



Revista Brasileira de Saúde Ocupacional

ISSN: 0303-7657

ISSN: 2317-6369

Fundação Jorge Duprat Figueiredo de Segurança e
Medicina do Trabalho - FUNDACENTRO

Bridi, Maria Aparecida; Tropia, Patricia Vieira; Vazquez, Bárbara Vallejos
Teletrabalho e saúde no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19
Revista Brasileira de Saúde Ocupacional, vol. 49, edcinq3, 2024
Fundação Jorge Duprat Figueiredo de Segurança e Medicina do Trabalho - FUNDACENTRO

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2317-6369/34122pt2024v49edcinq3>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=100577588006>

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How to cite (Vancouver):

Bridi MA, Tropa PV, Vazquez BV.
Telework and health in the context
of the COVID-19 pandemic.
Rev bras saúde ocup [Internet].
2024;49:edcinq3. Available from:
<https://doi.org/10.1590/2317-6369/34122en2024v49edcinq3>

Telework and health in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

Teletrabalho e saúde no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19

Abstract

Introduction: with the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing policy, almost 9 million workers had their professional activities transferred to the home environment, called “remote work,” “home office,” or “telework.” This context worked as a laboratory in which companies could experiment with teleworking. **Objective:** to analyze the unprecedented telework growth and the teleworkers' profile, highlighting the impacts and consequences for the workers' health. **Methods:** analysis of relevant bibliography, exploration of secondary data from empirical research on objective and subjective teleworking conditions, publications in the media about telework in the pandemic and post-pandemic context, and analysis of remote work ads. **Results:** due to the way remote work occurred during the pandemic, in addition to its consequences for health, and living and working conditions, new challenges were raised for the working class. Among them: how to ensure adequate environmental and ergonomic working conditions and how to guarantee the limit of working hours, and the delimitation of working time, in view of the tendency for telework to be maintained in the post-pandemic period. **Conclusion:** the analysis revealed impacts on workers' health that bring new challenges to the working class. Such impacts, among other reasons, are due to extended working hours, ergonomic conditions at home, and pressure to meet goals.

Keywords: COVID-19; telework; health; regulation; occupational health.

Resumo

Introdução: com a pandemia de COVID-19 e a política de distanciamento social, quase 9 milhões de trabalhadores tiveram suas atividades profissionais transferidas para o ambiente doméstico. Esse contexto funcionou como um laboratório no qual as empresas puderam experimentar a modalidade do teletrabalho. **Objetivo:** analisar o crescimento do teletrabalho e o perfil dos teletrabalhadores, destacando impactos e consequências para saúde dos profissionais. **Métodos:** análise de bibliografia pertinente, exploração de dados secundários de pesquisas sobre condições objetivas e subjetivas do teletrabalho, publicações sobre o teletrabalho no contexto da pandemia e pós-pandemia, análise de anúncios de trabalho remoto. **Resultados:** em razão da forma como ocorreu durante a pandemia, o trabalho remoto, além das consequências para saúde e condições de vida e trabalho, acarretou novos desafios para a classe trabalhadora. Entre eles, destacam-se: como assegurar condições ambientais e ergonômicas adequadas ao trabalho e como garantir o limite de jornada, a delimitação do tempo de trabalho, tendo em vista a tendência de sua manutenção para o período pós-pandemia. **Conclusão:** a análise revelou impactos sobre a saúde dos trabalhadores, com novos desafios para a classe trabalhadora. Tais impactos, entre outras razões, se devem a jornadas ampliadas, condições ergonômicas no domicílio e pressões para cumprimento de metas.

Palavras-chave: COVID-19; teletrabalho; saúde; regulação; saúde do trabalhador.



Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a new milestone for labor studies in 2020. The uncertainties and challenges of dealing with a previously unknown disease led the World Health Organization (WHO) to recommend immediate social isolation as a measure to contain transmission, impacting the demand for goods and services and resulting in economic contraction. The pandemic compelled “the end of large gatherings and the closure of workplaces”¹ (p. 2) as a means of contagion control². This sanitary situation was further exacerbated depending on the varied responses of governments, ranging from support and compliance to denial.

Before the pandemic, only a portion of the working class in the Western world occasionally worked from home. From 2020 onward, there was a significant increase in the occurrence of telecommuting. In countries with a tradition of this modality, such as Finland (where approximately 60% of workers began working from home), Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark (which saw growth of over 50%), Ireland, Austria, Italy, and Sweden (around 40%)¹, the occurrence of telecommuting expanded.

