



## **CIPRIANI COLLEGE** OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

### **Remote Work ‘Beyond’ COVID**

We’ve decided to live with COVID-19. Herd immunity is a pipedream, given the combination of vaccine availability, distribution obstacles, an intractable distrust of the vaccines, vaccination and/or governments, and mandate hesitancy on the part of governments who seek to win the next election. The question now is “how” do we live with COVID-19 as we move from a pandemic to an endemic disease?

One answer has been remote work, wherever applicable. Formerly known as “telecommuting,” it has been embraced with surprising enthusiasm. As a public health strategy, it is the quintessential act of social distancing, presenting benefits to both employer and employee. However, far from being problem-free, with management distrust and labour dissatisfaction, these issues are prompting regulatory responses.

One such response was recent Portuguese legislation which prohibits employers from contacting employees ‘after hours’, in the effort to protect work/life balance. Remote work today is influenced by elements of the digital age; instant communication, instant gratification and a disturbing level of entitlement. This iteration involves an exponential increase in electronic communication; mobile calls, texts, WhatsApp messages and calls, Google meets, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, etc. Throw in the real loss of in-person, impromptu, verbal communication and you have too many e-meetings and fewer work hours. This hyper-connectivity manifests in longer work-days, less availability to families and increased stress.

This work intensification occurs in the context of long-term wage stagnation and COVID-induced reductions in income, with people now working more for less real and comparative income. With no universal framework for cost distribution, significant variation occurs, with some progressive employers providing tools (hardware, bandwidth, power etc.) while others have cynically turned the costs over to the employee.

One local communications company made remote work available only if employees could assure the necessary bandwidth, which paradoxically the company provides. At the same time, remote-enabled companies, progressive or otherwise, discovered the potential savings in recurrent expenditure; while the employees’ personal costs and working hours increase, but income decreases. The Portuguese legislation addresses the transfer of costs, requiring companies to contribute to higher domestic bills, such as electricity and internet, with these contributions being deductible as business costs.

As information technologies become ubiquitous, we often make the erroneous assumption of equality in access. The digital divide is real and manifests itself in many ways, especially when employees provide their own tools and infrastructure, thus maintaining digital class inequality.

The Portuguese legislation, recognizing the public health necessity of remote work, makes it the employer's responsibility (albeit temporarily) to technologically enable remote work.

Many employees support remote work as it offers the opportunity to achieve an effective balance between work and other equally demanding and challenging areas of their lives. Making work more convenient to workers in the COVID-age can determine the quality of education and provision of daily health, safety and security for family members in the absence of organized child and elder care systems. Social protection deficits are made up by the time and effort of already-stretched working people. It may not sound ambitious, but the Portuguese stipulation that parents with children under the age of eight need no prior employer permission to work remotely, goes a long way towards establishing a workers'-rights baseline in remote work, with potential applications in other areas of the employment relationship.

The closer we get to an approximation of "normal", real or imagined, the more we see management recidivism. There is a difference between acknowledging real accountability issues and the idea that the ability to physically see people is the only real form of managerial control. This highlights the often-arbitrary nature of defining and measuring productivity and is particularly funny because it is actually easier to surveil people electronically. Facebook anyone?

The Portuguese legislation clearly shows an approach to remote work not limited by COVID-19 reality. The government has repeatedly stated that remote work is an economic 'game changer' but only if managed fairly and effectively. Portugal is attempting to build an effective remote working culture to lure the future workforce talent, that growing tribe of technological nomads. Importantly, Portugal is not alone in taking a structured, forward-looking approach, with countries like Germany, Ireland, Russia and France all in the process of rethinking the regulation of remote work.

Pandemic or endemic, life must go on. If this is indeed a global existential crisis hinged on misuse and misdistribution of social resources, we must seek easy social wins, especially ones that can generate both practical benefits and the social goodwill necessary for future work. Remote work presents an opportunity to engineer meaningful change in an increasingly faltering social contract. The world is changing. People and values are changing. Perhaps we need to challenge ourselves, in work and in society, to be worthy of the moment.

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