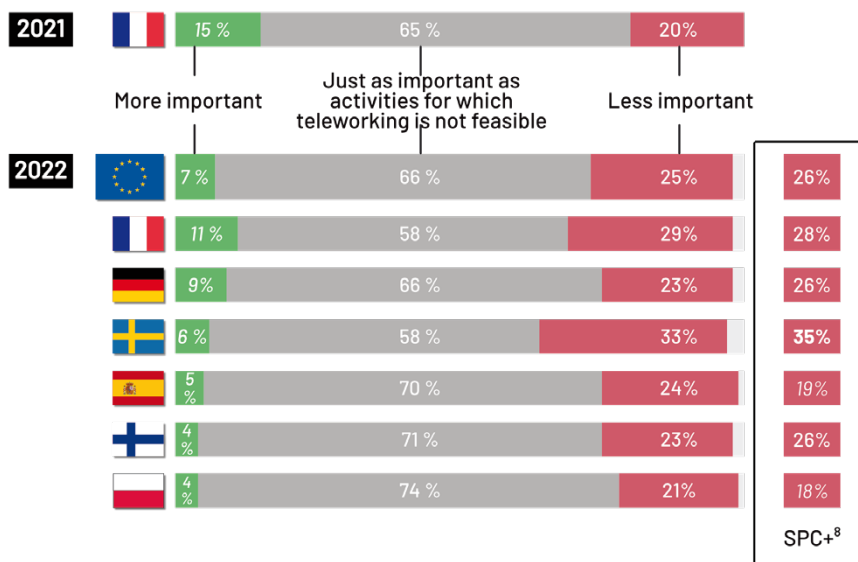
Concerning the value of functions that can be performed via teleworking and those that cannot, a previous survey conducted among French employees in 2021 by the Jean-Jaurès Foundation and the Selkis consultancy showed that 65 per cent of respondents attributed the same value to functions not amenable to teleworking as to those for which teleworking is possible. But 20 per cent expressed the view that the latter are less important.⁷

In our six-EU-country study conducted one year later, in other words after a year's experience of teleworking, and in the context of an easing of the pandemic we posed the question about the value of different functions once again. The results confirm that in general no distinction is drawn between the value attached to activities that are possible via teleworking and those that are not. Nevertheless, a third of respondents did draw this distinction, which means that more people regard teleworking activities as less important than the other way around. The results for individual countries scarcely deviate from the European average (Figure 16).

⁷ Cf. IFOP / FJJ / Selkis (2021): *Le bureau fragmenté, où allons-nous travailler demain ?* [The fragmented office – where are we going to work tomorrow?], survey of May 2021; Proust, Sarah (2021): *Télétravail: la fin du bureau?* [Teleworking: the end of the office?], Éditions de l'Aube, Paris.

Perception of the value of jobs or functions for which teleworking is feasible

16



3.2 INDIVIDUALISATION OF WORK: A SOCIAL ADVANCE WITHOUT SOCIAL CONFRONTATION

Even where a legal framework for it is in place, teleworking everywhere is an individual measure when it comes to its actual implementation. This often requires an addendum to the labour contract and/or the approval of direct superiors. Although the possibility of teleworking is governed by collective agreements, teleworking is thus organised on an individual basis in accordance with the wishes of employees – even though, the direct superior can refuse a teleworking day for reasons of work organisation

Teleworking thus leads to a kind of individualisation of work. Is this inherent, which is to say in the very nature of teleworking, or attributable to how it is implemented? This remains an unresolved question. A partial answer can be found in Spain, however, where companies are trialling collective teleworking, whereby on a given day a work team either comes into the office or engages in teleworking. This seems to ameliorate the disintegration of the collective somewhat.

Our survey findings also allow a political interpretation of teleworking. It is undoubtedly valued equally by employees and organisations. But apart from its associated benefits, is it regarded as a social advancement? In fact, 75 per cent of respondents do regard teleworking as a social advancement. And this perception of social advance is even more prevalent among employees who work for companies that have introduced regular teleworking (Figure 16).

Teleworking is regarded as a social advancement most clearly in Spain: 90 per cent of respondents agree with this. By contrast, in Finland and Sweden there is least enthusiasm for regarding it as a social advancement. Having said that, even

there 63 per cent («definitely») and 66 per cent, respectively, of respondents agree. This is probably because teleworking has been practiced for longest in these countries and thus has become so familiar that it no longer stands out as social progress.

