

The World Will Find a New Normal: A Czech Perspective



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PRÁT

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many employers in the private sector and self-employed workers to make the decision of whether or not their employees should be working from home. During the epidemic, home office became a crucial tool not only for protecting workers from infection, but also for maintaining the operation of companies in a full or limited capacity.

Because the lives and health of employees, as well as the computer security of companies are at stake, more and more

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businesses and authorities have made it possible to work from home as the constraints upon professional and social life continue to grow. However, many companies and governments were not prepared for this model of remote operation due to the lack of flexibility of their technical, material, and personnel capabilities.

In effect, the coronavirus has spurred the most extensive home office experiment in history, providing valuable knowledge to managers, sociologists, psychologists, urban planners, and human resources alike. Many of these specialists are already discussing home office's groundbreaking effects, noting the competitive advantage of companies whose affairs can be smoothly transferred to remote operations. Organizations with an existing technological, personnel, and procedural system for working from home have benefited greatly from such foundations when adapting to the ongoing extraordinary circumstances.

HOME OFFICE DEEPENS INEQUALITIES

According to a study by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), within the countries included in the study, young people with precarious employment and low income make up the largest proportion of the roughly 100,000,000 people who have started working from home¹. For many, prolonged home office will become the norm. However, it is very likely that the share of those who work from home is stabilizing at a higher level than it was before the pandemic, as noted by the French daily *Le Monde*².

¹ Brussevich, M., E. Dabla-Norris, and S. Khalid (2020) "Teleworking Is Not Working for the Poor, the Young, and the Women", [in]: *IMF Blog*. Available [online]: <https://blogs.imf.org/2020/07/07/teleworking-is-not-working-for-the-poor-the-young-and-the-women/>

² Ibid.



AS RESTRICTIONS CONTINUE TO BE EXTENDED, THOSE EMPLOYED IN THE TOURISM ECONOMY (IN SHOPS, HOTELS, RESTAURANTS, ETC.) AND ANY OTHER SECTORS, WHICH ARE NOT CONDUCTIVE TO REMOTE EMPLOYMENT, ARE FACING LOSS OF INCOME AND UNEMPLOYMENT

When applying for a job, many adepts are now inquiring about the possibility to work from home. Whereas home office used to be a privilege limited mainly to employers, many employees and self-employed workers are now seeking this option as it allows them to keep their jobs despite regular lockdowns and other restrictions to contain the coronavirus. Companies now risk

losing their attractiveness if they are unable or unwilling to allow home office, as more and more prospective employees are moving away from physical work, which would increase their vulnerability to the virus.

As restrictions continue to be extended, those employed in the tourism economy (in shops, hotels, restaurants, etc.) and any other sectors, which are not conducive to remote employment, are facing loss of income and unemployment. According to economists at the International Monetary Fund, this group consists of nearly 100,000,000 workers in 35 developed and developing countries, amounting to 15% of the active population. Of this 15%, the majority are young, poorly educated people with fixed-term employment contracts from small businesses and with low incomes³. Therefore, many experts are concerned that the ongoing pandemic will exacerbate inequalities between generations, genders, the rich and poor, and between individual countries. Because the ability to work from home reflects a country's focus of production, degree of technical maturity, and the nature of employment and income, developed countries hold a significant advantage as up to 40% of their citizens can work from home. Despite its comparative advantage, even the Eurozone demonstrates internal disparities, as the proportion of employees able to work from home ranges from 24% in Italy to 42% in Germany⁴ showing that few people can work from home in countries such as Turkey, Chile, Mexico, Peru, and Ecuador, while the possibility is much more available in Singapore and the Nordic countries. Such disparities and inequality could affect the policies needed to protect these workers after quarantine.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

GENDER INEQUALITIES

Working from home may also increase inequalities between men and women. On the positive side, for women, working from home can help facilitate better coordination of professional and family life. However, on the negative side, such a dynamic has the potential to create a pattern in which they will have to do more housework than before, a situation which is often reinforced by the fact that during the pandemic female workers have gone to the office less frequently than their male counterparts, often at the expense of their careers. This trend does not only affect household dynamics, but also impacts women's position in the company, as those who are more present in the office – and, therefore, in



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the eyes of their supervisors – are seen as more successful. As Pauline Hodson of The Guardian summarized:

*"I believe there is an unconscious expectation that "home", just like "mother", can cope with anything and adapt to any situation, but just like the office our home is an institution, and as such has a culture and adheres to a set of rules and boundaries that need to be recognised and taken into account if working from home is to be successful."*⁵

In addition, this new dynamic at home may create problems for a couple that now spend most of their day in the home office. This dilemma was well summarized by former Canadian Prime Minister Lester Pearson's wife, who was upset with how little she saw her husband following his transition to working from home. She is quoted as saying, "I married him for better or worse. I didn't marry him for lunch."⁶

While increased telework also holds many possibilities for decreasing gender inequality in employment, the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on women's employment may have lasting detrimental consequences for future female participation in the labor force, as well as women's earnings, due to disruptions in employment history and work experience⁷. Multiple studies⁸ from the past thirty years depict a bleak future for those who lose jobs and earnings

⁵ Hodson, P. (2020) "How Working from Home Affects Family Life", [in]: *The Guardian*. Available [online]: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/06/how-working-from-home-affects-family-life>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Madell, R. (2020) "Remote Work May Increase Gender Inclusivity for Women", [in]: *Remote.Co*. Available [online]: <https://remote.co/remote-work-inclusivity-women/>

⁸ Alon, T., M. Doepke, J. Olmstead-Rumsey, and M. Tertilt (2020) *The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality*, NBER Working Paper, No. 26947.



