

THE IMPACT OF REMOTE WORKING ON WORKERS IN MALTA: A REVIEW OF LOCAL RESEARCH

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Abstract Remote working has grown significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic, with evidence suggesting it is likely to remain a common practice. This review aimed to synthesise research on the impact of remote working on workers in Malta. A literature review of local studies identified 15 relevant publications, highlighting the diverse effects of remote work. Health and well-being outcomes were mixed, with musculoskeletal disorders emerging as a significant challenge, often linked to reduced physical activity and possibly poor workstation setups. While stress levels frequently improved, mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression were identified. Improved sleep patterns were noted, but social isolation and blurred work-life boundaries negatively affected motivation and mental health. Productivity generally increased, with workers valuing reduced distractions, commuting times, and greater flexibility. However, frequent and demanding digital communication emerged as a stressor. Most employees preferred hybrid work arrangements, balancing remote and on-site work. Remote working also supported employee retention, benefiting Malta's labour market.

Keywords: Remote work; telework; health; performance; Malta.

1. INTRODUCTION

Remote working arrangements have increased dramatically since the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19). During the pandemic, remote working was widely adopted as a measure to reduce disease transmission among those who could perform their jobs outside traditional workplaces. Statistics show that nearly half of the European workforce worked remotely during the first year of the pandemic, even though many had not previously worked from home [1].

Not all jobs can be performed remotely, but pre-pandemic data suggested that Malta had a higher potential for remote working than the EU average. Despite this potential, remote work in Malta was consistently less common than in the EU overall [2]. During the pandemic, the Maltese government introduced financial support measures to help private organisations implement remote working arrangements [3]. This led to a significant increase in remote working in Malta, with the uptake outpacing that of most EU member states [4].

A 2021 report [5] revealed that more than half of Maltese organisations had the majority of their workforce working remotely, often in hybrid arrangements that balanced remote and on-site work. Eurofound [6] observed that remote working in Malta continued to grow in 2021, with only seven EU-22 countries reporting higher levels of remote work. Indeed, all EU countries except Poland and Luxembourg saw an increase in remote working during this period. However, further growth potential remains. Eurofound [6] noted that only three EU countries had a larger proportion of employees in 'teleworkable' jobs, highlighting opportunities for Malta to expand its adoption of remote work.

Reports of organisations scaling back their remote working arrangements have become increasingly common, raising questions about the future of remote work. However, policies and findings from Malta suggest that remote working is here to stay. In the public sector, a policy allows public officers to work remotely for 20% of their time without the need for justification. Those requiring additional remote hours may apply with appropriate justification. Beyond the public service, it was reported that 65% of organisations actively support remote working for roles where it is feasible. Furthermore, 81% of organisations view remote work as important for their future [7]. 15% of organisations are also employing remote workers from outside Malta to address skill shortages, underscoring the growing strategic importance of remote working [8].

Several reviews have analysed the advantages and disadvantages of remote working. Findings suggest that when remote working is voluntary rather than mandatory, it can positively impact productivity and performance, whereas the effects tend to be less favourable when it is compulsory and full-time [9]. Benefits related to work-life balance and flexibility are widely reported [10], though findings in these areas have been mixed, highlighting the need for further research. Organisations can also benefit financially from remote working, saving on costs such as office rent and utilities, and reallocating funds to other areas [11].

Despite its advantages, remote working has notable drawbacks. Concerns often focus on technology, including issues related to workers' home environments, which organisations cannot control, as well as challenges with communication and maintaining team cohesion [10]. Remote work can also influence workers' well-being and illness behaviours, such as absenteeism and presenteeism, with various factors contributing to these outcomes [12].

A review of local research on remote working is essential for several reasons. While international studies have provided valuable insights, their findings are often mixed, highlighting the complexity of the topic and the need for context-specific exploration. Additionally, a substantial body of research has already been conducted locally, offering a unique opportunity to synthesise these findings and draw conclusions that are directly relevant to Malta's specific context. Such a review is not only of significant interest to local stakeholders, helping to inform policies and practices, but could also contribute to the broader international discourse, providing insights into how remote working operates within smaller, distinct nations.

