



WORKING FROM HOME: CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNIONS



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Renewed Attention on Working from Home

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its global response, has ushered in some considerable measures that will be the subject of discussion for years to come. Whether it is the requirement to physically distance or to wear a mask in public, the implications of these measures will be felt into the future.

One such measure has been the move for people to work from home. Due to the pandemic response, many workers have been required, or encouraged, to temporarily work from home.

Between February and April of 2020, the number of Canadians doing most or all of their job from home nearly tripled, reaching 5 million people.ⁱ This new reality, coupled with the prospect that it may continue for some time, has reignited a public conversation around the benefits and the pitfalls of working from home.

The terms working from home, home-based work, remote work, telework, and telecommuting are often used interchangeably. They refer to an arrangement wherein employees do some or all of their work from home or another location, instead of going into a traditional workplace. This is what is meant by *working from home* (WFH) in this paper.

WFH is sometimes encompassed in what are referred to as flexible work arrangements, or flex work. Flex work also includes flexible hours and the reduced work week, another concept that has garnered renewed attention during the pandemic.ⁱⁱ

It is worth recognizing at the outset that WFH does not apply to all workers or to all jobs. For many, WFH is not an option, nor would it be suitable. Here we might think of early childhood educators, grocery store clerks, or personal support workers. Statistics Canada has estimated that under “normal circumstances” only 4 in 10 workers can plausibly do their jobs from home.ⁱⁱⁱ

The jobs that can easily adapt to WFH are disproportionately managers and professionals in office environments. While there are lower-paid and more precarious jobs that can be adapted to WFH, the majority of adaptable jobs

generally command higher wages. Accordingly, the workers in these jobs enjoy more benefits and protections, and thus have been more insulated from job loss during the pandemic.^{iv} Even among those who can, in theory, do their jobs from home, not everyone will have the necessary equipment, space, or setup to do so.

While many people are anxious to return to some version of normal, there is a growing conversation about whether some activities—from fitness classes,^v to medical visits^{vi}—will continue to operate virtually beyond the pandemic. Some employers of large organizations, including Transport Canada^{vii} and tech companies like Facebook and Shopify,^{viii} have extended WFH arrangements indefinitely, signaling a more permanent move to WFH.

This renewed interest underlines the need to think critically about WFH as both a temporary, and possibly permanent, arrangement. This paper identifies some of the key considerations for workers and their unions:

- Use of technology
- Impacts on productivity
- Work-life balance
- Accessibility and equity
- Cost savings
- Environmental impact
- Health and safety
- Worker and community solidarity

1 Use of Technology

In the present context, it is worth beginning this paper by addressing the almost inevitable use of technology in WFH. Technology can be a tool to solve problems, to expand our access to information, and to communicate. Today, telephone, email, messaging platforms, and videoconferencing allow us to connect with members, colleagues, and allies. They can collapse barriers of geographic distance—something that’s become clearer than ever during the pandemic.

But technology is not perfect; it can even be a hindrance. For example, it might be more time consuming, or less meaningful, to craft an email than to have an in-person conversation.^{ix}

Notably, messaging platforms like Microsoft Teams and Slack have become popular tools for digital collaboration. Prior to the pandemic, these platforms have been used in a variety of workplaces, not just for remote work. In contrast to email, these platforms can facilitate more efficient communication and more closely simulate a quick visit to a colleague's desk.^x Of course, they are not without their own limitations, such as concerns around privacy, informality, and siloed communications.^{xi}

Videoconferencing has become a prominent tool for both meetings and social events during the pandemic, but it is an imperfect substitute. There have been many articles and anecdotes about so-called Zoom fatigue, named for the popular platform.