WHILE INCREASED TELEWORK ALSO HOLDS MANY POSSIBILITIES FOR DECREASING GENDER INEQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT, THE NEGATIVE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 CRISIS ON WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT MAY HAVE LASTING DETRIMENTAL CONSEQUENCES FOR FUTURE FEMALE PARTICIPATION IN THE LABOR FORCE

amidst recessions, as their future employment is jeopardized by lost experience. During the coronavirus crisis, women have tended to be disproportionately affected by cyclical unemployment and economic

inactivity⁹. The impact of COVID-19 on female entrepreneurs in the Czech Republic also demonstrates the severity of the gender disparity, as 8,400 women abandoned or postponed their entrepreneurial endeavors from 2019 to 2020¹⁰. LMC surveys also observed this trend from 2019 to 2020 in the Czech Republic, showing a disproportionate number of women on paid and unpaid leave when compared to men with full-time employment¹¹. The ILOSTAT data from 55 high- and middle-income countries displays the same pattern that women have been losing their jobs at a much higher rate than men during the COVID-19 crisis, a trend which is particularly concerning due to the already unequal labor force participation rates between men and women¹².

Sectors with existing opportunities for remote work display fewer differences in gender employment when compared to jobs without the opportunity to work remotely¹³. Before COVID-19, home office was driven by individual employees' needs (and the needs of self-employed individuals), and this pandemic is no exception. Generally, women's higher rates of remote work, when compared to men, likely reflect

⁹ Madell, R. (2020) "Remote Work May Increase Gender Inclusivity for Women", [in]: Remote.Co. Available [online]: <https://remote.co/remote-work-inclusivity-women/>

¹⁰ LMC (1996) *Práce se změnila. Navzdýcky... .. HRozně dobrý čtení.* Available [online]: <https://magazin.lmc.eu/prace-se-zmenila-navzdycyky>

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Azcona, G., A. Bhatt, U. Cattaneo, G. Fortuny, R. Gomis, S. Kapsos, and P. Seck (2020) "Fallout of COVID-19: Working Moms Are Being Squeezed Out of the Labor Force" [in]: ILOSTAT. Available [online]: <https://ilostat.ilo.org/fallout-of-covid-19-working-moms-are-being-squeezed-out-of-the-labour-force/>

¹³ LMC (1996) *Práce se změnila. Navzdýcky... .. HRozně dobrý čtení.* Available [online]: <https://magazin.lmc.eu/prace-se-zmenila-navzdycyky>

their need to transition to telework in order to care for out-of-school children or relatives. This trend is not only limited to women, however, as an increasing number of workers between the age of 25 and 44 are also working remotely because they are more likely to have young children and are therefore more heavily impacted by school closures¹⁴. The authors of a 2020 study on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality, Alon et al., put it succinctly: “women will be less protected from employment loss...”¹⁵.

While remote work has the potential to allow women and men alike to no longer have to choose between parenthood and employment by offering more flexible hours or the ability to stay at home with young children, the closure of childcare facilities due to the pandemic and the norms around mothers as the primary provider of childcare are resulting in women’s employment being disproportionately affected in a negative way by the COVID-19 crisis. Though potential positive impacts of remote work on gender equality in the workforce will likely be seen in the long-term, the present disruption of COVID-19 is accentuating the negative aspects of remote work for women.

HOW COVID-19 TOOK PEOPLE’S HAPPINESS – OR QUITE THE OPPOSITE?

According to the President of the Chamber of Commerce in the Czech Republic, there is a group of people who are treating home office as a form of paid leave. These employees are far less productive in their home office setting, generally doing only what work is given to them directly by their



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boss. Some often procrastinate until even procrastination stops entertaining them, at which point they will turn to other activities such as renovating their apartment, which is evidenced by the increased sales of hobby markets in the Czech Republic last year¹⁶.

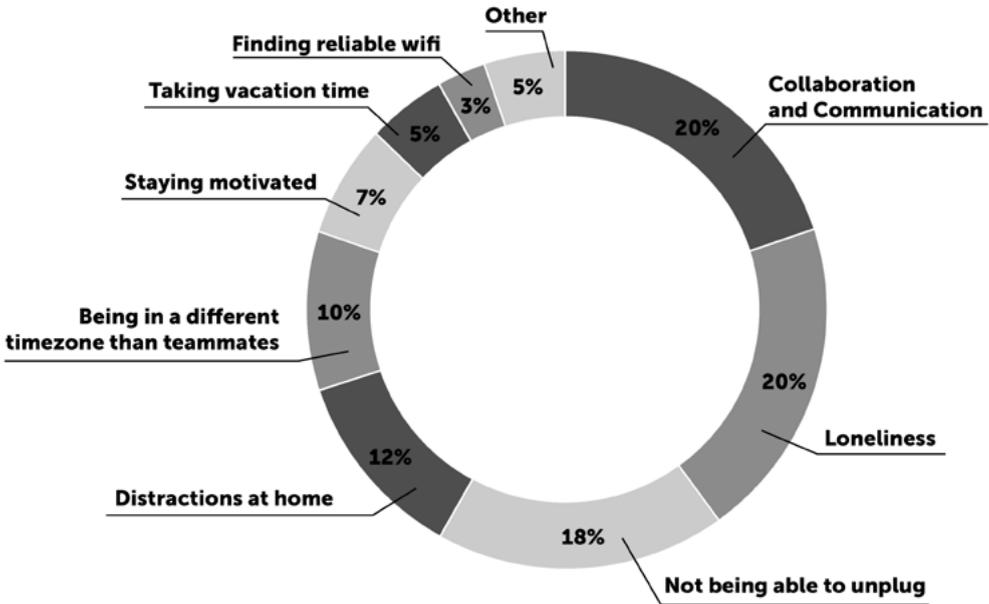
“We live in a time when the focus on working for the company is disrupted, when you have to spread your working hours and devote part of it to your personal responsibilities. If you worked in an office, you wouldn’t do this. It is a mutual tax for the

¹⁴ Alon, T., M. Doepke, J. Olmstead-Rumsey, and M. Tertilt (2020) The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality, NBER Working Paper, No. 26947.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.9.

