

Teleworking, workplace policies and trust: A critical relationship in the hybrid world of work

INSIGHTS FROM A SURVEY OF EMPLOYEES IN SEVEN OECD COUNTRIES

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<http://www.oecd.org/future-of-work/>

Key findings

- **Telework is more common when firms have teleworking policies in place.** For example, in firms which consult their employees on teleworking, 87% of them telework – compared to only 61% of employees in firms that have no policy of consulting workers.
- **In turn, teleworkers report better work experiences when they are covered by workplace policies, such as the right to disconnect or being consulted on telework.** Average levels of satisfaction with one's job, work-life balance, mental and physical health are all higher among teleworkers covered by such policies. For example, 79% of teleworkers who are consulted about teleworking are satisfied with their work-life balance, compared to 62% of those who are not consulted.
- **Workplace teleworking policies are also associated with higher levels of trust between teleworkers and their managers.** 89% of teleworkers who are consulted about teleworking report the presence of workplace trust, compared to 59% of those who are not. Similarly, 86% of those who have a right to disconnect report workplace trust, compared to 67% of those not covered by such a right.
- **Teleworking policies, workplace trust and teleworking take-up appear to be mutually reinforcing.** 67% of full-time teleworkers and 55% of hybrid workers say that teleworking fosters workplace trust (compared to 34% of those who never or very rarely telework). About 50% of full-time teleworkers and 37% of hybrid workers report a great deal of trust in their firm, compared to 27% of those who never or rarely telework.
- **Employees highly value the ability to telework.** 82% of those who are currently teleworking said that they were prepared to quit their jobs should they no longer be allowed to telework.
- **Despite these positive associations, many workplaces still lack teleworking policies.** For instance, close to 30% of hybrid workers, and 25% of full-time teleworkers, say that there is no worker consultation on teleworking in place in their firm. Coverage also varies by country: 64% of respondents in Switzerland report having a right to disconnect, compared to just 35% in the United States; and financial support for relevant IT equipment essential for digital collaboration is least frequently reported in Australia (44%) and most frequently in the Netherlands (65%).
- **While women tend to work from home more often than men, women who telework report lower levels of policy coverage than men.** For instance, 52% of men say they can telework from abroad, compared to 36% of women; 57% of men report having a right to disconnect vs. 51% of women.
- **Policy makers could play a role in promoting the adoption of workplace teleworking policies.** Possible avenues include: dedicated legislation at the national level to ensure that teleworkers have a right to disconnect, or that employers bear part (or all) of the IT costs associated with teleworking; collective bargaining to help establish or clarify teleworking policy frameworks; and workers' consultation on the subject to raise awareness of existing national level policies. In addition, the public sector could set an example by mainstreaming teleworking policies for public sector workers.

Introduction

Among the various short-term responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, teleworking appears to have evolved into a more permanent change in working practices. However, much remains unknown about its impact on employment relationships within firms. This policy brief helps fill this gap by presenting new evidence on: i) workplace teleworking policies; ii) trust between managers and teleworkers; iii) the interaction between policies and trust; and iv) the impact on employees' teleworking experiences.

To this end, an online survey was run in the third quarter of 2022 in collaboration with the software company LiveTiles¹ which collected 1 514 responses from employees in Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. The final sample, after removing respondents who failed an attention test or speeded through the survey, is made up of 805 observations. Contrary to previous research which has often lacked conceptual clarity – e.g. see the discussion in Touzet (2023^[1]) – the survey had a precise focus on **teleworking** (i.e. work in a physical location that is different from the default place of work using information and communications technology) and on **hybrid work** (a particular *mode* of teleworking combining telework some of the time and work the rest of the time in the employer's premises). Responses were collected from employees teleworking all the time, some of the time, or not at all.

The goal of the survey was not to quantify or to paint a representative picture of the hybrid workforce, but rather to dig deeper into the experiences of a particular group known to telework frequently. Indeed, bias in online data collection is common and the respondents to the survey were more likely to be managers and highly educated. While these may not be representative of the wider population of employees, they form a group particularly likely to engage in telework (OECD, 2021^[2]) and so their views and experiences are highly relevant from a policy perspective.

