

# Remote Working

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## **Abstract** (153 words)

Working remotely has become an abrupt reality for millions of workers due to recent external shifts. Traditionally viewed as a benefit granted to executives and knowledge-intensive workers in the corporate world, remote work is now recognized as a new, modern way of working in and with organizations. Since remote work has become more prevalent and has been growing in demand, unique challenges have also emerged. In addition to the long-identified limitations and struggles, the pandemic-induced paradigm shift has introduced a new set of complexities that are not adequately acknowledged. This entry provides an overview of the increasingly popular topic of remote working and presents the existing literature in organizational psychology. It critically evaluates the historical conceptualization of remote work and offers new perspectives that have been neglected in current scholarly debates. The entry also examines the challenges associated with remote work, including management issues, and highlights future directions for research in this area.

## **Keywords** (6 keywords)

*Telework, working from home, working from anywhere, alternative work arrangements, invisible inequalities, critical perspectives*

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## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for organizations to adapt and build the capacity to offer remote work. According to the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology's (SIOP, 2023) *Top 10 Work Trends List for 2023*, remote work has emerged as the number one challenge for researchers and practitioners. In addition to globalization and technological advancements, which have already enabled organizations to attract talent globally and reduce office space costs, the paradigm shift induced by the pandemic has played a crucial role in changing preferences and expectations. Current trends indicate that more and more employees prefer and actively seek employment opportunities that offer remote work. As a result, both the supply and demand sides of the market have shifted, supporting the adoption of remote work as a must-have condition for many organizations and industries.

The pandemic has indeed made remote work a sudden, unexpected, and, to some extent, permanent reality for employees and organizations. Consequently, this concept has gained increased attention in management and psychology literature, practice, and the media. Historically, remote work was considered a unique perk mostly offered to knowledge-intensive workers in service industries and executives who had proven themselves as loyal members of their organizations or climbed the corporate ladder to deserve such a privilege. At the same time, it has long been considered an impeccable tool for achieving work-life balance due to the flexibility of arranging work independently from time and space commitments. Furthermore, on a global scale, remote work is now regarded as a sustainable working approach that offers numerous societal and environmental benefits. This is attributed to increased efficiency, reduced commuting, and decreased pollution levels. Yet, not all the struggles and limitations are adequately addressed in the current debate.

Remote work has distinct characteristics that pose a significant challenge for managers in terms of effective management. These challenges have been extensively acknowledged in past research. Communication problems, lack of employee engagement, blurred boundaries between work and personal life, difficulties in establishing trust and collaboration, and increased feelings of loneliness and isolation are among the most commonly observed limitations. These drawbacks have led to an emerging divide in the corporate world, with some organizations embracing greater flexibility for their workforce, even on a permanent basis, while others restrict remote work opportunities and call their employees back to the office. However, regardless of the decision made by organizations, the widespread adoption of remote work necessitates a comprehensive understanding of the concept, its impact on organizational and societal outcomes, and a fair evaluation of these outcomes.

This entry aims to provide an overview of the increasingly popular topic of remote working and presents the existing literature in organizational psychology. To this extent, even though most entrepreneurial jobs – especially those in the gig economy can be performed remotely, in this entry, remote working is described as a phenomenon within the organizational context which assumes an employment relationship between the worker and organization. It also offers a critical evaluation of the historical conceptualization and provides neglected perspectives in the current scholarly debates. Additionally, the entry discusses the newly emerging challenges, provides a critical lens to remote work, and suggests future directions for remote work research in the field of organizational psychology.