According to psychologists and researchers, videoconferencing takes a mental toll for a number of reasons.^{xii} Our brains need to work harder to process non-verbal cues. Whereas silence naturally breaks up conversations in person, we tend to find silence during video calls uncomfortable, or we worry about technical issues. Looking at other people's faces constantly, and up close, saps our energy; and seeing our own faces makes us feel self-conscious or anxious. As a result, many people find videoconferencing extremely draining.^{xiii} It must be said that the pandemic context, with the fear and anxiety it brings, is likely a contributing factor as well.^{xiv}

The use of technology comes with concerns and challenges related to cyber security. In WFH situations, employers must ensure that there is an adequate level of cyber security for their employees, as there would be in the physical workplace. This includes having the appropriate policies, procedures, security tools and training in place, as well as ensuring employees have the appropriate equipment.^{xv}

There are also forms of communication that technology cannot replace. In WFH settings, most interactions become scheduled. Technology may not allow for spontaneous conversation, collaboration, or mentoring opportuni-

ties.^{xvi} These are the things that happen more organically or spontaneously in person. More of the impacts on employee engagement are discussed in Section 7.

It must also be said that access to technology is unequal. Workers with low to moderate incomes, or those living in rural or remote areas, may not have access to the necessary equipment or internet connection to WFH, as discussed further in Section 4.

2 Impacts on Productivity

An often-discussed aspect of the WFH debate is the impacts on productivity. While there may be more useful measures of WFH's effectiveness, such as work-life balance or accessibility, it is worth acknowledging the productivity question.

There are conflicting perspectives (and, in some cases, conflicting evidence) regarding productivity.^{xvii} On the one hand, employers and managers often express concern that employees working remotely will work less, multitask, or mix personal responsibilities with work time.^{xviii} In short, there is a fear that WFH will lead to lower productivity.

The actual evidence is mixed.^{xix} This is likely because the matter is highly context-specific.^{xx} However, there is evidence that suggests workers are just as productive—if not more productive—when they work from home.^{xxi} According to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS), WFH allows employees more flexibility in organizing their tasks and better time management.^{xxii} It can also foster a sense of trust between employees and employers, which can empower workers and improve job satisfaction.^{xxiii}

The impact on productivity while WFH for an extended period of time is less clear. WFH during crisis times like the COVID-19 pandemic may also negatively impact productivity as people juggle caregiving demands, health concerns, and anxiety.^{xxiv}

Regardless of the impact on an individual's productivity, there may be a different effect on the team or workplace as a whole. One analysis suggests that "collaborative efficiency,"^{xxv} or the ability of a team to problem solve, is what suffers when WFH or in communicating by technology.

With the emphasis so often on productivity, a serious concern is that employers or managers may expect their employees to work longer hours or to be available at any time of day because they are at home or reachable via technology. During the pandemic, there have been reports of employers threatening staff to be extra productive or else risk layoff.^{xxvi} The backdrop of widespread job loss and a recession will likely increase pressure on workers. They may feel the need to "prove themselves,"^{xxvii} note Pennington and Stanford, to protect their jobs.

Even without overt pressure, WFH may lead to a blurring of the line between work time and personal time, as will be discussed more fully in Section 3. According to a 2017 publication by Eurofound and the International Labour Organization (ILO), it is important to limit informal or supplemental WFH (i.e., longer hours), which could be viewed as unpaid overtime.^{xxviii} All of this suggests that clear boundaries and communication around hours, compensation, and expectations are key. There is an essential role for unions here.

WFH may also come with new or different distractions. One recent poll of Canadian workers found that those who were WFH with children or roommates around were less likely to report "really great" productivity.^{xxix} Workers may also have considerably different physical workspaces at home compared to their usual workplace, or compared to their colleagues' workspaces. While some workers may have a spare room to dedicate to a home office, others may work at their kitchen table or in close quarters with family or roommates.