The aim of this review is to synthesise and critically analyse local research on remote working to identify key findings, trends, and gaps in the context of workers in Malta. By situating these insights within the broader international discourse, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how remote working impacts productivity, well-being, and organisational practices in a small economy.

2. METHODS

In conducting this review of the literature, the steps suggested by Xiao and Watson [13] were followed. These include three key stages: planning, conducting and reporting the review. These are in turn divided into eight steps. The described research aim was formulated, a review protocol was then developed. In view of the local focus of this review, data was retrieved from Google Scholar as well

as HyDi, a local search engine and repository for academic documents hosted by the University of Malta. A substantial number of national studies have also been carried out by social partners and private research organisations. In view of the limited number of academic papers on the topic and the national focus of this review, these were also included in the review, thus a Google search was also undertaken. Search terms included remote work, telework, telecommunication, working from home and Malta. In terms of the inclusion criteria, only documents that focused on the impact on workers who carried out work remotely in Malta since the onset of COVID-19 were included. Furthermore, only empirical studies that included primary data collection were included. As the focus was on the impact on workers, studies that used quantitative, qualitative and mixed method studies were included. Only studies written in English or Maltese were included. Studies which were not about working adults were excluded, as were those that did not include primary data collection. Review articles and student dissertations were also excluded. Identified papers were screened initially on the basis of their abstracts, selected papers were then read in full. Data was then extracted and coded, following which it was analysed and the report was written.

3. RESULTS

A total of 15 papers met the inclusion criteria and were used within this literature review. Of these seven were peer-reviewed published papers, whereas the rest were papers from Maltese private research entities and social partners, and one paper was from an EU entity. In terms of research methods, seven were quantitative surveys, two papers were qualitative in nature, and six used both quantitative and qualitative data.

3.1. Impact on Health, Wellbeing, and Illness Behaviours

Mixed findings have been reported in terms of health and wellbeing. Debono and Garzia [14] did not identify a difference in physical or mental health when comparing remote and non-remote workers. The frequency of remote work may be relevant, with those who carried out all their work remotely reporting better overall health levels than those who did not [15]. A reduction in sickness absenteeism was also associated with more frequent remote working, however, such workers were more likely to work when sick (presenteeism) than engage in absenteeism [16].

Musculoskeletal pain was frequent among remote workers, with back pain, neck pain and shoulder pain the most common [17]. Grech et al. [18] determined that back pain was more frequent among remote than non-remote workers.

Regarding stress and wellbeing, two studies determined that improvements were more likely than deteriorations whilst remote working [19, 20], whilst one study associated remote working with greater levels of happiness [21]. Contrasting results have also been reported. Eurofound [6] determined that the percentage of remote workers who experienced anxiety exceeds the national average of workers. Fiorini [15] found that mental health issues such as depression and anxiety were a primary challenge for remote workers, whilst work-related technology, which is essential for remote working, has been linked to the development of stress [22]. Debono and Garzia [14] did not identify a difference in happiness between remote and non-remote workers.

3.2. Work Performance and Satisfaction

Several studies showed that overall employees felt equally or more productive when working remotely [14, 19, 20, 23]. In fact, one study highlighted that remote working was associated with better quality of work and a superior amount of work per hour [20]. Managers were also more likely to rate that productivity had increased during remote working [20, 24], although in one survey more company representatives reported a drop in performance when remote working than an improvement. Drops in productivity were more frequent in the education, hospitality and tourism and wholesale/retail industries [25].

In terms of job satisfaction, two studies found that those who worked remotely were more likely to report job satisfaction than those who did not [14, 20].

3.3. Working Environment

Several studies suggest that many employees feel more comfortable working in their home environment than in the workplace. In one study, the majority of participants reported having the "right environment to work effectively," with many noting that it could be less distracting than an open-plan office [14]. However, some participants acknowledged that remote working can be challenging without access to a private room. Similarly, qualitative findings linked remote work to fewer distractions [15, 19].

