

OVERCOMING BINARY BORDERS: HOW TELEWORKING COULD EVOLVE LABOUR MIGRATION

RESEARCH PAPER

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Overcoming binary borders: how teleworking could evolve labour migration

Summary

- The consolidation of telework as a mainstream practice has been one of the most evident consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak and, if applied to the case of non-EU citizens wishing to work for European companies, it could foster inclusive social innovation practices that have long been needed in the field of labour policy.
- Considering the unfilled vacancies in the EU that require foreign qualified workers, the option of relaxing the EU Blue Card requirements as well as broadening the programme to include teleworking appears as an interesting option for both European companies and employees that would like to be part of the European labour market.
- Working remotely should not be interpreted as yet another excuse to keep EU borders sealed for asylum seekers and job seekers; however, it could open up new schemes that would put people first by giving them the choice to move or to stay.

Covid-19 has changed our everyday life in many ways and, although some new practices are likely to be abandoned as soon as the emergency is overcome, others are here to stay. Teleworking is one of the latter for, despite the challenges that may arise, remote work has the potential of being extremely beneficial for people and territories, as if properly regulated it can allow for a better work-life balance (ILO, 2020b) and the rediscovery of “peripheral” areas. Some examples of teleworking contracts existed well before the pandemic, yet it is only now that talks of “south-working” (MorningFUTURE, 2020) to foster the development of rural or less developed

areas in Europe have started to take up space in the public debate and that some countries, such as Bermuda and Barbados, have developed “work from paradise” (Suri, 2020) programmes to encourage people to keep working urban jobs from their islands.

Working at a time of a pandemic thus seems, at least for a specific category of jobs, to have become more flexible and open to alternative solutions to cope with the newly established situation. However, such flexibility is a prerogative limited to a certain class of skilled citizens instead of a tool to overcome inequality. This is even more evident when associated with European policies towards non-EU workers. They either represent valuable human capital for EU companies (as seen by the extremely competitive Blue Card Programme) and they are encouraged to move to the continent, or they are merely members of a replaceable workforce allowed access to Europe only to work in limited sectors and for as long as it is needed. The European Union (and even more, European countries) fail to acknowledge the incredible potential of opening up the labour market to non-EU citizens by way of establishing more legal pathways to access the continent, which could also significantly reduce the number of tragedies at the EU’s borders.

It is important to underline how telework cannot and should not in any way be conceived as a substitute for the much-needed more flexible framework that regulates the physical access of non-EU citizens to the European Union. Nonetheless, in this context, telework might provide the opportunity to think outside the box and foster inclusive social innovation practices that have long been needed in the field of labour policy. For instance, could working remotely help overcome (to an extent) the European restrictive approach on the issue of work visas by way of allowing people to provide their services to a European company from outside the EU? And if yes, could it also represent a viable solution to foster innovative alternatives to development funds and the system based on remittances?

Work visas in the European Union

Labour immigrants have played a key role as economic development drivers in the European Union for decades. Therefore, the EU member states have created different common directives to regulate qualified migration, all while managing their own internal demographic challenges. One of the most common legal pathways for qualified workers to become part of the workforce in the EU is to be granted an EU Blue Card. Adopted in 2009 through the *EU Blue Card directive*, this residence permit allows third countries qualified nationals to work in 25 of the 27 European member states – excluding Denmark and Ireland – (Eurostat, 2020a).

The criteria to be granted an EU Blue Card is practically the same in the 25 member states, and consists of having a university degree, or ‘at least five years of relevant professional experience’, as well as a job offer and a gross salary 1.5 times higher than the average national salary (European Commission, 2020b). In 2019, 36,638 blue cards were issued in the EU, but one single country, Germany, issued 28,858, which is equivalent to almost 79% of the total (Eurostat, 2020b). Although applicants must have a job offer to apply for this type of visa, these applications can be rejected by the member states if the requirements are not fulfilled or if the authorities consider that the vacancy can be filled by an EU national.

