Lecture #3

WORKING ANYTIME, ANYWHERE — HOW TO DEAL WITH THE CHALLENGES TO WORKERS' HEALTH IN PRESENT-DAY SOCIETY

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The focus of this lecture is on the changes in the space and time dimensions of work arising from the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and their effects on the health of workers. While in the 1980s personal computers enabled working from home, several years later laptops and mobile phones fostered "portable" work, also while travelling. In time, online connectivity led to new communication technologies and their application to work without any space or time limits, this is to say, anytime, anywhere[1].

This is the context for the emergence of so-called telework, defined as a form of organization and/or execution of work through information technologies and involving a professional relationship style in which work is customarily performed outside the employer's premises. Telework is part of the so-called "new ways of working," which are characterized by temporal and spatial flexibility usually combined with resource to ICT and performance-based assessments[2].

However, the advantages in terms of greater autonomy, better control of the working time and shorter commuting time with lower cost are curtailed by the loss of social support from coworkers and a feeling of isolation. In addition, under such conditions workers tend to work longer hours, which fact interferes with the work-home balance and impairs recovery from work and work performance.[2] This type of flexibility is often associated with more after-hours work and negative impact on personal life. Therefore, while telework might seem advantageous in the short term, it might bear long-term negative consequences for the health and well-being of workers[2].

Indeed, the state of health is poorer, work-home imbalance more frequent and the stress levels higher among employees who usually work outside the employer's premises[3]. This group tends to spend more time working than employees who only work onsite[1].

In this lecture I will address teleworker health policies, such as the actions included in the European Framework Agreement on Telework in the EU, from 2002, which is the single international initiative in this regard. This agreement posits a general framework for telework to be implemented according to the particular procedures and practices of each country. The main aspects are: 1) voluntary nature of telework for both employer and employee; 2) teleworkers must enjoy the same rights as employees working at the employer's premises; and 3) the employer bears the entire responsibility for the provision, installation and maintenance of equipment, unless teleworkers choose to use their own[3].

Measures also seek to promote health and safety at work for teleworkers, for which employers are responsible, in addition to actions to prevent teleworkers from being isolated from the rest of the working community in the company. Further measures concern access to training and career development opportunities and collective rights, which should be the same as for the other workers[3].

One further aspect to consider is the employer's after-hours access to teleworkers for work-related matters. Among European workers, the risk of reporting health problems and sickness absenteeism was higher for those frequently contacted outside the regular working hours, independently from sociodemographic characteristics, workload, autonomy, control over working hours and working-time related variables. Even occasional phone calls or e-mails might interfere with rest, thus impairing recovery, sleep and social life[4].

Within the current scenario of work intensification, professional demands increasingly require working during the leisure time, which doubles the rate of work-related health problems. Use of ICT in association with increasing demands might make workers feel the urge to respond quickly to messages from clients, coworkers or supervisors, which characterizes the phenomenon known as "workplace telepressure." Such pressure is a predictor of burnout, absenteeism and poor quality of sleep, with consequent effects on the physical and psychological health of workers[5].

The current process of intensification of work together with a perception of immediatism and simultaneity in social life might exceed the human thresholds, with implications for health. Such situation is expressed in the tendency for acceleration of the pace of work[6] and longer working hours in several countries[7].

While in the past, the invention of the clock shaped the perception of time as "more linear, consecutive, irreversible, measurable and predictable," new facets of time are being experienced since the end of the 20th century, particularly the simultaneity of events[9]. Concrete initiatives were implemented in some countries to limit the negative effects of "connected work," including the "right to be unconnected." In France, for instance, a law from 2017 grants workers the right not to check e-mails after regular working hours. This a way to deal with the present-day flexibility, according to which people are expected to be always "available" even when outside the workplace[10]. It is such alleged availability we have to fight if we consider health our most valuable asset.

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