Quantitative findings illustrated that most employees associated remote work with greater physical comfort. However, 14% lacked access to a dedicated chair or desk, and 27% did not have a private workspace [20]. Fiorini [17] found that nearly all remote workers used a laptop as their primary workstation. Many participants also utilised an external mouse, while approximately half reported using additional equipment such as an external keyboard, external monitor, multiple screens, or an adjustable chair. The study found no significant link between the presence or absence of such equipment and musculoskeletal symptoms. Qualitative findings showed that a similar number of workers felt their home environment was either better or worse than the workplace, depending on individual circumstances, and attributed these perceptions to the impact on their health. Factors such as ergonomic equipment, ventilation, and temperature were commonly discussed as influencing the overall experience of remote work [15].

3.4. Health-Related Behaviours

Some workers reported improved health behaviours when working remotely, with improved opportunities to sleep, eat healthily and carry out physical activity. Being distanced from other co-workers also resulted in fewer communicable diseases. Individuals linked this with improved levels of health and less sickness absenteeism [15, 16]. Others, however, reported eating more food, or less healthy food, and being less active when working remotely, resulting in poorer health. Sleep appears to be the health behaviour that benefitted most from working remotely, with workers dedicating more time to this behavior [15]. Lower levels of physical activity and sedentary behaviour were also associated with musculoskeletal pain [17, 18].

3.5. Social Contact, Isolation and Support

A common finding was that social contact was reduced during remote working, with some workers feeling isolated or cut off from the workplace [15, 23]. Relationships with colleagues and subordinates were rated more negatively [20], and consequently, work motivation could be impacted negatively [19]. Whilst workers struggled with loneliness and associated it with poorer levels of mental health, some workers were more positive about being alone, even linking it to better mental health [14, 15, 23]. It is important to note that the findings of many studies were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to increased isolation due to partial lockdowns. However, a qualitative study argued that the isolation often associated with remote working is less relevant in Malta, where close family and community ties are prevalent [26].

While a study on teachers highlighted a lack of support [27], research on diverse sectors found that most remote workers felt supported by their organisations [14, 23]. Moreover, the former study revealed that remote workers received greater support from colleagues and managers compared to those not working remotely [14]. A study of managers identified more frequent manager check-ins as a key priority when implementing remote working arrangements [24]. In another study, a small percentage of managers felt that remote working impacted teamwork and team dynamics negatively [20].

3.6. Work-Related Demands, Communication, and Disconnecting from Work

A common finding was that some remote workers struggled with blurred boundaries between work and personal time and environment, leading to difficulties in disconnecting from work [15, 16, 19, 20, 26, 27]. One study revealed that most workers (88%) had access to work tasks on their phones, with the majority agreeing that this constant connectivity heightened their awareness of workplace activities [22]. For some workers, difficulty disconnecting was self-imposed, while for others, it was an expectation set by employers or clients [15, 22].

Qualitative findings linked remote working with greater work demands [14, 15, 19], longer working hours [27], and increased work-related communication [14, 15]. While communication during remote working was often characterised as "easy" [23], a few studies raised concerns about its quality [14, 20]. However, a comparison of samples found no significant differences in working hours or demands between remote and non-remote workers [14]. Similarly, Eurofound [6] statistics indicated that the percentage of teleworkers working overtime was nearly identical to the national average.

Excessive work demands, increased communication, and blurred boundaries were linked to poorer health outcomes [15] and presenteeism [16] among remote workers. Additionally, working beyond designated hours was associated with musculoskeletal pain [17].

3.7. Flexibility and Reduced Commuting

Workers reported enjoying greater flexibility, work-life balance [6, 14, 20, 23, 24] and a reduced need to commute [14, 15, 26] when remote working. These factors were linked with greater levels of health [15], better worker retention [25] and working outside of hours [16]. In relation to work-related

technology, one study found that participants were more likely to feel that this made it harder to achieve a work-life balance than it made it easier [22].