Teleworking is more common when firms have teleworking policies in place

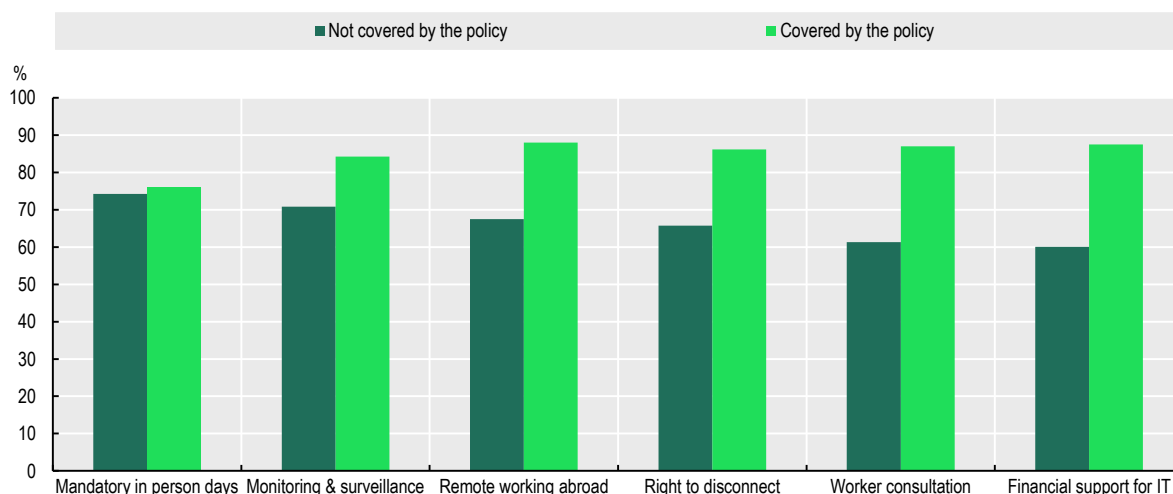
One finding emerging from the survey data is that employees who say they are covered by any of a number of workplace teleworking policies are more likely to telework (Figure 1), including policies that guarantee a right to disconnect, provide financial support for IT equipment, allow remote working from abroad, use remote monitoring and surveillance, and consult workers on teleworking. However, there is no statistically significant difference in the likelihood of teleworking between workers who are bound to work in person on specific days and those who are not.

Unless stated otherwise, all results presented in this brief hold when controlling for country, gender, age, education, presence of children, industry, firm size, and whether the respondent manages other workers or not. Yet, these results are associations uncovered in the data, from which no causal direction should be inferred. In the case at hand, the data reveals a link between teleworking policies and the incidence of teleworking, but the direction in which the causality runs is indeed unclear: is teleworking facilitated by the presence of such policies, or are workplaces where teleworking is more prevalent more likely to implement them? A third possibility is that workers in firms where teleworking is more common are simply more aware of the existence of such policies and hence more likely to report them.

¹ <https://livetilesglobal.com/>.

Figure 1. Teleworking is more common when firms have teleworking policies in place

Share of employees who telework, by policy coverage (%)



Source: OECD calculations based on the results of the OECD/LiveTiles online survey on the Hybrid World of Work.

