Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
ISSN 2013-9004 (digital); ISSN 0210-2862 (paper)

Papers 2026, 111(4)
1-27

Hybrid work and working-time flexibility: a comparative analysis of ten organisations in four countries with different industrial relations and working-time regimes

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Received: 06-12-2025
Accepted: 18-09-2026
Published: 15-10-2026

Recommended citation: Caprile, Maria; Arasanz Díaz, Juan; Bednorz, Jan; Cabrita, Jorge; Makarevičiūtė, Austėja; Sadauskaitė, Audronė and Sanz, Pablo (2026). "Hybrid work and working-time flexibility: a comparative analysis of ten organisations in four countries with different industrial relations and working-time regimes". *Papers*, 111(4), e3553. <https://doi.org/10.5565/rev/papers.3553>

Abstract

The objective of this article is to analyse the consequences of hybrid work on working time and work-life balance. In doing so, the article analyses the implication of three elements which, according to previous research, can influence or mediate the relationship between hybrid work and working time/work-life balance. First, management approaches towards hybrid work and working-time flexibility. Second, axes of inequality (gender and occupational inequality) that shape the teleworking experience. Third, the article considers institutional context factors, with a focus on implications associated with different industrial relations and working-time regimes. The article uses a comparative analysis of ten exploratory company case studies on hybrid work in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period conducted in four countries that represent different industrial relations and working-time regimes (Austria, Finland, Lithuania, and Spain). The results show that hybrid work generally improves work-life balance through commute-time savings, greater autonomy, and enhanced capacity to accommodate private responsibilities. However, it also facilitates longer, fragmented, and less visible working time. Our results indicate that the effects of hybrid work are mainly mediated by management practices that are contingent on the institutional context. Our results also show that hybrid work can both reduce and promote gender inequality.

Keywords: hybrid work; work intensification; always-on work culture; work; autonomy; collective bargaining; social dialogue

Resumen. *El trabajo híbrido y la flexibilidad horaria: un análisis comparativo de diez organizaciones de cuatro países con diferentes regímenes de relaciones laborales y de tiempo de trabajo*

El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las consecuencias del trabajo híbrido en el tiempo de trabajo y la conciliación entre la vida laboral y la personal. Para ello, el artículo analiza las implicaciones de tres elementos que, según investigaciones previas, pueden influir o mediar en la relación entre el trabajo híbrido y los tiempos de trabajo, cuidado y descanso. En primer lugar, los enfoques de gestión respecto al trabajo híbrido y la flexibilidad de la jornada laboral. En segundo lugar, los ejes de desigualdad (de género y ocupacional) que determinan la experiencia del teletrabajo. En tercer lugar, el artículo tiene en cuenta factores del contexto institucional y se centra en las implicaciones asociadas a los diferentes regímenes de relaciones laborales y de tiempos de trabajo. El trabajo se basa en un análisis comparativo de diez estudios de caso exploratorios en empresas que gestionan trabajo híbrido en el periodo posterior a la pandemia de COVID-19. Los casos fueron estudiados en cuatro países representativos de diferentes regímenes de relaciones laborales y de tiempo de trabajo (Austria, Finlandia, Lituania y España). Los resultados muestran que el trabajo híbrido mejora, en general, la conciliación entre la vida laboral y la personal gracias al ahorro en el tiempo de desplazamiento, a una mayor autonomía y a una mayor capacidad para conciliar las responsabilidades privadas. Sin embargo, también propicia jornadas laborales más largas, fragmentadas y menos visibles. Nuestros resultados indican que los efectos del trabajo híbrido están mediados principalmente por prácticas de gestión que dependen del contexto institucional. Nuestros resultados también muestran que el trabajo híbrido tanto puede reducir como potenciar la desigualdad de género.

Palabras clave: trabajo híbrido; intensificación del trabajo; cultura laboral de disponibilidad permanente; trabajo; autonomía; negociación colectiva; diálogo social

Summary

1. Introduction
2. Literature review
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Comparative analysis of the ten case studies
6. Conclusions
Bibliographical references

1. Introduction

Hybrid work, in which employees alternate between office-based and remote work, is one of the lasting legacies of the pandemic. Labour force survey data[1] reveal that the percentage of EU27 employees working from home 'at least sometimes'[2] doubled during the pandemic (from 11.1% in 2019 to 22% in 2021) and subsequently remained stable at a slightly lower level (20.3% in 2024). The proportion of employees working from home at least half of the workdays was around 3% throughout the 2010s, peaking at 12.3% in 2021 before gradually declining to 7.4% by 2024. Concurrently, the proportion of employees who work from home 'sometimes' increased from 7.9% in 2019 to 13% in 2023.

There is a large consensus that remote work will persist, as it potentially offers enduring benefits for both organisations and workers (Eurofound, 2023a). However, research has also identified potential drawbacks. In the context of work intensification and expansion of an 'always-on' work culture, workers with remote work arrangements may not have a supportive work environment for work-life balance and be more at risk of working longer hours and with more unpredictable schedules than onsite workers, with negative implications for their working conditions, work-life balance, and health (Chung, 2022; Kao et al., 2020; Karimikia et al., 2021). Moreover, research also indicates that remote work may reproduce or even exacerbate social and gender inequalities (Romens et al., 2025). In parallel, cross-country comparative research has argued that institutional context shapes the overall quality of working conditions (Gallie, 2007; Anttila et al., 2015).

The objective of this article is to analyse, through an exploratory case study approach (Yin, 2018), the consequences of hybrid work on working time and

1. Eurostat, European Labour Force Survey (EU LFS) [lfsa_ehomp]. Data refer to the 15-64 age range. EU-LFS only refers to 'work from home', excluding other locations for remote work (e.g. working at coworking spaces, while commuting or while travelling).
2. Eurostat measures the frequency of remote work over a four-week reference period and defines the following categories: 'Usually working from home' (doing productive, job-related work at home for at least half of the days worked within the 4-week reference period); 'sometimes working from home' (doing productive, job-related work at home for less than half of the days worked, but at least for one hour within the 4-week reference period). The category 'at least sometimes' is extensively used in quantitative research on telework and results from adding the total of both "Usually" and "Sometimes" categories.

work-life balance. In doing so, the article analyses the implication of three elements which, according to previous research, can influence or mediate the relationship between hybrid work and working time/work-life balance. First, management approaches towards hybrid work and working-time flexibility. Second, axes of inequality (such as gender and occupational inequality) that shape the teleworking experience. Third, the article considers institutional context factors, with a focus on implications associated with different industrial relations and working-time regimes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Remote work: effects on working time and work-life balance

Hybrid work consists of organising work in such a way that it can be performed partly onsite and partly remotely (Eurofound, 2023a). This involves changes in work organisation practices through three salient features: increased flexibility of space and time; intensive use of technologies and digital tools enabling individuals to work in synchronous or asynchronous ways; and the rearrangement of team coordination and communication practices.

