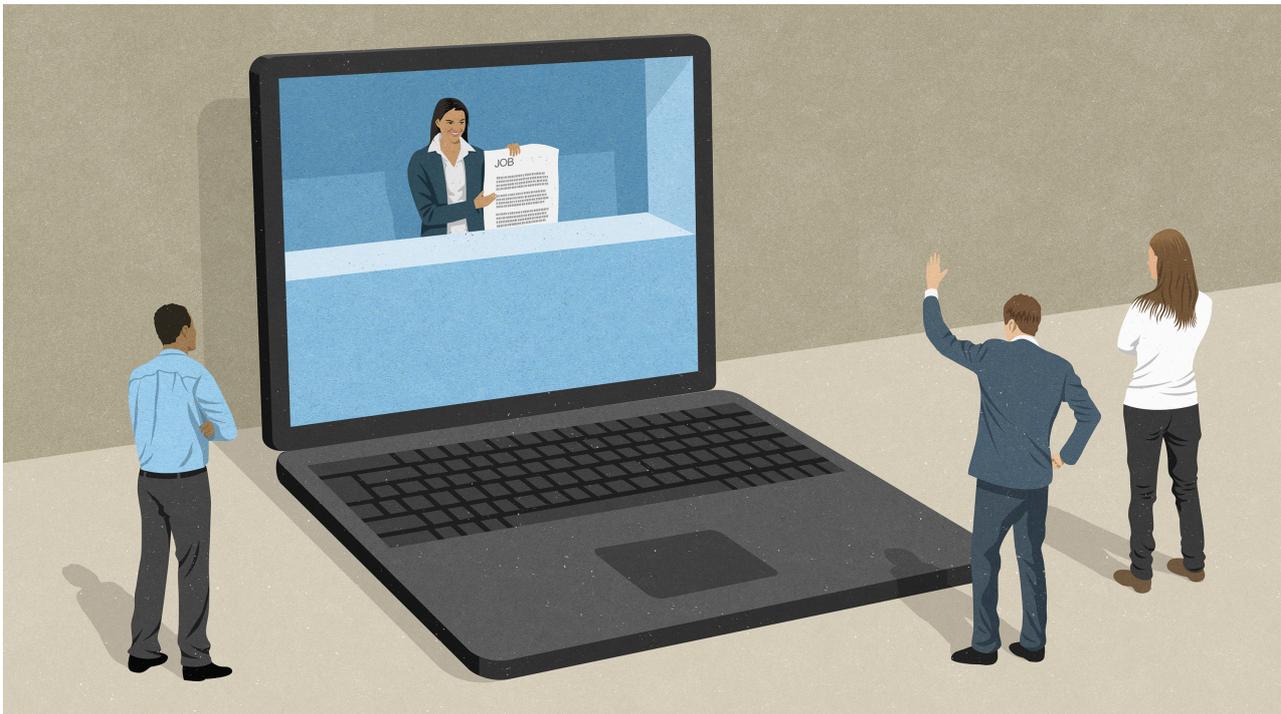


# Can remote work bridge the urban-rural divide?

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Even though normality seems to have returned for many, the pandemic has changed social interactions and working life for good. Post-Covid-19, it seems inconceivable that employers would send their employees to the other end of the globe for just one meeting, when a Zoom call suffices.

The new habits that have emerged not only affect business flights, but they also change daily work patterns. Companies are unlikely to revert to an ‘old normal’ of mandatory full-week office availability on nine-to-five business days. The new flexibility has therefore sparked hopes for many who have been dreaming about living in the countryside or in holiday destinations while continuing to work remotely in their jobs. This trend towards remote work, so the argument goes, could not only be beneficial for employees to achieve a more satisfying work–life balance, but it could also help to revive rural areas around the world, as it would spread work, income and buying power to places with lower living costs.

Seemingly a new idea sparked by the unique situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, the hope that information and communication technologies (ICT) could spread economic opportunities more evenly reaches back almost 200 years.

The introduction of the telegraph in the first half of the 19th century led to hopes of a better economic integration of rural areas. This vision has reappeared since then with every new ICT innovation, from the landline to mobile phones to the internet. These technologies have been heralded as that which will make cities as hubs of economic organisation obsolete. The ‘Information Superhighway’ ([Sawhney, 1996](#)) was envisaged to

turn the world into a ‘global village’ (McLuhan, 1964), integrating every area, no matter how rural, into a ‘spaceless city’ leading eventually to ‘the effective dissolution of the city itself’ (Graham, 1998, p. 168).

As we all know, this hasn’t happened. The city is still there, and it is bigger and more important than ever. Urbanisation is a megatrend that has only accelerated in recent years. More than half of the world’s population now lives in cities, and this proportion will rise to more than two-thirds by 2050. People continue to flock to urban centres in search of jobs and other opportunities.