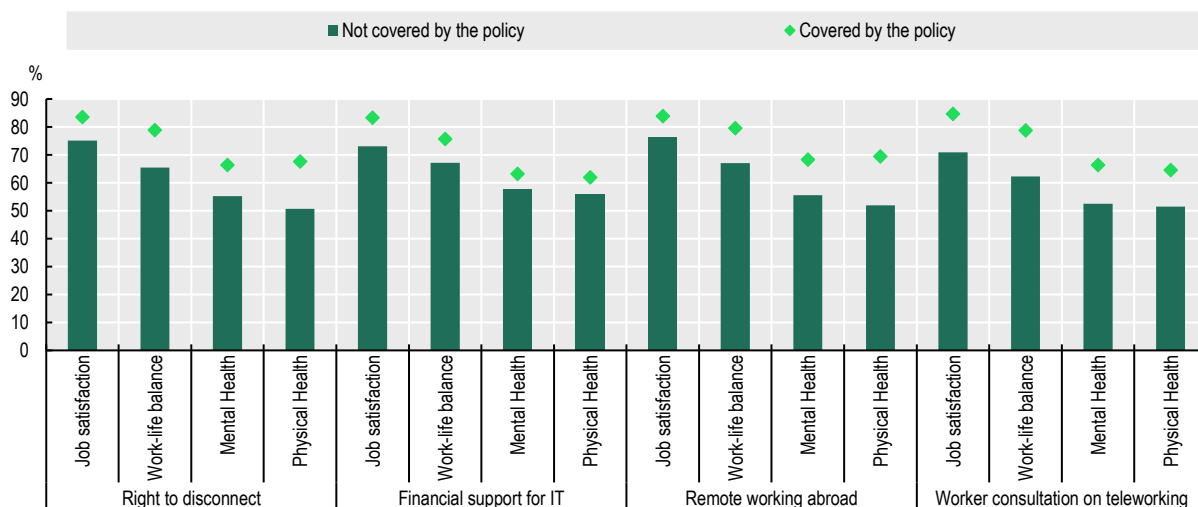
Note: “Not covered” means the individual either says the policy is not in place in their firm, or that they do not know. Reading example: 87% of respondents who are consulted about teleworking are teleworkers, compared to 61% of respondents who are not consulted (or don’t know). Policies from left to right refer to: the obligation to spend some specific days in the office, the use of remote monitoring and surveillance software, the possibility to telework from abroad, the explicit right to disconnect from phone and emails outside of office hours, the consultation of workers on teleworking, and the provision by the employer of financial support for the IT cost associated with teleworking.

Teleworking policies are related to better work experiences among teleworkers

The presence of teleworking policies is also associated with a higher average level of work satisfaction among teleworkers (Figure 2). Teleworkers with a right to disconnect or who are consulted about teleworking tend to be more satisfied on average with their job, work-life balance, mental health, as well as physical health. While 85% of teleworkers who are consulted about teleworking are satisfied with their job and 79% with their work-life balance, this is only the case of 71% and 62%, respectively, of those who are not consulted. Similarly, teleworkers who receive financial support for IT equipment are more often satisfied with their job and work-life balance, and teleworkers who are allowed to work from abroad are more often satisfied with their work-life balance, mental, and physical health. At the same time, there is no evidence that mandatory in-person workdays and remote surveillance and monitoring reduce satisfaction among teleworkers (results are statistically insignificant and not shown here).

Figure 2. Teleworkers are more often satisfied when teleworking policies are in place

Share of teleworkers who are satisfied, by policy coverage (%)



Source: OECD calculations based on the results of the OECD/LiveTiles online survey on the Hybrid World of Work.

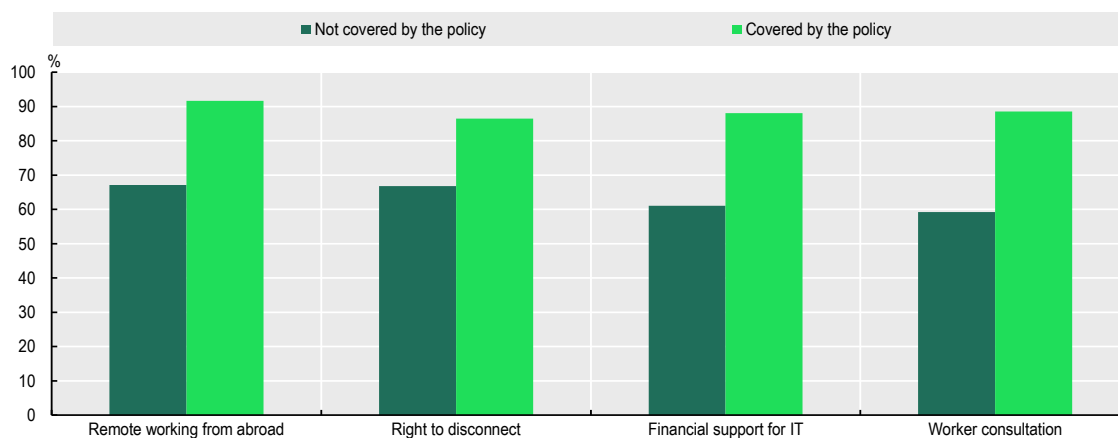
Note: See definition of “not covered” in the note to Figure 1.