A connected issue is the potential for increased surveillance of workers. Employers who are concerned about declining productivity may consider digital or electronic forms of surveillance and monitoring. These technologies, such as webcam monitors and keystroke counters, "are intrusive and offensive, all the more so when applied within workers' own homes, and should be tightly constrained through privacy laws, labour regulation, and collective bargaining."^{xxx}

Relatedly, it is worth highlighting Facebook’s recent announcement that current employees will be allowed to apply for permission to work remotely if they have positive performance reviews.^{xxxii} While supervision will likely remain part of the working relationship, the arrangements must not overstep or become tools for discrimination.

3 Work-Life Balance

A better measure of worker well-being and effective workplaces may be work-life-balance. WFH arrangements, along with other forms of flexible work, have been shown to be beneficial to work-life balance.^{xxxiii} A key reason why WFH improves work-life balance is the reduction in (or altogether elimination of) time spent commuting.^{xxxiii}

In 2016, the Government of Canada conducted a consultation on flexible work arrangements. It found that flex work offers employees a way “to better manage the often competing demands of paid work and their family and other personal responsibilities outside of work.”^{xxxiv}

Of the different types of flex work, it was reported that workers most often request flexible scheduling and flexible work location (WFH). Both employers and labour organizations said that when considering a job offer, workers now more often choose flexibility over a higher salary or opportunities for career advancement. Flexible work was said to be effective for recruitment and retention, especially among millennials, workers with caregiving responsibilities, and older workers.^{xxxv}

Past NUPGE research on the topic of work-life balance, led by the Advisory Committee on Women’s Issues, may provide insights. For example, a survey found that lack of access to flexible work time was one of women’s biggest challenges in balancing work and home, as was caregiving responsibilities.^{xxxvi}

Personal and family responsibilities are key factors in work-life balance. The federal government consultation found that most people who requested flex work did so to enhance their ability to care for family, or to manage

health issues or other personal responsibilities. Stakeholders also reported that flex work meant workers were healthier and more able to support their families.^{xxxvii} This has taken on renewed importance in the time of COVID-19, but it is evidently true in “normal times” as well.^{xxxviii}

Despite these benefits, it is also worth noting that WFH might blur the boundary between work life and home life. The CCOHS identifies the lack of separation between home and work as a potential disadvantage to workers.^{xxxix} This blurring, especially if coupled with high expectations related to productivity, or to being constantly reachable, may negatively impact work-life balance. The 2017 Eurofound and ILO report describes this disadvantage as “work-life interference.”^{xl} Also, the collapsing of previously separate activities and relationships into one space makes people more vulnerable to negative mental health impacts.^{xli}

Some research in Canada and the US suggests that remote workers end up putting in more hours than office-based workers.^{xlii} One Canadian union leader pointed to the potential for burnout when employees end up putting in more hours than a regular work day, despite the productivity gains.^{xliii}

UNI Global Union has pointed to the importance of setting boundaries between work and personal time to maintain a “sustainable work culture.”^{xliv} As more people work from home, UNI underlines the importance of “the right to disconnect.” It helps to prevent burnout, stress, and negative mental health impacts.^{xlv}

UNI developed a campaign and best practices around the right to disconnect.^{xlvi} Other recommendations for WFH include clear definition and agreement on working hours, and providing communication and training.^{xlvii} It seems that balance is key to ensure workers have the flexibility they need, while ensuring appropriate boundaries, protections, and supports are in place.

4 Accessibility and Equity

Just as flexibility can have significant implications for work-life balance, it is also an element of accessibility. The Government of Canada heard from stakeholders and survey respondents that flex work led to increased labour market participation by workers with chronic illnesses, disabilities, and mental health issues.^{xlviii}

People with disabilities and advocates have long struggled to secure the necessary measures to make work and workplaces accessible. This includes remote work on a full-time or as-needed basis.

The issue received considerable attention early on in the pandemic. People with disabilities and chronic illnesses pointed out that, prior to COVID-19, they had been told that WFH was not possible. Then, many employers suddenly permitted (or directed) their employees to work remotely due to the pandemic. This prompted frustration from those who needed this option but had been denied it (or had been made to jump through hoops) in the past.^{xlix} As with so many issues, the pandemic has shown what is possible.