If the data are broken down by age, sex and occupational group the differences are very slight. The valuations of women (89 per cent) and men (92 per cent) are almost the same. The differences between occupational groups are also minor (Figure 17).

Therefore, we can say that teleworking is regarded as a social advancement, and that no social conflict was needed to bring it about. Is this not the first example of such a phenomenon in recent history?

3.3 TELEWORKING IS REGARDED AS AN IMPROVEMENT IN LIVING CONDITIONS RATHER THAN AN IMPROVEMENT IN WORKING CONDITIONS

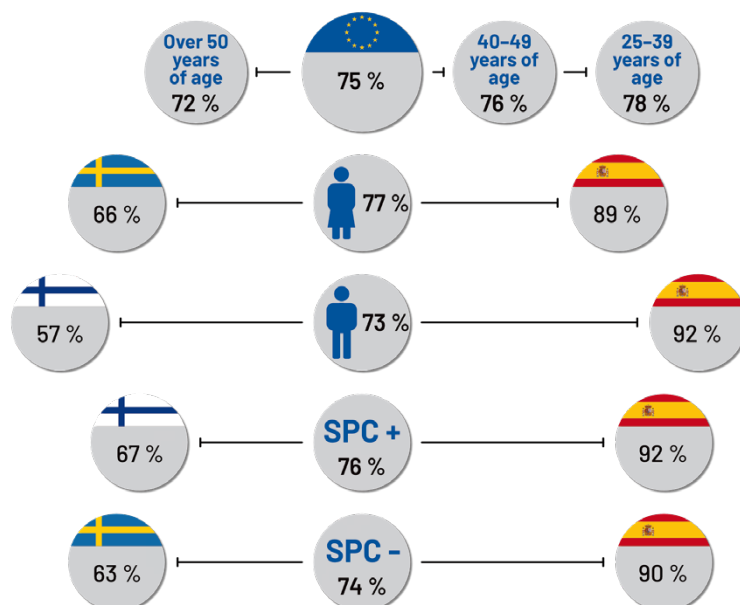
Many studies have already been written on the pros and cons of teleworking. In our survey we tried to distinguish between the negative and positive effects of teleworking from respondents' standpoint by means of a range of possible answers (Figures 18–21).

Four insights can be drawn from these findings: what can we learn from the data on the pros and cons of teleworking?

Positive effects of teleworking:

Four points can be made about the positive effects of teleworking:

Teleworking: considered a social advancement by the following age groups 17



First, the political and social context influences replies to a considerable degree. The emphasis on »making savings (economising)« as a result of teleworking played much less of a role in previous surveys than in our survey conducted in summer 2022, with inflation shooting up all over Europe. The differences between countries are also significant. The following three responses concerning the benefits of teleworking enjoyed the most agreement: »economising« (39 per cent), »less time spent travelling« (38 per cent) and »more efficient working« (27 per cent).

Looking at the results by country, the order changes. One peculiar finding with regard to France is that the response »economising« was mentioned least often, albeit by 29 per cent. In comparison with Spain (50 per cent), Finland (41 per cent) and Poland (40 per cent) shows the marked effects of the energy price cap imposed by the government.

Second, it turns out that the two possible responses mentioned most frequently in all the countries included in the survey concern working conditions: »economising« and »less time spent travelling«. Respondents in Spain are the only ones for whom the third option was not directly related to work, either: »more time with friends and family«. By contrast, in the other countries the third response is directly related to work: »more efficient working« is mentioned third most often, at 27 per cent, as a positive consequence; »fewer interruptions of work than at the office« is mentioned by 28 per cent of respondents in France; »more efficient working« is mentioned by 32 per cent in Germany; in Sweden »more efficient working« and »fewer interruptions of work than at the office« are mentioned as benefits by 29 per cent; in Finland the third most frequently cited benefit is »fewer interruptions of work than at the office« (35 per cent) and in Poland »more autonomy at work« (28 per cent) (Figure 18). Other possible responses concerning working conditions, such as more autonomy, relations with superiors or more time to think about work, were not selected by more than 22 per cent of respondents.

