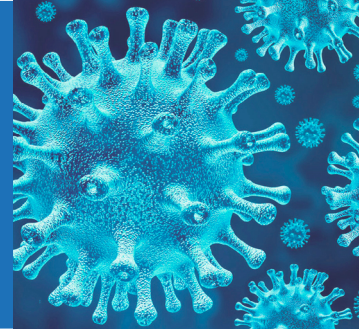


# Working from home in the corona crisis: What's next?



baua: report brief

During the corona crisis, and especially during the period of strict lockdown, many companies have used working from home to comply with rules on hygiene and social distancing. As a result, the proportion of employees authorised to work from home has increased significantly in many companies (Bellmann et al., 2020). The survey "Establishments in the Covid-19 crisis", commissioned by the Federal Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) and the Institute for Employment Research (IAB) suggests that many companies will continue to use or even will expand working from home after the corona crisis has ended. They see advantages in more flexibility for their employees and a better work-life balance. At the same time they expect to enhance employer attractiveness. In companies where working from home has been less common and no increase is planned, the nature of an employee's work is often cited as the primary obstacle to working from home.

## Working from home in the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic

The rapid spread of the novel coronavirus and the increasing number of Covid-19 infections pose a major challenge to occupational safety and infection control in companies. One way to limit contacts on the way to work, but also in the company, is to work from home, e.g. in the form of home office, teleworking or mobile working (BAuA & occupational health and safety committees in BMAS, 2020). A quarter of the companies have introduced working from home as a specific measure to reduce infection rates (Robelski, Steidelmüller & Pohlan, 2020). In addition, working from home makes it easier to take care of children when schools and childcare facilities are (temporarily) closed (Bujard et al., 2020). This has led to a significantly higher proportion of employees working from home, particularly during the period of lockdown in March and April 2020 (Bonin et al., 2020; Bünning, Hipp & Munnes, 2020; Eurofound, 2020). Many companies have improved the conditions for working from home (Bellmann et al., 2020). The majority of employees who worked from home at the time also did so to a much greater extent than before (Frodermann et al., 2020). The Institute for Employment Research (IAB) of the German Federal Employment Agency in cooperation with the Federal Institute for

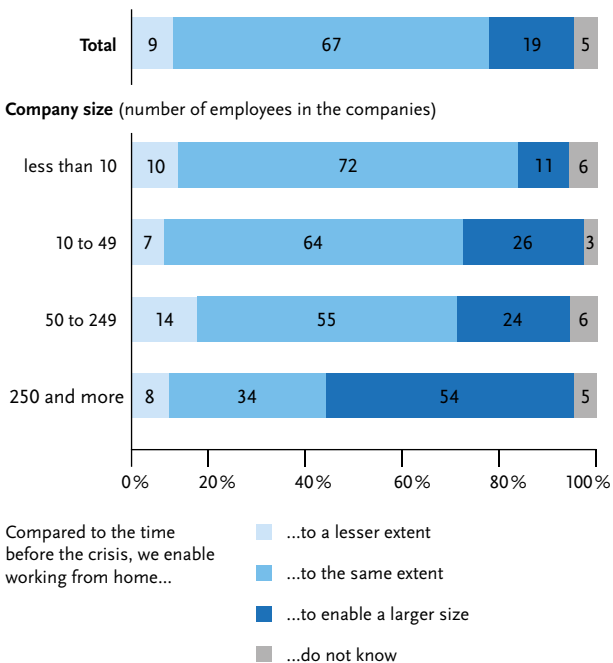
Occupational Safety and Health (BAuA) is conducting several company surveys with the aim of analysing the current challenges faced by companies. Every three weeks, a representative sample of private sector companies is surveyed on their situation in the corona crisis and how they are dealing with it. The fourth wave of the survey focused on working from home during lockdown in Spring 2020 and during the survey period (October 2020). The companies were also asked about their current plans for working from home after the crisis. Representatives from 1,791 companies in Germany took part in the survey.

