

How does teleworking affect society and our way of life?

Despite all the technology that makes it possible, the concept of teleworking can scarcely be considered a modern invention. Up until the 19th century, what we know today as remote working was the usual format for many: working from home was the norm for craftsmen and peasants, who conducted part or all of their occupation in a space set aside for this purpose in their homes. With the arrival of the Industrial Revolution, the factory and the office – as we have seen in the first article of this Dossier – replaced the domestic workshop and became the dominant working environment. With many nuances, this has been the case ever since.

Today, the coronavirus outbreak has once again brought remote working into vogue and has fuelled the debate about its social impact and the way we live. Nevertheless, the concept of teleworking had been recovered much earlier, when Jack Nilles, recognised as the «father» of teleworking, revived it in 1973 in a world still without the internet as a way for companies to offset the economic losses suffered as a result of the oil crisis.¹ As interest in teleworking as a way to save costs grew, so it did as a way to solve other social problems. In a world with a greater participation of women in the labour market, where all members of the household had to juggle work with domestic chores and childcare, teleworking was identified as a tool to address problems related to work-life balance or low birth rates. Let us take a closer look.

Better work-life balance under certain conditions...

One of the great attractions that has been attributed to teleworking is that it allows for a better reconciliation between people's professional and personal lives (commonly referred to as «work-life balance»). This issue is of great interest in societies where domestic and childcare tasks have gone from being exclusively the remit of one member of the family unit (usually the woman) to being an occupation shared by all members of the household, since they all work away from home.

According to the meta-analysis carried out by Allen *et al.* (2015), while teleworking is associated with a better work-life balance, and although the relationship is statistically significant, quantitatively it is rather tenuous. In particular, the study shows that if we were to ask 100 teleworkers whether teleworking has helped them to achieve a better work-life balance, on average we would «only» get 16 positive responses.

Other studies add important nuances to this result. Golden *et al.* (2006) show us that the positive relationship between teleworking and work-life balance grows with its intensity.² That is, the more a person works remotely, the greater the benefits of teleworking as a tool for achieving a better work-life balance: teleworking one day a month is not the same as three days a week. Furthermore, as one would expect, a person's experience in teleworking is also a key factor. Thus, people who have been working remotely for more than a year manage to achieve greater gains in their work-life balance than those who have been doing so for less time. Taking these nuances into account, the ratio of 16 positive responses per 100 respondents could increase to 25. While this is a considerable figure, it is by no means overwhelming.

Similarly, other studies analyse the relationship between teleworking and job satisfaction and also find a positive relationship. However, the effect in this case is not linear, and the benefits tend to disappear when the intensity of teleworking is high. This result is associated with the loss of social relationships and the greater sense of isolation that intense teleworking can generate.

... but a balance with limitations

As usual, the evidence available to date answers some of the questions raised, but opens the door to many more. For instance, how can it be that teleworking fails to report large gains in the eternal problem of achieving a work-life balance? In the end, teleworking saves us commuting time and gives us greater flexibility to combine professional and domestic tasks.

Let us highlight some channels that limit the potential benefits of teleworking. Firstly, just as teleworking makes it easier to prevent our work from interfering with our personal life, a concept that we will abbreviate with the acronym WIF (work interferes with family), the literature also explores the opposite effect: that our family life interferes with our work (FIW). According to the meta-analysis by Allen *et al.*, the greater the intensity of teleworking, the lower the WIF but the higher the FIW. It is easy to imagine, for example, that teleworking blurs the distinction between family and professional roles: while teleworking makes it possible to switch roles much more readily, which can contribute to a better work-life balance, it also increases the likelihood of FIW occurring. In other words, it increases the likelihood of interruptions and other problems from the domestic and family environment arising that can end up hindering job performance.

1. See Allen *et al.* (2015). «How effective is telecommuting? Assessing the status of our scientific findings». *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 16(2), 40-68.

2. T.D. Golden, J.F. Veiga and Z. Simsek (2006). «Telecommuting's differential impact on work-family conflict: Is there no place like home?». *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91, 1340-1350.

Secondly, another reason cited as a possible mitigating factor in the relationship between teleworking and work-life balance is the servitude generated by the digital connection. The technological interface that enables teleworking can also lead to extended working hours, for instance by creating the need to constantly check our emails, even outside normal working hours. If teleworking were to widely lead to longer working hours, then it could not be expected to improve work-life balance.