Third, there are slight differences by age group. Whereas for age groups 25–39 and 40–49 »economising« is the most

frequently mentioned positive effect, for those over 50 years of age it is »less time spent travelling«. »More efficient working« is ranked third by all age groups.

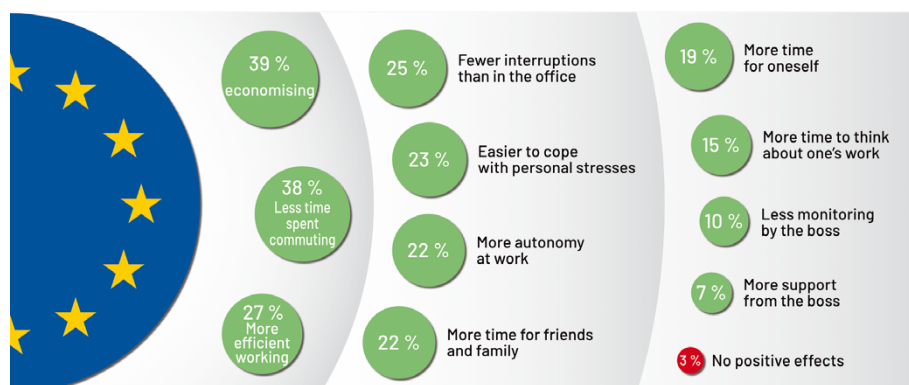
Finally, answers differ between men and women. While women put »economising« in first place (44 per cent, ranking first in all countries except Poland), the benefit mentioned most frequently by men is »less time spent travelling« (36 per cent). Given that women's wages are generally lower than those of men, this finding is not surprising, irrespective of country-specific differences.

Negative effects of teleworking:

Five observations can be made about perceptions of the negative effects of teleworking. First, it is scarcely surprising that the most frequently cited disadvantage of teleworking is the difficulty of separating work and private life (24 per cent of respondents from all countries, ranging from 19 per cent in Germany to 33 per cent in Poland). In four out of the six countries it is the disadvantage mentioned most often: France (20 per cent), Finland (25 per cent), Spain (30 per cent) and Poland (33 per cent). What is striking about these findings is that, in contrast to other responses, it makes little difference whether teleworking is already well established in a given country. For example, the Finns also place this negative effect at the top of the list, while Swedes assign it second place. The merging of living space and working space clearly presents a difficulty that workers often highlighted from the very start of the Covid-19 lockdowns. Working at home did not originate with the introduction of teleworking, however. Women have always engaged in paid handicrafts from home (sewing, washing, ironing). In winter, farmers engage in all kinds of work at home (especially to do with textiles). In short, working from home predates the age of the internet. That also applies to the blurring of lines between work and private life, as well as living and working space. This mixing, however, has been intensified by the hybridisation of work. This has given rise to numerous new problems, which are more serious than material problems. For example, the office is also cherished exactly because it is not in one's own home. When someone arrives at the office in the morning, they can to some extent leave personal or domestic worries behind