Research has recognised the crucial impact of remote work on working time and work-life balance. The main point of debate is whether the reduced commute time and the increased working-time flexibility while working remotely actually enhance workers' autonomy to accommodate job demands and personal life. However, findings are mixed. The bulk of pre-pandemic literature finds that remote work arrangements may turn out to be a 'double-edged sword' for working time and work-life balance (Beauregard and Canonico, 2019; Dén-Nagy, 2014). Research based on EWCS data, (Eurofound and ILO, 2017; Eurofound 2018, 2022) finds mixed evidence of the impact of working from home on work-life balance before and during the pandemic. 'Employees working from home at least several times a month' (see footnote 2 for the definition of this category) are more likely than onsite workers to work longer, more irregular schedules, including during evenings, nights, and weekends. Additional hours performed remotely are most often not compensated with pay or time off. Overall, these studies point to the blurring of boundaries between home and work domains, although many workers perceived a positive impact on work-life balance, especially those who have young children.

These mixed results appear to be related to different phenomena. The following sections revise previous studies on three key elements that influence or mediate the relationship between hybrid work and working time/work-life balance: management policies towards hybrid work; axes of inequality; and contextual/institutional factors.

2.2. Management approaches

The literature highlights four aspects in the management of hybrid work rules and practices within organisations (i.e. hybrid work regimes).

First, eligibility criteria. Overall, research indicates that transparent eligibility criteria and procedures promote equitable access to remote work opportunities, improving working conditions (Kossek et al., 2023; Touzet, 2023; Eurofound, 2023c).

Second, the *proportion of working time allowed to be spent remotely* ranges from an office-first approach to a remote-first approach. As a hybrid model moves away from on-site work, the impact of hybrid work on working conditions becomes more significant, requiring managers to adapt their organizational practices (Gratton, 2021; Lake, 2023). Moreover, the frequency of telework has implications for working time and work-life balance. Research highlights that hybrid work enables employees to maximise the benefits of flexibility in working hours and work-life balance, whilst mitigating isolation costs in fully remote working models (Junça Silva y Lopes, 2025). In contrast, high-frequency telework triggers the "autonomy paradox" phenomenon (Mazmanian et al., 2013), blurring boundaries and extending work hours due to expectations of being constantly available and fears of being overlooked (Weintert et al., 2015).

Third, attention has been drawn to whether approval decisions for remote work arrangements are centralised or decentralised, allowing flexibility at team level. Smite et al. (2022, 2023) highlights trade-offs between centralised and decentralised hybrid work regimes in terms of equality versus adaptation to different operational team needs and different individual needs and preferences.

Fourth, research suggests that work-life balance is contingent on teleworkers having autonomy over their schedules and not being expected to remain available or work outside regular hours (Ojala et al., 2014, Abendroth and Schwarz, 2023, Yang et al., 2023). The poor quality of teleworkers' working time is associated with work intensification and the 'always-on' work culture (Van Zoonen et al., 2021; Eurofound 2023; Howcroft et al., 2025). EWCS 2024 data reveal that 4 in 10 employees in hybrid work arrangements worked during rest time to meet job demands several times a month, compared to 1 in 10 onsite employees (Eurofound 2025). Research distinguishes between supplementing onsite work ('informal' or 'unregulated' remote work to perform additional work hours) and substituting onsite work (that is, formal remote work regulated through individual agreement with the employer, including verbal agreement with the line manager). Sustained additional remote work hours lead to work-life conflict and affect health, especially for women due to gender norms and the unequal division of care and domestic work (Ojala et al., 2014, Abendroth and Schwarz, 2023, Yang et al., 2023).

Kossek and Kelliher (2023), point to the need for collectively negotiated approaches in order to guarantee equality in access and enhance legal provisions on the right to request flexible working opportunities. In addition, they advocate for the need to expand the content of these arrangements beyond traditional forms of working time and place flexibility to facilitate the supervision of other forms of work-non-work boundaries related to workload and connectivity (the right to disconnect).

2.3. Axes of inequality

Unlike management literature, which primarily addresses remote work through the lens of productivity and employee engagement, sociological literature focuses on analysing why and how remote work reproduces or exacerbates social and gender inequalities (Romens et al., 2025). From this perspective, telework policies are mediated by pre-existing gender, occupational and social inequalities that condition both access to telework and teleworking experience regarding working time and work-life balance.

Empirical research shows that remote work has both enabled and constrained gender inequality. On the one hand, telework has helped many women balance professional and caregiving responsibilities, reducing constraints of the "ideal worker" model that assumes constant availability (Chung et al., 2021). Longitudinal studies indicate that telework and workers' autonomy to organise working time have helped mothers remain employed, avoid part-time work, and potentially gain long-term career advancement and higher wages (Chung and van der Horst, 2018; Arntz et al. 2022; Harrington and Kahn, 2025). On the other hand, research has shown that the offer and uptake of remote work are gendered, and that remote work affected working time, work-life balance and well-being (Lott and Abendroth, 2020). Pre-pandemic (Franklin et al. 2022) and pandemic studies (Moreno-Colom et al., 2023; Yavorsky et al, 2021; Blaskó et al 2020; Chung and Van der Lippe,2020) showed telework negatively affected the quality of working time, health and wellbeing, more for women than men because it exacerbated existing gender inequalities in care and household responsibilities.

The issue of occupational inequalities influencing access to telework has been less explored. Most studies refer to a managerial lack of trust and a reluctance to lose direct control, which reinforces occupational stratification (Chung 2022; Lott, 2015; Sewell and Taskin, 2015; Breda et al., 2026). Equity issues across occupations may arise due to discretionary practices and stigma, even when formal equitable policies are in place. The growing number of technicians and, notably, clerical workers adopting this work arrangement suggests a certain erosion of managers' hierarchical biases and stigma against telework in lower-skilled occupations. In this regard, Chung's (2024) multilevel analysis of the EWCTS 2021 data across 30 countries indicates a significant shift compared to the pre-pandemic situation. Clerical support workers are as likely to telework as other white-collar workers when all control factors are considered, and this is associated with the fact that women are more likely to telework than men, all else equal.

