

# Telework after COVID-19: survey evidence from managers and workers on implications for productivity and well-being

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In many ways, the pandemic has shown to be a watershed for the future of work. To respect social distancing measures many firms had to embrace intensive telework for the first time. The investments they made in IT equipment and online digital tools, the extensive experience gained by managers and workers with intensive telework and the ensuing breakdown of the stigma previously associated with telework may have indeed ushered in the permanently more widespread use of telework.

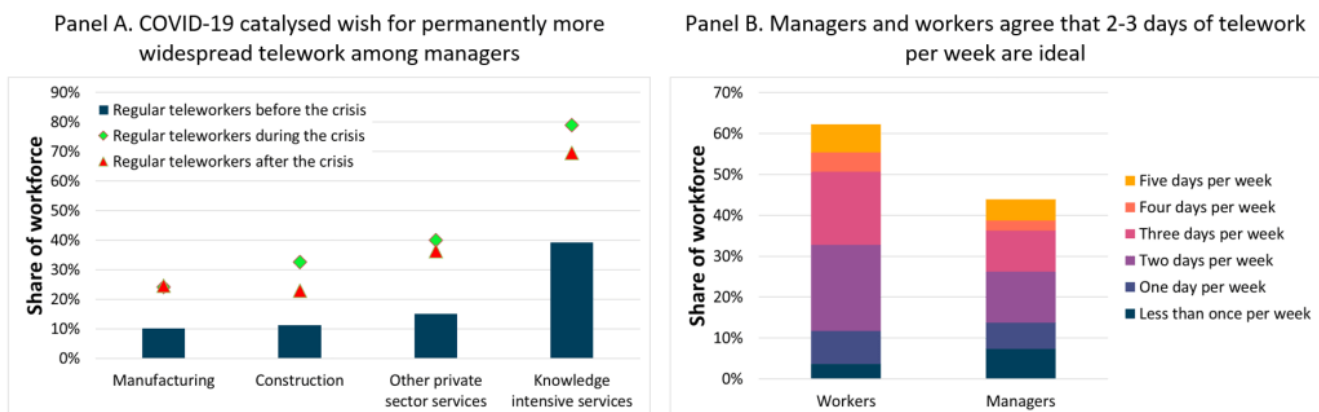
To assess the potential implications of this large-scale change, the OECD's Global Forum on Productivity (GFP) launched an online survey together with Business at OECD (BIAC), the Trade Union Advisory Committee to the OECD (TUAC), the Energy Regulators Regional Association (ERRA), and supported by GFP Steering Group members. The survey inquired from managers and employees about their experience with and expectations about telework. Survey results from several thousand companies in 25 countries provided insights about how extensively telework may be relied on in the future, the anticipated advantages and downsides and what role public policies and managers can play in raising the gains from telework. The *Key Highlights* brochure that we released on our website for the 2021 Annual Conference of the Forum ([oe.cd/gfp2021](https://oe.cd/gfp2021)) provides a more

exhaustive summary of the main results.

## Telework is expected to remain widespread, but less intensively than during the pandemic

Survey results document that the share of workers doing telework once or more per week during the first wave of the pandemic roughly doubled across sectors compared to the pre-pandemic period (Figure 1 – Panel A). Even if this practice was new for many workers and had to be carried out in less than ideal conditions due to competing household and childcare duties, most managers and workers report telework had a positive impact on performance and well-being: the stigma has been broken. Accordingly, workers wish and managers expect telework to remain quite widespread after the pandemic (albeit less so than during the crisis). In a nutshell: telework seems here to stay.

**Figure 1. Views from managers and workers about ideal telework post COVID-19**



Source: Telework survey of the OECD Global Forum on Productivity.