¹⁶ John, Z. (2020) “Glossary: Stories from the Home Office. Who Makes More at Home and Who Less”, [in]: Seznam Zprávy. Available [online]: https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/glosa-historky-z-home-office-kdo-doma-maka-vic-a-kdo-mene-141150#dop_ab_variant=0&dop_source_zone_name=zpravy.sznhp.box&dop_req_id=6pAOKXA36ZV-202102081728&source=hp&seq_no=4&utm_campaign=8utm_medium=z-boxiku&utm_source=www.seznam.cz

Figure 1: Biggest struggles in working remotely



Source: <https://lp.buffer.com/state-of-remote-work-2020>

covid era that we are experiencing. Your boss has to come to terms with lower productivity, and you have to come to terms with multitasking,” says Dlouhý¹⁷.

However, not all employees and self-employed workers are simply finding ways to entertain themselves, as many working from home are suffering from weight gain, poorer working conditions, and decreased concentration. Mental health concern can also occur due to a range of factors – such as the loss of sports and social activities as well as a loss of separation between the work and home environment. Although experts agree that the change in work regime has affected people’s lives, their work commitment, and their physical and mental condition, the extent of the change

remains unclear, because comprehensive data and long-term studies are still lacking.

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¹⁷ Ibid.

In practice, however, some physicians are already noticing the changes:

"We observe that employees at the home office are gaining weight, even though we cannot quantify it yet. Much depends on the family, what options it has and how much it is possible to replace what people would otherwise have when going to the gym or various sports activities. On the one hand, it is true that people sit and are at computers, but it also happens in the office. In the afternoon, however, they could move in the normal mode," said doctor Ilona Hülle¹⁸.

Another doctor, Bohuslav Procházka, notes that *"the number of people with symptoms of depression, requiring pharmacological help, is increasing significantly."* Such developments make it imperative for both employers and doctors to realize that people spend much more time with computers than the work that would normally take place in the office. In addition to work, people also use the Internet to contact one other, play online games, or watch social media and streaming sites. It is obvious, then, why their eyes are suffering and why many people are reporting headaches, fatigue, and a loss of sleep. As doctor Alena Šebková describes, *"I increasingly encounter my patients with panic disorder, anxiety and sleep disorders, which require psychological or pedopsychiatric intervention."*¹⁹

These challenges to working remotely have been further exacerbated by the fact that the original extraordinary situation is becoming routine, as unfavorable conditions

¹⁸ Prádova, D. (2020) "Overweight and Depression. The Epidemic Can Affect the Lives of Isolated Children", [in]: *Seznam Zprávy*. Available [online]: <https://www.seznamzpravy.cz/clanek/nadvaha-a-deprese-epidemie-muze-ovlivnit-zivoty-izolovanych-deti-141743>

¹⁹ Ibid.

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continue. As psychologist Kulhánek puts it: *"People are clearly suffering from a lack of exercise. There is also a lack of contact with peers and hobbies and we are more isolated when we spend time at home and at the computer. It all plays a role"*. Another thing is that concentration and bad mood are closely related, and depressive states have a great influence on the ability to concentrate well.

The Safety Line, a Czech nonprofit NGO, also recently drew attention to the increase in mental health conditions. According to Kateřina Lišková, the head of the professional services of The Safety Line, more

callers turned to them in 2020 because of these pandemic-related problems. The year-on-year increase in such calls amounted to 28%. There have also been more problems in family relationships as well as cases of cyberbullying. Lišková noted, *“Much more often than before, we also encounter the fact that callers on the line bring the topic of suicidal tendencies and self-harm, which are very serious things.”*

According to psychologist Jana Růžičková, the perception of a pandemic and the associated limitations is individual and depends on the situation in the family. In addition to their job, some parents have to help with homework and learning.

“The situation is very exhausting and stressful for some of them. Some clients experience sleep disorders and nightmares. Clients with depression lack social contact - contact with friends, although it was more difficult for them due to illness, activated some of them at least a little,” she added.



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Due to a lack of exercise and computer work in the home environment, more and more people are having problems with their spine²⁰. Physiotherapists also warn that the situation will worsen after the winter²¹. However, companies are already paying the cost, as hundreds of millions of Czech crowns are spent on medical bills due to back pain problems²². Until September 2020 alone, over 200,000 people in the Czech Republic had problems with their backs. Accordingly, the amount of sick pay due to back problems was 30% higher in 2019. *“The role was played by insufficient physical activity and days spent at home office in the wrong positions,”* indicates Katarína Železná, the co-founder of Fitgee. According to earlier Chamber of Commerce estimates, about 40% of people worked from home in both waves of the coronavirus pandemic²³. In addition to sports, many of them lacked natural movement, such as walking to the bus stop, moving to the office, or going to lunch or shopping.

Physiotherapists warn that the main onslaught of people with back problems is yet to come. There were longer days and more favorable weather conditions in the spring wave, which attracted more to outdoor activities. Though these activities partially abated many people’s sedentary regime, these options are now once again limited. *“With the autumn and winter waves, the lack of exercise will become even more pronounced,”* says Vladan Toufar, chairman

²⁰ Havelková, E. (2021) “Current Aspects of Work at Home Office”, [in]: *Money Blog*. Available [online]: <https://money.cz/mzdy-a-personalistika/aktualni-aspekty-prace-na-home-office/>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.



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of the Union of Physiotherapists of the Czech Republic²⁴.

At the same time, Toufar points out the problem of low physical activity does not only apply to adults, but also pupils and students who are learning from home. In adults, symptoms are usually limited to back pain, damage to the intervertebral

²⁴ Hronová, M. (2021) "Little Physical Activity and Bad Sitting. Working from Home Destroys People's Backs, It Has Already Cost Companies Over a Billion", [in]: *Hospodářské noviny*. Available [online]: <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66868250-malo-fyzickych-aktivit-a-spatne-sezeni-prace-z-domova-nici-lidem-zada-firmy-uz-to-stalo-pres-miliardu>

discs, headaches, and neck pain. In addition to lack of exercise, unsuitable working conditions are also detrimental, such as the use of a bad chair or desk, incorrect computer settings and poor lighting²⁵. "For example, working with a laptop is completely unsuitable for longer work performance. Here, there are justified requests from employees for the possibility of paying for the necessary equipment and facilities," he gives as an example.

