

# HEALTH AND SAFETY AT WORK IN TIMES OF REMOTE WORK

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**Abstract** In recent years, there have been upheavals and a change in the way work and tasks are performed. Employees and companies have had to become much more innovative and adaptable to be able to survive, despite the changes brought about by the global situation. During the COVID-19 pandemic, matters took a turn for the worse, as most companies carried out teleworking to ensure health and safety at work, while companies continued to provide a safe working environment. The personal responsibility of individuals is not only to ensure their own health but also to meet the requirements of health and safety at work, thus families had to adjust and adapt around work in such a way as to meet these requirements. In this paper, the authors describe three important components that marked work during the COVID-19 period: remote work, health and safety during teleworking, and personal responsibility. Through three main topics, the authors provide answers to questions about work that affects health and safety at work, while also covering the findings of statistics from the field of work performance and the importance of personal responsibility in ensuring health and safety at work during remote work.

**Keywords:**

remote work,  
health and safety at  
work,  
personal  
responsibility,  
COVID-19,  
teleworking.

## **1 Introduction**

Remote work is a work arrangement in which an employee works outside the office. Such work arrangements became necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic, as employee health and safety was endangered. In this article, the authors highlight remote work, the personal responsibility of employees and, above all, health and safety at work during remote work.

The problem of health and safety at work during remote work is that the responsibility for securing safe working environments mostly falls on the employee. Although they are responsible for complying with the requirements, the responsibility lies with the manager. When the responsibility falls on the employee, it is due to the fact that most of the time they did not acknowledge the importance of the risks that their working conditions have on their health. Managers must provide employees with appropriate working conditions while empowering them with skills to promote health and safety at work, such as ergonomics, healthy lifestyles, etc.

In this paper, the authors explore the importance of telework, the legal regulations for such work, the limitations and advantages and the effects that this form of work has on the personal responsibility of employees and health and safety at work. The authors are particularly interested in whether teleworking neglects occupational health and safety.

## **2 Literature review**

### **2.1 Remote work**

Remote work, whose many definitions differ according to geographical and regulatory context, is a relatively new phenomenon that has developed in parallel with the advent and development of new communication and information technologies (EU OSHA, 2021) (Savić, 2020).

Businesses began introducing remote working in the 1970s and to date several studies have examined the effects of remote work or related concepts such as working from home and virtual work. Although most research has focused on employees, Bloom et al. (2015) found that it is also becoming more common for

managers to work from home from time to time: the proportion of managers in the US, the UK and Germany allowed to work remotely at normal times is almost 50% (Stoker et al., 2021).

For the most part, remote work is legally defined in national legislation, which defines what remote work is, who performs it and what the responsibilities are of those involved, i.e. the employer and employee. In addition to complying with current legislation, it is also important that companies introduce rules for teleworking and that all participants are aware of them. Remote work management is certainly different than office work. It is also important that all those involved are aware of the responsibility they have to carry out their work effectively and to ensure health and safety at work.

### **2.1.1 Performance in remote work**

Working remotely mostly causes two types of problems for employees. The first is whether managing work from home is useful in terms of increasing productivity and profitability, while the second is that work-life balance often deteriorates (Bloom, Liang, Roberts & Ying, 2015).

Employee digital skills are an important factor in employee performance at work from home. Eurofound (2020) data show that employees with stronger digital skills are better positioned for work needs from home during crisis situations. However, digital skills are not so self-evident, as there are big differences between member states of the European Union (Eurofound 2020).

### **2.1.3 The effect of COVID-19 on remote work**

In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on global economies and suddenly triggered a sharp increase in the number of people working from home. In the current crisis, remote work is generally considered to be an effective way to restore and maintain the functioning of entire sectors (EU OSHA, 2021).

The impact of COVID-19 extended to all industries. Those that have already been heavily digitised (OECD, 2019), including information and communication services, professional, scientific and technical services and financial services, have consequently achieved much higher levels of remote working – on average more than 50% of employees.

Remote work in the European Union (EU) prior to the pandemic was 5.4% in the 15-64 age group. According to Eurostat (2021), at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, as many as 37% of all EU employees moved to working from home. Data from the Slovenian Labour Inspectorate, published by RTV Slovenia in 2022, show that in 2019, i.e. before the spread of coronavirus, 2,037 workers were registered as working at home, while by the end of 2019 this figure had reached 217,428. This means that more than 100 times more workers were working from home prior to the epidemic than before it.