## Working from home in German companies: What is the way forward?

Initial analyses of the wider use of working from home during the corona crisis show that the proportion of employees with the option of working from home increased significantly in companies at the time of the lockdown in spring and remained high in October 2020, before the beginning of the second lockdown period (Bellmann et al., 2020). In addition, around 42 percent of the companies stated that working from home was in principle possible for them. This raises the question of how companies plan to deal with working from home in the future.

The majority of the companies (67 %) that are basically able to offer working from home intend to return to the pre-crisis level of working from home after the crisis has ended.

Almost one-fifth of companies intend to further expand work from home (18 %), 9 percent say they intend to reduce the extent, and a small proportion (5 %) do not know yet how the situation will look in the future. However, large companies (250+ employees) are significantly more likely to expand their working from home compared to medium-sized companies (50 to 249 employees), small companies (10 to 49 employees) and very small companies (fewer than 10 employees, see Fig. 1.).



**Fig. 1** Plans for the future extent of working from home in the companies (extrapolated results based on n = 1053, only companies that indicate that the activities in principle allow to work from home, rounding errors possible)

Companies in the transportation and warehousing (38 %), information and communications, and manufacturing (23 %) sectors are particularly likely to expand working from home. A return to pre-crisis levels is most frequently cited in the construction industry (91 %), the

education sector (89 %) and the health and social services sector (80 %).

**The role of formal arrangements for working from home**

Employee data show that formal regulations or agreements on working from home in the sense of teleworking (cf. Section 2 Para 7 of the Workplace Ordinance) enable healthy and humane working from home (Backhaus et al., 2019). In the survey "Establishments in the Covid-19 crisis", 12 percent of the companies stated that they had formal regulations for working from home. In doing so, companies make use of both telework (i.e. working from home with a permanently installed remote workplace) and home office (without formally establishing a workplace in the employee's home). Many companies use both forms concurrently (6 % of companies with the option of working from home). 5 percent of the companies exclusively use home office agreements and only 1 percent claim to have made agreements exclusively for teleworking.

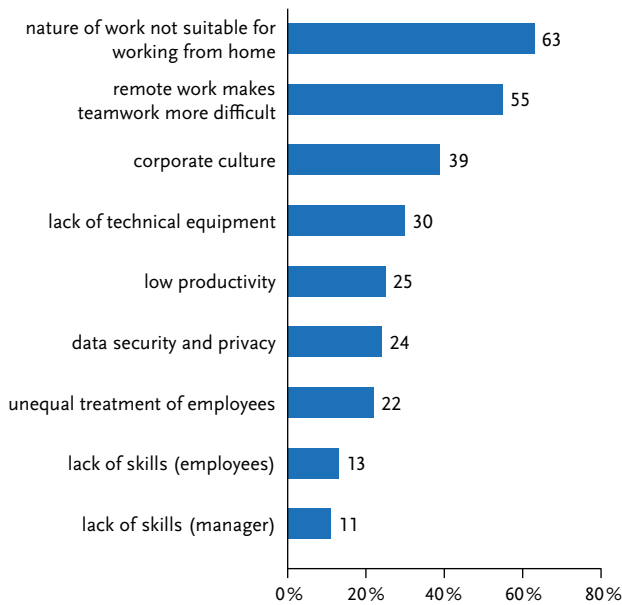
Likewise, 1 percent of the companies with the option of working from home also state that an arrangement exists including neither home office nor teleworking. Since regulations without a remote workplace assume that working from home does not take place regularly but only sporadically or on specific occasions, the workplace regulations do not apply here. However, the legal regulations on occupational health and safety must also be taken into account when working from home, e.g. in the risk assessment.

Both existing regulations on home office and teleworking are accompanied by companies formulating the intention to expand working from home in the future. Thus, companies with regulations in place more often intend to expand their use of working from home (30 %) than where this is not the case (17 %).