From teleworking to childbirth

At a time when our societies must learn to deal with the slow but inevitable decline in the birth rate and all its repercussions,³ considering ways in which we can combine our family and professional lives is crucial. As we have seen, with teleworking serving as a way to improve work-life balance, it could also influence the very decision to have children. In this regard, could we consider teleworking «an engine of liberation», a way of working that would impose fewer restrictions on households' decisions related to having children?⁴

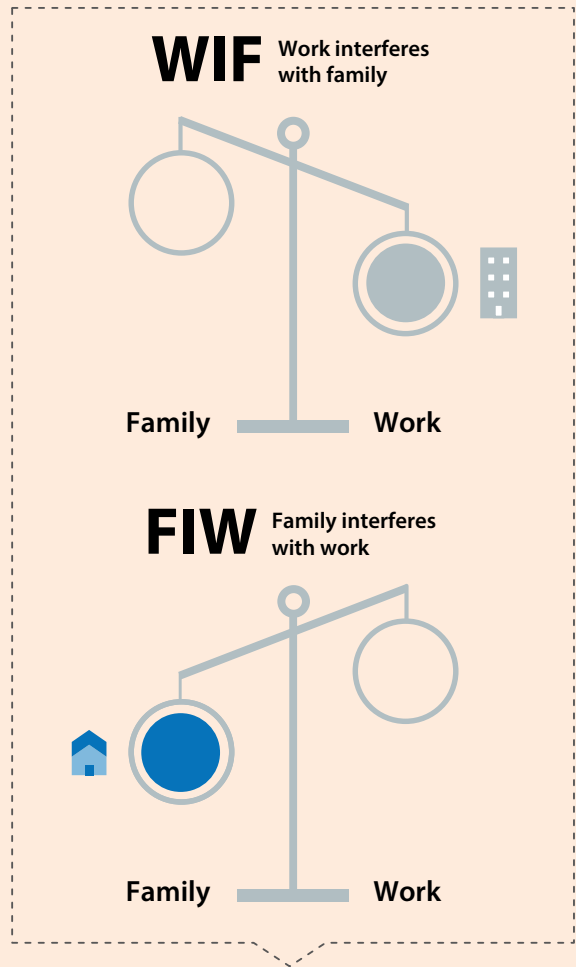
While we do not know of any studies that explicitly address this relationship, closely connected issues have been analysed. For example, in a relatively recent study conducted with data from German households, Billari *et al.* analysed whether broadband internet access affected decisions related to having children. They found a small but positive effect between access to high-quality internet and the birth rate in women between 25 and 45 years of age and with a high level of education.⁵ According to the authors, the reason for this is that broadband internet access opens the door to more flexible forms of working that facilitate a better reconciliation between work and family life, such as part-time work or telework.

Conclusions

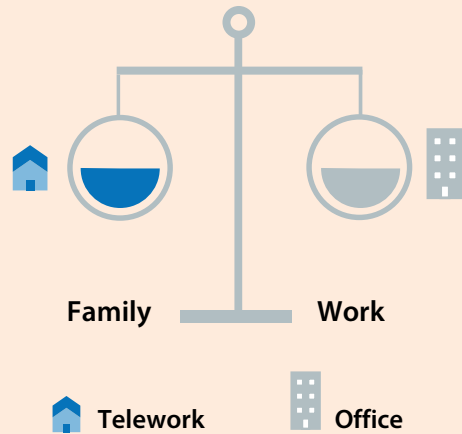
In short, the impact of teleworking is not just limited to the economic sphere – as we have explored in the previous article – but has very important social implications for key issues such as work-life balance, job satisfaction and even the birth rate. The empirical evidence to date indicates that teleworking as a more flexible form of work does indeed facilitate a better work-life balance, increase job satisfaction and may increase the likelihood of households having more children. Nevertheless, behind this evidence there are some important nuances that must be taken into consideration in order for these positive effects to occur effectively: a suitable implementation of teleworking and a learning process are essential. Otherwise, it can become a new form of servitude, rather than «an engine of liberation».

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Interference between personal and professional life



BALANCE



Source: CaixaBank Research.

3. See, for example, the Dossier «Impact of ageing in Spain and Portugal» in the MR04/2020.
 4. See Billari, *et al.* (2017). «Does Broadband Internet Affect Fertility?». IZA DP n.º 10935.
 5. The authors find that broadband internet access increases the likelihood of having children by 12% among women between 25 and 45 years of age and with a high level of education.