Regarding social class, some studies have suggested that economic capital—particularly the conditions under which paid work was carried out during the pandemic—significantly influenced individuals' experiences of teleworking (EU-OSHA, 2021b). Other studies that intersect class and gender show that telework increases intersectional inequalities. This is because teleworking

mothers with limited economic and social capital must carry out their jobs in poor working conditions, with children present and in spaces that are not well-prepared for working (Romens et al., 2025)

2.4. Institutional context of hybrid work: understanding differences in EU countries

Hybrid work, as well as other flexible work arrangements, is not used in a vacuum, and the institutional and cultural context in which it is used matters (Chung, 2022). Despite common pressures associated with work intensification, digitalisation and the expansion of hybrid work, national variations persist and distinct working time and telework regimes are identified in the European countries (Anttila et al., 2015; Eurofound, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026).

Comparative research has consistently shown the existence of four main country clusters in Europe which diverge in terms of the prevalence of telework and, more generally, the type or forms and purpose of flexible work arrangements used (company oriented vs. employee oriented, etc.); the institutional regulation with regard to 'substantive rules' (i.e. protective versus promoting approach, etc.) and 'procedural rules' (i.e., if the rules are mainly developed by the state, the market, or the social partners through collective agreements); and the impact of telework and flexible work arrangements on gender division and the everyday lives of individual employees (Chung and Tijdens, 2013; Anttila et al., 2015; Chung y Van der Lippe, 2018; Eurofound, 2018, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026).

In the Nordic countries, employees are more likely to work in remote and flexible working-time arrangements. Flexible arrangements tend to be driven by employee and employer needs (employees often enjoy autonomy to organise their working time, etc.) based on rules underpinned by collective bargaining and social dialogue (Anttila et al., 2015; Chung y Tijdens, 2013; Eurofound, 2022). There is no statutory legislation on telework and working time (the right to disconnect, the right to request telework etc.). Trade unions deem it unnecessary, given their capacity to collectively regulate and enforce flexible arrangements at company level (Eurofound, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026).

In Western-Central European countries, there is also a high prevalence of telework. Nevertheless, in contrast with the Nordic cluster, previous research has found that there is a gendered pattern of working-time flexibility (women are overrepresented in part-time work) (Anttila et al., 2015; Chung and Tijdens, 2013; Chung y Van der Lippe, 2018). Also, there is a different regulatory framework on telework which combines both collective bargaining and statutory legislation (Eurofound, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026).

Eastern and Southern European countries show the lowest telework prevalence in the European Union (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026). Employees in these countries often face 'company-driven' flexibility policies: higher working-time

variability and unsocial working time but lower employees' working-time autonomy (Anttila et al., 2015; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026). These two clusters diverge regarding institutional regulation. Eastern European countries regulate telework only through statutory legislation (collective bargaining coverage is low in these countries) and follow a promoting approach where legislation mainly provides for telework access (Eurofound, 2020, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026). In contrast, Southern European countries' legislation has recently followed a "protective approach" (Eurofound, 2020, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026). In 2022, all Southern European countries (Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal) established the right to disconnect, with a focus on telework. This is the cluster in which most countries have regulated the right to request telework (in order to prevent discrimination) and are developing stricter working time recording requirements to prevent employer abuses (Eurofound, 2020, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026).

Comparative research shows the importance of institutional dimensions in shaping the rules, practices and effects related to hybrid work. National industrial relation systems determine the extent to which hybrid work arrangements are regulated through collective bargaining, statutory legislation and/or unilateral market mechanisms. Those institutions affect the type and orientation of policies implemented at company level, since countries relying on collective bargaining show more balanced flexibility policies (Chung and Tijdens, 2013; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026). Finally, gendered divisions of labour and normative views about women and men (especially the roles of mothers and fathers) shape how remote work is performed and viewed by employers and employees, and consequently its outcomes in terms of working time and work-life balance (Chung y Van der Lippe, 2018). For instance, comparative research of Poland and Sweden has highlighted the importance of gender norms and family support policies ('care regime') in understanding differences in how mothers and fathers use telework to balance work with leisure and caring responsibilities (Kurowska, 2020).

3. Methodology

A comparative analysis of ten *exploratory* case studies (Yin, 2018) on hybrid work was carried out to analyse the regulation and management of hybrid work and the implications for working time and work-life balance.

The case studies were carried out between October 2023 and April 2024. Each case study referred to one organisation and consisted of interviews with individuals representing three profiles—employer representative, employee representative, and line manager—and a focus group with at least four hybrid workers. Employer representatives were either chief executive officers or human resources managers; employee representatives were members of the works council, other representative bodies, or trade unions; and all line managers had supervisory responsibility over a working team or department. Employee representatives were present in all selected organisations except in a medium-sized

Table 1. Number of interviews by role

Role of interviewees	Number of interviewees
Employer representative	11
Employee representative	12
Line manager	10
Employee (interviewed in a focus group or individually)	42
Total	75

Source: Authors based on case studies.

Lithuanian company.[3] In a few instances, the focus group had to be replaced by individual interviews with workers because of difficulties in setting a suitable date for all participants. The case studies were informed by 47 one-to-one interviews and seven focus groups with workers, involving a total of 75 participants (see Table 1). Most interviews and all focus groups were conducted online.[4] In addition to budget constraints, this method was found to be more adequate for conducting focus groups with distributed employees. Fieldwork information was supplemented by documentation provided by the organisations investigated and additional desk research.

The interviews with the management and workers' representatives were conducted at the organisation level because, in all instances, this was the level at which hybrid work had been designed and adopted. Identifying the unit of analysis for interviews with line managers and workers required a more focused approach in some organisations, due to variations in hybrid work across areas and departments. The unit of analysis was agreed upon with management representatives on a case-per-case basis. In some instances, it was the whole organisation; in others, it was a department or a specific group of employees (see Table 2). Participants in the focus group were selected to represent the diversity of socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. age, gender), occupational profiles, and hybrid work arrangements in the unit of analysis. This multilayered approach was intended to provide a balanced account of how hybrid work had been designed, managed, and experienced in each organisation, involving different participants in its assessment. Women were overrepresented in the organisations analysed, accounting for two thirds of the employees who participated in the focus groups and interviews. As regards occupations, skilled jobs were most prevalent. Approximately three quarters of the participant employees were in skilled jobs.