## **2.2 Safety and health at remote work**

An employer is equally responsible for ensuring safety and health at work for an employee working on its premises as it is for an employee working at home or in another location outside the employer's location. In doing so, it must pay particular attention to (Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, 2020): working environment (lighting, noise, thermal conditions, etc.) work equipment stress and mental well-being the fact that the employee works alone (in the event of an accident at work) other risks in workplaces at home (risk of slipping and falling, manual handling of loads, danger of electric current, etc.).

Existing literature reports extensive evidence of how physical risk factors can affect the health and well-being of workers. In modern workplaces, occupational risk exposure is often more associated with the way work is organised than with the nature of work (Litchfield et al., 2016) and more with the work environment (EU-OSHA, 2013) than with specific physical, biological and chemical substances. The damage is therefore often more mental than physical.

In terms of health and safety at work, it should be noted that conducting risk assessments, regardless of the actual job, is the responsibility of the employer. However, assessing a home working environment is difficult, and it is also difficult for inspection bodies to inspect private premises. Therefore, in terms of risk

assessment, remote work is still a 'grey area' for several reasons (EU-OSHA, 2008; ILO, 2018). This means that this new way of working, which has only recently become widespread, involves complex governance issues and legal aspects.

A growing number of companies are offering employees the opportunity to work (a few days a week or a month) from home or remotely. It seems very likely that this trend will continue (Klopotek, 2017). Sometimes the way of working remotely depends on the characteristics of the profession itself and only a percentage of all duties can be performed remotely. In addition, employment agencies report that about 85% of job seekers appear to be more likely to stay with an employer if flexible work is available (Twentyman, 2010; Grant et al., 2013).

The commonly mentioned benefits of teleworking include: schedule flexibility, no interruptions, and time savings while driving (DeSanctis, 1984). However, studies on telecommuting show that reducing travel to and from the workplace is not the main incentive for this form of work (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). The benefits of teleworking may also include meeting family requirements or a desire to reduce social contacts (Olson et al., 1995). Working from home also means flexible working hours or a less formal atmosphere (Olson et al., 1995). Home workers also report high levels of satisfaction (Wheatley, 2012).

### **2.3 Personal responsibility**

A socially responsible company has an advantage over its competitors due to increased productivity and competitiveness, improved reputation and company image, as well as significant cost savings due to the loyalty and motivation of its external and internal stakeholders (Gorgenyi-Hegyes et al., 2021). An internal occupational health and safety responsibility is established when workers and managers assume responsibility for acting effectively against the bane of work injuries and occupational diseases. Organisations should relearn the best way to take responsibility for occupational health and safety to promote healthy growth and greater productivity (Ndjoulou et al., 2015).

As is so often said, change means first starting within ourselves. Due to the great impact managers have and the responsibilities they carry, they have a particularly important role in being the first to make a change and are thus role models (Mrak Hendrickson, 2020). Personal responsibility means each individual must accept

responsibility for their thoughts, words, behaviour, decisions, mistakes, well-being effort and influence. Although the term personal responsibility seems to be simple and easy to understand, it actually requires a very high state of involvement and readiness. By entering the field of strengthening one's personal responsibility, a person changes and consequently causes changes in other people and society. The importance of personal responsibility can be expressed in private or in public, at home or at work (Rauter, 2020).

Based on the knowledge and mastery of all three dimensions of personal sovereignty, individuals are more easily and effectively able to act responsibly and accept responsibility for their actions. Personal responsibility (Hrast, Rauter, Lešnik Štefotič, 2018) is the ability to take responsibility for one's thoughts, decisions, actions and similar. Personal responsibility primarily means being responsible for what you think, say, decide and do, as well as working on yourself, your knowledge and developing own skills, not blaming others for situations and circumstances, and choosing a life that respects your values, purpose and your way of life. However, it must always be placed in a social context and through interactions with others.

### **2.2.1 Personal responsibility as part of care for health and safety at work**

The development of health awareness as a social sustainability factor can be implemented on the following three levels: state or governmental level, corporate level, consumer level (Toussaint et al., 2021).

The ultimate target of occupational health and safety law is to protect workers in all occupations, from occupational dangers or harm to which they are exposed by virtue of the nature of their occupation or the state of their working environment. The doctrine of occupational health and safety hence hinges on the assumption that the employer has ultimate authority and control over the workers' working conditions or workspaces, and therefore has legal responsibility to ensure the health and safety of those workers (Orazulike, 2015).