### **History of Conceptual Development**

Since the 1990s, organizational scholars have been conceptually exploring various types of flexible work arrangements, particularly virtual teamwork, which laid the early foundations for remote working. Charles Handy, a prominent management professor at the London Business School, was among the first researchers to initiate discussions on managing remote workers. In his seminal paper published in Harvard Business Review in 1995, he posed the question, “How do you manage people whom you do not see?” (Handy, 1995, p. 41). This inquiry sparked the development of different approaches and models. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) provided the initial typology for virtual teams in their study, distinguishing these structures from conventional teams and examining their distinctive characteristics. They identified task complexity, spatial distance, temporal distribution, and electronic dependence in communications as the main features of virtual teams. Consequently, virtual teams were defined as structures composed of individuals working remotely from different geographical locations but connected through electronic communication tools. In the early stages of the literature, virtual work was viewed as a distinct form of work setting separate from traditional teamwork. However, Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) introduced the concept of “team virtuality,” which suggested that teams could vary in their degree of virtuality. They proposed measuring virtuality based on the extent of electronic communication usage, the value of information shared through these tools, and the synchronicity of team member communications. This perspective challenged the dichotomous categorization of teamwork and argued that geographic dispersion was not necessarily a determining factor. This view is not shared by all scholars. For example, Schweitzer and Duxbury (2010) disagreed with this explanation and argued that geographic dispersion alone could suffice as a condition for virtuality. Despite ongoing disagreements regarding the defining dimensions, most studies assume that geographic dispersion and electronic communication are the primary defining characteristics of virtuality. Several other dimensions were also offered by researchers, yet lack of face-to-face communication is found to be the common characteristic of virtual collaboration. For a more comprehensive analysis and critical literature review, refer to Orhan (2017).

Contrary to what is often suggested, remote work or organizing work remotely is not a novel organizational arrangement. While its implementation and conceptualization in today's corporate organizations are relatively recent due to technological advancements, remote work has a long history of existence. Throughout history, many individuals have engaged in various forms of remote work. For example, in historical wars, commanders would send orders to control their troops through messengers when electronic tools were not available. Scientists collaborated on distant projects even before the invention of the telephone. People were already seeking ways to connect with those at a distance, leading to the development and adoption of technologies like postal letters and telegraphs to bridge global distances. Even before the widespread use of the internet, military teams utilized the available tools and technologies to conduct operations remotely. Apollo 11's mission to the Moon was a prime example of remote work success. The persistent need to communicate with individuals at a distance has greatly influenced the rapid growth of technology, resulting in the acceptance and utilization of electronic communication as an essential component of work. Hence, it would be inappropriate to consider 'virtual collaboration' and 'remote work' as completely new work arrangements, despite the recent surge in theoretical discussions and research over the past 30 years, coinciding with the advancement and increased affordability of telecommunication technologies that have become integrated into our personal and professional lives. It is crucial to acknowledge that our current understanding of remote work primarily focuses on digital work that is examined in the context of electronic communication technologies. Consequently, there is significant overlap and a lack of consensus in definitions and concepts regarding remote work.

## **Definitions and Use**

An accurate and coherent definition of remote work poses a significant challenge for researchers and practitioners. While early examples of remote work and related studies demonstrate that the phenomenon is not entirely new, its theoretical conceptualization, evolution, and widespread implementation in the business and organizational context have a relatively short history. This is mainly due to the widespread acceptance that remote work is a byproduct of digital transformation. Consequently, the existing literature exhibits a variety of concepts that are often used interchangeably, contributing to the complexity of the topic. These concepts include *telework*, *telecommuting*, *working from home* (WFH), and *working from anywhere* (WFA). Other related concepts are *flexwork*, *distributed work*, *dispersed teams*, *virtual work*, and many others. Although there may be subtle differences among these terms, remote work encompasses the broad spectrum of these concepts due to its comprehensive nature.

Theoretically, the most simplistic, inclusive, and holistic definition of remote working is *a work arrangement that allows employees to work outside of the traditional office environment, supported by*

*various communication channels*. The work environment can include working from home, a co-working space, or any other location.