Accessibility must be part of the WFH discussion. Advocates argue that WFH must be explored and implemented through a disability lens to ensure that people with disabilities aren't further excluded or harmed. For example, some technology used for WFH may be incompatible with screen readers or voice recognition software, or WFH could serve to further isolate those who already feel disconnected.^l One researcher with the Canadian Disability Policy Alliance notes that employers mustn't use the move to WFH as an excuse to avoid making workplaces or work arrangements accessible.^{li} After all, WFH is only one part of making work and workplaces accessible, though exploring the other measures is outside the scope of this paper.

In some cases, there is still a stigma associated with flexible work. Employees worry that requesting flex hours or WFH will cause blowback from the employer or colleagues. For examples, employees indicate they fear being laid off, denied career advancement, or bullied.^{lii} This raises serious con-

cerns about the exclusion of, or discrimination against, those who need accommodations. It also raises the question of how more widespread or normalized WFH might impact these perceptions.

Could WFH contribute to advancing other forms of equity? As noted above, WFH is beneficial to those with caregiving responsibilities. Women in Canada are still disproportionately responsible for unpaid caregiving.^{liii} As a result, it is worth considering whether flexible work arrangements like WFH can play a role in advancing gender equity by improving women's labour force participation, or by encouraging more balanced distribution of unpaid care work.^{liv} The Eurofound-ILO study found that women WFH seem to achieve slightly better work-life balance than men.^{lv}

It is worth noting here that even if WFH does contribute to gender equity, it will not be the sole solution. WFH should not be a replacement for other equity-advancing measures like universal public child care and long-term care.

It is important to consider, as well, whether WFH may exacerbate existing inequities or create new ones. For example, the pandemic has reinforced a divide between workers who can do their jobs from home and those in front-line sectors who cannot, and who face a higher risk as a result.^{lvi} This divide is often based on industry or role, as noted above, and may even vary within an organization.^{lvii} This creates inequity in the labour market.^{lviii}

It may also be based on socioeconomic factors. In the US, analysis shows that the divide between who can and can't work from home occurs along lines of race and educational level. Those who are required to show up to work in person are more likely to be people of colour, have a high school education, and be precariously employed. They are also less likely to have paid sick leave.^{lix}

New data show a similar situation in Canada, where access to WFH is unequal. According to a June 2020 report by Statistics Canada, workers with high levels of education, and those with higher earnings, are more likely to be able to work remotely.^{lx} Since the risk of job loss or loss of hours is more likely to fall on financially vulnerable families, the report authors note that the pandemic may contribute to widening inequality.

Another inequity exposed by the pandemic is what's known as the digital divide. People living with low and moderate incomes, or those in rural and remote areas, may not have access to the equipment or the internet connection needed to participate in remote working and learning.^{lxi} Just as in any workplace, employers must be responsible for equipping workers with the necessary tools of the job.

Relatedly, not all workers may have access to an appropriate workspace at home. Even if a worker could, in theory, do their job from home, they may not have a spare room to dedicate to a home office. As noted above, workers living with family members or roommates may face more difficulty finding space and privacy to do their work. All of this raises questions around ensuring occupational health and safety in WFH arrangements, as discussed further in Section 7. It will be important to consider workers' diverse living arrangements.

These inequities must be acknowledged and addressed in the WFH discussion. According to UNI Global, maintaining a sustainable work environment in WFH arrangements requires recognizing that different groups are differently affected.^{lxii}

5 Cost Savings

One of the other selling features for WFH proponents is its potential for cost savings. Having all, or some, staff work from home, full-time or part-time, could lead to savings in office, energy, and maintenance costs for the employer.^{lxiii} It also saves time and commuting costs for employees.^{lxiv}

An important question is how these employers' savings will be used. Will they be used to support staff, clients, and services, or to benefit executives and shareholders? Will cost savings be used by public sector employers to justify privatization efforts? Union involvement will be essential to monitoring and informing the outcomes.