Workplace trust is higher among teleworkers covered by teleworking policies

The presence of teleworking policies also appears to be related to higher levels of trust between workers and managers (Figure 3). Teleworkers who have a right to disconnect are more likely to report a moderate or great deal amount of trust between workers and managers (86% of teleworkers covered by the policy report workplace trust, compared to 67% of those not covered). The same is true of teleworkers who are given financial support for IT (88% vs. 61%), those who are allowed to work from abroad (92% vs. 67%), and those who are consulted about teleworking (89% vs 59%). Once again, the direction of causality is not clear: it could be that teleworking policies foster trust, but it could also be that firms with higher levels of workplace trust are more likely to adopt teleworking policies.

Figure 3. Workplace trust is higher among teleworkers covered by teleworking policies

Share of teleworkers who report trust between workers and managers in their workplace, by policy coverage (%)



Source: OECD calculations based on the results of the OECD/LiveTiles online survey on the Hybrid World of Work.

Note: See definition of “not covered” in the note to Figure 1. Teleworkers with workplace trust report either a great deal or a moderate amount of trust between workers and managers.

Neither mandatory in-person workdays nor remote surveillance and monitoring appear to be detrimental to trust: there are no statistically significant differences in the level of perceived workplace trust between teleworkers covered by these policies and those who are not (results not shown).

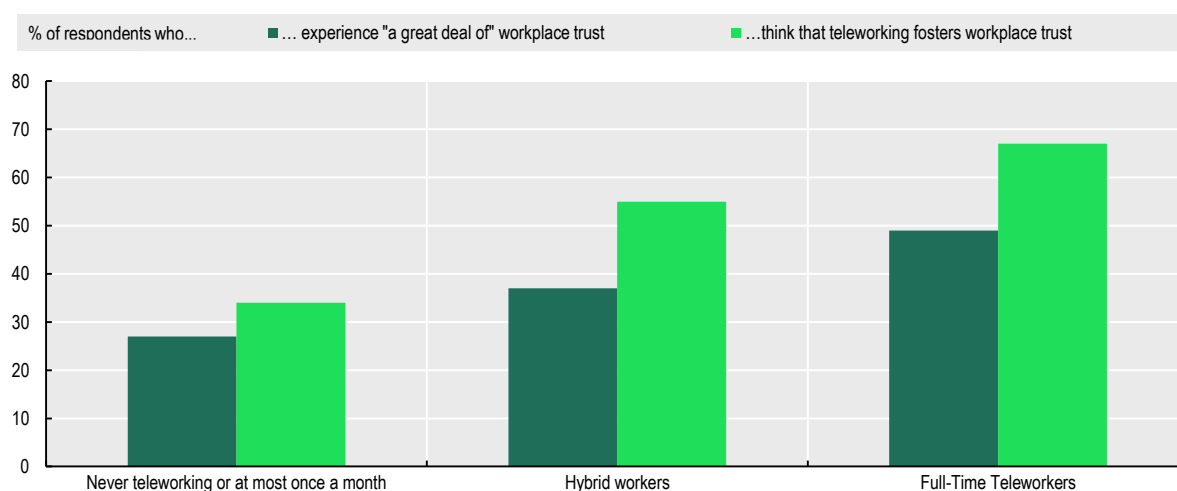
Teleworking policies, workplace trust, and teleworking take-up appear to be mutually reinforcing

Full-time teleworkers and hybrid workers (defined in this brief as employees teleworking at least several times a month) are more likely to report a great deal of trust between workers and managers in their firm than employees never teleworking or those teleworking at most once per month. While about half of those who telework all the time and 37% of those in hybrid work report a great deal of trust in their firm, this is only the case for 27% of those who never or very rarely telework (Figure 4).