In response to the widespread adoption of remote work, many countries have implemented regulatory arrangements to establish operational definitions that clarify employers' obligations and ensure workers' rights and responsibilities. France, for instance, has distinct organizational approaches to telework for private-sector and public-sector employees<sup>1</sup>. In the private sector, the operational definition of telework is typically determined through collective agreements between employers and employee representatives. Consequently, the eligibility criteria and procedures for telework can vary between the public and private sectors. Similarly, in Spain, work is considered remote if at least one-third of the work is performed outside of the physical workplace within a three-month period<sup>2</sup>. These examples demonstrate that while theoretical definitions offer a broad understanding of remote work, the operational definition can differ significantly depending on the regulatory environment governing work activities.

### **Critical Reflections**

This section highlights a dual perspective concerning the critical aspects of remote work. Firstly, it criticizes the neglect of diverse perspectives in both conceptual development and empirical findings. Remote work is often portrayed as a universal, one-size-fits-all solution in organizational contexts, disregarding variations in working conditions, cultures, and idiosyncratic circumstances. Additionally, the wider criticism of research focusing primarily on Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democratic samples and contexts does also apply to the study of remote work. The lack of representation of diverse populations and contexts undermines our comprehensive understanding of the challenges and limitations associated with remote work. This is also partly due to the disregard for differences in communication styles, preferences, and perceptions, which can significantly impact remote work experiences, outcomes, and fair evaluation of employee performance. Another related aspect that warrants consideration is the potential legal implications of remote work. Remote work arrangements may create loopholes that allow organizations to unlawfully avoid certain liabilities, potentially undermining the rights and protections of remote workers. This highlights the importance of establishing robust regulatory frameworks to ensure the fair treatment and legal compliance of remote work practices. Secondly, the critiques extend to the neoliberal positioning of remote work within organizational structures. The emphasis on work individualization and the dissolution of organizations as dynamic social systems can have far-reaching implications. It is crucial to recognize that remote work exists within a larger societal context, and its

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.service-public.fr/particuliers/vosdroits/F13851?lang=en>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2021/07/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2021-11472.pdf>

implementation should consider the collective well-being of employees and the maintenance of the human and social aspects of organizations.

### *The Myth of Remote Work as a Universally Viable Solution*

In recent years, an increasing amount of research has addressed the underrepresentation of diverse populations in management and psychology studies. This focus on specific populations and contexts has not only limited the generalizability of findings but also failed to capture the complexity and diversity of remote work experiences. It is crucial to consider cultural differences as they can influence employees' preferences for communication styles, which vary widely depending on contextual factors. A decade ago, a global survey conducted by Randstad (2012) shed light on the variations in communication preferences across different countries. The findings revealed that around 55% of employees in countries like Norway or Singapore preferred face-to-face contact over electronic communication, whereas in China, India, and Turkey, this figure approached 80%. Although no recent follow-up study has been conducted to observe more recent trends, these differences indicate the importance of cultural context in shaping communication preferences. Several studies support the existence of differing preferences for working from home. Bloom et al. (2015) found that Chinese workers were reluctant to embrace remote work even when their performance improved during a work-from-home experiment. The reasons behind their decision included concerns about fair assessment, visibility for promotion opportunities, and the lack of social interactions necessary for gaining tacit knowledge and networking. Furthermore, research by Dekker et al. (2008) demonstrated that Western cultures assess the importance of information differently than Eastern cultures. Consequently, one can expect conflicts and misunderstandings if communications rely on non-face-to-face interactions that lack non-verbal cues and contextual meanings. Considering these findings, it is evident that cultural factors play a significant role in shaping employees' preferences and experiences in remote work settings. Failing to account for these variations limits our understanding of remote work and its implications across diverse populations and contexts. Therefore, increased performance in remote work conditions should be assessed with caution, as these studies may not be representative of all cultures and settings.