According to experts, in order to prevent health problems due to sitting position, people must intersperse the session with movement. However, employers also pay for health problems with the spine, as "physically inactive employees deprive their companies of finances on wage compensation", notes Železná from Fitgee²⁶. According to her calculations, companies could pay up to 1.2 billion Czech crowns for sickness benefits for a period of six months. Some companies are aware of this problem and have responded to it – for example, České energetické závody, Czech company specialising in the distribution of electricity, offers training for its employees to learn how to organize their work environment at home. Consulting company KPMG did the same, drawing up a manual for its employees with advice on how to prevent back problems at home office²⁷.

According to Fitgee, the investment in prevention of health problems will pay off for companies, as is supported by data from foreign companies that have implemented prevention programs. A 2014 analysis by O'Neil Industries found that when its employees began to move more and take care of their health, this led to cost savings of almost 12 million crowns.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS GO TO THE OFFICE EVEN DURING A PANDEMIC

Working from home during a pandemic is common for private companies, but in government offices it is often complicated by insufficient technical equipment and weak digitization. According to the press department of the Czech Social Security Administration, the security of the data with which officials work also hinders work from home. This mainly applies to logging into applications and databases²⁸.

The director of the Prague Cadastral Office, Lubomír Klučka, explains that only certain tasks can be completed remotely, primarily those which do not require looking at papers, printed records or maps²⁹. Prague Cadastral Office generally allows its employees to work from home when there is a greater risk of infection in the region or city where it is located, or when one of the employees suspects an infection in the workplace³⁰. Another solution has been to divide people into teams that take turns coming into the office in order to avoid having too many employees together in one space.

Michal Fišer, the director of Operator ITC, admits that work outside the office had to be fine-tuned and that people took some time to adjust. *"They had to realize that if they didn't work at home, sooner or later it would show"*, says the boss, adding that some initial projects were delayed, but clarifying that this was also caused by external pandemic circumstances. The direc-

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Plihalová, M. (2021) "Úředníci chodí do kanceláře i při pandemii. Práci z domova jim komplikuje technika i bezpečnost", [in]: *iHNed.cz*. Available [online]: <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66875940-urednici-chodi-do-kancelare-i-pri-pandemii-praci-z-domova-jim-komplikuje-technika-i-bezpecnost> [in Czech]

³⁰ Ibid.



IN 2019, AROUND 27% OF EMPLOYEES WORKED PART-TIME IN GERMANY AND AUSTRIA, 47% OF EMPLOYEES WORKED PART-TIME IN THE NETHERLANDS, AND ONLY 6% WORKED PART-TIME IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

tor plans to continue to offer home office as a benefit as soon as the pandemic subsides. *"I can imagine that, for example, we will not force developers to go to work at all, if they do not need it"*, describes Fišer. For other employees, he wants to set up a "reasonable mix" of office and home. According to him, people still have to meet in person occasionally because it promotes creativity and corporate culture.

Furthermore, Fišer does not foresee any serious technical barriers, which would prevent home office from reaching its full potential, noting only the need to retrofit its employee's home computers for security purposes. However, he estimates that the organization of work itself is often an obstacle. For instance, it is difficult to

work remotely with clerks who help clients at counters, as is evident in Prague, where long queues formed in front of the driver's register building in the autumn of 2020. Despite the challenges, some issues could be handled electronically over time. "I think that if something accelerates the pandemic, it is the digitization of offices"³¹, Fišer notes.

However, according to the Czech Government Commissioner for IT Vladimír Dzuriš, some institutions are facing a shortage of laptops, as it has been difficult to quickly replace them with desktop computers. "In the state administration, we can't suddenly make an order and exchange 150,000 computers for laptops", he explains.

THE POST-PANDEMIC PLAN

Economists have drawn comparisons between the current fall in GDP and the post-war economic crisis due to coronavirus' severe blow to the global economy. In this context, GDP can be understood not only as a number, but also as an answer to the question of whether or not *I have a job*. Accordingly, it seems the time for a new post-epidemic Marshall plan is upon us, so that people have something to turn to *after the war* – whether at home or in the office.

One of the solutions might be shared spaces. According to Eurostat, in 2019, around 27% of employees worked part-time in Germany and Austria, 47% of employees worked part-time in the Netherlands, and only 6% worked part-time in the Czech Republic. The average rate among all 27 EU



