Overtime or fragmentation? 
Family transactions and working time during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract. What changes affected the working time of employees required to work from home by the 2020 French health measures? Drawing on a qualitative survey of a municipal water company, based on interviews, direct observations, and questionnaires, the author shows how telework prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic restructured working time and redistributed the power of regulation. During lockdown periods, working hours were extended and work rhythms changed, with considerable variation depending on the family configuration: confinement with family was not conducive to extended working hours, instead tending to fragment them, whereas isolated teleworkers experienced the opposite effect.

Keywords: conflict, COVID-19, family, digital technology, telework, work from home, hours of work, France.

1. Introduction

In 2020, half of the world’s population were confined to their homes in an attempt to halt the spread of COVID-19. In an unprecedented move, thousands of establishments simultaneously sent part or all of their employees to work from home. They did so on public health grounds – to limit the risks of contagion among colleagues (Belzunegui-Eraso and Erro-Garcés 2020) – rather than for budgetary reasons under corporate strategies aimed to motivate employees in their work or address environmental concerns. The move particularly affected the service sector, where many employees were confined to their homes...
— presented by public policies as a “shelter” in the health crisis (Kushtanina and Vinel 2020). Thus, in France, from March to May 2020, a third of employees continued to work in their usual place of work, a third stopped working altogether through short-time employment arrangements, leave or redundancy, and the remaining third began working from home (Safi et al. 2020). This redistribution has undermined women’s professional standing and slashed the incomes of young people and poor households (Lambert and Cayouette-Rembière 2021).

Telework has thus ridden a new “silent wave” (Taskin and Vendramin 2004). In the space of a few weeks, its use increased as much as it had over the previous 15 years. Confinement has provided the “exogenous shock” capable of revitalizing the stagnant use of telework (Aguillera et al. 2016, 261), yet it has forced through an abrupt adoption of telework without allowing prior deliberation. Accordingly, each new lockdown has wrought havoc in work, home and parental arrangements (CAFC 2021).

Working from home,\(^1\) in particular, is not an anodyne, consensual measure and its use gives rise to conflict. A number of studies carried out before the COVID-19 crisis consider the conflicts entailed in working from home, focusing on the tensions between family and work life, thrown together once again after their separation in the mid-nineteenth century (Weber 1965). To varying degrees, working from home gives rise to intense and difficult negotiations, and family and work life are reciprocally impacted upon (Tremblay 2002; Metzger and Cléach 2004; Le Douarin 2007; McNaughton et al. 2014). Although it is generally a consensual feature in the life of most firms, telework can also lead to confrontation between employers and workers, mostly in relation to individual cases (Ellison 1999). When kept apart in their homes, workers try to make their contributions more visible (Lee-Kelley, Crossman and Cannings 2004), which can create tensions between people teleworking and those on site (Gálvez, Martínez and Pérez 2011). Furthermore, some employers see teleworking as a means of downgrading job posts (Stanworth 1996), outsourcing tasks (Largier 2001) and informally pooling the resources and capacities of employees in “third locations” of “co-working” (Cléach, Deruelle and Metzger 2015).

This article considers these two types of conflict — within families and at work — side by side in order to analyse the way in which they develop and are configured around the issue of working time. I examine the influence wielded by workers’ families and by management and observe the result of their indirect confrontation. This article is thereby situated in the literature on the interconnection between work and family routines, which shows how balance and conflict are played out simultaneously in daily practice (Medved 2004). The article offers two contributions to this literature. First, its results point to a disconnect between trends in working hours and in working schedules during periods of confinement, under the influence of the worker’s immediate circle (Grossin 1996). Family arrangements (Pailhé and Solaz 2009) may lengthen the teleworking

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\(^1\) The term “telework” is used to refer to all situations where work is carried out from a worksite other than the default place of work, making use of internet, email and the telephone. The term “work from home” is used to designate, more specifically, telework that takes place within the worker’s own residence.
day or stabilize it; they may also fragment teleworking schedules or maintain them. These two processes are autonomous and create different combinations. The capacity to “control the time spent on professional work at home” (Barbier, Fusulier and Landour 2020, 8) does not apply in the same way to working hours as it does to schedule. Second, this article shows how confinement periods have reversed the roles of family and managers, who exert opposing pressures on these two dimensions (hours and schedule). Contrasting these observations gives the most surprising result yet: although family density runs counter to the time pressures that line managers impose on their employees (towards extending the working day), it also dismantles the Fordist rhythms and schedules of work. In the case under study, the family circle was thus found to protect one temporal paradigm while dismantling another.