There are still costs associated with WFH. It is estimated that costs for space, utilities, equipment, and supplies can reach up to \$1,500 per

month.^{lxv} It will be important to consider—and to clearly define—who pays for these costs.

Another development to watch is the potential for employers to lower or freeze compensation because of the benefits that come with WFH, like increased worker flexibility and lower commuting costs.

This is already being seen. When Facebook announced its move to WFH, employees were told that their pay will be adjusted based on the cost of living in the area where they reside. GitLab, a San Francisco-based company, built a compensation calculator when it moved to permanent WFH. The calculator takes into account an employee's role and seniority, along with local rent prices.^{lxvi}

It will be important to watch this trend carefully. In his recent report, Jim Stanford notes:

“[I]t is a tried-and-true strategy of employers to identify groups of workers who do not fit easily into normal work routines (with respect to hours, commuting, and other constraints), and then recruit them on the basis of lower compensation offers but great ‘flexibility.’”^{lxvii}

6 Environmental Impact

Related to cost savings, WFH is touted for its lower environmental impact. As climate change worsens, we must recognize the need to transition to a more sustainable economy, and this will include the way we work. WFH can have a lower environmental impact because of lower office energy usage and a reduction (or elimination) of commutes.^{lxviii}

But the issue of environmental impact is more complicated than it may seem on the surface. There are environmental impacts of WFH, too. A key question is whether energy use might be more efficient in a single workplace compared to employees' individual homes. This may vary by region, season, and workplace.

For example, one UK-based study found that WFH was more energy efficient in the summer. In winter, the environmental impact was higher than office-based work, as employees each heated their homes.^{lxxix} Generally, the environmental impact of work varies by country, depending on consumption patterns, energy use, and energy source.^{lxxx}

Regardless of where people work, another consideration is the environmental impact of the tools and supplies we use. One example is the environmental (and human rights) impacts of our electronics and technologies due to resource mining.^{lxxxi}

We will need overarching solutions to minimize the environmental impact of our activity, whether WFH or at the office, such as building retrofits and sustainable transportation. For example, an often-unaddressed consideration surrounding the environmental impact of commuting is the quality and accessibility of public transit. As with the aforementioned equity issues, WFH will not be the single solution to climate change.

7 Health and Safety

As with any working arrangement, the occupational health and safety of WFH must be considered. Currently, there are numerous health and safety concerns related to COVID-19. Employers and governments will need to ensure that appropriate protocols are in place to make the return to work safe for all employees.^{lxxii} This may include providing a WFH option when it is not safe or possible to be physically in the workplace.

WFH itself also presents new questions and challenges related to occupational health and safety (OHS). Under OHS requirements, employers are responsible for ensuring the workplace is a healthy and safe environment. When the work site is an employee's home, this may present challenges to OHS.^{lxxiii}

In Canada, CCOHS notes that it is not clear how OHS laws cover telework arrangements.^{lxxiv} This raises questions about whether employers might mis-

use WFH arrangements to skirt their obligations, and how unions might guard against this. It is important that remote workers not be subjected to lower OHS standards.^{lxxv}

As mentioned above, there is the possibility that some remote workers will work longer hours. Overworking also presents OHS issues.^{lxxvi}

Another issue related to WFH is the threat of domestic violence for those workers for whom home is not a safe place.^{lxxvii} This is an issue NUPGE has raised during the pandemic. In the time of high stress and uncertainty, and as people spend more time at home, the risk of violence is high.^{lxxviii} Ensuring the necessary supports, resources, and job protections are in place for domestic violence victims and survivors must be part of WFH considerations.