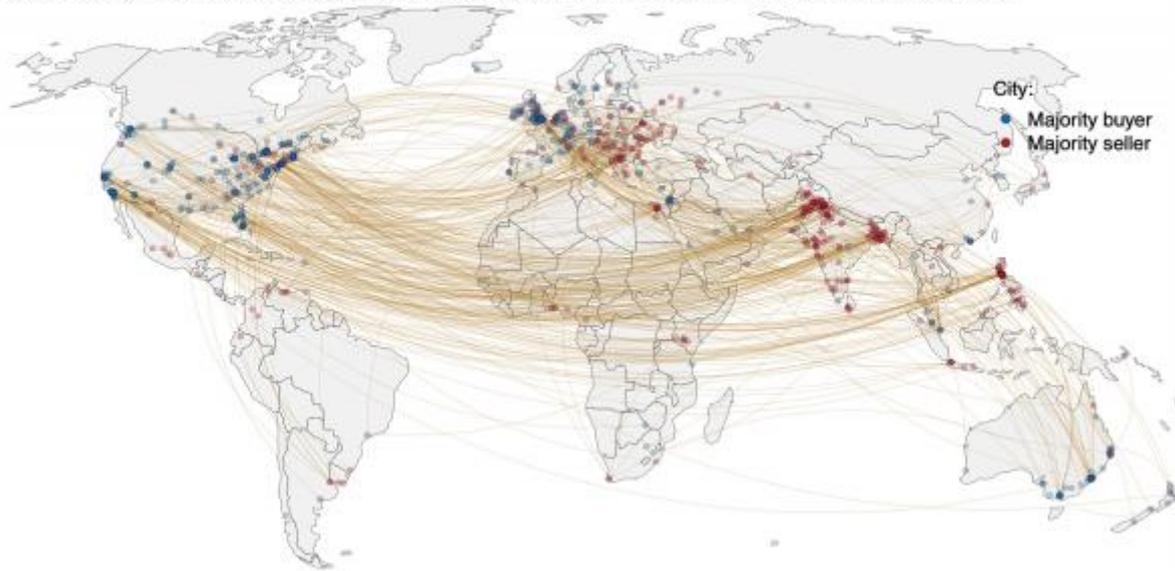
The promise of ICT to bridge the urban-rural divide is as old as ICT themselves, and so far no technology has fulfilled it. Can digitally enabled remote workspaces change this trend and distribute work opportunities more evenly?

### **The reality of remote work**

To understand the effects of remote work on the urban–rural divide, we need data on the location of people working remotely. So-called ‘online labour platforms’, such as Fiverr, Freelancer and UpWork, provide the right data as they can be considered prototypes of a fully remote labour market. These platforms are web applications that mediate between buyers and sellers of remotely deliverable work, such as software development, graphic design, accounting and data entry. They enable workers and employers to find each other, conclude contracts and enforce cooperation over distance, as they include reputation and escrow systems, remote monitoring and online dispute resolution mechanisms.

Rather than spreading work more evenly across space, [our research at the Oxford Internet Institute](#) shows that remote work conducted via online labour platforms mirrors existing urban–rural divides. Figure 1 highlights the global distribution of remote work conducted via one of the leading online labour platforms in 2020. The platform connects demand (blue) with supply (red). Instead of an even global geography, we see that most demand comes from urban areas in North America, western Europe and Australia, while most supply comes from urban areas in south-east Europe, south Asia and the Philippines. Many rural areas and countries in the ‘Global South’ are not participating, or they play only a marginal role in the global flow of remote platform work.

Flows in the global online labour market between cities with majority buyers (blue) and sellers (red) in 2020 (5% sample)



The global online labour market. The majority of remote platform work comes from metropolitan areas in high-income countries (blue dots) and flows (yellow lines) to urban areas in middle-income countries (red dots). Source: Braesemann et al. (2021).

We also find that certain rural areas are able to participate disproportionately in the online labour market. These areas, however, have institutions that are usually characteristic of urban environments: they tend to have a good internet infrastructure, a strong local economy with a focus on ICT industries, a highly educated workforce and offer specialised training opportunities. The least populated and least educated rural regions with the least internet connectivity are least likely to participate in the online labour market.

Thus, we find that remote work is unlikely to bridge the urban–rural divide. The reason for the unequal distribution of remote work is the unequal distribution of enabling institutions across space. Many in-demand digital jobs require specialised skills and know-how, and these are linked to place-bound institutions of the local economy. These institutions – local business and networking opportunities, specialised vocational training and higher education – usually concentrate in urban centres. As long as these enablers of remote work remain clustered in large cities, remote work is not likely to overcome the ‘tyranny of distance’ (Virilio, 1993).

### **The future of remote work**

Remote platform work is unlikely to fulfil technology’s old promise to overcome spatial boundaries between urban and rural areas. Education, vocational training and business opportunities pull talent toward large cities and digital technologies are only amplifying this process. Certainly, some work-related travel will be substituted by digital interactions and the central business district might be challenged by coworking spaces outside of city centres and in the suburbs, but it is unlikely that knowledge work is going to spread significantly to the countryside. On the contrary, as digital interactions allow specialists to

benefit from increased demand online, it could actually lead to a situation where urban specialists benefit disproportionately from increased visibility on online platforms while people in rural areas increasingly fall behind.

Despite these urban-centric dynamics, remote work can become an instrument of economic empowerment and growth for rural areas. For this to happen, remote work needs to be embedded in broader economic and labour market development schemes. Disadvantaged regions need to be supported by the provision of reliable and high-quality internet access, investments in infrastructure, local employment alternatives and skill-building opportunities. This applies also to remote labour demand. Remote platform work can be a chance for rural employers to get access to global talent. Programmes that foster the integration of remote work into their business processes might help companies to become more resilient and to keep them in their local surroundings.

For rural areas to benefit from remote work, they need to flourish locally.

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