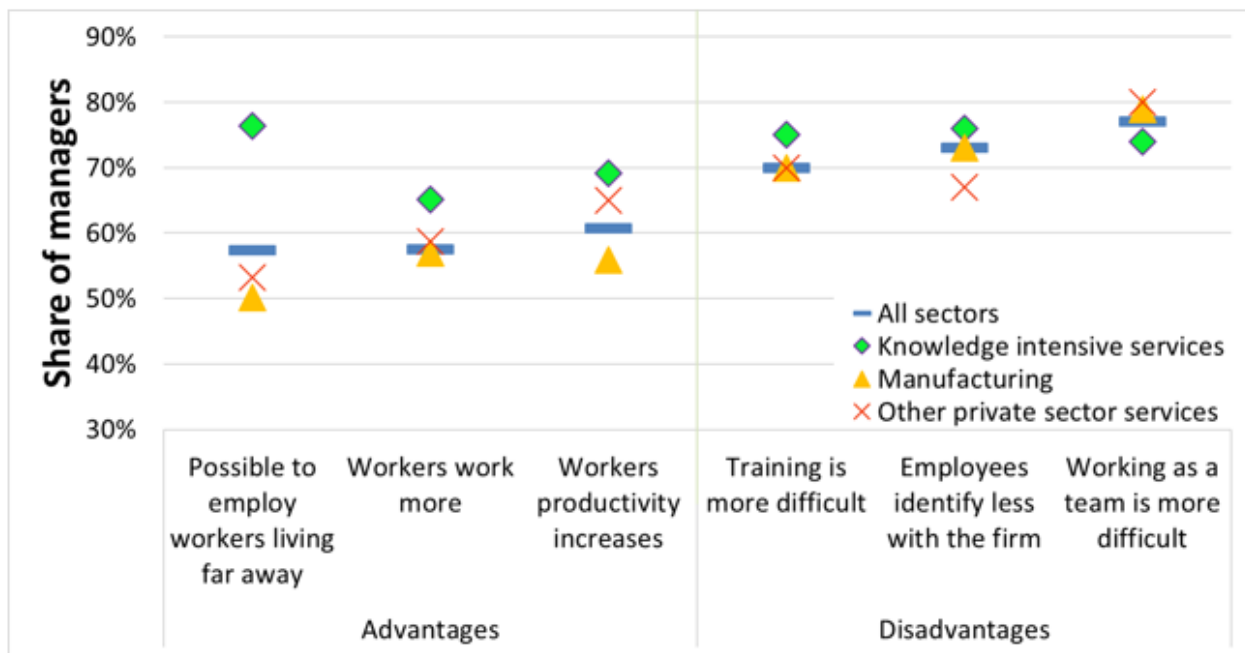
In a previous policy note on the OECD COVID-19 hub, we argued that intermediate levels of telework are likely to be ideal for firm performance and employee well-being for most types of activities. Our survey results vindicate this hypothesis by showing that, according to both managers and workers, the largest share of regular teleworkers will likely work from home 2/3 days per week (Figure 1 – Panel B).