OHS is a particular concern when employees are working alone.^{lxxix} Working alone also contributes to feelings of isolation and impacts mental health.^{lxxx} It is not yet clear what will be the long-term mental health impact of the current WFH setup due to the pandemic.^{lxxxi}

Social interaction is an important part of the workplace. It also plays a role in workers' mental health and well-being.^{lxxxii} Workplaces are "a point of connection for their employees"—not just connection with one another, but to the organization as well.^{lxxxiii}

While it is possible for employees and employers to maintain a sense of being connected through technology, it is not always the ideal mode. This is evidenced in the earlier section on technology. As the pandemic has forced many people to connect with their colleagues, as well as with their loved ones, through technology alone, the downfalls of communicating via technology have become clear.

While colleagues may still connect virtually while WFH, they may lose the broader social interaction and relationship building that happens in the workplace. Spontaneous or non work-related conversations take place around lunch tables or coffee pots. WFH may also eliminate the informal learning and mentorship opportunities that occur in person.^{lxxxiv}

8 Worker and Community Solidarity

Social interaction in the workplace is not only beneficial to workers' mental health and well-being, but it also plays a role in building solidarity. The workplace has traditionally played an important role in fostering collective learning, collective experience, and collective action.^{lxxxv} The impact of WFH on worker solidarity must be explored further.

But it is possible to build solidarity outside of a traditional or physical workplace. We might think of the food courier workers in Canada who recently organized,^{lxxxvi} or the mobilization of precarious workers through the Fight for \$15 and Fairness movement.^{lxxxvii} There have also been stories of workplaces successfully joining a union during the pandemic via virtual means.^{lxxxviii} We must seek insights from these workers and movements when it comes to organizing and building solidarity in nontraditional ways.

Workplaces can serve as more than just workplaces, too. Some organizations make their offices available for community events, meetings, and activities. This can facilitate broader organizing, awareness raising, and community building. No matter what WFH arrangements look like, it will be important to consider how to preserve and promote community spaces.

Conclusions: Striving for Balance

What all of these considerations make clear is WFH will not be a one-size-fits-all solution.^{lxxxix} It will be important to consider how WFH arrangements might apply to different jobs, industries, and workplaces, and how these might vary over time and place. We must also consider how these arrangements will impact (or be tailored to) different people and their circumstances.

Similarly, it is important not to frame the WFH debate in an all-or-nothing approach. Either end of the spectrum—working remotely 100% of the time, or spending 40 hours a week in a physical workplace—has pros and cons. Perhaps somewhere in the middle, or different arrangements for different situations, will be more effective.

For example, a US-based survey in 2017 identified the “remote work sweet spot.”^{xc} According to the survey, employees who spent 3 to 4 days working off-site reported feeling the most engaged with work, compared to those who spent all or none of their time working remotely.

Also, WFH won’t be the silver bullet to addressing all workplace and societal issues, as discussed in the sections on equity and the environment. Even with work arrangements, specifically, there may be other alternative or complementary initiatives. For example, France has instated a 35-hour work week, and also has the highest number of paid vacation and paid holidays among OECD countries.^{xi}

The present moment, shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic, could have a real impact on the future of work. The pandemic has prompted a broad rethink of the way we do things, from work and socializing, to how we care for one another and organize our economies. As a result, we could be on the brink of widespread, structural change towards the more equitable and sustainable world that the labour movement has long advocated for.

Or this moment might be captured by powerful interests to entrench the status quo or lead us down a path towards greater inequality, exploitation, and crisis. Workers, their unions, and communities must shape the path forward.

WFH is poised to be one of the major labour issues through the pandemic and beyond. Researchers have already begun to flag important considerations and identify policy solutions to mitigate risks to workers.^{xii} Workers and their unions have an essential role to play in naming and addressing these challenges.

Endnotes

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- Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU)
- Canadian Union of Brewery and General Workers (CUBGW)
- New Brunswick Union of Public and Private Employees (NBU)
- Nova Scotia Government and General Employees Union (NSGEU)
- PEI Union of Public Sector Employees (PEI UPSE)
- Newfoundland & Labrador Association of Public and Private Employees (NAPE)

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