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Is teleworking a driver towards more sustainable lifestyles?

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The lockdown period related to the Covid-19 pandemic was marked by the requirement to teleworking for those who could do so. The possibility of its large-scale development burst into the public debate. This blog post gives an overview of the associated issues, and suggests ways to explore in a broader way the possible impacts on our lifestyles of a generalisation of teleworking.

Health measures to combat Covid-19 have led to the widespread use of teleworking: it is estimated that [a quarter of employees have teleworked during lockdown](#), which is broadly in line with [Ministry of Labour estimates of the proportion of the working population likely to telework \(30%, or 7 million individuals\)](#). From an atypical practice, largely reserved for managers,¹ teleworking has thus become a common practice, also shared by employees, in the

wake of the pandemic. This episode seems to have repercussions: according to an [online survey](#) conducted in April 2020, 58% of people would like to work remotely more often than before the health crisis. Companies with operating methods as different as the car manufacturer [PSA](#) or [Facebook](#) have announced that they will make teleworking the new standard. Finally, as a final sign that confinement has put teleworking back on the political agenda, [the French social partners launched a joint reflection](#) on June 5 to carry out a diagnosis of this practice at the end of September.

The current state of the debate

In France, the issue of teleworking deployment has been addressed in the framework of the political process on labour law. This practice holds out a number of promises for the well-being of the employee:² feeling of autonomy, improved management of private/work life, time saving, etc. However, it can also give rise to a number of [psycho-social risks](#) for the employee: loneliness, cognitive overload due to the excessive amount of information to be processed, inability to reconcile private and professional life, increased sedentary lifestyle, etc. These risks have been reinforced by the particular context of the pandemic and forced teleworking. Discussions between the social partners are therefore focusing on the right of employees to teleworking, how to implement it and how to manage it. In the more general debates on the subject, the environmental dimension is also addressed, with the main benefit highlighted being the reduction in mobility, particularly in the automotive sector. However, if the overall energy impact is taken into account, the climate benefit of teleworking is less clear than it appears due to a number of potential negative impacts: increased use of telecommunication infrastructure, heating of the home, longer commuting distances (e.g. away from the workplace), increased non-work related travel (e.g. shopping trips rather than return trips from work) and modal shift (e.g. relocation to a more car dependent area), etc. A [review of the literature](#) published in 2020 indeed shows that the overall energy impact of teleworking depends on a set of variables: what will be the rationale underlying household relocation?³ What will be the strategies of companies to reduce their office space (and therefore energy consumption)? What will be the share of double IT equipment?

The impact of teleworking on our lifestyles needs to be understood more broadly

While its direct environmental impact is not unambiguous, can teleworking make other beneficial changes possible? Can it, through changes in lifestyles, facilitate the ecological transition? Work is indeed a central component of our lifestyles and has multiple relationships with most of our behaviours: pace of life, need for mobility, choice of place to live, daily sociability, but also food, way of consuming, leisure, etc.

Let's take the example of food. The workplace structures the possibilities of the midday meal and its sustainability: is there a canteen, a kitchen at the workplace, or does the meal have to be purchased to take away? This is important as [meat consumption is driven in particular by the increase in out-of-home consumption](#). For those who can telework, could this allow the realisation of aspirations such as avoiding plastic or processed products, favouring meat-free or organic alternatives? In addition, work and travel times constrain the pace of life and the time available for cooking and eating.⁴ Is teleworking an opportunity to change practices? Can the period of confinement, which has had an impact on the feeding practices and aspirations of individuals,⁵ be a moment of rupture?

In terms of sustainable development, another possible impact would be a rebalancing of the territories. By abolishing the obligation for part of the working population to reside close to their place of work, full or near full teleworking could change the attractiveness of territories. Large conurbations are indeed major employment centres and drivers of the globalised economy, but they are not necessarily the best places to live: accelerated life, fatigue due to travel,

feelings of disappropriation, loss of connection with nature, all phenomena that Guillaume Faburel describes as "barbaric metropolitan areas". Surveys carried out in the Paris region speak for themselves: [one in two people in the Paris region would like to leave the region](#). From this point of view, the development of teleworking could contribute to improving living conditions in large metropolitan areas (by reducing saturation in public transport and fatigue due to travel, or even real estate pressure), but also strengthen the attractiveness of smaller conurbations and lead to a better geographical distribution of the working population, thus supporting the dynamism of medium-sized towns in difficulty, via what L. Davezies and T. Pech call "the residential economy".⁶

Broadening the teleworking policy agenda?

While the agenda of discussions between social partners is centred on the legal dimension of labour law,⁷ should we not start to broaden the focus, in order to anticipate the possible impacts of a generalisation of teleworking? Beyond the necessary coaching and learning process to minimise psycho-social risks and enhance benefits, we believe that other policy issues could be put on the agenda.

Environment

- How to ensure a direct environmental gain (mobility, housing, digital equipment)?
- How can the impacts on lifestyle changes (diet, relocation, etc.) be assessed and accompanied?⁸ Experiences from countries that already have a high level of teleworking could then be useful (e.g. Finland, Belgium).⁹

Social cohesion

- What may be the risks of a generalisation of telework in terms of reinforcing inequalities or loss of social links? Just as the pandemic has revealed inequalities in terms of health exposure, this generalisation could create a new gap between those who have to "go to work" and teleworkers.

Employment transformations

- Is there a risk that teleworking, by standardising remote working in managerial practices, will reinforce a trend towards outsourcing via freelance workers and thus a form of ubisation of employees, cost shifting and competition between self-employed employees?

¹ In 2017, 11% of managers teleworked regularly, compared to 1.4% of employees and 0.2% of blue-collar workers. In March 2020, this figure rose to 70% for managers, 23% for employees and 8% for blue-collar workers (Source: Le Monde, https://www.lemonde.fr/emploi/article/2020/05/17/coronavirus-le-teletravail-nouvel-ideal_6039941_1698637.html).

² See for example the benefits and risks put forward by the government site <http://www.teletravailler.fr/le-teletravail/quest-ce-que-cest/le-teletravail-cest-quoi> .

³ According to Facebook's internal survey on employees' appetite for full teleworking, 75% of those interested would like to move if this way of working were to become established. See https://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2020/05/22/les-geants-du-numerique-apotres-du-teletravail_6040472_3234.html

⁴ For example, longer distances between home and the workplace are a factor that has increased the consumption of processed products. Monceau et al. (2002). « La consommation alimentaire depuis quarante ans. De plus en plus de produits élaborés ». Insee Première.

⁵ See Ifop, Quel est l'impact du confinement sur le poids et les habitudes alimentaires des Français ? Avril 2020 https://mk0darwinnutrit3vtub.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Infographie_Ifop_Darwin-Nutrition.pdf

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⁷ At the national level, but the international level should not be neglected, notably in the framework of the ILO https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2020/03/30/teletravail-un-enjeu-pour-la-communaute-internationale_1783598

⁸ See the work carried out in 2015 by the Commissariat général à l'égalité des territoires. <https://www.cget.gouv.fr/ressources/publications/etude-sur-les-opportunites-des-territoires-a-developper-le-teletravail-modelisation-des-gains-pour-les-individus-les-entreprises-et-les-territoires>

⁹ <http://www.teletravailler.fr/observatoire/en-europe>

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