The interviews and focus groups were based on a semi-structured interview guide focused on three aspects: regulation and management of hybrid work, organisational performance and related outcomes, and working conditions. Questions were adapted to each type of participant interviewed. Interview guidelines were initially drafted in English (as they were discussed and agreed

3. Employee representation is very rare in Lithuanian SMEs.
4. Seven one-to-one interviews were conducted in-person, 40 were conducted online.

Table 2. Characteristics of the selected organisations and units of analysis of the case studies

	Country	Organisation	Ownership structure	Sector (NACE)	Total number of employees (circa)	Employee representative body	Unit of analysis (number of employees in the unit of analysis; circa)
AT1	Austria	Bank	Joint stock company	NACE 64 Financial service activities, except insurance and pension funding	>40,000	Works council	Headquarters (3,000)
AT2	Austria	Federal ministry	Public	NACE 84 Public administration and defence; compulsory social security	1,700	Staff council	Central administration (1,000)
FI1	Finland	State agency	Public	NACE 84.11 General public administration activities	>5,000	Trade union association and OSH representative	Whole organisation
FI2	Finland	Temporary employment company	Limited company	NACE 78.20 Temporary employment agency activities and other human resource provisions	12,000	OSH representative and committee	Internal staff (170-250)
ES1	Spain	Insurance company	Limited company	NACE 65 - Insurance, reinsurance and pension funding	320	Works council	Central services (70)
ES2	Spain	Pharmaceutical multinational	Stock company	NACE 21.20 Manufacture of pharmaceutical preparations	>1,800	Works council	Head office and R&D centre (580)
ES3	Spain	Regional public entity	Public	NACE 74.90 Other professional, scientific and technical activities n.e.c.	170	Works council	Whole organisation
LT1	Lithuania	Bank	Publicly listed company	NACE 64.19 Other monetary intermediation	1,000	Works council	Credit department (13)
LT2	Lithuania	Software publishing company	Private company	NACE 58.2 Software publishing	80	No employee representation	Software development team (13)
LT3	Lithuania	State agency	Public	NACE 84.11 General public administration activities	180	Works council	Policy group (12)

Note: Case studies were coded using the country abbreviations (AT: Austria, FI: Finland, ES: Spain; LT: Lithuania) followed by a number. These codes are used throughout the article to refer to the case studies.

Source: Authors based on the case studies.

by all the researchers) and were then translated into Lithuanian, German, Spanish and Finish, as the interviews and focus groups were conducted in national languages (the research team included native speakers from the four countries).

To be considered for selection, organisations had to have implemented some form of hybrid work. Further *selection criteria* were adopted with a view to increasing diversity in terms of contextual and organisational factors that impact the design and management of hybrid work according to literature.

To ensure *contextual diversity* (see section XXX), four countries were selected to recruit organisations (Austria, Finland, Lithuania, and Spain). These

countries represent different telework regimes (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026) and working-time regimes (Anttila et al., 2015). They differ markedly in three contextual aspects relevant for understanding varieties of hybrid work according to the literature: historical prevalence of telework and types and purposes of flexible work arrangements; regulation of working time and remote work, connected to different industrial relation models; gender patterns and norms (see section 4.1 and previous section 2.4).

Concerning *organisational diversity*, a set of specific criteria was established to ensure diversity in terms of public/private sectors, economic activity, and size. The selected organisations consisted of four public entities (one per country) and six private companies (one large company per country and one SME company in Spain and Lithuania) operating in different knowledge-intensive service activities. Table 2 presents the characteristics of the selected organisations and further details about the unit of analysis of each case study.

It is important to note that the low number of case studies and their exploratory nature limit the generalisation of the findings. Case studies should not be deemed representative of other organisations, but rather illustrative of diverse approaches and practices. Furthermore, there is a risk of self-selection bias in the recruitment of organisations. A substantial number of organisations declined to participate for diverse reasons including coinciding with collective bargaining negotiations, internal conflicts, and time constraints. Thus, the participating organisations may have more positive experiences with hybrid work than the average, or more generally, be in a more favourable situation than others, including work climate and industrial relations.

4. Results

4.1. The institutional context of the case studies

There are marked differences in the regulation of remote work (Eurofound, 2022) and, more generally, in the telework regimes of the selected countries. The four countries selected represent different industrial models, telework regimes (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026) and working-time regimes. Moreover, they also show different gender patterns and norms. As discussed in section 2.4, those institutional partners can shape different effects on telework practices.

Finland is one of the EU27 countries with the highest share of employees working from home (see table 3). High prevalence occurs where there is negligible statutory legislation (telework is only dealt with in OSH legislation), and only collective agreements regulate telework. This country shows egalitarian gender norms and working-time flexibility policies more driven by employee needs (Chung and Tijdens, 2013; Anttila, 2015; Chung, 2022).

Austria has a higher proportion of employees working from home than the EU27 average. Statutory legislation regulating telework was introduced in

April 2021. The so-called Home Office Law introduced a statutory definition for telework, and established basic rules for the telework regime as well as other provisions related to occupational safety and health and cost compensation (Eurofound, 2022). However, there are no legal provisions regulating the right to disconnect and only limited legal provisions requiring recording of working time. Statutory legislation on telework is also combined with regulation established through multi-employer and company collective agreements (Eurofound, 2022; Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026). This regulation coexists with persistent gender inequalities regarding time use, adjustments in paid work, and part-time employment (Schmidt, 2022). Moreover, teleworkers experience comparatively higher rates of overtime (Eurofound, 2022).

Spain has a lower proportion of teleworkers than the EU27 average. Of the selected countries, statutory legislation plays a more prominent role in regulating telework in Spain. In 2021, new regulations set provisions in certain dimensions (the right to request, health and safety, cost compensation, etc.). Moreover, it adopted an approach aimed at protecting teleworkers against the negative effects of an 'always-on' job (the right to disconnect). Those regulations were complemented by legislation on the recording of working time. These provisions were developed in a country that records a higher proportion of teleworkers working during unsocial working hours or doing overtime (Eurofound, 2022). Despite this 'state-centred approach' (Molina, 2014), collective bargaining agreements regulating telework are increasing (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026).