The results presented in this article are based on a sociological survey carried out by a municipal water production, distribution and treatment company employing 900 workers. I was able to observe the widespread use of working-from-home arrangements in this structure over a whole year, from their sudden introduction early in 2020 to their partial relaxation in the summer and their resumption in the autumn. The survey provided an insight into the common contention and day-to-day challenges that arose from working at home.

Following this introduction, the second section of this article presents the municipal water company under study and the methodological protocol adopted. The third section describes the company’s teleworking arrangements before the pandemic and following their widespread introduction over a matter of days. The fourth and fifth sections distinguish between two contradictory rationales that were found to be operating in the implementation of working-from-home arrangements. First, the family circle often contributed to setting limits to the working day, restricting any telework-induced extension. Second, this same circle encouraged the fragmentation of the working day by introducing frequent breaks and interruptions. Accordingly, being confined to one’s home dismantled the principles of Fordism while restricting overtime work. The sixth section provides some observations by way of conclusion.

2. A public water company during the pandemic

In January 2020, a collective sociological survey was launched at a water company in a French municipality with the aim of identifying the reasons for recurring labour disputes. I was hired as a postdoctoral researcher within a larger team that rapidly had to rethink its methodology when the French Government announced the national lockdown in March 2020. Following a short overview of the conditions in which we conducted the survey, I will outline the methodology that we adopted and the teleworking arrangements that already existed in the company.

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2 Although the analysis in this article draws on interviews, conversations and consultation with Henri Bergeron, Olivier Borraz and Patrick Castel, as part of the survey, its conclusions are the author’s own.
2.1. A sociological survey confronted with lockdown

The water company in this study was a municipal public establishment that was responsible for producing, treating and distributing the water consumed and used in the municipality. It had a general management and was made up of ten departments, some of which held the status of “directorate” while others were “agencies” or “centres” (for the sake of simplicity, I will refer to all three as “departments”). The establishment as a whole employed more than 900 people, with an average age of 45 (table 1).

Table 1. Internal structure of the municipal water company and distribution of interviews

| Department                | Structure | Employees | Interviews | Work Status |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|-------------|
| General management        | 1 director, 2 deputies and 3 employees | 254 (38 women) | 15 | 7 (working from home full-time); 4 (working on site); 4 (on furlough) |
| Distribution              | Four agencies spread throughout the municipal area | 254 (38 women) | 15 | 7 (working from home full-time); 4 (working on site); 4 (on furlough) |
| Production                | Department spread throughout the region (close to the catchment sources and pumping stations) | 244 (37 women) | 15 | 6 (working from home full-time); 4 (working on site); 4 (on furlough); 1 (medical leave) |
| Quality and treatment     | Stationed in a field laboratory | 84 (46 women) | 7 | 4 (working from home full-time); 2 (working on site); 1 (on furlough) |
| Engineering and assets    | Stationed at headquarters | 78 (46 women) | 6 | 5 (working from home full-time); 1 (working on site) |
| Water flow regulation     | Stationed at headquarters (three 8-hour shifts) | 27 (3 women) | 7 | 3 (working from home full-time); 4 (working on site) |
| Human resources and finance| Stationed at headquarters | 68 (58 women) | 7 | 3 (working from home full-time); 4 (working on site) |
| Information systems       | Stationed at headquarters | 31 (5 women) | 4 | 2 (working from home full-time); 2 (working on site) |
| Communications            | Stationed at headquarters | 62 (45 women) | 6 | 3 (working from home full-time); 3 (working on site) |
| Materials and logistics   | Stationed at headquarters | 54 (36 women) | 5 | 2 (working from home full-time); 3 (working on site) |
| Accounting                | Stationed at headquarters | 19 (9 women) | 2 | 2 (working from home full-time) |

Total: 80 interviews (37 with employees working from home full-time; 31 with women)

Note: We do not use the real names of the departments for reasons of confidentiality and in order to clarify the distribution of tasks.

Source: Author’s compilation based on the data from the water company staff survey in 2020.
Some employees carried out technical tasks, in the workshops or treatment plants, coming into direct contact with the water. They were part of a chain. First, the water had to be collected (from the surface or underground), then it was transported, via aqueducts and pipes (which required continuous monitoring of water pressure and repair or renovation work), and, lastly, it was delivered to the users. Other employees had administrative support roles. They ensured the general operation of the company and were responsible for human resources management, compliance with external regulations, processing data from industrial sites, and customer relations.

