

Patrizia Leone: «Remote working hasn't completely solved the work-life balance problem»

The Remaking project aims to provide institutions with criteria to regulate remote working, and the 30 participating researchers met in Donostia-San Sebastian. Leone reports on the initial results: 40% of workers in the European Union are remote working.



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Remote working spread thanks to the pandemic and does not seem to be about to disappear. For many workers it has become their daily bread, but it is still a new situation for most, with risks and advantages in equal measure. Patrizia Leone, a Bologna University lecturer, is aware of this; and from there they are coordinating the Remaking project, which aims to provide the European Union authorities with criteria to regulate remote working.

Thirty researchers from ten countries got down to work a year and a half ago. Previously they met in Bologna (Italy), Berlin and Crete (Greece) and their fourth meeting was held in Donostia-San Sebastian on 20 and 21 November. It was hosted by Elhuyar, who handles the communication of the project. They had conducted 14,000 interviews in six countries, and Leone explains the initial conclusions to BERRIA newspaper.

That's no mean number of interviews.

No, it isn't. It's a very large sample, it took us a long time to achieve it, and we still only have the first results, descriptive ones. More detailed analyses will come later on. We conducted surveys in Italy, Germany, Ireland, the Czech Republic, Greece and Portugal, and the people we interviewed are highly qualified industry workers who can work remotely. We are also working in Ukraine, but we haven't had the chance to conduct surveys there.

Research shows that 40% of the population already has remote working integrated into their daily lives, mainly in a hybrid way, that is, they work like this two or three times a week, six or seven days a month. In 2023, it was only 23% of the population.

You concluded that 40 to 55-year-olds are the ones that make use of remote working the most.

That's right. Young people have fewer opportunities for this. Why is that? Because many are offered remote working as an option when there is trust, and not as a right. The idea that it is a concession is widespread.

What other conclusions would you highlight?

We concluded that people engaged in remote working do not work more hours; they continue with a working day of approximately 38 hours per week. If we look at gender, it has changed a little: women work slightly fewer hours since the spread of remote working. It is the result of the care work they still continue to undertake. So far, remote working has not reduced this gap.

That is one of the main criticisms of remote working: it encourages women to take on even more care work.

At the University of Bologna, we are studying the case of workers who started remote working after the pandemic, and it is certainly true that there is a lot of stress and the burden is on the shoulders of women who work from home and work at home at the same time. Remote working is a tool designed to make life easier for workers, but it is clear that it has not completely solved the problem of the work-life balance.

You are working on four pieces of research. You mentioned those who started remote working since the pandemic; another is the digital nomads.

That is a very interesting case, and we are investigating it, for example, in the archipelago of Madeira (Portugal) and Crete. Many are workers in the cultural and creative industry or who are highly qualified self-employed workers. As the digital

tourists and nomads bring in money, governments are making great efforts to seduce them and make it easier for them to live there through taxation or visas.

However, tension is also being generated in the local community; these workers raise the cost of living and the cost of housing, in particular. The Canary Islands are a good example of that. The institutions are trying to reorganize the region to accommodate so many people, to guarantee basic services for those who arrive from abroad, and some regions are undergoing a profound transformation.

What are the other two research cases?

One is that of cross-border workers who have had to go into exile for social, economic or political reasons. We are investigating the situation of Ukrainian workers in Germany and the Czech Republic who have fled the war and continue to work. Many are women, and they have serious problems integrating into their host countries. We are also looking at workers in large technology companies in Italy, and in Ireland especially. In Europe that is where digital platforms emerged: Airbnb, Booking...

You also discussed territoriality.

Yes, we did. We asked: could remote working stimulate repopulation? To distribute the inhabitants properly across the country? To address overpopulation in some cities and the rise in the cost of living or housing?

But you're not investigating the regions that need to be repopulated, are you?

On the whole, urban and rural dynamics are integrated into all the cases. Here in Italy, we have some indicators that show that something is happening around the repopulation issue, but it is not a consolidated phenomenon.

What is needed for that?

For politicians to give a push. Remote working is one element, but municipalities and local institutions need to regulate and promote the phenomenon. Citizens moving inland or to out-of-town areas need to have their basic services guaranteed. Being able to work from home can help, but the conditions need to be made easier.

You mentioned in the study that remote working divides the labour market.

Does it make it difficult for workers to organize themselves in support of their rights?

It's a complicated issue. This new dynamic breaks with the past; the workers are more dispersed and further away from the trade unions. The labour market itself is changing, and the creation of new forms of struggle and organisation is needed.

For example, demands relating to remote working have got as far as collective bargaining.

Working from home poses risks.

Yes, it does; big ones: isolation, leaving the most vulnerable unprotected... It's a major challenge for companies, workers and trade unions. It offers great opportunities, but properly regulating it is essential.

That is the aim of your project. Haven't the right measures been taken in recent years?

There are big differences between countries. The advice we have given Brussels is that it must try to unify and harmonize measures. There are places where the State has taken the initiative, such as Spain, which has a complete specific law to regulate remote working. In others, it has been regulated through collective bargaining, as in France and Belgium, and there are also those that have something in between: Italy, Austria... Some aspects are regulated, but others are specified in negotiations between companies and workers.

What is most regulated?

On the whole, laws guarantee the right to disconnect, privacy and control, the reduction of the digital gap and the rights of digital nomads. But we have recommended that the EU not only take into account the situation of workers, but also look at how their activities affect society. For example, that the wealth brought in by the digital nomads should be used as a tool for the development of the country. Ireland is a good example: there are programmes to promote repopulation, to improve social cohesion and to harmonize regional differences.

Will remote working be around for a long time?

Since the pandemic, it has continued to be a reality and I believe it will be consolidated and expanded. We cannot guarantee it, because the future can change a lot depending on political decisions, but the demand is high, because the workers greatly value the time they gain.

The issue has many strands and there are many actors involved. It allows companies to attract talent and decentralize production. Workers can have advantages and some differences are reduced, but there are also significant risks: techno-stress, isolation, fragmentation, etc. It is a subject that must be properly researched and studied, and properly regulated.