**Operational barriers for expanding working from home**

The majority of companies that have no plans to expand home office or teleworking indicate that the nature of the work done by their employees is not suitable for working from home (63 %, see Fig. 2). A further barrier seems to be the difficult conditions of working remotely (55 %). Companies that report that social distancing

makes teamwork more difficult also frequently have concerns about unequal treatment of employees. This is shown by bivariate correlations between the various obstacles. In third place is corporate culture (39 %). Other reasons include loss of productivity, lack of technical equipment, data security and privacy, or employees and managers lacking the skills to work from home (all  $\leq 25$  %).

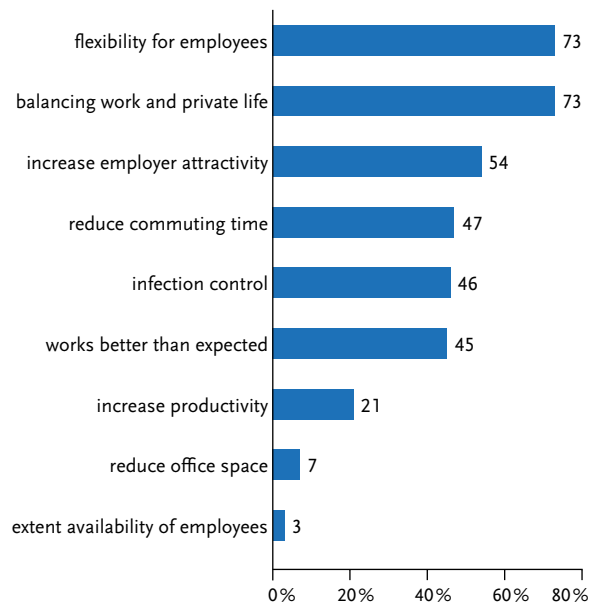


**Fig. 2** Barriers to working from home in companies (extrapolated results based on  $641 \leq n \leq 692$ , only companies that do not want to expand working from home, the proportion that answered "agree")

**Operational reasons for expanding work from home**

Companies that intend to expand working from home were asked about the drivers for the planned expansion. Overall, employer attractiveness in the jobs market appears to be one main driver for expanding opportunities for working from home (see Fig. 3). More than half of the companies assume that there is a direct connection between the expansion of home office options and employer attractiveness (54 %). Almost three out of four companies (73 %) want to give their employees more flexibility and a better work-life balance by working from home. Both are often related to the expectation of increased employer attractiveness. In addition, almost half (47 %) of the companies also quote reduction of commuting times for employees. For 46 percent, the prevention of infection also plays a role after the end of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Both of these aspects are cited particularly frequently by companies who state that working from home has turned out to be better than they had expected.

For a smaller number of companies, the expectation of increased productivity (21 %), savings in office space (7 %) or the possibility of extending accessibility times (3 %) also play a role.



**Fig. 3** Reasons for a potential expansion of working from home in companies (extrapolated results based on  $271 \leq n \leq 272$ , only companies that want to expand work from home, scale from 1 "do not agree at all" to 5 "agree completely", proportion for 4 and 5 is presented)

**Conclusion**

Working from home has become much more important in German companies during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. Based on the experience gained during the corona crisis, approximately one fifth of the companies plan to expand opportunities for home office or teleworking in the future by comparison with the time before the crisis. However, there are also companies without the possibility to working from home and companies that would like to reduce the share of home office or telework after the crisis. Here the main reason is that the nature of the work done by the employees is not suitable for working from home. However, if companies want to and are able to expand working from home, most of them state that they will do so in order to improve flexibility and work-life balance for their employees. A growing number of studies show that formal arrangements for working from home help not only to improve the compatibility and flexibility of work, but also to ensure occupational safety and health (Backhaus, Wöhrmann & Tisch, 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Lott, 2020).

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