Full-time teleworkers and hybrid workers are also significantly more likely to believe that teleworking fosters workplace trust, compared to those who telework less often or never: 67% of full-time teleworkers and 55% of hybrid workers think that teleworking fosters workplace trust, compared to 34% of those who never or very rarely telework.

Figure 4. Full-time teleworkers and hybrid workers report more workplace trust

Share of employees, by teleworking status (%)

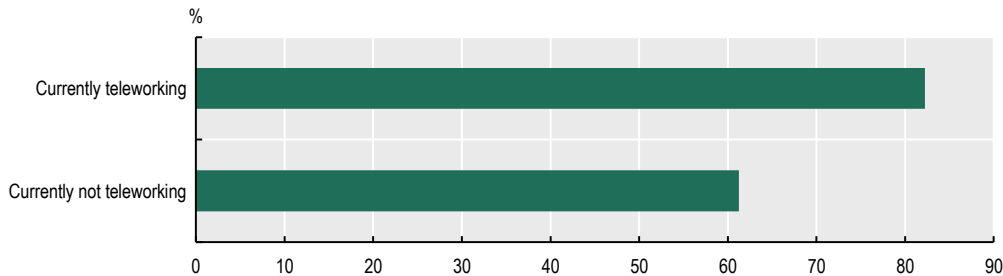


Source: OECD calculations based on the results of the OECD/LiveTiles online survey on the Hybrid World of Work.

Together with the other relationships uncovered above, this suggests that there might be mutually reinforcing relationships between teleworking policies, workplace trust, and teleworking take-up. Such mutually reinforcing relationships might also explain why many teleworkers value telework so highly, to the extent that they would be willing to leave their job if their employer no longer offered telework. 82% of employees currently teleworking said they would switch jobs to keep teleworking, compared to 61% of those not currently teleworking (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Teleworkers are willing to switch jobs to continue teleworking

Share of respondents who would seek work elsewhere if their employer stopped allowing telework, by teleworking status (%)



Source: OECD calculations based on the results of the OECD/LiveTiles online survey on the Hybrid World of Work.

Again, however, the direction of causality is unclear: it could be that pre-existing preferences for teleworking lead employees to self-select into jobs that allow them to telework. Given that teleworking is more common among high-skill, high-pay occupations (OECD, 2021^[2]), current teleworkers might be more willing to switch jobs simply because they have more exit options compared to workers in occupations that are less conducive to teleworking.