Finally, Lithuania presents most of the features of the Eastern cluster (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026). Its proportion of teleworkers is below the EU27 average. It has specific legislation on telework but has not legally established the right to request telework or the right to disconnect. Moreover, collective bargaining plays a negligible role in the regulation of telework in a context where collective bargaining coverage is very low and trade unions are comparatively weaker.

4.2. Regulation and management of hybrid work and working-time flexibility

The hybrid work regimes in all organisations studied had similar foundations. Hybrid work is a voluntary option for workers, established through consistent rules, not ad-hoc practices, and relies on agreements with line managers. In all cases, access to hybrid work is egalitarian; the only eligibility criterion is the possibility of carrying out tasks remotely (teleworkability). While managers agreed on this approach, some employee representatives and managers identified risks related to inconsistent implementation:

> I see that many line managers don't telework. They don't do it and they don't want others to do it (…) (...) Some managers are somewhat reluctant and say, 'Now I want the meetings to be in-person.' (...) So, what options do you have for telework? (Employee representative 2, man – ES2)

Table 3. Contextual characteristics of the countries where the analysed organisations are located

	Proportion of employees working from home (2024)				
	At least 50% of workdays	Less often	Regulation of remote work	Specific regulation to protect rest time	Industrial relations model
Austria	8.7%	16.3%	Specific legislation and important role of collective bargaining	No right to disconnect; limited legal provisions requiring the recording of working time	Organised corporatism
Finland	18.6%	18.1%	General legislation and important role of collective bargaining	No right to disconnect; legal provisions requiring the recording of working time	Social partnership
Spain	6.3%	6.4%	Specific legislation and increasing role of collective bargaining	Right to disconnect; legal provisions requiring the recording of working time	State-centred governance
Lithuania	3.4%	6.0%	Specific legislation and marginal role of collective bargaining	No right to disconnect; legal provisions requiring the recording of working time	Voluntarist associational governance

Source: Eurostat, Labour Force Survey [lfsa_ehomp] (proportion of employees working from home). Data refer to the 15-54 age range; Eurofound 2022 (regulatory framework of remote work); Eurofound 2023 for right to disconnect; Eurofound, 2018b (industrial relations model).

> The guidelines are the same for everyone, but how a team manager manages their team is up to them. (Line manager, woman -FI1)

Hybrid work regimes differ in the other three dimensions identified in the literature as relevant: regulation and management of hybrid work, maximum frequency of remote work allowed, and working time flexibility. The first two dimensions allow three types of hybrid work regimes to be established. The typology outlined below was found to be consistent to some extent with variation in working time flexibility. These results are based on desk research from participants and the triangulation of interviews with employer representatives, worker representatives, and line managers.

In the rigid, office-first regime (ES1), the rules are equal for all employees and established at the highest management level. The proportion of remote work permitted is low (20%, that is, 1 day per week), and remote workdays are fixed (once established by agreement between the line manager and worker). There is almost no time flexibility regardless of where employees work (0.5h start/end).

In the structured, balanced regime (AT1, AT2, ES2, ES3, LT1), the remote work frequency is balanced (40%–60%). Hybrid work regulation and management can be defined as "structured": the hybrid work regime sets general rules and is managed in a decentralised way. Line managers have significant leeway over access to hybrid work, the amount granted, and its organisation within their teams (such as allocating remote days or establishing regular in-person meetings). Remote workdays tend to be fixed, although rules and practices differ across organisations and teams, partly depending on space constraints and line

Table 4. Types of hybrid work regimes

	Rigid, office-first (ES1)	Structured, balanced (AT1, AT2, ES2, ES3, LT1)	Flexible, unlimited (FI1, FI2, LT2, LT3)
Regulation and management of hybrid work	Rigid (equal rules)	Structured (high leeway of line managers)	Flexible (mainly relies on individual preferences)
Maximum frequency of remote work allowed	Office-first (20% of working time)	Balanced (40%-60% of working time)	Unlimited (100% of working time allowed)
Working-time flexibility	Low	High or very high	Diverse across and within organisations

Source: Authors based on the case studies.

managers' views. Working-time flexibility is high or very high across organisations. This flexibility is regarded (by management, workers' representatives, and employees) as crucial for enhancing both individual and team performance.

Finally, in the flexible, unlimited regime (FI1, FI2, LT2, LT3), there are no formal restrictions on full-time remote work. Hybrid work regulation and management are 'flexible': it is granted by default, and remote-work frequency depends on individual preferences. In two organisations (FI1, FI2), a large proportion of employees work fully (or almost fully) remotely. Line managers play a role in coordinating hybrid teams, either because of diverse individual hybrid work arrangements or the large proportion of employees working most or all of their time remotely. Formally, working-time flexibility differs across organisations, from low to very high. In practice, there are differences within organisations, depending on tasks and hybrid work arrangements.

In all organisations except those in Lithuania, the working-time regulation applies equally to all employees, regardless of where they work. In Lithuania (LT1, LT2, LT3), due to legal provisions, hybrid workers enjoy greater flexibility (employees working remotely must be reachable only by e-mail or phone within the work schedule applying to on-site work). In practice, this requirement is not enforced in any of the studied Lithuanian organisations, even where onsite schedules are rigid (LT3).

Regarding working-time flexibility, three organisations with limited pre-pandemic hybrid-work experience introduced flexitime or expanded it with the adoption of the post-pandemic hybrid regime, either 'balanced, structured' (ES2, ES3) or 'flexible, unlimited' (FI2). In organisations, flexitime was in place before hybrid work was adopted, and working-time regulation has not been altered due to workplace flexibility (AT1, AT2, FI1, LT1). The situation is similar in LT2, where schedules are rigid but there is minimal supervision of working hours, except when tracking work hours is a client's request.

Except for ES1, where working-time flexibility is minimal, all organisations face challenges in regulating and managing working-time flexibility for remote work. This concerns addressing extended working hours, which could in principle be managed through flexitime rules (balancing actual and contracted hours) or overtime rules (pre-ordered by the line manager, agreed with the

worker, and compensated with pay or time off). While several organisations preclude practising overtime remotely, additional work carried out remotely is often not recorded and therefore neither recognised nor compensated. Importantly, the regulation and management of working time and the system for recording work hours appear to be organisation-specific, with no consistent connection to working-time flexibility, hybrid work regime, or national legislation. The main finding is that most recording systems are inadequate for providing transparent and accurate data of the hours worked remotely, especially as regards additional work hours. This is especially notable in organisations that have different rules for recording onsite and remote work.