## **Telework is set to raise firm performance and well-being, but some challenges must be addressed**

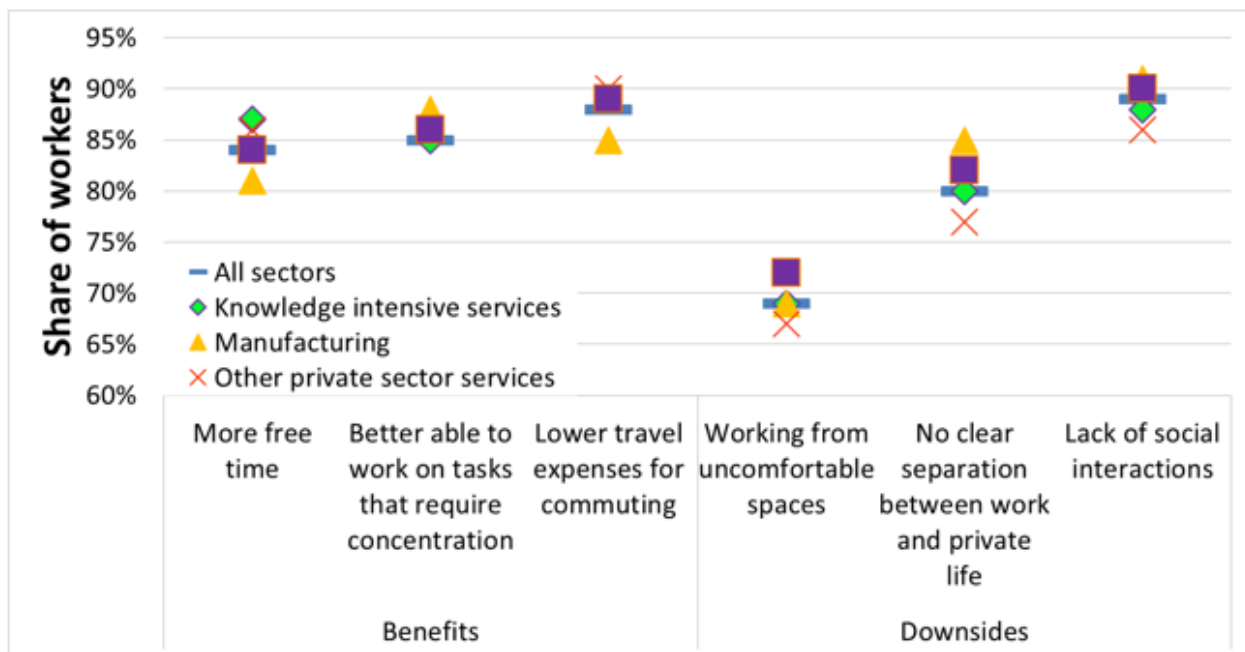
Why do managers and workers wish telework to be widespread in the future? Managers see the potential for better firm performance through telework because, in their opinion, workers work more intensively and more productively (due to the possibility for being more focused at home and for saving commuting time and effort). Moreover, this practice could generate opportunities for cost savings on reduced office space and better job matching from a geographically broader pool of talent. On the other hand, workers are keen to telework more because, among others, they can save money and time on commuting and they are more focused and relaxed at home (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Telework for higher productivity and enhanced well-being: killing two birds with one stone?**

Panel A. Managers expect higher worker efficiency but fear for long-run impact of impaired communication and team spirit



Panel B. Workers expect to commute less but worry about blurring between private and work-life



Source: Telework survey of the OECD Global Forum on Productivity.

However, just as there are two sides to every coin, this practice also entails important disadvantages that could hamper firm performance and well-being, especially in the long run. Managers are particularly worried about the longer-term impact of impaired communication among team members brought about by telework and the difficulties of training staff in a

teleworking environment. In addition, they fear employees' loyalty and team cohesion to be jeopardised when colleagues spend less time together in person. Focusing on the workers' side, the fusing of private and work life, social isolation – which may become even more visible in the long run – and working from inappropriate spaces are the decisive drawbacks of telework.

To ensure the benefits dominate the drawbacks – and telework pays its double dividends by triggering better firm performance and higher worker satisfaction – it is pivotal to find innovative ways of promoting knowledge flows and training on both hard and soft skills within each firm and coordinate schedules among colleagues so that teams can get together in person on a regular basis.

**To ensure gains from telework public policies should *enable, empower and protect***

In this context, public policies play a key role in ensuring that the advantages of this practice are not reaped solely by frontier firms and high-skilled workers. Firstly, public policies should enable access to telework for all by promoting investments in broadband access and childcare facilities – both in urban and rural areas. Secondly, they should empower workers and managers by supporting upskilling and training on both hard (notably ICT) and soft skills. Lastly, policies should protect workers from excessive telework by adapting the legal environment – with a special focus on health insurance coverage for remote work. Importantly, regulations should ensure this working arrangement remains a choice made jointly and in agreements by employers and employees. Dialogue among social partners will be crucial to achieving these goals.