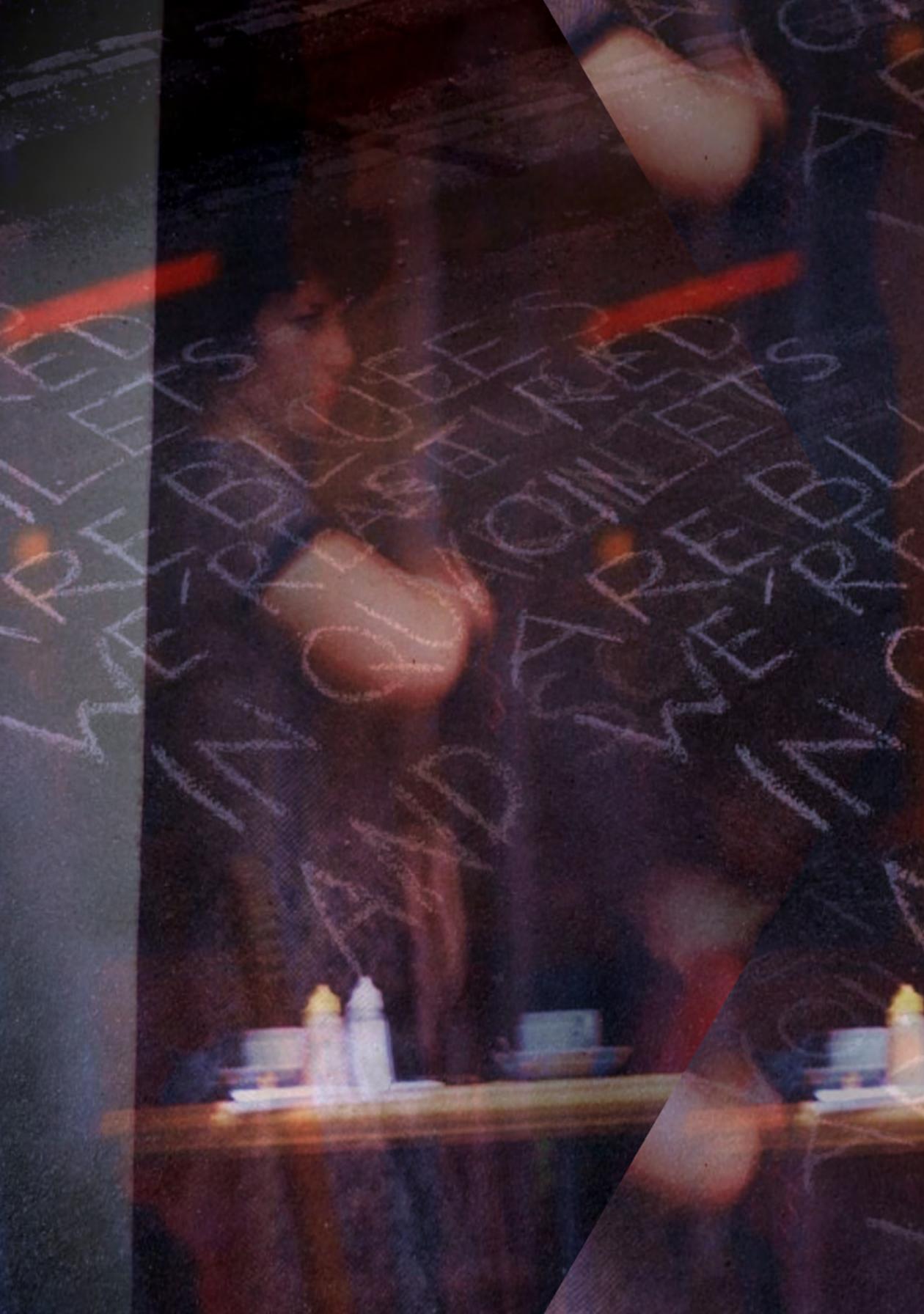
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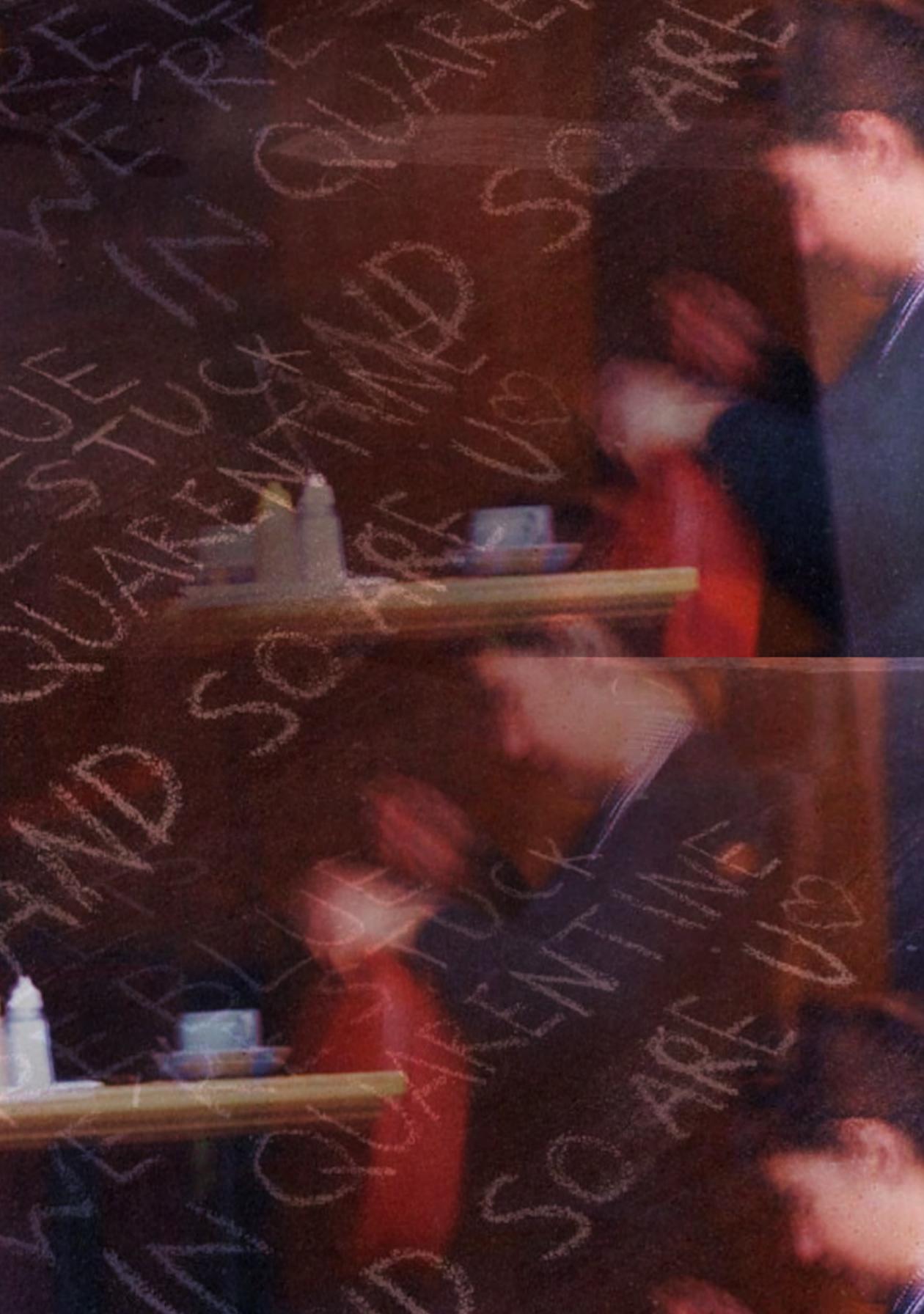
member states was about 18%³², meaning Czechia is one of the countries with the lowest share of part-time workers in the European Union. Even compared to developed countries, mothers with young children have the lowest employment in the Czech Republic. State-sponsored shared spaces could change that, according to company representatives.