Workers' representatives were involved in the design and implementation of hybrid work in line with traditions and trends in industrial relations. In seven of the nine cases with employee representation, the hybrid work regime relies directly or indirectly on an agreement between the employer and employee representation, and hybrid work rules and practices developed with the participation of workers' representatives (AT1, AT2, FI1, FI2, ES2, ES3, LT1). In one public organisation (LT3), the works council was formally consulted but little involved in practice. In one private company (ES1), hybrid work was unilaterally adopted by the employer (in line with low works council involvement in other aspects).

In the seven organisations, social dialogue and collective bargaining have played a role in ensuring voluntary and equitable access to hybrid work by establishing clear rules and procedures. In one organisation (AT1), the works council participates in monitoring office restructuring, including the ratio between workstations and employees, which is deemed important to ensure the voluntariness and reversibility of hybrid arrangements. In another organisation (ES3), equality was substantiated by setting compensation for workers in non-managerial positions who cannot work hybrid due to the nature of their tasks. Workers' representatives have influenced the frequency of remote work allowed. Views on the optimal frequency of remote work vary across countries and organisations, but workers' representatives are aligned with management in defending a balance between on-site and remote work, even if some employees would like the option of always working remotely. In addition, issues related to employers' support for ergonomic equipment and cost compensation are gaining attention, although this has not been the focus in negotiating hybrid work agreements. The same applies for working time. In some organisations, workers' representatives have raised concerns over long hours and presenteeism when working remotely, but this has not been a central issue.

4.2. Implications for working time and work-life balance

Hybrid work is perceived to positively affect working conditions and well-being, particularly the quality of working time and work-life balance.[5] While

5. Hybrid work was also found to have a relevant (and overall positive) impact on the physical and social environment, although this is beyond the scope of this article.

this is the overall assessment of workers, employee representatives, line managers, and employer representatives, the findings show important nuances and downsides, outlined below.

Increased ability to accommodate job demands and private life

Workers in hybrid work arrangements benefit from commute-time savings, which positively affect their work-life balance. Even when remote work is limited to a fixed day per week with no working-time flexibility (ES1), the saved time is used for rest or personal issues, such as picking up children from school, medical appointments, or errands, without having to request a day off.

> These things may seem trivial, but it makes it much easier for me to have at least one day for these things that would otherwise be unattainable. (Employee 1, woman in an intermediate skilled job–ES1)

The same is true when working-time flexibility is constrained by operational reasons. For instance, employees who provide support services (FI1) are bound to regular schedules. Nevertheless, hybrid work saves commute time, which is a notable advantage.

Hybrid work regimes that encompass substantial time flexibility are highly valued. According to most workers interviewed, flexitime increases workers' ability to accommodate work and non-work domains. This results in diverse work schedules: some employees start work early, have long breaks, and finish work late, others opt to start later or 'compress' work hours as much as possible, and many vary work schedules depending on private circumstances.

> You might start work at 7.30 in the morning and finish at 3.30 in the afternoon. Or you can do one or two things over lunch and finish work at 5. In the best case scenario, there will still be enough time for leisure activities if you start early in the morning. So I think they are key advantages. And if you ask around, most employees see it that way too. (Employee representative, woman – AT2)

> I officially start working at 9 a.m. Lithuanian time, and it coincides with about 20 minutes until my child leaves for school. So, at the same time, I can work and see my child off to school. In my case, I often finish my active work around 4 p.m. when my child returns and then I work again in the evening; sometimes, I work until 9 p.m.-11 p.m., or even past midnight. (Employee 2, woman in a skilled job– LT3)

In other cases, employees adhere to regular schedules and occasionally use working-time flexibility to address unexpected individual circumstances. This pattern is predominant in the Finnish company (FI2). Once understaffing issues were resolved, the workload was stable and not excessive; most employees worked almost always remotely, and work schedules were well fitted to meet private needs.

To benefit from flexibility without a fear of stigmatisation, workers stressed the importance of a supportive organisational environment that values work-life balance. One objective of the agreement on hybrid work and working-time flexibility in a Spanish company (ES2) was to support parents with children, as stated by the employer and employee representatives (ES2). This allowed many employees, mainly women, to work full-time instead of part-time due to caring responsibilities. To a lesser extent, this outcome was found in the Austrian Ministry (AT2). This finding aligns with research based on pre-pandemic panel data, which indicates that hybrid work can reduce the gender gap in contractual hours, although gender inequalities may persist (career progression and wages) due to entrenched gendered stigma against women with caring responsibilities (Arntz et al., 2022).

Furthermore, many workers in most organisations stated that increased autonomy over when and where to work is a source of intrinsic reward that enhances mutual trust between managers and workers, fuelling their motivation to meet performance expectations.

> I believe what is most appreciated by employees is the ability to decide for themselves when, how, and why. In the past, when you needed flexibility, you had to request it explicitly, and there had to be a reason behind it. But now, I don't need to give a reason. (Employee 2, woman in a skilled job – ES2)

> I usually work from home two days a week, but I sometimes take a third day at short notice. I am on very good terms with my line manager in this respect, there is complete trust. And I believe that I give a reliable work performance in return for this trust. (Employee 1, man in a skilled job – AT2)

Challenges for managing work and life boundaries

Savings on commute time and working from home make it easier to work longer. Instances where this was needed to address rare and unexpected work issues were found in all organisations. In other cases, working longer is more related to workers' difficulties in managing work and life boundaries.

Employees of the Austrian Ministry (AT2) reported working longer hours from home "*without knowing the reason*". In the absence of work overload and time pressure, this pattern can be interpreted as a self-imposed reciprocating behaviour, where workers feel compelled to work longer in exchange for the possibility of working remotely (Menezes and Kelliher, 2017). The lack of social routines enacted in the office may also explain why some workers find it more difficult to adhere to regular work schedules and breaks when working remotely, sometimes ending up working more hours than intended. In contrast, household members and caregiving needs may help to set boundaries between work and private life.

> Maybe we should set an alarm that makes you take regular breaks. (…) I always have the feeling that I've spent the entire morning here without moving

> from my seat. In contrast, in the office, it's different. You engage in conversations with others, and you also make yourself take breaks. (Employee 4, woman in an intermediate skilled job– ES2)

> You're not aware of it, but you're at home, sitting in front of your laptop, and you've been working for over eight hours without realising it. In my case, I have a daughter who makes me stop working, depending on how my partner and I organise our schedules. Otherwise, I think I'd work longer hours. (Employee 2, woman in a skilled job – ES3)

Challenges around managing work and life boundaries are notable when hybrid work has been adopted recently and time flexibility is high (AT2, ES2, ES3, LT2). Most workers emphasised that hybrid working must be learned. Workers' autonomy over when and where they work may positively or negatively affect work-life balance depending on workers' ability to manage work boundaries healthily and productively.