Another substantial concern in remote work is the lack of clear boundaries between work time and personal time. Contrary to the popular belief that remote work can create flexibility, the lack of boundaries can lead to overtime, stress, and burnout. Employees often struggle to establish clear boundaries and separate their work responsibilities from their personal obligations. Recent evidence supports the notion that remote work patterns vary heterogeneously based on gender and parenthood status (Arntz et al.,

2022). For individuals without children, remote work is associated with increased overtime hours, although it is also accompanied by higher job satisfaction. However, for parents, particularly mothers, remote work is linked to extended contractual hours as they juggle parental responsibilities alongside their work commitments. This can result in longer working hours for parents, further exacerbating existing inequalities, such as gender disparities and biases.

In addition to the parenthood example, other idiosyncratic conditions, invisible inequalities, and disparities in affordances can significantly influence remote work preference, performance, and satisfaction. Traditionally, office premises served to standardize and safeguard working conditions, provide necessary tools, equipment, and training, and ensure workers' health and safety. However, the transition to remote work has introduced idiosyncratic circumstances that can lead to unfair working conditions and performance disparities. The lack of standardized workstations also poses challenges in effectively controlling and monitoring work-related injuries and limits the opportunity to implement preventive measures. Moreover, the shift to remote work can perpetuate neglected inequalities that often go unnoticed by managers. These inequalities encompass variations in employees' home environments, where not all workers have equal access to resources and amenities like dedicated office spaces, ergonomic furniture, reliable internet connections, and adequate lighting. Such disparities in physical working conditions can impact productivity and overall well-being. Tleuken et al. (2022) have highlighted the influential role of the work environment in remote work satisfaction and productivity. Creating a comfortable space within the home, featuring a designated work area and ergonomic furniture, is a crucial factor. However, not all individuals have the means or resources to arrange such optimal conditions. It is essential to recognize that remote work was historically treated as a privilege for high-status employees, resulting in certain essential requirements being taken for granted. In today's prevalent remote work landscape, managers may lack direct visibility into these disparities as they are unable to observe each employee's home workspace. This lack of visibility can perpetuate existing inequalities and hinder career progression, as managers may not be fully aware of the challenges faced by their remote workers. Open communication between employees and managers is crucial, although informal interactions tend to be less frequent in remote work settings. This unequal protection of workers' health and well-being highlights the necessity for clear definitions and comprehensive regulations governing remote work. These regulations should encompass guidelines for identifying work-related injuries, delineating work hours, and establishing the roles and responsibilities of both employees and employers. Failing to establish clear regulatory definitions and boundaries for remote work may result in legal loopholes that compromise the well-being and rights of remote workers.

### *The Instrumentalization of Remote Workers within the Organizational Context*

Remote work can be considered a hallmark of neoliberal ideology, which aligns with the principles of individualism and market-driven approaches. Neoliberalism places a strong emphasis on global competitiveness and the pursuit of individual success within a free-market economy. Such arrangements, with the ability to transcend geographical boundaries, enable organizations to tap into a global talent pool and attract the most skilled individuals from around the world. This global perspective aligns with the belief in the unrestricted movement of labor and capital in search of market opportunities. Moreover, remote work reinforces the instrumental role of workers within neoliberal ideology. In this framework, workers are seen as agents instrumental to achieving organizational goals and maximizing productivity, profitability, and shareholder value (Bal & Dóci, 2018). Remote work facilitates this instrumental perspective by focusing on individual outcomes and performance metrics rather than traditional office-based interactions. Keeping interactions virtual and the work itself remote diminishes the opportunities to build strong, long-lasting relationships, even if they can bring efficiencies to the organization. However, it highlights the instrumental view of human contributions to the organization, an input that can be mechanically administered. Workers are expected to demonstrate their value and contribute to the organization's success through their individual productivity and the achievement of targets. Remote workers are empowered to manage their own schedules, work environments, and work-life balance. This emphasis on individual agency and self-determination resonates with neoliberal notions of personal responsibility and the market-driven pursuit of success. While remote work offers opportunities for individual empowerment and flexibility, it is important to critically examine the potential consequences within this framework. The instrumentalization of workers can lead to a narrow focus on individual performance, potentially overshadowing the importance of collective collaboration and social dynamics that traditional organizations foster. The reliance on individual outcomes may risk neglecting the significance of teamwork and the synergies that arise from shared experiences and face-to-face interactions.