3.8. Trust and Managing Remote Workers

Trust and challenges related to management were also highlighted. A small percentage of high-level managers [20] reported difficulties in managing, controlling, and monitoring remote workers. Issues with managing worker absences in the public sector were also noted [19]. Most managers one study indicated that their approach to measuring worker performance had shifted, focusing more on output rather than physical presence in the office [24]. The study emphasized the importance of fostering a culture where management trusts employees to be productive while working remotely. In a survey, about one-third of remote workers reported that their organisation implemented measures to monitor their productivity. However, 29% of respondents found these measures intrusive [22].

Debono and Garzia [14] found that most remote workers felt trusted by management. However, when workers felt a lack of trust or when managers lacked the skills to effectively manage remote teams, it negatively impacted their remote working experience. Similarly, it was reported that remote workers often felt pressured to demonstrate their performance and expressed a desire for greater trust from their managers [23].

3.9. Family and Leisure

Several studies have acknowledged that remote working can lead to increased time spent with children, other household members, and more opportunities for non-work-related activities [15, 19, 20, 23]. The impact of these changes on workers, however, varied, often depending on family dynamics, particularly regarding children.

Fiorini [15] found that while some individuals associated the additional family and leisure time with improved health, others perceived the increased family time as a source of stress. A separate study highlighted that some mothers struggled to balance work and family responsibilities, often resorting to working during their children's sleeping hours [14].

Two studies emphasized the need for managers to pay greater attention to employees' work-life balance and their commitments outside of work. These studies also found that individuals living alone tended to have a more positive view of remote working [23, 24]. Conversely, it was found that remote working was associated with improved family relationships, and women were more positive about remote work, expressing a stronger preference for it [20]. Similarly, Briguglio et al. [21] found that those working from home were generally happier, with this sentiment unaffected by gender or the presence of young children at home.

3.10. Job Security and Retention

A few studies suggested that those working remotely had better perceived job security than those who did not [14] and that remote working may be linked to better retention [14, 25].

3.11. Preference for Remote Working

Several studies indicate that workers tend to favour a hybrid approach, where a portion of work is performed onsite and the remainder remotely [20, 23]. Notably one study found that those who spent most of their time working remotely expressed a preference for reducing their remote hours, while those with limited remote working desired an increase in remote working opportunities [20].

4. DISCUSSION

Remote working has been found to have mixed impacts on health and well-being. This finding is not unique to Malta [28] and is likely influenced by the diverse methodologies used in studies to measure health, well-being, and related constructs, as well as by the range of factors that appear to shape the experience of remote working [15].

One clearer finding was that musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are common among remote workers and may be more prevalent in this cohort. International studies have attributed this trend to various ergonomic issues within home environments, reductions in physical activity, and increased stress levels [29, 30]. Maltese studies did not identify a direct link between MSDs and the equipment available to workers. However, they found that musculoskeletal pain was associated with decreased physical activity [17, 18], longer working hours, and heightened burnout [17].

Maltese research also suggested that stress may be alleviated by remote working. However, mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety remained significant concerns. This observation aligns with international findings; a review paper reported that while stress levels often improved with remote working, the evidence for conditions such as depression and anxiety was more mixed [31].

Findings on work productivity were clearer, with nearly all studies—bar one—indicating that work performance was more likely to improve when employees worked remotely. However, international findings have been more mixed [9, 28]. As with health-related studies, comparability issues arise due to differences in how performance is measured. Both in Malta and internationally, such measurements are typically based on self-reports. Various factors appear to influence work performance during remote working, several of which emerged in this review. The study also found that remote workers experienced greater job satisfaction, a finding that aligns with most international studies [32].