> Hybrid work has the potential to have a very positive impact on work-life balance, but it's something that needs to be learned. I work with boundaries to define my working hours. At home, you might end up working an extra half-hour; it's harder to feel the boundaries. But having a hybrid work regime is a big plus for me - I can take care of my family and spend more time with my partner and child. (Employee 2, man in a skilled job – LT2)

This learning curve was already identified by Gajendran and Harrison (2007), suggesting that workers learn over time to better structure their time around work demands and private life to avoid blurring boundaries and potential conflicts, and has been further substantiated by longitudinal evidence post-pandemic (Moens et al. 2024).

In contrast, a member of the works council of a Spanish company (ES2) reported that many employees lose track of time when they work from home and end up working longer hours because they are 'passionate' about work, echoing Chech's (2021) analysis of the passion principle reinforcing a culture of overwork with a clear gender bias.

> A lot of people tell me that they start working at 8 in the morning and don't realise that it is 8 at night. This is indeed a problem… What's happened? (…) This is the type of job that you're passionate about, you keep on working and don't realise until your wife arrives home from work and asks you 'what you are doing here? (Employee representative 2, man – ES2)

Expectations of responsiveness to address work-related requests in rest time

None of the organisations studied explicitly favoured an 'always-on' work culture expecting employees to respond to work requests during rest time. Nor were there guidelines protecting workers' rest time. The Spanish organisations adhered to legal provisions on the right to disconnect. In the Austrian

bank (AT1), the workers' representative stated that flexitime rules explicitly specify that workers are not expected to work outside regular hours, generally complied with by not sending requests or messages during off-peak hours. Similarly, the workers' representative of the Finnish private company (FI2) emphasised that employment contracts clearly stipulate that no employee is expected to send or attend work-related requests outside regular hours, which is widely accepted in Finland's work culture. In Lithuania, where the right to disconnect is prominent in policy debates, the studied organisations saw no relevant issues or debates. In one of them (LT2), there was a recommendation to limit communication outside office hours.

However, the protection of workers' rest time is not always enforced. Even when an always-on work culture is not favoured by the employer, workers may practise it on their own initiative or be encouraged by other workers. Many employees reported engaging in work-related communication outside regular work hours, although none perceived a negative impact on work-life balance. Typically, this is framed as personal preferences and communication practices among co-workers. While many employees install corporate applications on personal mobile devices, many participate in informal chat groups with colleagues, blurring boundaries between personal and work matters.

> When using tools like MS Teams or corporate email, the recipient receives the message as soon as they connect, and if they choose to connect at inconvenient times, that's their problem. The issue is always with WhatsApp groups. When you use WhatsApp on a private device, it's difficult to set boundaries, isn't it? (Employee representative, woman – ES3).

Work pressure

In some organisations (ES2, ES3), hybrid work has been adopted alongside a substantial increase in working-time flexibility. In both cases, workload tends to be irregular, and employees are expected to work extra hours when needed and compensate with time off in less busy periods. Working from home eases longer work during workload peaks, even with caring responsibilities present.

> I tend to work longer hours at home when deadlines are very tight. At the office I could stay until 7.30 p.m., but then I think, 'Oh dear, that's quite late and there's no one else around'. However, at home, it's already 9 p.m., I have dinner, and I continue working until 11 p.m. This is a common issue for those who work in grant management when deadlines are tight. (Employee 2, woman in a skilled job– ES3)

However, workers experience a lack of clarity in flexitime rules as regards balancing actual and contractual hours when working remotely, while systems for recording hours do not contribute to transparency. In ES3, the system automatically records 7.5 hours on remote days. In ES2, the line manager said that she and her team see recording as a "mere legal requirement that must be

fulfilled". Therefore, in both organisations, balancing hours relies on informal agreement with the line manager. Interviewed line managers were aware of workload peaks and supportive of balancing hours, but reported that this was not possible because workload is "on the edge" and understaffing issues persist. Workers reported the same.

More issues of sustained excessive workload and additional work hours were identified in other organisations (AT1, FI1) by workers' representatives and employees and corroborated by the public institution representative (FI1). The Finnish public institution (FI1) illustrates how issues can be tackled. The basis is a system where working time is recorded precisely, line managers monitor it regularly, and imbalances are addressed through discussion with employees. According to the management representative, excess workload was due to "big projects" launched by the institution before the pandemic. The workers' representative also linked longer work hours to full-time home working during the pandemic. When a sustained, widespread excess of work hours was identified, the institution launched campaigns to raise awareness of balancing actual and contractual work hours. These two-year campaigns had a positive effect according to management and workers' representatives. Employees' recorded work hours declined progressively until they aligned with contractual hours. In the focus group, employees noted that working time had evened out or remained stable.

The Austrian bank (AT1) shows an opposite approach to overwork. While workload has increased since the pandemic, employees work additional hours at home. This pattern emerged during the pandemic and continues, according to workers' representatives. An employee stated:

> What has increased, especially since the pandemic, is the work pressure. That doesn't mean that bosses have become more unpleasant. But in contrast to other industries, the workload has increased for us during and since the pandemic. After all, banking business didn't stop during the pandemic, but rather became more and more complex ... And we are really feeling the effects of this. (Employee 1, woman in a skilled job – AT1)

In this organisation, overtime must be pre-ordered and pre-approved by the line manager, and work outside regular hours or on weekends is not covered by flexitime. Therefore, additional hours worked at home are not recorded, remain invisible to the company, and are not compensated. The workers' representative highlighted that employees work at home because it remains unnoticed. In the office, there is a "more immediate expectation from colleagues and superiors that the laptop is closed and the office left at the end of official working hours". Thus, organisational culture does not reward longer work, but it is required, according to workers' representatives. This illustrates how remote work anytime may conceal excessive workload and understaffing, resulting in under-reported, non-compensated additional hours. Workers' representatives related overwork to widespread presenteeism (working while sick) and increased long-term sick leaves due to stress.