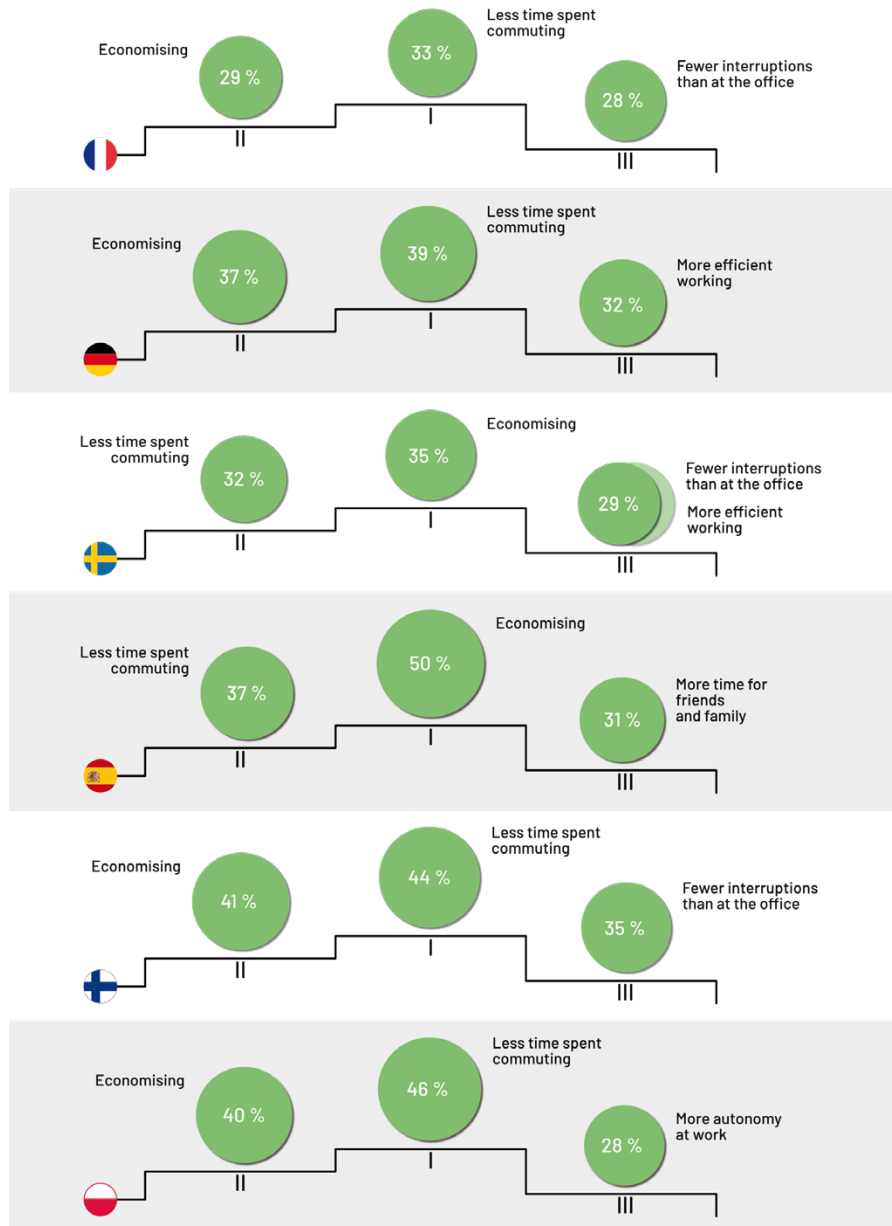
Positive effects of teleworking for European employees

18



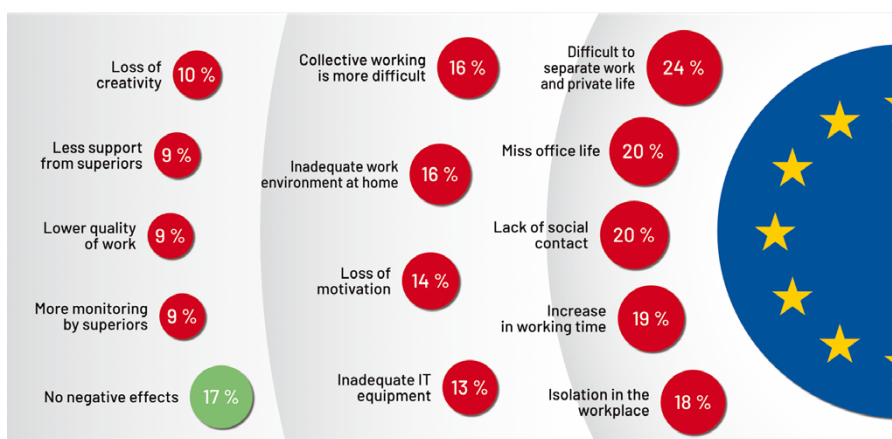
Positive effects of teleworking by country

19



Negative effects of teleworking for European employees

20



them. Basically one creates another personal domain at the workplace. It is subjective, separated and does not include every area of life. One deliberately selects what one talks about and what not, what is revealed and broadcast. By the same token, certain areas of office life are kept well apart from one's private life. Here too, not everything is brought from one place to the other.