The relative success and smooth transition to home office has led many companies to realize that they want to allow a substantial part of their workforce to continue working remotely even after the pandemic subsides. They have already begun adapting their offices, which are shrinking, and incorporating more shared spaces. According to experience from abroad, we can assume that one job could be shared, for example, by employees in accounting offices and receptions, assistants or cashiers. As pointed out by Miroslav Dir, a spokesman for the

³¹ Hronová, M. (2021) "Little Physical Activity and Bad Sitting. Working from Home Destroys People's Backs, It Has Already Cost Companies Over a Billion", [in]: *Hospodářské noviny*. Available [online]: <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66868250-malo-fyzickych-aktivit-a-spatne-sezeni-prace-z-domova-nici-lidem-zadafirmy-uz-to-stalo-pres-miliardu>

³² Eurostat (2019) *19% of 20-64 Year Olds in Part-Time Work in 2018*. Available [online]: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/DDN-20190621-1>





Czech Chamber of Commerce, it is likely that even with regard to the current economic situation, employers will support the idea of shared jobs³³.

Shared jobs have long been supported by trade unions in the Czech Republic. “We have been saying for a long time that any support for flexible forms of employment is good”, said Josef Středula, chairman of the Czech-Moravian Confederation of Trade Unions. However, he does not think that it is precisely this type of aid that could help the current labor market situation in any fundamental way. According to Dir, who commented for *Hospodářské noviny*, the institution of shared jobs also entails certain complications for employers. “For example, it is about organizing work – the sum of working hours must not exceed one working time, so it is necessary to solve the transfer of tasks, there is also a problem of termination or termination of the agreement by one of the employees,”³⁴ he added.

The pandemic also affected plans for office construction. Companies have stopped projects and investments. They are waiting for what will happen next. “According to estimates, activity on the office market fell to the 30% level of 2019”, says Tomáš Pardubický, CEO of the Finep Group. In some cases, however, the changes also affect projects already in progress. Česká spořitelna, for example, is negotiating with the developer Sekyra Group, who has been given the contract to build Česká spořitelna’s new campus in Smíchov,

³³ Marčeková, M. and A. Váchal (2021) “Companies Are Shrinking Offices and Looking for Subtenants. Owners Must Make Discounts and Offer Incentives”, [in]: *Hospodářské noviny*. Available [online]: <https://archiv.ihned.cz/c1-66880810-firmy-zmensuji-kancelare-a-hledaji-podnajemniky-vlastnici-objektu-se-musi-prizpusobovat-pobidkami-i-zlevnovanim>

³⁴ Ibid.



THE FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE IS THAT THE OFFICE WILL BE A PLACE FOR MEETINGS RATHER THAN FOR FOCUSED INDIVIDUAL WORK

Prague, which will be designed to have more shared space. According to the advisers, how big an impact the pandemic will have on the offices will be clear when people return to work.

EVERYTHING BELONGS TO EVERYONE

Silence, no one in sight, an experience usually reserved for cleaners walking between empty desks in the quiet evening hours. More and more workplaces remain empty, devoid of their usual employees for months on end. Flowers are left neglected upon their desks, hot and cold water flow in the kitchen, heaters are left running, and yet no one goes there. Despite their apparent state of abandonment, there are some employees who bounce from home to office once or twice a week. As a consequence, companies are not able to sell or lease out their buildings yet, and are instead devising ways to avoid losing money on their operation.

Companies are, therefore, changing the layout of their offices and looking for ways to sensitively explain this to their

employees. Will offices survive the corona crisis when people discover how much can be done from home? Certainly not in the form we know now. The fundamental change is that the office will be a place for meetings rather than for focused individual work. *"In the offices, it is less and less expected that everyone will have a stable place in them – their own desk. The premises will be divided according to activities: in one zone you can think undisturbed, in*



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A SURVEY BY ABSL,
AN ASSOCIATION
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FROM HOME
IN THE FUTURE

one you can discuss and create with colleagues, in another you can make phone calls, conduct video conferences or relax”, explains Apolena Weiss, who specializes in working in Capexus designing offices. Weiss adds that the changes are intended to bring greater work efficiency, deeper cooperation and, as a result – despite their less than enthusiastic acceptance – an improvement in the environment so that people want to return from their home workplaces. Employers also react fundamentally to the development of work procedures, mainly due to the development of agile ways of cooperation that require flexible spaces. *"In such offices, there are not only chairs on the wheels, but also tables. People can readjust the furniture themselves,”*³⁵ describes Weiss.

Many offices to which people return after the COVID-19 pandemic will be different, and employees need to be prepared for such changes. They may feel that the company has taken away a piece of their comfort and disrupted their habits. *"The key is to explain the reasons and the benefits of the change. And ask them about their needs, not whether they want change. Because they always get a negative answer to such a question”,* says Weiss, who provided several such office transformations before the current pandemic. According to her, it is ideal to entrust someone within the company to manage the change instead of leaving it to the building managers. *"Usually, HR professionals or better managers who are in charge of corporate culture or solve corporate community projects can do it well”,* she says.

³⁵ Jarošová, B. (2021) "What about Empty Offices? Most People Like Working from Home", [in]: *Idnes News*. Available [online]: https://www.idnes.cz/finance/prace-a-podnikani/home-office-prazdne-kancelare-vyuziti-coworking.A210121_590468_podnikani_sov



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Vodafone is now on the threshold of such a change in their working environment. Already at the beginning of the pandemic, when people left for the home office, the company rented one of their buildings. Now, they are waiting to see how the planned regime will work: two days of work from the office (creative and team) and three days from home (focused, individual). People like working from home. A survey by ABSL, an association of customer, business, and IT service providers, shows that four out of five employees want to work more than half their working hours from home in the future. People do not want to go to work every day, but, on the other hand, they cannot imagine that they will not go anywhere at all and work only from home. In addition to comfort and flexibility of renting, the location and equipment of the office will now be crucial. According to Colliers, which advises on real estate, employees who worked in open spaces are the least likely to return to the office.