It is important to note that the possibility of telecommuting is related to the productive structure of countries; not all activities can be transferred to the domestic environment. This includes segments of heavy manufacturing, agriculture, as well as security, transportation, and healthcare services, for example.

In Brazil, the pandemic deepened a crisis and worsened the job market situation stemming from the rupture in 2016, initiated by the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and the dismantling of economic policies, the Growth Acceleration Programs (PAC I and PAC II), and crises in sectors such as construction and shipbuilding, among others³.

The health crisis affected the entire working class, albeit in different ways: job losses in some sectors, especially in the service, tourism, and food sectors; intensified work for those engaged in activities considered essential and for those subjected to government provisional measures, which allowed salary reductions, extended work hours, cost-sharing, among other things. As a result, nearly nine million workers had their professional activities shifted to the home environment, in what is referred to as “remote work,” “home office,” or “telework.” This modality, which was already growing in the period leading up to the pandemic, as indicated by several studies on the subject⁴⁻⁶, inaugurated a new milestone in labor with COVID-19.

Telework is the concept referred to by the International Labor Organization (ILO), labor laws in other countries, and the Brazilian Labor Code (*Consolidação das Leis de Trabalho* – CLT) for modes of work performed at home or outside the employer’s physical workspace utilizing informational equipment, computers, cameras, web, telephones, and software. The complexity lies in the various criteria that define telecommuting, which can encompass the organization and location of work (whether it is fixed or mobile, at home, or in other spaces, mobile or not, for example), the frequency of remote work (every day, a few days a week, a few days a month, or a few months a year), the type of employment contract (full-time, part-time, formal, whether it is public or private, etc.), and the technology employed.

Methods

Through an analysis of the relevant literature, the examination of secondary data from empirical research on the objective and subjective conditions of telework, publications in the media about telework in the context of the pandemic and post-pandemic, and an analysis of remote job postings, this essay aims to investigate the recent expansion of telework in Brazil. It specifically focuses on the profile of workers employed in this mode and seeks to map the new working conditions it engenders, with a particular emphasis on those related to the health of the workers.

The evolution of telework in Brazil, worker profiles, and regulation: a new marker of inequality?

In Brazil, telework has seen significant growth, especially since its regulation, the Labor Reform Law no. 13,467/2017⁷, introduced a specific chapter to address this mode of work, albeit without guarantees of basic rights. One critical point of the law is the absence of timekeeping control for teleworkers.

Data from the Continuous National Household Sample Survey (PNAD Contínua) reveals that, in 2012, there were 2.7 million people working remotely in Brazil. This number grew, although slowly up to 2016, with an increase of only 3.7% during that period. In 2017, the year of the Labor Reform, remote work increased by 16.2%. The notable growth in remote work continued in the following years, with an increase of 21.1% in 2018 and 19.4% in 2019. By the end of 2019, there were 4.6 million workers performing their tasks remotely in Brazil⁸.

In the federal public service, in the early 2010s, some sectors, such as the Federal Revenue Service and the Federal Justice, introduced telework in an experimental or pilot form.

In 2012, via Ordinance 947/2012⁹, the Brazilian Federal Revenue Service established, as a pilot project, the performance of activities, tasks, and responsibilities “outside the physical facilities of the administrative units of the Brazilian Federal Revenue Service (RFB) in telework mode.” Only certain areas were authorized to participate in the project, and telework was optional for tax auditors, subject to meeting predefined goals. The pilot project initially stipulated an experimental period of up to 18 months. The Ordinance also stated that the performance goals for teleworking employees should be at least 15% higher than those set for employees performing the same activities within the revenue service premises. As a result, tax auditors were initially very reluctant to embrace the project. In a survey conducted with the category, Trópia and Gomes¹⁰ identified that, among the surveyed tax auditors (N=1,511), only 3.3% were engaged in telework.

In 2015, however, 16 out of 65 tax auditors in telework at the Brazilian Federal Revenue Service faced the imminent prospect of being excluded from the pilot project because they had not achieved the goals as they had participated in a strike against the approval of amendments 40 and 41 to Provisional Measure (MP) 660/14¹¹, which shared exclusive responsibilities of the class with a junior position (tax analyst). This episode certainly contributed to reinforcing the category’s reluctance regarding telework. However, it was during the pandemic that almost the entire category began teleworking and, through the action of the National Union of Tax Auditors (*Sindifisco Nacional*), succeeded in having the requirement to achieve 15% higher productivity goals removed.