What is interesting about this overlapping of one's work and one's private spheres is that not everything is mixed together with everything else. People have a choice and there is clear separation. The question arises whether the more workplaces become fragmented, the stricter the separation of areas of private life from the office, or, on the contrary, the more such separation begins to break down. How, if more and more work is performed at home (third locations are limited to a certain range of people at present), can this separation be maintained which protects living space in both spheres – office and home – and allows us to find room to breathe? In our view this issue requires a broad public debate.

To make a second observation, surveys and research on teleworking often make reference to the issue of social contacts. In our survey this issue of a lack of social contacts is one of the three negative effects of teleworking cited most often by respondents in all countries (with the exception of Sweden). This gives credence to the view that teleworking contributes to the individualisation of work.

Our third observation is that the difficulty of separating work and private life is mentioned as a negative effect of teleworking to a similar extent by all age groups: 23 per cent of 25–39 year olds, 25 per cent of 40–49 year olds, and 27 per cent of those over 50 years of age.

A fourth point of interest is that there are no significant differences between men and women when it comes to their views on this issue. The difficulty of separating work and private life is the negative effect of teleworking mentioned most frequently by both men (22 per cent) and women (27 per cent). And both men and women mention »I miss office life« as a negative effect second most frequently, with little difference between women (21 per cent) and men (20 per cent). Only in the case of the third most frequently mentioned negative effect does a difference arise: while women cite »I generally have fewer social contacts« (21 per cent), men mention »I work more« (19 per cent).

Focusing on women's responses, the following findings stand out: 20 per cent of female employees in France and Sweden, and 29 per cent of female employees in Finland stated that they see no negative effects of teleworking. It is also notable that a third of female employees in Spain emphasise the difficulty of separating work and private life, while another third (31 per cent) of women workers in Poland stress the problem of poor working conditions in home office.

Turning to a fifth remark, concentrating on respondents who mentioned no negative effects of teleworking: Disaggregating by age, gender and occupational group, we find that in Germany (35 per cent), Finland (32 per cent), Sweden (29 per cent) and Spain (21%) it is primarily the over 50s who see no negative effects. In France, those aged 40–49 (23 per cent) see some negative effects, while in Poland no more than 13 per cent in any age group acknowledge negative effects. Considering that living standards are higher in Germany, Finland and Sweden than in Spain and Poland, these findings seem to confirm the hypothesis that workers in richer countries suffer less from negative aspects of teleworking.

In summary, analysis of our survey findings leads us to the conclusion that teleworking tends to improve (or worsen) living conditions rather than working conditions. This is suggested by the fact that teleworking used to be regarded merely as a form of decoupling from a fixed workplace, not as a new way of working, which accordingly requires new rules, a different organisation and a new conception of work, its aims and its evaluation. Where there is some awareness that management needs to change, this needs time, not so much to take various training courses on »distance management«, but to develop new practices that rethink working time, its asynchronous organisation, work evaluation and worker autonomy.

