

Resources

Working conditions and sustainable work

Flexible work increases post-pandemic, but not for everyone

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Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, various forms of flexible work, such as teleworking and flexitime, were in place across EU Member States. However, the pandemic led to a surge in flexible working practices with many workers wanting to focus on their work–life balance and have more time for their family and personal life. There is much debate on the pros and cons of flexible work initiatives, with features such as work–life balance, autonomy, productivity and mental health at the core of the discussions. In addition, flexible working time arrangements could help with the urgent need to future-proof the labour market, especially as the new drivers of change – digitalisation, climate change and the demographic shift – become more salient. In response to this debate, this article looks at the following questions: Has the pandemic permanently altered the traditional boundaries of work? How do EU Member States implement flexible working measures? Why has the widespread adoption of teleworking not been followed by a corresponding increase in flexible working time?

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The reconciliation of work and personal life responsibilities is an issue that has been high on the EU policy agenda for decades given its impact on quality of life, gender equality and work–life balance. Prior to COVID-19, the EU had introduced legislation for employee-oriented flexibility at work with the Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive and the Work–Life Balance Directive. The Work–Life Balance Directive provides the right to request flexible working arrangements (reduced working hours,

flexible working hours and place of work) to all working parents of children up to at least 8 years old and all carers. The directive also states that the use of flexible working time arrangements could tackle gender stereotypes and differences between work and care by ensuring greater work-life balance for both women and men.

The widespread implementation of flexible work during the pandemic shed light on the realities of this working arrangement. Flexible working time allows employees to set their hours according to personal commitments, such as caring responsibilities and preferred working hours. Remote work allows for greater flexibility regarding the place of work, with the additional benefit of lower commute times. However, flexible work may also result in the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, leading to work intensification and 'work on demand' requests.¹

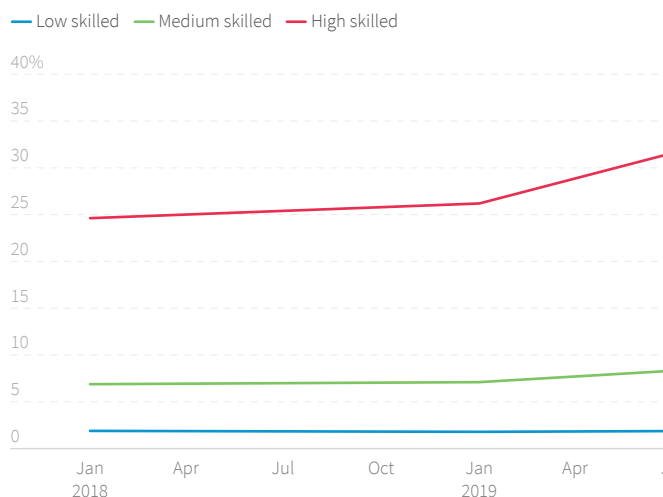
Teleworking: A legacy of the pandemic

In 2020, when the pandemic hit, there was a significant increase in teleworking in most EU Member States, as highlighted by the Network of Eurofound correspondents and the EU Labour Force Survey 2019–2022 (EU-LFS). Remote working policies were adopted across the EU due to travel restrictions and the requirement for workers to stay at home. After this initial surge in teleworking, the number of EU workers working from home continued to increase in 2021, followed by a small decline in 2022, and a general trend of stabilisation by the end of 2022 and 2023. The number of workers teleworking 'usually or sometimes' increased from 14% in 2019 to 24% in 2021, followed by a small decline to 22% in 2022. More than 44 million workers teleworked in the EU.

In some countries (Austria, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, Ireland and the Netherlands) teleworking remains widespread, with almost the same number of workers teleworking in 2022 than in 2020. However, the outlook for teleworking differs in other countries. For instance, Bulgaria and Romania experienced the biggest decline in teleworking after 2021. Other countries also experienced a considerable reduction in workers teleworking (Portugal, Poland, and Greece and Slovakia). Poland is the only country returning to pre-pandemic figures. The remaining 14 Member States follow the EU average; a small decrease in 2022, which then stabilised in 2023 (based on national level LFS quarterly data).

Interestingly, the EU-LFS 2022 shows strong variations in the percentage of people working from home between 2019 and 2022 depending on the skill level of workers. Workers in high-skilled occupations experienced the most significant increase in remote working.

Teleworking by skill level, 2018–2022, EU27(%)



Skill level refers to the ILO classification based on ISCO codes.

Source: EU-LFS 2018–2022, authors' calculations • [Get the data](#) • [Download image](#) • [Download SVG](#)



From 2020 to 2022, 12 Member States updated their telework regulation, either through legislation or national level collective agreements (Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia and Spain).² These updates tackled some of the challenges uncovered by the sudden widespread use of telework, including the obligation on employers to fulfil occupational safety and health provisions and how to safeguard the right to disconnect.