In the Federal Justice, in 2012, telework was introduced experimentally within the scope of the Labor Court through Resolution 109/2012¹² from the Higher Labor Court (*Conselho Superior da Justiça do Trabalho* – CSJT). Participation was optional and did not constitute a right or duty for the employee. Those who chose to participate in telework had to show an increase in productivity, determined and assessed by the head of the unit, never lower than 15%. This experience led to the regulation of telework by the judiciary in 2016 with Resolution 227¹³. This resolution, in addition to defining goals, also stated that the physical and technological infrastructure required for telework would be the responsibility of the employee. In 2018, the Superior Labor Court (*Tribunal Superior do Trabalho* – TST) regulated the system through Administrative Resolution 1970/2018¹⁴. Participation was voluntary and authorized by superiors. Daily, weekly, or monthly goals had to be stipulated in an individualized work plan for each employee, included in the terms of participation, and established by unit managers. At the time, the goals were required to be 15% higher than those set for employees performing the same activities within the TST premises. Currently, the goals are even higher.

Representative labor organizations in the judiciary sector expanded the debate on telework within the category starting in 2018, warning that the presented proposals would not only generate health problems for workers but also concretely result in work precarization and a reduction in the value paid per hour worked should the proposal of superior goals for teleworkers persist¹⁵.

Indeed, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, a large-scale telework experiment began in the country. Due to the need for social distancing, telework was recommended as one of the discretionary measures

that companies could adopt. This decision was supported by Provisional Measure (MP) 927/2020¹⁶, which authorized, among other things, the advance of vacations, suspension of employment contracts, and the adoption of telework without any negotiations with the worker's representative entities⁷.

With the new context and the support provided by the new MP 927/2020, telework proliferated. According to data from IBGE PNAD-COVID-19¹⁷, it reached 8.9 million workers in June 2020, decreasing to 7.9 million people by the end of September 2020. Based on data from IBGE PNAD-COVID-19, IPEA¹⁸ showed that the majority of teleworkers were women (56.1%), white individuals (65.6%), and those with completed higher education (74.6%). The economic sectors where telework was more significant included education (51%), finance (38.8%), and communication (34.7%).

Despite a slight reduction in the number of teleworkers with the weakening of social distancing measures, the PNAD-COVID19 published by IBGE showed that there were 6.2 million workers working from home in March 2022.

This reality is also reflected in the increase in collective negotiations on the subject. A survey conducted by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socio-Economic Studies (Dieese)¹⁹ revealed that during the pandemic, in 2020, 13.7% of the registered collective labor agreements discussed telework. The topic appeared in 2,738 collective agreements that year, compared to only 284 in 2019.

The increase in the number of teleworkers generated pressure for regulation. Telework became a more prominent issue in labor court discussions, and numerous bills were introduced in the National Congress. In an examination of TST decisions, 90 appeals related to telework were found between 2020 and 2021, representing an 850% increase compared to the period from 2019 to 2020. These appeals generally concerned the right to telework, payment of overtime, and recognition of employment relationships¹⁵.

As for legislative proposals, Soares²⁰ identified the existence of 27 bills related to telework up to early 2021. In several of them, telework was also referred to as “remote work,” “distance work,” or “home office.” Among these bills, four were presented before the Labor Reform of 2017, six were introduced between the Reform and the pandemic, and 17 were introduced after the pandemic. They generally addressed topics such as regulating working hours, funding for home office infrastructure, the right to disconnect, or employer liability for workplace accidents¹⁵.

In August 2022, MP 1.108²¹ was finally approved, despite the extensive experience and discussion regarding telework regulation that revealed the flaws in the Brazilian Labor Reform and the chapter on this new mode of work. Unable to address the central conflict resolution needs in telework, such as the tendency to overwork, health issues, increased labor costs assumed by the worker, among others, MP 1.108 reaffirmed employer liberties, creating the possibility of task-based or production-based hiring and extending telework to interns and apprentices. Regarding working hours, the CLT now includes the following provision: “An individual agreement may establish working hours and means of communication between the employee and employer provided that legal breaks are guaranteed”¹⁶ (Article 75B § 9º). §5 also states that the use of work equipment (computers, chairs, cell phones, etc.) outside working hours, in general, does not constitute working time or on-call time.