Many teleworkers are still not covered by workplace teleworking policies

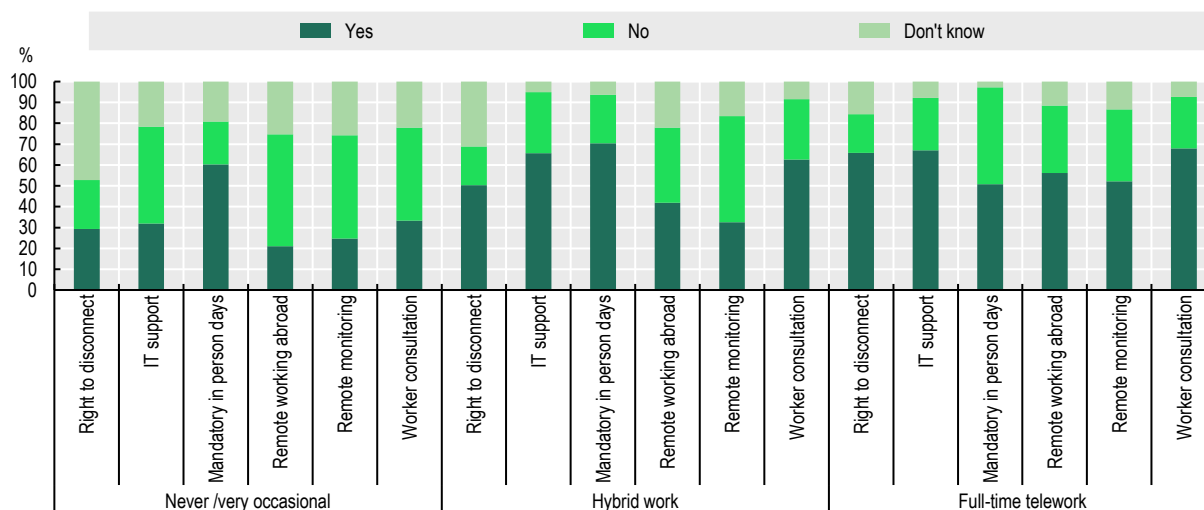
Despite the positive link between the incidence of teleworking, job quality and trust, on the one hand, and the presence of teleworking policies, on the other, the survey suggests that the adoption of such policies is far from universal. For example, the share of hybrid workers either not covered by a policy or unaware about such coverage is substantial: 19% of hybrid workers say that they do not have the right to disconnect, while another 31% do not know if they do (Figure 6). This is also the case for 19% and 16% of full-time teleworkers. Similarly, close to 30% of hybrid workers and 25% of full-time teleworkers say that they are not consulted about teleworking, with an additional 8% of hybrid workers and 7% of full-time teleworkers unsure about coverage.

Women who telework also report lower levels of policy coverage than men – which likely reflects occupational and hierarchical gender imbalances. 51% of women teleworking report a right to disconnect (vs. 57% of men who telework); 63% say they have access to IT support (vs. 67% of teleworking men); 61% report being consulted on teleworking (vs 65% of men teleworking). Finally, 36% of women who telework say they have a right to work from abroad (vs. 52% of teleworking men). These results merit further investigation given the gender gap in the incidence of work from home (with more women working from home than men) and the gender gap in the preference for frequent work from home (with women favouring it more than men). Both these gaps have widened during the pandemic (Touzet, 2023^[1]).

The presence of workplace teleworking policies also varies between countries (Figure 7). Around 64% of employees in Switzerland report that their firm guarantees a right to disconnect, compared to 35% in the United States and 37% in Australia. Remote working from abroad is a possibility for 61% of respondents in Switzerland, but only for 20% in the United Kingdom. Financial support for IT equipment is least frequent in Australia (44%) and most frequent in the Netherlands (65%). The extent to which respondents are consulted about teleworking varies less between countries, ranging from 49% in Australia, to 62% in Canada. Mandatory in-person workdays are frequent in all countries, but least common in Switzerland (58% of respondents) and most common in Australia (71%) and the United Kingdom (73%). By contrast, the use of remote monitoring and surveillance is the least common policy in all countries but is most often reported by respondents in Switzerland (42% vs. 21% in Australia).