Workers were generally positive about their physical working environment, with the primary benefit being reduced distractions compared to the workplace. Dissatisfaction with open-plan offices is well-documented [33-35]. While the home environment may introduce new distractions, such as increased work-related digital communication and interruptions from other residents, many still view it as an improvement. The availability of a private room was particularly important for workers who did not live alone.

Participants also reported feeling physically comfortable; however, many lacked the necessary equipment to set up their workstations properly, a common issue among remote workers [36, 37]. One study that examined the link between ergonomic equipment and musculoskeletal pain found no

significant association, although in another study, the working environment was described as having mixed effects on workers' health. Previous research on the availability of ergonomic equipment and its relationship to musculoskeletal pain among remote workers has shown inconsistent findings [38-40]. These inconsistencies may stem from limitations in study design, as most studies are cross-sectional, and the assessment of workstations often relies on self-reported data. To address these gaps, more longitudinal and experimental studies are needed.

Health behaviours appear to be influenced by remote working. For some individuals, nutrition and exercise improved, while for others, the opposite occurred. Clearer benefits were observed in terms of increased time for sleep, as participants saved time on commuting and preparing for work, as well as a reduction in exposure to communicable diseases. Previous studies have noted that remote workers may benefit from additional sleep time. However, they have questioned whether this translates into improved sleep quality, given other challenges faced by remote workers, such as difficulty disconnecting from work [12, 41]. The evidence that remote working reduces communicable diseases is more definitive [42].

Social isolation and reduced relationships were a regular finding and these impacted negatively upon work motivation and mental health. The prevalence and impact of these factors on mental health has previously been reported [28, 43]. Overall, most studies found that remote workers had access to co-worker and management support. This has been found to be important to mitigate the impact of loneliness and isolation [28].

The blurring of boundaries between work and personal time, along with workers' struggles to distinguish between work and non-work environments, emerged as a common finding. This difficulty in disconnecting from work was further exacerbated by high work demands and continuous communication. While this issue frequently appears in Maltese studies, it is only occasionally highlighted in related international reviews [e.g., 12]. This suggests that the topic, a risk factor specific to remote working, warrants greater attention. Policymakers have been proactive in addressing this concern, with the EU considering legislation to enshrine the right to disconnect [44].

While remote work has led to increased work demands for some workers, it remains unclear whether this is a common characteristic of remote work. Similarly, although remote workers often work outside their designated hours [16], it is uncertain whether they work longer overall hours. This lack of clarity may be specific to Malta, as Eurofound [6] reported that, across the EU, only remote workers in Malta and Czechia were unlikely to work more overtime than their national averages. Nonetheless, excessive work demands have been identified as a feature of remote work that contributes to job stress [45].

Communication in remote work settings was found to be more frequent and demanding, with some evidence suggesting a decline in communication quality. This is particularly problematic, as frequent communication with remote workers is often encouraged [46]. Social contact is known to mitigate issues such as loneliness and isolation, but frequent communication can have mixed effects. For instance, one study found that increased and higher-quality communication both enhance work performance. However, while frequent communication may lead to burnout, quality communication reduces it [47]. This highlights a tension between optimising work performance and safeguarding

employee well-being, warranting further research into the implications of remote work communication.

The review found that remote working was associated with reduced commuting, greater flexibility, and improved work-life balance. The health and performance benefits of flexibility, as well as its positive impact on work-life balance, have been well-documented [12, 48]. However, factors such as excessive work demands, increased communication, and working beyond regular hours can negatively affect work-life balance. Despite these challenges, remote work appears to provide an overall benefit to workers' work-life balance [6]. Flexibility could also aid workers to cope with work demands, thus benefitting performance, but this may come at a cost to workers' health.