The anticipated impacts on workers' health are “compensated” with mere guidance from the employer on precautions to avoid illness and workplace accidents. In any case, the provision requiring the employee to sign a responsibility agreement in which they commit to following the employer's instructions was maintained, a mechanism that appears to suggest the employee's responsibility for their own health at work.

In Brazil, telework has become a new marker of inequalities of various kinds related to occupations that can be performed remotely as well as the profile of workers who engaged in this mode of work, mostly highly educated, white, stable, and with more time within the company, concentrated in the Southeast region. Notably, it has had a greater impact on women due to the burden of reproductive and productive work, reflecting the continued gender division of labor.

Although not an element capable of explaining the speed and extent of telework proliferation, the technological development that enables it is a key factor. By isolating the technological aspect, measures of telework potential can be obtained, estimating the amount of work that could be performed remotely in a specific country or region. Góes et al.¹⁸ updated previous work on the potential for telework as previously reported in the Economic Applied Research Institute (IPEA) Economic Bulletin. They concluded that, in 2021, approximately 20.5 million people could engage in telework in Brazil, which would represent 24.1% of the total employed population in the analyzed period (1st quarter 2021 – PNAD-IBGE)¹⁷. In addition to this significant finding, the authors concluded that the income of these workers represents about 40% of the total income mass. These are, therefore, occupations with above-average earnings compared to the national average. When analyzing the profile of potential teleworkers in Brazil, a predominance of women is evident, representing 58.3% of the total; white individuals (60%); and individuals with at least a completed higher education (62.6%).

However, the effective implementation of telework on a large scale is also conditioned by corporate flexibility strategies, institutional factors, and existing resistance from social actors (whether employers or workers). In general, telework proliferates in times of increased flexibility of labor relations and contractual rules, including working hours and remuneration, emerging as one of the new mechanisms contributing to the dissolution of traditional salaried employment.

Telework and its impact on worker health

Studies on telework and health generally identify a recurring causal relationship: teleworkers tend to work longer hours than when in company facilities. One hypothesis is that time previously spent on commuting is now dedicated to work tasks. Another hypothesis is that teleworkers without a secluded workspace or who are frequently interrupted need to extend their work hours beyond “business hours.” Besides extending actual working hours, there is also greater pressure to meet goals and, above all, greater difficulty separating working time from non-working time or even distinguishing the workspace from the non-working space to the extent that the lack of disconnection is already considered one of the main risks of telework. As Huws²² indicates, the boundaries between work and private life become confusingly intertwined. The use of information and communication technology (ICT) tools “intensifies the constant connection of the worker to work since work not only invades their home but also accompanies them throughout the day, wherever they are”²² (p. 11) as work can be carried out from anywhere.

Since the 1990s, the ILO had pointed out that telework also resulted in an increase in work during the nighttime and on weekends. In this regard, telework not only invades the home, but also intrudes on sleep, rest, leisure, and family relationships of teleworkers. The lack of boundaries between work, leisure hours, and the constant interruptions by family members constitute potential sources of conflicts¹³. As highlighted by Vebber and Borges²³, in some cases, teleworkers have to share electronic devices with family members who are also working from home or attending remote classes.

The literature reports that during the pandemic, telework had a significant impact on the mental health of workers. This is due not only to the suffering caused by social isolation but also to the difficulties of adapting to the new work routine and balancing it with family life and the “physical and technological spaces offered by their homes, often having to restructure their home spaces to adapt them for remote work”²⁴ (p. 113). The fact that work is conducted through ICTs makes it challenging to separate work from leisure, and supervisors not only expect but often act as if employees were available for work at any time of the day or night²⁵.

The impact on mental health was already reported even before the lockdown. Fonseca and Pérez-Nebra²⁶ conducted one of the initial studies on the relation between telework and mental health. The research carried out by the authors — with a sample of 90 teleworking individuals, mostly men aged from 30 to 39 years, with 40% having postgraduate degrees — also identified a high number of individuals dedicating more than 40 hours per week to their activities (33.4% of participants). The increased pressure to meeting goals and working hours were perceived as an overload by the respondents. The authors concluded that telework is a potential source of psychological distress and identified that, in terms of mental health, the most prevalent symptoms were manic. However, the results obtained “from the mania scale” revealed symptoms situated below the midpoint. So, “although more manic, teleworkers do

not present concerning levels of psychopathologies, contrary to what Kitagawa²⁷ found, who found a predominance of obsessive symptoms among tax auditors.” Meanwhile, Codo²⁸ “identified the empty work syndrome among bank employees, paranoia among typists, hysteria among daycare workers, and burnout among educators”²⁸ (p. 314).