Figure 6. A sizable share of teleworkers are not covered by teleworking policies

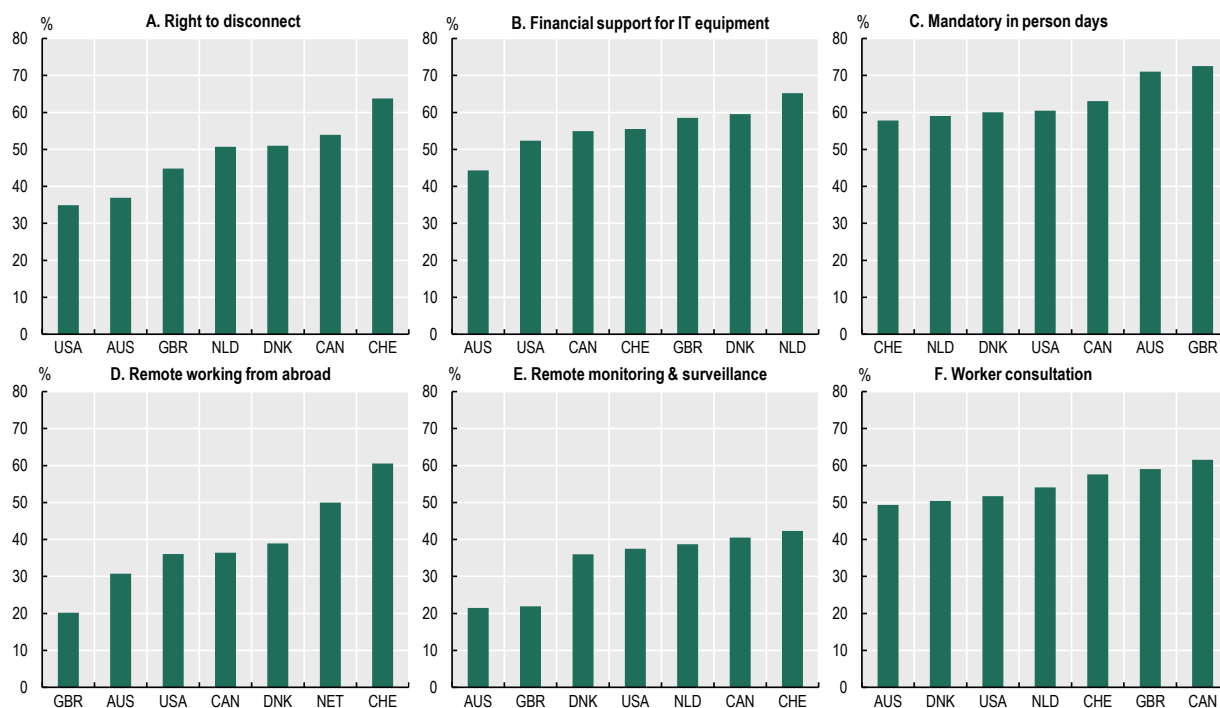
Policy coverage, by teleworking status (%)



Source: OECD calculations based on the results of the OECD/LiveTiles online survey on the Hybrid World of Work.

Figure 7. Policy coverage also varies between countries

Share of respondents who say that a given policy is implemented in their firm, by country (%)



Source: OECD calculations based on the results of the OECD/LiveTiles online survey on the Hybrid World of Work.

What role for government?

Workplace teleworking policies appear to be associated with higher job quality (as measured in terms of job satisfaction, work-life balance and physical and mental health) for workers and also higher workplace trust. Yet many workplaces still do not have such policies in place, so what can policy makers do to promote them?

On the one hand, social dialogue could play an important role, and policy makers could encourage or mandate the negotiation of dedicated collective agreements to establish or clarify the policy framework around teleworking in specific workplaces and/or sectors. Fostering workers' consultation and collective bargaining might also help raise awareness of existing national level policies and/or their translation into concrete workplaces policies.

In some cases, policy makers may want to strengthen legislation, for instance by implementing a formal right to disconnect, by mandating employers to bear some of the costs associated with teleworking, or by regulating the use of remote monitoring and surveillance systems. In that spirit, the European Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) calling on the European Commission to draft an EU-wide "Right to disconnect" directive in January 2021, and several European countries are currently discussing right to disconnect laws (Eurofound, 2020^[3]).

Finally, policy makers could help foster workplace trust around teleworking by mainstreaming its use among public sector workers and setting an example to the private sector. The sharing of best practices across sectors, e.g. through tripartite social dialogue, might also be helpful in promoting the adoption of teleworking policies. These initiatives should prioritise sectors and occupations with a high concentration of female workers given the gender gap between teleworking incidence and workplace teleworking policies.

References

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<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/wpef20019.pdf>.
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- Touzet, C. (2023), "Teleworking through the gender looking glass: Facts and gaps", *OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers*, No. 285, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/8aff1a74-en>. [1]

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