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Brouwer, Aleid; Mariotti, Ilaria

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# Remote Working and New Working Spaces During the COVID-19 Pandemic—Insights from EU and Abroad



Aleid Elizabeth Brouwer and Iaria Mariotti

## 1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic changed geographical work patterns in several ways. Firstly, the pandemic redefined the needs and functions of commercial and office spaces; secondly, the pandemic generated a new look on where to live and work from home [14, 24]. Suburban and peripheral areas are expected to become more attractive places. Thirdly, a new demand for geographically dispersed shared workspaces for remote workers, and digital nomads, enabling them to reduce commuting and improve work-life balance [31, 21]. According to the ILO [20], the term distance working includes the following working arrangements: teleworking, agile working, smart working and working from home. The economic activities that have a greater ease of working at a distance (e.g., at home) are those with a higher knowledge content: professional, scientific, technical activities, finance and insurance; professional services; public administration (among the others, Barbieri et al. [1]).

This chapter explores why people decided to keep working remotely even after the restrictions were cancelled. The remote working phenomenon is described in European countries and the USA, and its effects on workers' wellbeing, workplaces, cities, periphery and rural areas explored. The last section concludes with some hints on how remote working affects coworking and hybrid spaces' future.

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A. E. Brouwer

Academy of International Business Administration, NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences, Emmen, The Netherlands

e-mail: [aleid.brouwer@nhlstenden.com](mailto:aleid.brouwer@nhlstenden.com)

Faculty of Spatial Sciences, University of Groningen, Groningen, The Netherlands

I. Mariotti (✉)

Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy

e-mail: [ilaria.mariotti@polimi.it](mailto:ilaria.mariotti@polimi.it)

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## 2 COVID-19 Pandemic and Remote Working in the EU and USA

More people started to work from home following the introduction of the social distancing measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and this seems to be a trend. According to Eurostat [13], in 2020, 12% of employed people aged 20–64 in the European Union worked from home, while this share used to be a constant 5 or 6% in the 10 years before. The European regions with the highest shares of remote workers in 2020 are Helsinki-Uusimaa, the capital region of Finland with 37%, recorded the highest share in 2020. Followed by the Belgian Province du Brabant Wallon with 27% and the Belgian capital region, Région de Bruxelles-Capitale/Brussels with 26%. In some the capital regions of the European Union about 25% of the employed worked from home in 2020; 25% in Eastern and Midland in Ireland, 24% in Wien, Austria and 24% in Hovedstaden in Denmark. The Île-de-France in France, the city Utrecht in the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Área Metropolitana de Lisboa in Portugal all have 23% of the employed work from home in 2020 [13].

During the pandemic, the USA and Europe have experienced out-migration from their cities, even though each in their own specific way [25]. Recent studies in the USA (e.g., [7, 29]) found that especially those people located in higher income neighbourhoods living in high-income neighbourhoods in larger U.S. cities have the most chance of working from home. Ramani and Bloom [29] found two effects in the US cities. Firstly, the “Donut Effect” is where people and activities move from the cities towards the city edge and more to suburban areas. Secondly, a relocation of people from the cities to smaller regional cities or more rural towns. Since the pandemic started, people have commuted less, hence it is worth moving to places further from the office. Some European examples also indicate to a trend to more remote workers in less urban areas. In Spain, it was observed that small towns (< 2000 inhabitants) experienced population growth [18]. In the Netherlands, there is a slight shift outward of the larger cities observed, but primarily to municipal neighbours, which are still quite urban by address density [3]. In Italy, Mariotti et al. [25], in a study about the leave of workers from the city of Milan in 2020, found that municipalities closer to Milan with a strong broadband connection, a high concentration of knowledge workers, and foreign immigrants are more suitable for hosting remote workers. Besides, Italy experienced a movement of remote workers to southern and inner areas of the country while working for employers based in the big cities of the north or even abroad [8, 26]. In Scotland also a growth in population in some intermediate and more rural villages since the pandemic [10].

In 2022, some larger cities the number of people returning to the office is significantly less than before the pandemic. Some cities returned to baseline quite swift such as Harare, Zimbabwe had a baseline recovery of 59.8% and Lima, Peru had a baseline recovery of 32.9%, while Montgomery, Alabama, USA had a baseline recovery of – 10.9% [9]. Countries where the rate of return to the office was fastest were Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nigeria, Egypt, and Tanzania [37]. In some countries, the government gives pressure to bring employees back to the office as soon as possible

to resume life as normal. Also, many companies view that working in the office leads to higher productivity levels, more effective collaboration, and enhanced communication and therefore are bringing their employees to the office fast. And for many employees, the office can be more attractive to work since they simply do not have the space, or technology at home to work efficiently [2]. Differences in return ratio's are bound by cultural reasons, but also influences by other factors such as availability of other spaces [9] and possibilities to for example more to more suburban or rural areas to live and work remotely [19, 34].