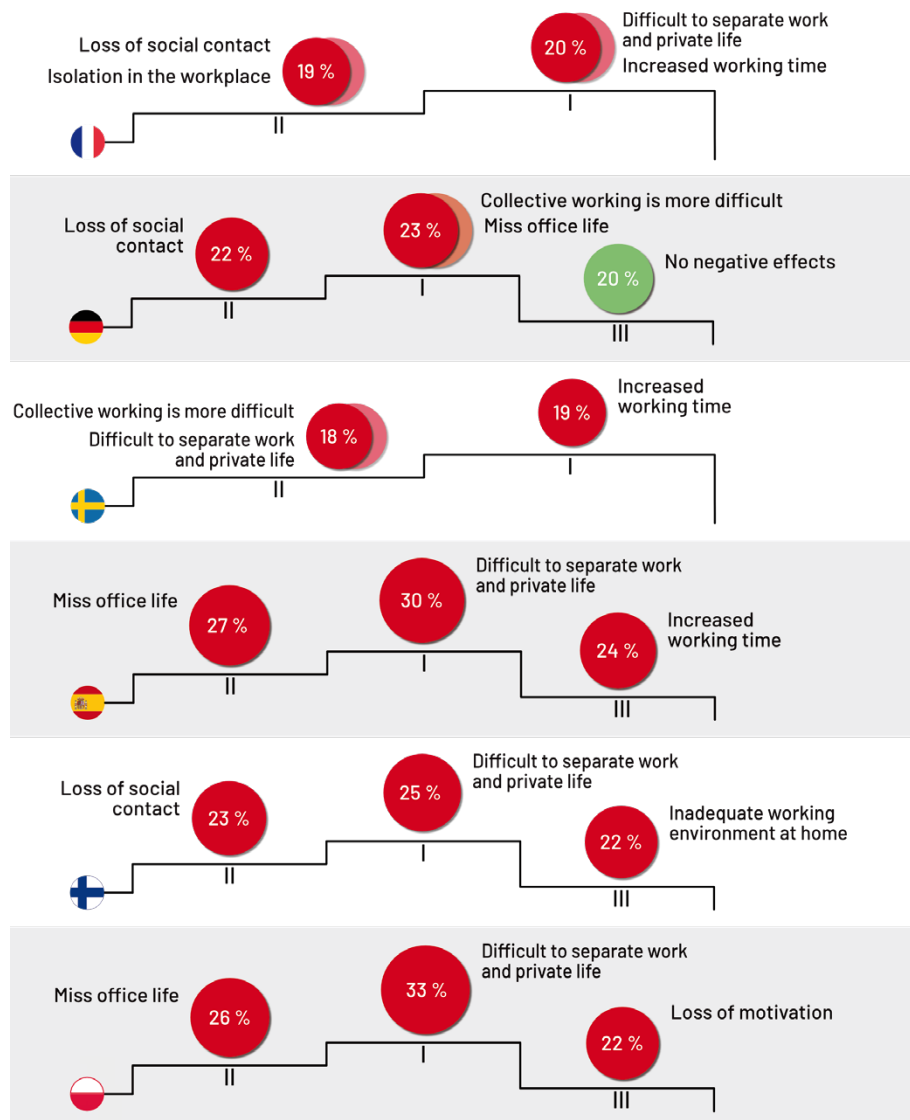
In addition to the survey questions on the benefits and disadvantages of teleworking, we asked respondents whether, with the introduction of teleworking, work had assumed a higher or a lower priority in their lives, or whether it had had no effects. As in the debate that has developed on this issue over the past few months, opinion is also divided among our respondents. While 35 per cent take the view that work takes up less of their lives since the advent of teleworking, 37 per cent replied that it takes up more time, and 27 per cent that it has had no effects. It's interesting that these findings scarcely vary between those who practice teleworking and those who do not (Figure 22).

3.4 WORKERS' EXPECTATIONS OF EMPLOYERS CONCERN WORK MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT RATHER THAN MANAGEMENT

Regarding employees' expectations of their employer the findings show that they are less concerned with issues directly related to actually carrying out their work: 35 per cent expect closer adaptation of working time to their needs, while another 35 per cent are concerned about the provision of work materials (IT, office chair, desk and so on) and 28 per cent would like the employer to contribute to ongoing expenses (electricity, heating and so on). Expectations revolve least around work organisation, regardless of regulations and arrangements in the relevant country (Figure 23).