In 2023, some governments addressed specific policy measures in relation to work flexibility. The most recent national policies mainly deal with the integration of specific teleworking regulations with regard to caring and parental responsibilities in the national labour codes. Legislative changes seem to be part of the transposition of the Work–Life Balance Directive, with the exception of Croatia.

In Portugal, Law 13/2023 of 3 April 2023 amends the National Labour Code by extending the right to telework to workers with a chronic illness or oncological disease or to those who have children with a disability. Similarly, in Czechia, the amendment to the Labour Code of 1 October 2023 provides that the employer must justify in writing the potential refusal of remote work for pregnant employees or employees with care responsibilities. In Croatia, the amendment to the Labour Code of 1 January 2023 states that in the case of exceptional circumstances, such as an epidemic or a natural disaster, the employer may facilitate work at an alternative location. In Poland, legislation introduced on 9 March 2023 provides that employees are eligible to work remotely for 2 days per month, and the employer cannot refuse a request for full-time remote work to parents of children below the age of four in teleworkable jobs.

Regulatory framework updates continue across the EU, and are now usually based on issues related to work-life balance. The bulk of regulatory modifications happened during the pandemic, while changes in policies since 2023 are mainly taking place at company level.

These trends highlight that telework remains a key feature of the post-pandemic world of work, however differences remain both among and within countries, for example in relation to the evolution of the take-up rate of telework and its prevalence between occupational levels.

Flexible working time: Privilege of a few

Research shows that digitalisation and teleworking have consequences for work organisation. There is a general trend towards work that is project-based and fragmented, on-demand and performance-related. These types of work do not fit with regular working hours and rely more on the flexible allocation of tasks (Eurofound, 2022a).

Working time trends show how flexibility in relation to work location isn't all fun and games. Even before the pandemic, teleworkers were more likely to work longer hours and be subject to more irregular schedules than onsite workers^{3, 4, 5}. Eurofound's evidence shows that during the pandemic workers in telework arrangements continued to report working more hours and irregular schedules (Eurofound, 2022b).

The increased demand for work-life balance and autonomy of workers following the pandemic had led to calls for the introduction of specific flexible working time-related policy measures and more national level debate. Indeed, one of the main drivers for the increase of working time flexibility and autonomy is the surge of teleworking during the pandemic. However, for certain countries flexibility in relation to place of work has increased more than flexible working hours (Germany, Luxembourg, Lithuania, Greece, Malta, Cyprus, Portugal, Belgium, Czechia, Netherlands, Slovakia, Sweden, Estonia, Ireland). In other countries (Italy, Spain, France, Czechia, Croatia and Poland) there is little debate on flexible working time compared to the focus given to remote work. Indeed, in these countries typical working hours continue to be the norm and no legislative adaptations have taken place, except for short-term COVID-19 provisions.

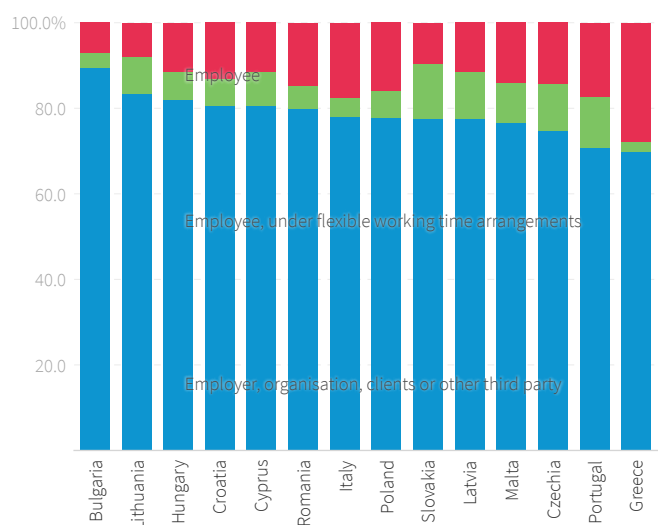
Recently, policy makers have often focused on initiatives to reduce working time rather than also introducing flexible working hours, despite the fact that both measures aim to improve work-life balance and reduce pollution. For example, the reduction of working hours is included in Italy's national energy and climate plan 2023, but flexible working time measures are omitted. In Spain, the limited debate in

Parliament centred on the implementation of measures to reduce working time, rather than flexible work schedules.

On the other hand, in several countries flexitime arrangements were already adopted and implemented prior to the pandemic (Austria, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands and Sweden). Finland serves as a good example as its high levels of flexible working rates have remained stable over the past 10–13 years (85% of state employees, 72% in industry, 59% in municipalities, 58% in private services availed of flexible working hours in 2022).

