

Technical note

► **Labour Overview Series
Latin America and the Caribbean 2021**

Challenges and opportunities of teleworking in Latin America and the Caribbean

Executive Summary

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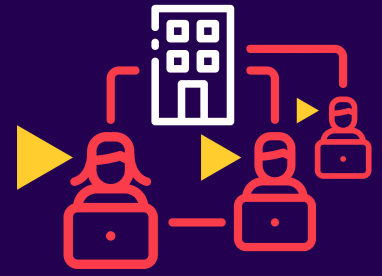
Summary

Although teleworking is not a new phenomenon, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated measures implemented to reduce infections, this work arrangement increased significantly in the region. Teleworking facilitated the continuity of certain economic activities and, with it, of the employment relationship, which was particularly important considering the devastating impact of the crisis on the region's labour markets. The transition from face-to-face work to teleworking, however, was not without challenges for both workers and the enterprises that had to implement it quickly. Not all workers were able to engage in telework. In the exceptional context imposed by the pandemic, formal workers, those who were more highly educated and those who worked in professional, technical and administrative occupations had the greatest possibilities for continuing their work from home. This work arrangement poses challenges that must be addressed to ensure that it makes a positive contribution to the world of work, both for enterprises and workers.

* Sol Catania contributed to processing information for this report. Fabio Bertranou, Humberto Villasmil, Andrés Marinakis, Janine Berg, Marcela Cabezas and Sergei Soares made valuable comments. The section referring to the Caribbean was prepared by Diego Rei, Ariel Pino and Shingo Miyake of the ILO Office for the Caribbean.

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- ▶ Working from home is not a new phenomenon. However, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown measures implemented to address the health emergency, this work arrangement increased significantly in Latin America and the Caribbean, as it did in the rest of the world.
- ▶ Most activities that began to be carried out at home rely on information and communication technologies (ICTs), which led to a significant increase in teleworking.
- ▶ In the countries of the region included in this study, between 20 and 30 per cent of employees who were working did so from home during the lockdown period. In 2019, that figure was less than three per cent.
- ▶ An estimated 23 million people teleworked in the region during the second quarter of 2020.
- ▶ Thus, remote work facilitated the continuity of certain economic activities and the employment relationship. This was particularly important considering the devastating impact of the crisis on the region's labour markets, which was reflected in significant job losses and reduced working hours.
- ▶ Although this phenomenon is not new, several key dimensions differentiate the nature of work from home before and during the lockdown and restricted-mobility measures.
- ▶ Before the pandemic, workers combined working from home with working on the employer's premises. During the lockdown, however, it became the exclusive mode of work in many cases. Previously, remote work had usually been a planned, voluntary option for both parties. With the pandemic, however, this work arrangement became one of the few alternatives to continue economic activity and employment in exceptional circumstances.
- ▶ While working from home was previously a work arrangement that was expected to contribute to improving the work-life balance, during the health crisis, the difficulties in carrying out work from home increased owing to the closure of schools and care facilities. This particularly affected women, since household responsibilities continue to fall largely on them.
- ▶ Not surprisingly, the possibility of working from home depends -among other factors- on the type and nature of the occupation and job duties, as well as on effective access to the technologies necessary to perform work remotely.
- ▶ Formal employees, adult employees, more highly educated employees and those employed in professional, technical, managerial and administrative occupations made more intensive use of this work arrangement. Employed persons who were able to continue with their activities from home had higher average earnings prior to the pandemic than other workers.



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- ▶ The opposite trend is observed among informal, own-account and youth workers, and those with less education and lower incomes. This group experienced the most job losses and reduction in hours worked, especially during the first half of 2020.
- ▶ In a region characterized by labour structures with low overall use of ICTs and high technology gaps, it was not surprising that the increase in the incidence of working from home and especially telework varied among the different groups of workers.
- ▶ This is an “ongoing process” where the incidence and characteristics of this form of work differ not only from those observed prior to the pandemic but will also most likely differ from the post-pandemic scenario.
- ▶ The region has reported progress in the regulation of teleworking. However, the unprecedented increase in this type of work revealed multiple challenges that must be addressed to ensure that home-based workers do not lose the rights enjoyed by employees who work on the employer’s premises.
- ▶ From the perspective of enterprises, teleworking also poses challenges to guaranteeing that operations will continue and that the productivity levels required for their survival will be maintained.
- ▶ It is possible to identify good practices that protect the rights, health and well-being of workers, that create an organizational culture that efficiently takes advantage of the possibilities offered by new technologies, and that lead to productivity gains and efficient results according to the enterprise’s objectives and possibilities.
- ▶ The Resolution concerning a global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, adopted by the International Labour Conference No. 109 in June 2021, urges, among other initiatives, “to introduce, utilize and adapt teleworking and other new work arrangements so as to retain jobs and expand decent work opportunities through, among other means, regulation, social dialogue, collective bargaining, workplace cooperation and efforts to reduce disparities in digital access, respecting international labour standards and privacy and promoting data protection and work-life balance.”



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► **Box 1. Working from home in the Caribbean¹**

Some Caribbean countries have labour force surveys that address the issue of working from home. Grenada, for example, introduced a module related to COVID-19 beginning in the second quarter of 2020. This module includes special questions about the default and current place of work. Questions include "Which of the following best describes the usual place of work of your job or main business?" and "During the reference week, in which of these places did you work the most hours?" The home is one of the alternatives in both cases. In 2021, the Belize survey added the question "Which of the following best describes the current place of work in your main job?" and "Are you working from home due to COVID-19 or is this your usual place of work?"

Like in Latin American countries, the regulation of telework in the Caribbean has become an increasingly relevant issue. During the pandemic, several countries encouraged the use of this work arrangement while advancing its regulation. For example, in Barbados and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, governments allowed teleworking in the public sector, which was subsequently replicated in the private sector. In the Bahamas, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, enterprises are encouraged and, in some cases, required to continue to operate with employees who work from home. Public service employees were also ordered to work from home unless designated as essential workers.

In Curaçao, Jamaica, Montserrat, Sint Maarten, Turks and Caicos Islands, workers and employers were encouraged to make use of flexible work arrangements. Additionally, in some Caribbean countries, the issue of remote work and telework has been addressed through guidelines related to occupational safety and health rather than through specific legislation or regulation. This is the case, for example, of Trinidad and Tobago, where a guide was published on how to work from home while maintaining healthy and safe conditions. In other countries, protocols or guidelines have been developed to establish basic criteria and requirements to ensure a productive, safe organization of work from home. An example of this is the public sector in Jamaica.

Despite advances in telework regulations, challenges remain. In tripartite consultations during the past year and a half, constituents most often mentioned the challenges of dealing with working hours, overtime pay, reimbursement of expenses, provision of equipment, health and safety requirements, as well as data protection and security.

Finally, several Caribbean countries established special arrangements to encourage foreign workers to settle in their countries to telework. While the practice has had varying degrees of success depending on the country, it may raise legal issues in terms of worker protection and legislative jurisdiction.

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¹ Diego Rei, Ariel Pino and Shingo Miyake of the ILO Office for the Caribbean prepared this box.