5. Comparative analysis of the ten case studies

The ten case studies show that hybrid work has ambivalent effects on working time and work-life balance. While hybrid work reduces commute time and increases employees' autonomy, it also increases overtime. Our exploratory analysis shows that these outcomes are shaped by the interaction between company management practices, national industrial relations contexts, and gender and occupational inequalities.

5.1. Company management practices

Company management practices are the most immediate factor shaping the relationship between hybrid work and working time. The cases identify three broad regimes: rigid office-first (ES1), structured and balanced (AT1, AT2, ES2, ES3 and LT1), and flexible and unlimited (FI1, FI2, LT2 and LT3).

ES1 (rigid office-first) demonstrates that even limited hybrid work can improve work–life balance through commute-time savings, despite minimal working-time flexibility. In contrast, the structured and unlimited regimes provide greater autonomy, but also create greater challenges in managing working-time boundaries. In these last regimes, employees generally value autonomy over when and where to work, and perceive it as enhancing motivation and mutual trust. However, trust can also generate implicit expectations of reciprocity. For instance, in AT2, employees reported working longer hours at home without clearly knowing why, suggesting that flexibility may encourage self-imposed additional effort.

Our results show, in line with previous studies revised (Ojala et al., 2014, Abendroth and Schwarz, 2023, Yang et al., 2023; Van Zoonen et al., 2021; Howcroft et al., 2025) that workload and irregular distribution of working time is a particularly important mediating factor. In FI2, manageable and predictable workloads allowed flexibility to support work–life balance. In contrast, in ES2 and ES3, irregular workloads and deadlines encouraged employees to work longer at home and compensate for these hours during less busy periods. In AT1, sustained workload increase and insufficient staffing resulted in additional work that remained largely unrecorded.

Finally, FI1 demonstrates how accurate recording, monitoring and management intervention can reduce excessive working hours.

5.2. Institutional context

The four countries analysed represent different telework and working-time regimes (Sanz de Miguel et al., 2026: Anttila et al., 2015). Although the cases do not show a direct and straightforward relationship between national institutional regimes and working-time outcomes in the context of hybrid work, the findings indicate that national institutions can indeed mediate managerial practices producing different effects on working time and work-life balance.

The Finnish cases illustrate this point. In FI2, employee-oriented flexibility coexists with stable workloads and positive work–life balance. And FI1 shows that excessive working hours were addressed in a company with strong trade union presence through precise recording, regular monitoring and awareness campaigns, resulting in a progressive reduction of recorded hours. These cases suggest that managerial practices supported by trade union representative structures and past experience on flexibility policies can favour sustainable working time even where statutory telework regulation is limited.

The Austrian company cases show, in contrast to the Finish cases, that the mere presence of a work council does not guarantee proper managerial practices or prevent negative impacts of hybrid work in the absence of formal rights. In AT1, increased workload and insufficient staffing led employees to perform additional work at home. Because overtime required prior approval and remote work was not adequately recorded, these hours often remained invisible and uncompensated.

Spanish cases reveal the limitations of formal regulation to prevent work intensification and overtime in a context where informal and individual arrangements on hybrid work implementation prevail. In ES2 and ES3, statutory protection coexisted with inadequate recording systems and informal arrangements for balancing actual and contractual hours.

The Lithuanian cases further illustrate the implications of informal regulation. In LT2, formal working schedules were relatively rigid, but supervision of working hours was limited. In LT3, flexible remote work enabled employees to combine work with caring responsibilities, but also contributed to fragmented working days extending into the evening.

Overall, national institutions influence the resources available for regulating hybrid work, but organisational implementation is decisive. Collective representation played an important role in establishing voluntary and equitable access to hybrid work in most organisations. However, working-time issues were generally less central to collective agreements than access to remote work, suggesting that the temporal consequences of hybrid work remain insufficiently regulated.

5.3. Gender and occupational inequalities

Finally, findings gathered through our exploratory approach were only partially consistent with previous research findings. Our research shows, in line with previous studies discussed in section 2.3, that hybrid work can support gender equality by making full-time employment more compatible with caring responsibilities (Chung and van der Horst, 2018; Fuller and Hirst, 2018; Arntz et al. 2022; Harrington and Kahn, 2025). This is particularly evident in ES2, where the hybrid-work agreement was designed partly to support parents with young children. According to the interviews, flexibility enabled a substantial number of employees, mainly women, to work full-time rather than reducing their contractual hours because of caring responsibilities. A similar, although less pronounced, outcome was observed in AT2. These findings suggest that

hybrid work can reduce inequalities in contractual working time by allowing employees to accommodate family responsibilities without necessarily reducing their working hours. However, the evidence also indicates that other gender inequalities, including career progression, wages and gendered stigma, may persist, which could not be properly gathered because of the limitation of our data. Moreover, flexibility can also produce contradictory outcomes. In ES3, one employee explained that caring responsibilities helped establish boundaries by making her stop working when her daughter returned home. Without this external constraint, she believed that she would work longer hours. Conversely, the LT3 case illustrates how caring responsibilities can lead to a fragmented working day, combining work before and after childcare activities and extending into the evening.

The occupational dimension is equally important. Access to hybrid work was formally based on teleworkability rather than occupational status. Nevertheless, teleworkability is itself occupationally structured (Sostero et al., 2023): administrative, professional and knowledge-intensive jobs are more likely to be performed remotely than jobs requiring physical presence. ES3 addressed this inequality by compensating non-managerial workers whose tasks prevented them from working hybrid. The cases therefore suggest that hybrid work can improve equality of access to flexibility, but does not eliminate occupational inequalities. Its benefits depend on whether workers can use flexibility to reduce time pressure or are instead required to accommodate additional work around their private responsibilities.

6. Conclusions

The comparative evidence shows that hybrid work generally improves work-life balance through commute-time savings, greater autonomy and enhanced capacity to accommodate private responsibilities. However, it does not necessarily reduce working hours. Instead, it can facilitate longer, fragmented and less visible working time, particularly where workloads are high, recording systems are inadequate and responsibility for managing boundaries is transferred to employees.

Our results indicate that the effects of hybrid work are mediated by the interaction of institutional context, gender and occupational inequalities, and management practices. National regulation and collective representation provide important frameworks, but organisational implementation determines whether flexibility becomes a resource for work-life balance or a mechanism for extending working time.

Funding

This article was developed in the framework of the project “Hybrid workplaces in the EU: provision of case studies from the public and private sectors”, financed by Eurofound (contract number 23-3030-07).

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