

Smart work: can digitalisation help reconcile work and family life?



COFACE Families Europe launched a discussion end 2016 in Berlin at its conference on the social impact of digitalisation, looking at six dimensions including smart work, digital literacy, the digital economy, the potential of technology in social/health service provision, connected children and safety online, and the threats and opportunities of Big Data. As a result of the conference, we produced a series of short briefings summarising some of the emerging trends and challenges. **This briefing focuses on Smart Work.**

Discussions over the “future of work” and how technologies and digitalization is having a deep impact on employment opportunities are becoming increasingly common. Work-life balance is also getting high on the scale of workers’ demands, with more people wanting to be able to decide how to use their time and reconcile their work with their family and private life. While this can be an aspiration for some, for others it is a basic need: with insufficient care service provision for children or other family members, being able to work flexibly can be the only opportunity for many, especially women, to stay in employment.

Smart work is one type of flexible working arrangement that can help many families reconcile their work and family life, but also a tool in the hands of businesses to review their relationship with their workers and the community around them.

A definition of Smart Work can be found in the [European Parliament resolution of 13 September 2016 on creating labour market conditions favourable for work-life balance](#):

“Smart work as an approach to organising work through a combination of flexibility, autonomy and collaboration, which does not necessarily require the worker to be present in the workplace or in any pre-defined place and enables them to manage their own working hours, while nevertheless ensuring consistency with the maximum daily and weekly working hours laid down by law and collective agreements”.

Challenges and opportunities

Smart work is a step further than telework where people have a predefined alternative place of work (home). Instead, it can be performed anywhere and without communication to the employer, including the workers’ home, co-working places closer to the workers’ home than the office, public spaces...

Therefore, it is a real shift away from the idea and paradigm that for all jobs it is necessary to be present for long and fixed hours to perform the duty assigned. On the contrary, knowing that smart work is a possibility (regularly or on a needs basis) can help workers in organising their time and better reconcile work, family and personal life.



Smart work is a renewed pact based on trust between the worker and the employer, in the framework of law and collective agreements. The worker has the freedom to decide when and from where to work, being able to cater for personal or family needs (e.g. visit to a doctor, drive children from school to another extra school activity, go to a public office..) and the employer has the insurance that the tasks will be completed.

However, shifting away from the idea of “work being done only at the workplace” also has some risks. In a period of rapid development of technologies, where we are all always connected, there is a risk of falling into a culture of total availability of the employee, because it will always be possible to be contacted and receive work-related requests because of technologies (e.g smartphones and constant email and internet connection). This can rapidly lead to the opposite consequences than the ones desired: from increased stress and anxiety to an even greater inability to reconcile work, family and personal life.

Finally, it has to be recalled that smart work should be an instrument for women and men and not a way to reinforce the unequal distribution of family and care responsibilities on women’s shoulders, by allowing women to smart work and men to stay at the workplace.

Local and national experiences can pave the way

While Smart Work can be a fairly new concept in EU policy, this is not the case at local and national level. In different EU realities there has been a number of reflections, research and pilot projects that have tried to understand, implement and assess smart work and its consequences.

In our conference in Berlin, we learned from and discussed three different cases and approaches:

- **In Finland** national authorities commissioned research in IT-intensive sectors, to understand the impact of technologies on workers and their workplace. Starting from IT sectors in a moment of intensifications of technologies can serve to understand the direction the broader labour market will take and design a sound labour market reform. In Finland, around 70% of workers in the IT sector are already performing some form of smart work, or “mobile work” as it is called.
- **In The Czech Republic** the Government is modifying labour legislation and initiatives are present in this reform to support work-life balance and flexible working arrangements. In The Czech Republic only a 10% of workers use flexible working arrangements, below the EU average. Smart work has been implemented also in the public administration and through an internal survey it has been possible to measure the perception of employees and improve areas that were considered problematic (e.g. issuing guidelines to prevent the feeling and stress for excessive availability outside working hours).
- **In Italy** there is a very recent law regulating smart work. Through a pilot project called Smart Companies to promote work-life balance and publicly initiated, a network of companies decided to test smart work and assess its impact on the company (productivity, achievements..), on workers’ satisfaction and well-being

(stress, time saved, ability to better reconcile..), but also on the community (reduction of traffic and CO2 emission because of employees not going to the workplace..). After one year, a survey was submitted to the 924 participants (823 smart workers and 119 managers) and both parties were satisfied and defined the experience as very positive. In particular, it was found that thanks to smart work, on average everyone saved 90 minutes daily that they could use for their own private needs, instead of being on the road to/from the workplace and 43.000 euros were saved (30 euros per day on average per smart worker for transports, food...). This had a wider impact as this project saved 65,4 tons of CO2 (equivalent to 8.720 new trees planted) in 6 months.

EU context and the future

The European Commission is currently preparing a package to respond to the work-life balance challenges of working parents and carers. According to the Roadmap and consultation documents, working arrangements are part of the proposals the European Commission will put forward.

COFACE Families Europe welcomed the European Parliament resolution (see above) that included a call for supporting the development of smart work across the EU. We would, therefore, encourage the European Commission to seize the opportunity and include in its upcoming package a document that could guide Member States in understanding the potential of smart work and supporting its correct development, on the basis of the local and national experiences already present in several EU countries.

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