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Hemicycle – European Parliament – Brussels & online

Steering paper for Session 3:
Challenges and opportunities of telework and the right to disconnect

Short conversation 1: Working time, working conditions and health and safety

Background

Europe has among the world's highest standards in terms of working time, working conditions and occupational safety and health. Relevant EU laws dovetail with manifold regulations, policies and collective agreements at the national level, ensuring protection against work-related risks. Yet, as digitalisation re-shapes the world of work, existing rules, frameworks and practices are put to the test. This calls for a need to assess the ongoing trends and challenges of telework and the right to disconnect, as well as their possible impact on the current application of the rules.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sharp increase in telework, which is likely to persist. In the context of the blurring of boundaries between professional and private lives, uncertainty over applicable rules in cross-border situations and heightened psycho-social and other health risks, questions arise as to what extent the EU and Member State's labour and social *acquis* are future-proof.

Participants to this panel discussion are invited to reflect on the below questions.

Short conversation 2: The gender and digital divide, disadvantaged workers

Background

The digital transition is a boon for businesses and society at large. Technology holds the promise of bringing new opportunities to all, expanding the market-horizon for companies to trade in and improving the lives of people through wider product choice and easier-to-access services. Workers in many sectors, as well, benefit from the use of ICT, through more flexible work arrangements, more job opportunities and potentially higher wages linked to higher productivity.

These benefits, however, are not equally distributed. Particularly in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, women were more likely to carry out the bulk of house chores and caring duties, thereby reducing work hours or stepping out of the labour force, with

possible detrimental effects for their well-being and their career. Women are still largely underrepresented amongst science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates and ICT professionals, with only around a third of the former and less than a fifth of the latter being female.[1]

This digital divide is not only gender-based, but runs deep along demographic and territorial lines. Job opportunities and working conditions are increasingly linked to the access, or lack thereof, to digital know-how and infrastructure. Only 56% of Europeans have at least basic digital skills[2], despite being essential to thrive in the workplace. People with low levels of education (which correlate with digital savviness) and people with disabilities may thus be disadvantaged on the labour market. Equally, access to digital infrastructure goes hand-in-hand with income and job opportunities. People with poor housing conditions tend to have less of both, similarly for people living outside of cities: 10% of rural areas in the EU have no access to fixed broadband connections, whereas 40% of them are not covered by advanced connectivity infrastructure.[3]

The shift towards permanent or semi-permanent telework arrangements consolidates digital skills as well as access to digital infrastructure as necessary conditions to perform many existing jobs, and risks exacerbating inequalities further. Participants to this panel discussion are invited to reflect on the below questions.

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[1]   European Commission. Women in Digital Scoreboard 2021. Available online.
[2]   European Commission. Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) 2021. Available online.
[3]   *Ibidem.*