In 2022, 36% of EU workers had complete or partial working-time autonomy and were able to decide at what time they started and finished work. However, there are differences between countries. Countries with widespread teleworking practices, such as Scandinavian countries, have more working time autonomy than countries where teleworking is less prevalent, such as countries from eastern and southern Europe.

Decisions on flexible working time, 2022, EU27 (%)

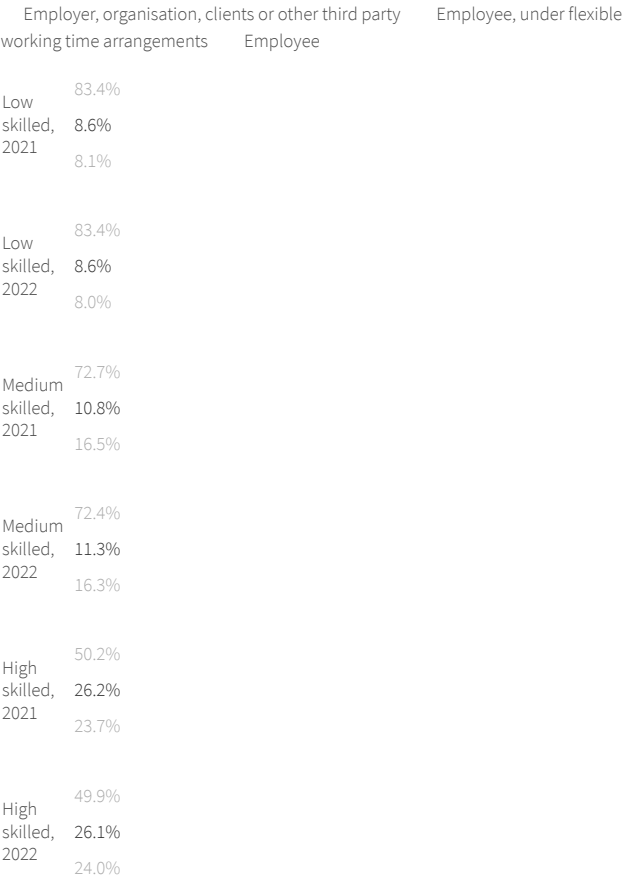


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As is the case for teleworking, the level of skills strongly impacts the availability of flexible working hours. In both 2021 and 2022, higher rates of flexible working hours were recorded among workers in high-skilled occupations, whereas only a handful of workers in low-skilled occupations had access to flexible working time arrangements.

Decisions on flexible working time by skill, 2021–2022, EU27(%)



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Conclusions

Flexible working conditions have, in general, increased in most EU Member States, both in relation to the workplace location and working time, and initiatives and policies have been implemented. This reflects the ongoing changes in work organisation in the post-pandemic world of work.

The widespread adoption of teleworking has not yet been followed by a corresponding increase in flexible working time – only slight to moderate increases in flexible working time have been reported. The lack of flexible working time measures may be due to the increasing use of monitoring practices, for instance through algorithm management, or because working time autonomy did not accompany the expansion of telework after the pandemic.

However, at country level, the prevalence of flexible arrangements in workplace location and working time appear to be correlated, with countries with high prevalence in one indicator reporting also high prevalence in the other. Eurofound plans to conduct further research on these trends using comparable data from the European Working Conditions Survey 2024.

It appears that flexible working arrangements are not available to all workers, instead they could be considered a privilege afforded to only some groups of workers. Recent

legislative updates foster flexible working for those with caring responsibilities, while other workers may have more informal agreements depending on the company, sector and type of job. In addition, working time flexibility appears to be more available to some occupational categories of workers, namely workers in high-skilled occupations.






Continued and broadened regulatory support should facilitate the accessibility of flexible working arrangements in the workplace and ensure fairer working conditions for an increasing number of workers. Meanwhile, the evolving landscape of the labour market in Europe will be shaped by the development of new drivers for flexible working conditions, such as innovative technological advancements, changing demographics and rising commuting costs.

Image: © Inti St. Clair/Adobe Stock

Footnotes

- ^{^ 1} Eurofound (2022a), *The rise in telework: Impact on working conditions and regulations*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- ^{^ 2} Eurofound (2022b), *Telework in the EU: Regulatory frameworks and recent updates*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg
- ^{^ 3} Eurofound and ILO (International Labour Office) (2017), *Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and ILO, Geneva.
- ^{^ 4} Eurofound (2020), '*COVID-19 unleashed the potential for telework – How are workers coping?*', blog post, 9 June.
- ^{^ 5} Chung, H. (2022), *The flexibility paradox: Why flexible working leads to (self-)exploitation*, Bristol University Press, Bristol.

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