Organizations, as social systems, require collective human interactions. They are not merely structures or processes but living entities that thrive on the interplay of individuals working together toward shared goals. However, the rise of remote work challenges this fundamental aspect of organizational dynamics. Therefore, it can be contextualized that remote work can be contradictory with the dignity perspective, as identified by Bal (2017), which highlights the importance of meaningful social interactions and a sense of belonging in the workplace. Moreover, it is worth noting that work itself constitutes a significant proportion of time in individuals' lives. Traditional organizations, with their physical offices and hierarchical structures, provide a conducive environment for collective human



interactions. The workplace becomes a space for collaboration, learning, mentorship, social support, and the cultivation of shared values and goals. Face-to-face interactions foster relationships that extend beyond task-oriented conversations, enabling employees to form social bonds and a sense of camaraderie. This social dimension of traditional organizations contributes to employee well-being and job satisfaction, creating a holistic work experience.

Finally, the endemic challenges of remote work should not be overlooked. Globally, isolation and loneliness crises indicate that trends are at an all-time high, signaling the potential role remote work plays within the organizational context. The absence of face-to-face interactions, limited quality of work relationships, and lack of social connections can lead to feelings of disconnection and hinder the development of strong professional relationships. Furthermore, remote work blurs the boundaries between work and personal life, making it difficult for individuals to separate themselves from work-related pressures and fully engage in non-work social interactions. The lack of satisfying work relationships can spill over into personal lives. Numerous scientific studies in various domains, from psychology to medicine, highlight that having strong social connections is a crucial factor that predicts longer life expectancy and better overall physical, cognitive, and mental health, whereas social isolation and loneliness are significant indicators of early mortality and poorer health outcomes. As remote work gets more pervasive, its detrimental impacts could be more dominant. These factors contribute to a growing concern regarding the mental well-being, physical and psychological health, safety, and social isolation of remote workers and put greater pressure on individuals.

## **Discussion of Future Avenues**

In this entry, I address the relatively apolitical phenomenon of 'remote work' and present its historical conceptualization and empirical findings. At the same time, I aim to provide critical perspectives that have been disproportionately weak in the current scholarly debate. The existing literature often portrays remote work as a productive, efficient, and cost-effective alternative to the traditional office environment. However, as remote work becomes more pervasive, new complexities arise that have been largely undiscussed in the current debate. Therefore, in addition to providing an overview of the current state of research, this entry presents a critical lens to explore these overlooked aspects.

The uncritical promotion of remote work as a panacea for organizational challenges perpetuates a neoliberal perspective that places excessive emphasis on individual responsibility and self-reliance. This individualistic approach often overlooks the broader structural and systemic factors that influence remote work outcomes. Organizations must recognize and address the social, economic, and psychological implications of remote work to foster a supportive and equitable work environment for all employees.

Striking a balance between individual autonomy and collective well-being is crucial within the remote work paradigm. At the same time, policymakers need to understand and carefully assess the impacts of remote work on larger societal outcomes, as most of the challenges remain invisible.

To ensure a more comprehensive and objective understanding of remote work, future research should strive for inclusivity by considering diverse perspectives, cultural contexts, and communication dynamics. By addressing these neglected areas, we can move towards a more nuanced and equitable approach to remote work that recognizes its limitations, challenges, and impact on individuals and organizations alike. It is crucial to consider the varying needs, expectations, and challenges faced by individuals and organizations across different cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic contexts. By expanding research to include a broader range of populations and contexts, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the implications and limitations of remote work. This will allow for the development of more inclusive and effective strategies for implementing remote work arrangements.

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