In the context of the pandemic, telework led to an accumulation of tasks both domestic and professional, resulting in unprecedented physical and psychological fatigue²⁰. In this context, in which workers experienced telework for the first time without prior preparation and training, many faced feelings of distress, anxiety, and insecurity. There are indications of psychological impacts, such as fear, stress, suffering, and having to deal with death²⁹.

Antunes and Fischer³⁰ identify that tele-pressure resulting from telework tends to lead to professional isolation and also affects friendships, social interactions, and individualization. Among the consequences are anxiety, decreased sharing of actions, communication difficulties, recognition issues, and reduced feedback.

Rodrigues et al.³¹ report that when working from home, employees need to adapt to the way they perform their tasks and their working hours. Self-imposed pressure regarding tasks tends to intensify work, leading to an increase in daily working hours. In practice, teleworkers have greater levels of responsibility due to growing pressure to meet goals and expected results, especially in a context of a health crisis combined with an economic recession. Teleworkers frequently report that they cannot complete all tasks within an 8-hour workday and often extend it to 10 or 11 hours daily, sometimes even on Saturdays and Sundays to meet demands. It is worth mentioning that the research conducted by ABET³² reveals that 50.3% of respondents had their work hours controlled by the company, and the vast majority (57.8%) had productivity goals to meet. Additionally, among those with productivity goals, 48% reported an increase in these goals with telework.

Vepper and Borges²³ state that telework can cause mental health damage, including changes in sleep and mood caused by interpersonal conflicts, anxiety disorders, depression, and more. According to Chapadeiro et al.³³, teleworkers feel more tired, overwhelmed, exhausted, and frustrated since they cannot disconnect from work. They work between 1 to 4 additional hours in their daily workday; yet they still feel frustrated because they cannot disconnect from work. Companies demand productivity as if the pandemic situation were normal. Social isolation increases distress and feelings of guilt and worsens the effects of loneliness. There is not enough interactivity and sociability through screens alone. Mental health deteriorates due to increased workload, loneliness, and exhaustion (also stemming from screen-related factors such as the blue light and platform fatigue).

Pre-existing mental disorders have increased during the pandemic because “extreme stressors accompanied by generalized concerns [...] can induce or intensify psychiatric illnesses”³⁴ (p. 16). Andrade³⁴ researched female salaried workers in the public service of Poços de Caldas, Minas Gerais, who were engaged in educational telework from March to August 2021. Even before the pandemic, the adoption of educational innovations generated uncertainties and led many educators to technostress, such as anxiety, depression, and other emotional dysregulation factors. Andrade states that learning to manage one’s own time in a stressful context—brought about by confinement and the distance from friends and family—and adapting quickly to remote work resulted in emotional disturbances. In this sense, the pandemic exacerbates the teacher’s discomfort²⁵ through a range of physical and psychological manifestations, including stress, anxiety, depression, and fatigue.

During the pandemic, there were numerous factors that contributed to a negative evaluation of telework. Telework replaced the relief from commuting stress—as reported in surveys—with other sources of stress resulting from the accumulation of tasks and goals, as well as difficulties with previously unfamiliar tools and technological procedures, disconnection, and balancing household activities and work, resulting in alarming physical and psychological fatigue^{13,27}. The relationship with the family itself is ambiguous because it is a source of both closeness and increased tension, worry, and conflict.

In the research conducted by ABET³², 6% of respondents reported incidents of illness and harassment. When asked to express their experiences with telework freely, many testimonials revealed complaints related to work overload, increased stress, harassment, and compromised eating habits. Work is considered exhausting, and there is often a sense of physical and mental burnout. Problems with concentration, anxiety, and depression are reported: “There are months when anxiety crosses the limits because I don’t know if I will get paid, if I will

continue working, all of this messes with your psyche. Having sick family members also contributes to increased stress and discouragement”³².

Episodes of mood swings and shifts between sadness and psychological well-being due to social isolation were reported. Some had to take leaves. One of the respondents stated that the work relationship mediated by technology even makes it seem like workers are machines.