### 3 The Effects of Working from Home on Individuals and Workplaces

In 2021, people felt that the work balance should be different than before; this is visible in employees' choices. According to the Work Trend Index [37], 53% of the employees are more likely to prioritize health and wellbeing over work than before the pandemic. Rather than just returning to the office, employees more often than before the pandemic decide to engage in hybrid work [34], which can have consequences for their residential and mobility behaviour [10, 15] as well as for the way they behave as consumers. For individuals that decide to keep to work remotely, this can have a positive effect on their wellbeing (Mariotti et al. [24]). This wellbeing can improve by having more autonomy and an expected better work-life balance [20]. Even before the pandemic, women working from home reported slightly better work-life balance scores than men, and they valued flexible work schedules and limited commuting time more positively than men [12]. Women, indeed, could dedicate that time to carrying out caregiving and domestic responsibilities [11], and may be more positively affected by the opportunity to work from home [32]. From a collective standpoint, remote work has the potential to reduce commuting with positive effects on the environment [22].

But even though the positive effects are there, and working from home—especially since the pandemic—can also induce productivity growth [17], remote work, especially working from home (WFH), can also be related to negative effects on wellbeing. The office offers certain positive effect such as connection, friendship, routines and innovative capacities [36, 30]. Furthermore, working from home sometimes means you miss adequate technology the sense of isolation, the difficulty in balancing work-life and the feeling of being constantly connected [36]. Companies are realizing that remote working is staying and are opening in some places geographically dispersed offices (hubs) to be closer to workers' places of residence [21]. About 73% of the employees need a better reason to come into the office than just company expectations and say they are only tempted to go to the office for their friends and peers rather than managers and leadership [37].

Regarding the working space, in most cases, the home is not a suitable place to work; there can be a lack of space, difficulties to concentrate and lacking technologies

[2, 28]. During the lockdowns, the issues of unequal living conditions became even more on topic because the new ways of remote work and working from home were perceived during the lockdowns and restrictions [6]. As such, administrative and knowledge workers that used to work and live in cities are now considering to live and work remotely in more peripheral and rural areas to increase their wellbeing by living in the countryside [5].

Recent research in Europe, such as the Cost Action CA18214<sup>1</sup> project and the Coral ITN-Marie Curie Project,<sup>2</sup> is questioning the relevance of new workplaces, such as collaborative spaces, coworking spaces and hybrid spaces, as an alternative to the home and office. New workplaces positively impact users (in terms of improved well-being, economic performance and work-life balance) and the local context (in terms of community building, improvement of the surrounding public space and urban revitalisation) [2]. In fact, these are not only spaces equipped for carrying out work activities, but hybrid, flexible spaces and multifunctional environments that offer users services for childcare, upgrading of professional skills, aggregation and socialisation, etc. [22].

## 4 Opportunities for Non-urban New Working Spaces

Studies focusing on peripheral and rural areas found that in areas where digital infrastructures are lacking, the creation of hubs and facilities to enable remote work may potentially push for the development of 5G networks, thus reducing spatial inequalities [24, 34]. The attraction of knowledge and creative workers can provide opportunities for the area's economic development [27], primarily if the newcomers work stably. Nevertheless, the effects of these spaces on the socio-economic development of peripheral and remote areas, and the working conditions of rural entrepreneurs and freelancers are still unclear [4, 34]. The effects of remote workers and digital nomads relocating to peripheral and rural areas can be positive if they contribute to developing community well-being [35].

The interest in peripheral and rural areas rose during the pandemic, and new working spaces coworking spaces have attracted the attention of municipal councils and policymakers, who, in some countries, have funded them [4, 16]. Policymakers have begun to recognise the role of these spaces. Even before the pandemic, coworking spaces were used as a tool to stimulate entrepreneurship and economic activities outside the cities [34]. Even though many co-working spaces faced difficult times during the lockdown and restrictions, now that the restrictions have been cancelled, and remote working seems to have found a solid user base, especially in non urban areas, co-working spaces and other hybrid solutions can become solutions for more traditional office use [33].

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA18214>; <https://new-working-spaces.eu>.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://coral-itn.eu/>.

## 5 Conclusions

The growth of remote working has been considered one of the “positive” aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, especially for those countries not used to practising it. This new working modality has had several effects on knowledge workers, their wellbeing and work-life balance, and the workplaces, core and periphery. Nevertheless, the pandemic-accelerated distance working has both positive and negative aspects. While on the one hand, it brings with it undoubted advantages related to the possibility of a better work-life balance, reduced commuting, and positive environmental effects. On the other hand, it has widened inequalities in the labour market by favouring knowledge workers, and workers without family burdens, further calling for policies that rebalance these differences. In this context, it is crucial to recognise the social role of new working spaces and socio-cultural hybrid spaces through bureaucratic facilitation of authorisation processes, flexible public policies and accompanying policies, primarily if they are located in peripheral and rural areas.

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