Companies are thus considering a completely new arrangement of workplaces with several variants to choose from.

“One of the possibilities is the Hub & Spoke model, where the company reduces the size of the main office and complements it with smaller spaces in different locations in the same city or even regions. Many large companies already operate offices in several locations today, but so far the individual premises have been intended only for one specific department, not for all employees of the company,”³⁶ says Jana Vlková from Colliers.

According to her, the regional offices must be rebuilt into a kind of internal mother company, where any employee of the company can work.

Jana Vlková believes that another alternative is the Flex & Core model. In this case, the company’s head office offers a high-quality design and technologically equipped shared internal work environment with membership in one or more coworking centers. *“This model is especially suitable for companies whose dynamically changing number of employees and with it the required capacity of offices”,* offers Vlková. This means that those who will return to the newly designed offices may not have access to their customary workplaces as the tables will be given to those who need it.³⁷

Another option is the so-called fix desk, which provides the client with one permanent place that no one else can use. *“This method is mainly used by people who*

³⁶ Vacková, H. (2021) “Personal Space Is Disappearing from the Offices, Everything Will Belong to Everyone”, [in]: *Ekonom*. Available [online]: <https://ekonom.cz/c1-66871480-z-kancelari-mizi-osobni-prostor-vsechno-bude-patrit-vsem>

³⁷ Ibid.

do not go to the office so often, but feel the need to have a solid workplace where they can put their things away,”³⁸ describes Jana Gerhátová. The desk is part of a larger workspace used in the same way by other clients, who usually do not know each other.

There is a higher interest in coworking positions, especially among employees of companies with a mandatory home office. The closing time is long and in the households of young families with children, employees do not have a professional and quiet place for their work³⁹.

NEW TECHNICAL EQUIPMENT

In recent months, companies have also set up virtual studios, such as Generali Česká pojišťovna, Microsoft, and Česká spořitelna⁴⁰. Demand for such solutions was recognized by the company AV Media, which equips offices with technology, and also helped Komerční banka with digitization. AV Media has also been devising solutions for inter-office connectivity. *“From the car park to the meeting rooms and relaxation zones, employees can book all this via their mobile phone and from anywhere, as well as control the presentation that is projected in the meeting room,”* Jiří Plátek from AV Media Marketing describes the possibilities of interconnection.

Interconnectivity and remote access will support new forms of hybrid collaboration where part of the team will work from home alongside their colleagues in the office. These online connections between homes and offices will be facilitated by reservation systems. *“Not only do they provide space control, they can also help organize community life”,* says Apolena

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.



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Weiss. *“It is advisable to have them if the company has more than 20 employees. In a larger number of people, it is no longer effective to keep all communication with employees in emails”,* she adds. The office will, therefore, record and transcribe meetings through new methods – such as video or digital annotations.

In addition to virtual connections and crowd-control methods, new voice technologies are being implemented in office spaces as the risk of the COVID-19

pandemic persists. Companies in the Czech Republic are beginning to use automatic transcriptions of audio recordings from online meetings and call centers. Voice identification is also being implemented in order to verify people's identities for purposes such as gaining access to buildings and individual rooms. *"Corporate virtual assistants are also being used abroad, i.e. business alternatives to commercial Alexa from Amazon or Siri from Apple. In the Czech Republic, 'voice robots' are also beginning to emerge, some alternatives to chatbots"*, says Michal Hrabí, the head of Phonexia, a company that develops voice technologies and works primarily for banks, operators, and call centers.



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Komerční banka has set up special rooms in the Czech Republic that support creativity and cooperation by providing special audiovisual and interactive technology, such as smart boards with touch screens and special electronic pens. *"Paper boards were not enough for us"*, says Zajiček, adding that there will be more places in the bank for individual phone calls and video calls. *"These have increased and people would be disturbed in the open"*.

Presently, communication tools such as Skype, Microsoft Teams, or Google Meet still predominate. Although the controls are intuitive for all applications, users may still need to learn a number of basic functions such as muting their microphone and sharing their screens with colleagues or teachers. *"No one wants to wait for the first ten minutes while you fix your microphone, camera or applications which aren't working"*, emphasizes Zuzana Krajča, an HR partner of Sodexo Benefit41. It is also a good idea to consider what will be displayed when you use the camera.

COSTS FOR EMPLOYEES/SELF-EMPLOYED INDIVIDUALS WORKING AT HOME

According to an analysis by consulting firm Grand Thornton, the employer should reimburse employees for expenses related to work at home⁴². However, certain expenses (such as the costs of heating, electricity, water, or the Internet) cannot be determined at a flat rate. Therefore, it is impossible to calculate the actual expenses related only to the performance of work from home, and not to housing. On the other hand, calculating compensation

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² EuroZprávy (2021) *The Current Legislation Is Unsatisfactory for Work from Home*. Available [online]: <https://eurozpravy.cz/domaci/politika/nynejsi-pravni-uprava-je-pro-praci-z-domova-nevyhovujici.e8d70207/>



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for the wear and tear of an employee's own property used for work, such as a computer, printer, telephone, or furniture is comparatively straightforward. Refunds for such regular wear and tear may be fixed at a flat rate.

Complications arise, however, when trying to differentiate electricity usage from work-based activities and personal entertainment. Though employers should be responsible for expenses such as Internet, electricity, and heating incurred when

working, they should not be held accountable for other, non-work related uses. At the end of last year, the Czech Chamber of Commerce stated that 47% of employers in the Czech Republic had at least one home office worker in November. This proportion was greater for large companies (92%), and comparatively low in micro companies, where only one third of businesses had ten (or fewer) home office employees⁴³.