Moreover, the European Commission (2016), estimated a shortfall of 756,000 and 1 million ICT and health professionals respectively for 2020. Nonetheless, despite the benefits of immigration and the ongoing challenge of addressing labour shortages, this procedure remains a restrictive issue, which highlights the national and European protectionism towards immigration, including the qualified type.

Telework in the European Union

Although the world was not ready for the teleworking shift, as only 7.9% of the global workforce teleworked prior to the pandemic (ILO, 2020a), and although this change was mainly a strategy to maintain production levels worldwide, the Covid-19 crisis made the world realise that telework has been undervalued over time and that it is a practice that has come to stay. For instance, according to the European Commission (2020a), in 2019 only 5.2% of employees in the EU ‘usually worked from home’; while the share of those who did this type of work ‘at least sometimes’ in the same year was 9%. Moreover, 48% of those that actively worked in the EU during the pandemic did so from home (Eurofound, 2020). Overall, due to the pandemic, the share of people teleworking in the EU increased by 33.8%.

Nonetheless, the confinement exacerbated the gap between those who can work from home and those who cannot. In fact, there are certain occupations that can easily shift to teleworking, while others, particularly those that require physical tasks, cannot. Likewise, it has been proven that the share of those who telework during the Covid-19 pandemic is closely related to their educational level. While 74% of employees with tertiary qualifications shifted to this type of work, this number went down to 12 per cent for those with only primary education (Eurofound, 2020).

Therefore, considering that the most qualified workers find the shifting easier, as well as the unfilled vacancies in the EU that require foreign qualified workers, the option of relaxing the EU Blue Card requirements as well as broadening the program to include teleworking appears as an interesting option for both European companies and employees that would like to be part of the European labour market.

Alternative development?

Working in the EU is not only seen as a great opportunity to improve one's living conditions, but also as a way to help sustain one's family or community of origin by way of sending remittances back home. However, while this provides valuable income for local groups, it inevitably reduces workers' personal quality of life abroad with disproportionately high transaction fees on remittances (Merler & Porcaro, 2018) further adding to people's economic commitments. Thus, working for EU companies from outside the EU would not only provide citizens of third countries with the possibility to put their skills to use for relatively stable jobs and salaries, but also allow them to choose (if they want) to live their lives without the economic and emotional burdens that often come with settling abroad and leaving people and places behind.

Remittances have been widely acknowledged to contribute to development, their amount often being greater than money channelled through international aid schemes (UN DESA, 2019). However, if people could help sustain those close to them while being physically there rather than sending money over, they could further engage in developing and planning more durable strategies to make use of the money without having to comply with increasing fees. This would allow for an even more direct form of "international development", one that really empowers people, through their work, to consume and invest not only money, but also time and skills in their local dimension. In addition to that, such possibility could also further detach national governments and international agencies from managing huge amounts of money - with all the possible consequences that that entails.

Such a configuration of work would inevitably require a special thought concerning waived salaries, social security contributions and taxes; however, specific "work packages" could be set up precisely to create a framework viable for these kinds of contracts.

The right (and privilege) of having the option

Telework has been described by many as “the future of work”. If properly regulated and managed, working remotely can represent an advantage for many, as it allows for more flexibility, less commuting and a better work-life balance. Despite the challenges that have inevitably arisen, telework could also potentially be the much needed innovation in the European labour market, providing more opportunities to people coming from non-EU countries.

As working remotely should not be interpreted as yet another excuse to keep EU borders sealed and turn down indiscriminately both asylum seekers and job seekers, it could open up new schemes that would put people first by making use of existing technologies. This would allow for more people to gain access to the EU labour market, for long or short periods of time, and to have the option to move abroad or not. Such a possibility would thus represent a further step towards the establishment of relations that are beneficial for both employers and workers while improving the latter’s living conditions, possibly allowing them to invest in their local community and, most importantly, giving them the possibility to pursue their professional careers without being forced to move to another continent. For choosing to move, or to stay, is itself an undeniable right and it should not remain a privilege.

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