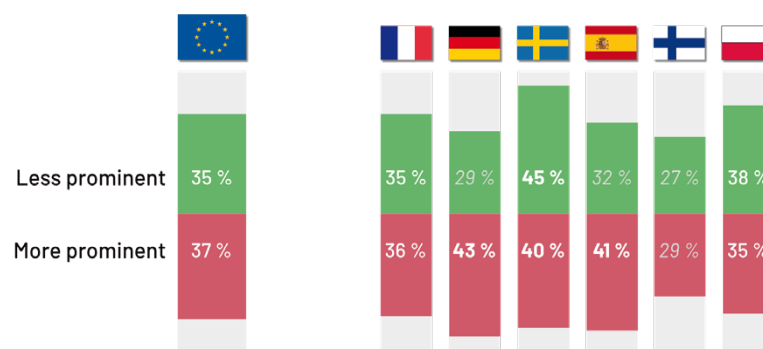
Negative effects of teleworking

21



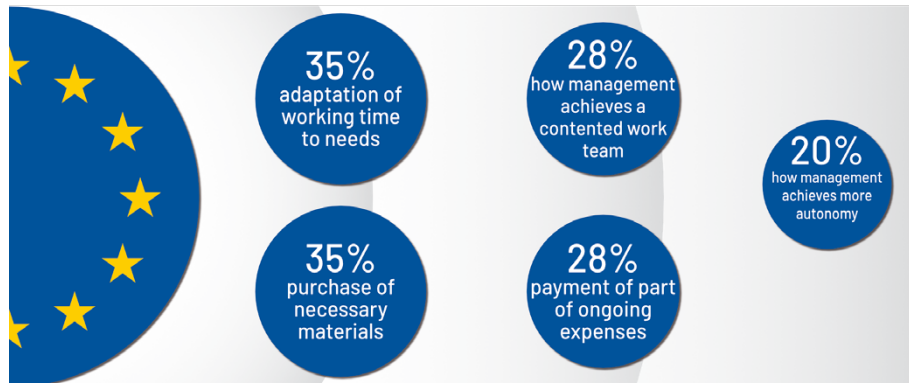
How prominent is work in the lives of employees with teleworking?

22



Expectations toward the employer with regard to teleworking

23



4

CONCLUSION

At first sight, teleworking appears to be a simple issue. It concerns the organisation of the working week, an agreement with one's superiors, and ways of organising team work. But after almost three years, during which the ascendance of teleworking was fuelled by the Covid-19 pandemic, things look rather different. Teleworking is a complex issue with many facets, bound up and interrelated with many other social aspects.

Teleworking is a political issue

If teleworking should be regarded as a political issue, one must state that it has scarcely been treated as such so far. When one realises that it is primarily office workers in the tertiary (service) sector and, furthermore, that hybrid working (sometimes in the office, sometimes teleworking) is preferred and made available, the effects of teleworking on public transport, housing policy, local development, digitalisation and general spatial planning become more understandable. Teleworking thus raises questions that require a redefinition of local and national policies.

Teleworking has contradictory consequences

Some issues are inherently polarising. Teleworking provides for a certain quality of life which is valued by those who practice it, and even by those without sizeable dwellings, but who, for example, benefit from the time they gain from not having to make as many journeys to their workplaces. On the other hand, teleworking goes hand in hand with a distancing from social contacts in the office, not necessarily from work, but from the organisation where one is employed. This leads to a loss of a sense of belonging and to a growing distance from collective workplace culture. Teleworking is inherently contradictory, translating into gains in quality of life on the one hand, and disintegration of the social working environment on the other. We have accepted teleworking with dizzying speed without giving its negative aspects sufficient attention. Teleworking today seems to be an acquired right

to the extent that a return to the previous status quo ante is inconceivable. Not the least contradictory aspect of teleworking is the fact that it has become established without those conflicts that tend to accompany the assertion of social rights.

Teleworking is changing work

Should we, in the interest of workers' equality, push ahead with the detachment of work activities from a particular workplace and also make teleworking available to those occupations that are not really suitable for it at present? Is it not inconsistent to make all official business open to teleworking, even though the real point of the authorities is their proximity to and direct contact with users? Is it not absurd to have employees work at home, but to impose office hours on them? And is it not odd, with teleworking, to favour an individualised form of work but to maintain the same narrow framework? Can the organisation of work teams remain the same as before, along with the setting of goals and the evaluation of work when workplaces are becoming increasingly fragmented?

These issues reveal the extent to which teleworking is calling into question work itself, its future, how it is carried out and where. There is a whole range of issues that require social reflection and debate.

This study is the result of a cooperation with the Jean-Jaurès-Foundation. The French version was published jointly under the title: «Travailler autrement? Comment la pandémie a changé les organisations du travail en Europe».

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The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in France was opened in Paris in 1985. Its activities aim to fulfil a mediating function in Franco-German relations below the level of exchange and cooperation between the governments of Germany and France. The focus is on giving decision-makers from politics and administration as well as actors from civil society the opportunity to exchange views on issues of mutual concern and to learn about the problems and challenges facing the other side. German and French partners of the FES can thus arrive at common positions, especially on European integration, and draw on the existing knowledge and experience of the neighbouring country when formulating solutions to their own problems. Long-standing series of events include the Franco-German Strategy Talks (« Cercle stratégique ») on current foreign and security policy issues, annual conferences on current economic policy issues (« Franco-German Business Dialogue ») and the Franco-German Trade Union Forum.

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