According to Labor Law § 2 subsection 2, companies are not allowed to order their employees to work from home; it can only be done with consent. Though some of its aspects can be managed through internal regulation, companies cannot impose specific obligations on employees, and instead have to set the conditions for the performance of the home office on a contractual basis. In these contracts, it is advisable to implement adjustments for home office conditions and to agree at least in general terms when the employee must be available by telephone or other technical means. It is also possible to make agreements on various matters – such as how the employee will record the time worked and how they will be assigned tasks. Ideally, the employee should also avoid working at night, on days off, or overtime without the consent of the employer, so as not to incur additional costs due to the supplements provided by the Labor Code for specific states.

Because employers cannot pass on the costs associated with work performance to the employee, it is practical to adjust the method and amount of reimbursement for costs incurred by employees (e.g. the Internet, energy and others). Although companies could reimburse the billed costs retrospectively, it might be best to agree on a lump monthly sum. Employees may

⁴³ Ibid.

also be required to ensure the protection of company and personal data, and to treat the employer's entrusted property with care.

HOW TO SURVIVE (OR EVEN ENJOY) WORKING REMOTELY?

If an employee/self-employed individual is not in quarantine, she is advised to go out at least once a day, otherwise she runs the risk of cabin fever. All she needs is a coffee on the balcony or a walk in the park. One should not feel remorse when indulging in ordinary breaks. It is important to maintain the line between privacy and work, and working from a sofa or the bed should be avoided.

Employees need to create a comfortable place to work, which means finding the right lighting and layout of their monitor, keyboard, and mouse.

It is also important that the table is not too low or too high, and that the chair is adjusted so that your elbows form right angles with your hands placed on the table. The screen should be at eye level, not lower or higher, and it is also advisable to connect an external keyboard and mouse.

It is a good idea to change your sitting position every 20 minutes and to combine movement with normal work activities. For example, walking around the room while on the phone, doing stretching exercises while waiting for the coffee machine, and occasionally standing while working at a suitably high shelf are all beneficial. At least once an hour, stand up, breathe, and stretch for a few minutes.

With the team, it is necessary to establish clear rules on availability, methods of communication or periodicity of information exchange, assignment, and reporting. However, mere e-mails cannot replace



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social contact, and phone calls should be arranged whenever possible if you are feeling depressed or isolated. It is also necessary to set a time when the work will be performed, and to remember that some stimuli from the home environment can cause inattention or distraction from unfinished tasks.

Because there are few reasons to leave your apartment when working at home, you may grow accustomed to solitude and not feel the need to interact with others.



AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS DRAGGED ON AND CRUSHED ALL HOPES FOR A SPEEDY RETURN TO WORK, SCHOOL, AND SOCIALIZATION, MANY ARE BEGINNING TO REIMAGINE THE FUTURE OF WORK AND EXPERTS AGREE IT IS LIKELY TO BE INCREASINGLY REMOTE

However, it is very important to keep in touch with co-workers and colleagues.

CONCLUSIONS

In the first few weeks of the global health crisis, many thought that the break from normalcy was likely to last for a few weeks or months at most, and that their makeshift home-offices would go back to

being a spare bedroom in no time. As the COVID-19 pandemic has dragged on and crushed all hopes for a speedy return to work, school, and socialization, many are beginning to reimagine the future of work and experts agree it is likely to be increasingly remote.

People's experience of working from home differs greatly, and while some have lost their jobs due to necessary social distancing, others are finding that telework suits them and their lifestyles. The lack of a commute, time flexibility, and no office distractions are some of the many positive elements of remote work, even though still, they are balanced with negative consequences, which may not be as inevitable as employers and leaders think.

Despite the contradictory costs and benefits of home office, company leaders are enthusiastic about its future implementation, with 88% of business leaders in Western Europe forecasting the permanent adoption of remote-work elements. Leaders recognize increased employee retention and savings from cutting down on office space as two of the prominent benefits of telecommuting, and as organizations across the world are adapting to remote work on a massive scale, the solutions they craft in response to unique challenges will benefit other leaders.

Remote work is not new, but its widespread adoption is. Scientific benefits of this rapid adaptation are surfacing as scholars continue to investigate the factors, which make or break the teleworking experience on the individual and organizational level. Yet, the mass transition to home office is taking place synchronously with a global pandemic that exacerbates some of the challenges of remote work. Conditions such as social isolation prevent us from reaping some of the potential rewards of telework

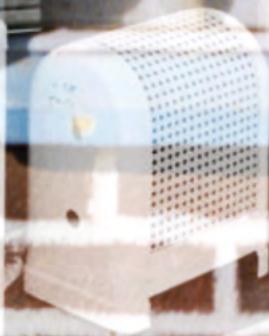
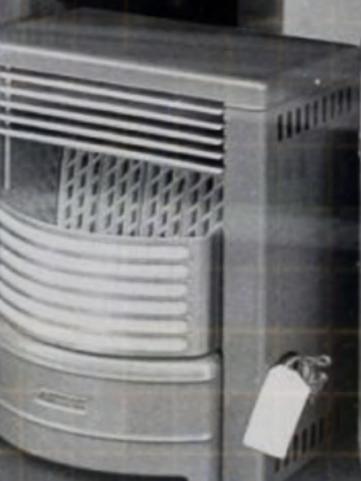
ELECTRICAL SUPPLIES

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CONDITIONS
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– like increased gender equality in employment, something which has suffered greatly due to the COVID-19 crisis.

What positive effects did the year 2020 bring? Hundreds of thousands of pupils and students probably got their first computer and learned to use it. Thanks to home office mode, the computer literacy of the

working population has increased dramatically. Views of part-time employment and home office are likely to change in the future, and will likely be appreciated, especially by employed mothers.

In any case, we can look forward to 2021 with a sense of cautious optimism. Pharmaceutical companies will compete in the supply of vaccines, the majority of the population will be vaccinated quickly, and the world will return to a new, perhaps *better*, normal.



*

ŠÁRKA
PRÁT

The director of the Institute for Politics and Society, a Czech think-tank, and an elected board member of the European Liberal Forum, a think tank of the ALDE Party