Managers play a crucial role in shaping the policies and support systems that regulate the flexibility employees derive from remote work. This includes decisions about where employees can work, when they can work, and the provision of necessary infrastructure [48]. The current review also highlighted that flexibility can positively impact family life, although this varies between individuals, particularly for women with children. According to Eurofound [6], women are more likely to balance work and personal responsibilities when they telework occasionally. Additionally, a Canadian study found that men and women use flexible remote working in different ways. Men are more likely to use it as an opportunity to spend more time on childcare, while women often see it as a way to allocate more time to work [49]. Fostering healthy and productive remote working opportunities for women is especially important, as women across Europe are more likely to be employed in roles that are suitable for telework—a trend that is also observed in Malta [6]. Moreover, work-life balance and childcare responsibilities significantly influence work performance [28]. This underscores the need for tailored policies that support diverse employee needs while promoting both productivity and well-being.

The review indicated that while some managers faced challenges in managing remote workers, employees expressed a desire for greater trust. Some managers adapted their approach by focusing on managing outputs or monitoring work levels. Consistent with these findings, a lack of perceived trust in remote workers has been identified as a stressor [50]. Conversely, greater trust can alleviate feelings of overload and emotional exhaustion, ultimately improving performance [46]. To address this, it has been suggested that workers and supervisors communicate regularly and build strong relationships [46]. Managers are also encouraged to evaluate employee performance based on deliverables rather than physical presence [46, 51]. This aligns with current practices reported by several managers, indicating positive progress. However, some managers continue to struggle with managing remote teams. Traditional management skills do not always translate effectively to remote work environments. As a result, organisations should prioritise supporting and upskilling managers to enhance their ability to lead in remote settings.

Remote working has been associated with improved employee retention, which is particularly valuable in Malta, where employment rates are high and many organisations face challenges in finding workers. This may also explain why concerns about job insecurity did not emerge in related studies. While it remains unclear whether remote workers truly experience better retention rates, several factors discussed—such as flexibility—enable individuals with other commitments to remain in the workforce. This flexibility may also attract individuals who are currently out of the workforce or those employed at organisations that do not offer remote working options. Additional factors, such

as perceived improvements in work-life balance and reduced commuting time, may further enhance the appeal of remote work for employees. Overall studies suggested that most employees would rather work in a hybrid manner. This may aid workers to enjoy the benefits of remote working whilst tackling some of the possible shortcomings, such as isolation, workplace relationships and teamwork. Workers' preferences may also be shaped by other factors, such as conflict between work and family life [52], and limited commuting time, given Malta's size. It is worth noting, however, that traffic is a substantial issue in Malta that extends commuting time.

4.1. Limitations

The review focused exclusively on findings from a single country, which may limit the applicability of the results to other regions. A variety of study types were included, some of which were not peer-reviewed. All quantitative findings were derived from surveys, meaning causality cannot be established. Qualitative studies typically relied on small, non-random samples.

The body of literature reviewed was limited, and this occasionally led to contrasting findings. Additionally, the method of paper selection may have unintentionally excluded relevant studies or overemphasised certain perspectives.

5. CONCLUSION

The review highlighted the multifaceted impacts of remote working on workers in Malta. Health and well-being outcomes were mixed, with MSDs emerging as a notable challenge among remote workers, potentially exacerbated by improper workstation setups. While stress levels appeared to benefit from remote working arrangements, mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression were frequently reported. Health behaviours were also affected, with varied impacts on nutrition and exercise, though a clearer benefit was seen in improved sleep patterns. Social isolation and weakened interpersonal relationships were consistent findings, often negatively influencing motivation and mental health. Additionally, the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life posed a significant challenge, making it difficult for workers to delineate their professional and personal environments.

From a productivity standpoint, the majority of studies found that remote working positively influenced work performance. Workers were generally satisfied with their physical working environment, particularly valuing reduced distractions compared to the traditional workplace. However, work-related digital communication was more frequent and demanding, with some evidence pointing to a decline in its quality. Workers appreciated the reduced commuting times, increased flexibility, and improved work-life balance associated with remote working. Managerial challenges were noted, with employees expressing a desire for greater trust. Remote working may also have contributed to improved employee retention, a valuable outcome in Malta's labour market. Overall, hybrid work arrangements were the preferred option for most employees, offering a balance between remote and on-site work.

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