Another thing I notice is that colleagues and the company consider it unacceptable if I occasionally need medical interventions during working hours, as if remote service providers can't get sick and don't need medical treatment (n.p.)³².

Current trends in telework

In 2022, as of the time of writing this article, COVID-19 vaccination has progressed, and the return to in-person work is observed in categories such as teaching, tourism, and trade, among others. Many categories have resumed in-person activities. However, in cases like education, there is a growing trend toward expanding distance learning (EAD). Online activities, live events, meetings, seminars, etc., resulting from the lessons learned during the pandemic, are expected to continue, especially in universities. In this case, it is not remote teaching but an expansion of the use of information technologies and accumulated learning.

However, in the absence of precise data, we can speak of trends. One of them is the continuity or permanent establishment of telework by companies. The research conducted by SAP Consultoria and the Brazilian Telework Society³⁵, with the participation of 554 companies, shows that 72% of them expressed an interest in continuing remote work after the pandemic. These findings are corroborated by companies from various economic sectors that have announced the maintenance of telework, either in total or hybrid forms³⁴.

The explanation for this predisposition, in general, is due to productivity gains, satisfactory results with remote work, cost savings on physical spaces, among other reasons. On the other hand, there is also workers' interest in home office work due to advantages related to commuting, flexible hours, proximity to family, and more. Job advertisements with or without a formal work contract on social media are significant. In the financial sector, for example, digital banks offer remote positions for various occupations. With the growth of virtual services, the number of workers acting as freelancers, legal entities, or other forms in Brokerage companies, and Fintechs, such as personal bankers³⁶, has increased. In the communication sector, we can cite the case of Telefônica Brasil S/A, which permanently transferred part of its work to telecommuting. Workers signed an additional employment contract following the 2017 labor legislation and the measures enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. As reported by a young worker-student^d, having signed an additional employment contract means there is no option for in-person work. Describing the challenges of working from home, inadequate space, and feelings of isolation, she pointed out that a return to in-person work would only occur if there were technical problems with the equipment. In this case, even though it is agreed that the company is responsible for providing and maintaining the equipment, it is the worker's responsibility to take care of and maintain the received materials, which places an additional burden on the employee to resolve issues and cover the costs of repairs, loss, and even theft. In terms of cost payment, the company pays 90 Brazilian Reais as of 2022.

As recognized by Durães et al.³⁷, “remote emergency work has fulfilled an important health measure and at the same time secured jobs (public and private)” (p. 961). The authors reiterate that, in addition to a critical view of work in the so-called digital economy, it is necessary to observe the legislation that has given significant room for private regulation and great power to employers, opening the way for the intensification of precarious work and, consequently, health risks for workers. Citing Sennet's work³⁸, they claim that the subjective erosion experienced by the working class given the characteristics of flexible capitalism “generates a process of psychological suffering, especially for those who cannot adhere to the imposed flexibility and the rupture of social ties”³⁸ (p. 959) as they believe that this telework scenario tends to amplify the invasive dynamics of work on life. By potentially disrupting social relationships and spaces of sociability, it tends to negatively impact collective action.

^d Interview with a Call Center worker given to Maria Aparecida Bridi in 2022.

Conclusion

During the pandemic, telework grew extraordinarily in Brazil. Companies, in turn, had broad freedom to establish the general conditions of telework, serving as a large laboratory for companies and managers who had previously restricted telework. Forced to keep workers at a distance and adopt remote work on an unprecedented scale, they obtained gains and savings due to the transfer of some costs to the workers.

This form of work, as noted in the text, in addition to the consequences for health and living and working conditions, brought new challenges to the working class; among these, ensuring environmental and ergonomic working conditions and, above all, ensuring one of the most cherished rights achieved by the working class, the limit on working hours, that is, the delimitation of working and non-working time.

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Authors' contributions: Bridi MA organized, structured, and drafted the manuscript. Tropic PV and Vasquez BV contributed to manuscript writing and critical review. The authors approved the final version and take full responsibility for the study and published content.

Data availability: all the data supporting the results of this study have been published in the article itself.

Funding: the authors declare that the study was not funded.

Competing interests: the authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Presentation at a scientific event: the authors report that the study has not been presented at a scientific event.

Received: September 27, 2022

Revised: November 04, 2022

Approved: December 21, 2022

Editor-in-Chief

José Marçal Jackson Filho