Employees also need to understand and have an insight into their responsibility in the company and their responsibility to themselves. They need to understand that their health, safety and well-being are part of their personal responsibility. This allows employees to understand that, to a large extent, their future health and safety also depends on themselves not on their superiors and other employees.

### **3 Methodology**

For the purposes of this research, the authors formulated three hypotheses, which are listed below. The hypotheses discussed are:

- H1: Prolonged teleworking can have a negative impact on employee health and safety.
- H2: Teleworkers are less likely to be infected with COVID-19.
- H3: Teleworkers show a high degree of personal responsibility for health and safety at work.

In this paper, the authors examined existing literature and other sources and describe the impact of teleworking on occupational health and safety. The method of the descriptive approach of research was used, whereby existing literature and data was analysed from the field of research with the help of description, compilation, comparison, analysis and synthesis.

The expected result of the research carried out is a review of the impact of remote work on the health and safety of employees and the impact of this on the personal responsibility of employees.

### **4 Discussion**

A review of existing literature showed that there are many advantages and disadvantages of teleworking, however, it also showed there is a link between health and safety at work and the personal responsibility of employees and managers.

The hypotheses were confirmed or refuted on the basis of the conducted research. Below the confirmation or refutation of the hypotheses are shown.

- **H1: Long-term remote work can have a negative impact on employee health and safety.**
  - Confirmed
  - Explanation: Although research reports positive effects of remote work, long-term regulation can be bad for employees if rules and guidelines for remote work and preventive measures for health and safety at work are not set within the company. The personal responsibility of employees to follow the guidelines and be responsible for their health plays an important role, as they are aware of the long-term consequences that can result from poor healthcare in the workplace.
  
- **H2: Teleworkers are less likely to be infected with COVID-19.**
  - Confirmed
  - Explanation: Employees who worked remotely had less physical contact and formed so-called 'bubbles'. As a result, most companies introduced remote work where possible.
  
- **H3: Teleworkers show a high degree of personal responsibility for health and safety at work.**
  - Confirmed
  - Explanation: Employees showed a high degree of personal responsibility during COVID-19 in terms of adhering to the measure to prevent the spread of infection by limiting contact. Due to no longer having to commute from home to work, employees were, on average, left with more free time, which many individuals spent outdoor, thus positively taking care of their mental and physical health. Problems arose when employees were unable to distinguish between working and leisure time, where burnout due to remote work could have occurred.

## 5 Conclusions

Through an integrative review of existing literature, the authors of this paper wanted to confirm the research question. They looked for links between health and safety at work and remote work. The key theoretical insights include the awareness that remote work in many companies was key to curbing the spread of coronavirus.



Employees also had a high degree of personal responsibility in avoiding being infected with COVID-19 infection when working remotely. Thus, companies had less absenteeism due to illness and were able to continue work without interruption. It is notable that problems with health and safety at work can be caused by a poorly arranged workspace, for which both employers and employees are responsible. It was also found that due to remote work, employees had more time to improve their mental and physical health, however, some had trouble separating work from leisure, which can lead to burnout.

The authors are therefore able to confirm the hypotheses, thus suggesting that remote work is a sensible measure to curb the spread of disease, while showing that individuals with personal responsibility play a major role in maintaining their own health while working from home. Companies or organisations that want to be attractive to the new workforce must be prepared to introduce working hours that also allow for part-time work while at the same time strengthening personal responsibility for maintaining safety and health at work.

For a broader overview of the advantages and disadvantages of remote work and the impact on occupational health and safety, it would be necessary to study more literature and include more domestic data in order to make a comparison between remote work in Slovenia and the international environment. The amount of empirical research and results related to personal social responsibility in companies – especially in the field of the promotion of workplace health – is limited, albeit constantly increasing, both nationally and internationally. For further research the authors propose a continuous review of measures and literature in the domestic and foreign environment.

The personality of individuals – first and foremost the employers and employees in companies – is key to achieving business success and individual performance and satisfaction. Strengthening health must be a priority for companies, as a healthy employee brings many more benefits to the company in the long run, as well as competitive advantages in the company's reputation. As previously mentioned, it is the responsibility of the employer to provide working conditions that ensure health and safety in the workplace. At the same time, it is important that companies begin to actively raise awareness among employees about the importance of looking after their health, which is the key to a quality and long life. The personal responsibilities of managers and employees are key to achieving this.

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