Half of the staff, including those in administrative support roles, worked at the company headquarters. The other half, including those performing technical tasks, worked at external installations close to customers, water catchment sources, pumping stations or intermediate technical sites, such as treatment factories or reservoirs.

The survey was launched only a few weeks before the lockdown was declared in France on 16 March 2020. As a result, it was carried out in four different stages. In the first the survey was carried out in person (January–March 2020), then via telephone or videocall (March–May 2020), followed by a return to in-person interviews (May–October 2020) and a final stage carried out remotely when the lockdown was reimposed (October–December 2020). This timeline allows a comparison of two periods under lockdown with two periods when the lockdown had either not yet been imposed or had been lifted.

2.2. Survey methodology
In an initial exploratory step, in January 2020, we participated as observers in several company events, namely the general director’s annual new year visits to each department. At these events the research team presented the survey project to the staff before giving the floor to the management and mingling with the staff to hear throwaway private reactions as well as responses on the microphone that were intended for everyone. This allowed us to identify work tensions for follow-up during our interviews.

The sociological material in this study was essentially gathered through 80 interviews with employees working in the company’s various departments (table 1). We got in touch with them using the internal staff records, which were made available to us by the director of the human resources department. Once we had established contact with each department, we carried out a reputational analysis, contacting employees cited by various colleagues as having a considerable influence on day-to-day work. When we were on the company premises for interviews or other on-site visits, we also invited employees whom we met at random to participate in an exercise of ethnographic random sampling (Schmeidler 1990). Lastly, some employees who became aware of the survey only later contacted us directly using our professional contact details, which were made available online.

The semi-structured interview grid was built around three main areas. The first focused on the person’s career, previous experiences and current work. We then asked the interviewee to describe their daily activities and a typical day. Lastly, we asked them to talk about their work relations in general and with colleagues in each of the other departments in particular. In the case of
employees working from home, we added a fourth area of discussion about the consequences of the new working arrangement: How had their work changed? Had the rhythm and the length of working days changed? Since they had started to work from home, how had they been dealing with these changes? Most of the interviews lasted between one and two hours, excluding time spent dealing with technical issues, interruptions or lost connections (table 2).

As a result of the lockdown, the interviews were not all carried out in the same conditions (Clouet, Oudot and Noûs 2021). The first 20 interviews were carried out in person between January and March 2020, before the restrictions on movements were imposed. Once the first lockdown had been announced, we carried out 16 interviews via telephone, the Microsoft Teams (Teams) software that was installed on all the computers made available to employees working from home – protected, however, against external invitations – or Zoom, which allowed us to send the interviewees invitations. We resumed face-to-face interviews for most of the 32 interviews carried out between May and September 2020, but we had to carry out the last 12 interviews via videocalls under the second lockdown. We conducted 37 interviews remotely with people who were working from home full-time and 20 interviews with employees who had been assigned to work from home in the preceding months.

We also built on a questionnaire that the company was planning to send to its employees to evaluate their working conditions. As well as closed-ended questions, it included open-ended sections where respondents could express themselves freely. It was sent out in April 2020 to the 400 employees who had started working from home and 120 of them replied.

The survey concluded with a series of feedback sessions (via videoconference, for health reasons) for 350 employees who agreed to participate, at which management were not present. The purpose of these sessions was to report back to the respondents and involve them in a conversation about the survey’s results (Rorty 1993) that might highlight areas of conflict. The sessions also sought to defend the survey’s utility and its approach before an audience who were generally in favour of the exercise but somewhat sceptical after having previously been through a number of consultant-led studies.

### 3. Teleworking: From employee demand to employer requirement

Before the lockdown, no more than 12 per cent of employees worked from home, on either a full- or part-time basis. However, after the health measures were introduced in March 2020, the arrangement was rapidly extended to some

| Hours | N  |
|-------|----|
| <1    | 4  |
| 1–2   | 46 |
| 2–3   | 27 |
| >3    | 3  |

Source: Author’s compilation based on the data from the water company staff survey in 2020.
64 per cent of staff on a full-time basis by the end of the month. (The company, being responsible for the municipality’s water supply, had been classified as an essential service and was required to continue its activities.)

3.1. Management reticence

Before 2020, telework had been a controversial subject in the company. Most members of the board of directors were openly hostile to it and sought to limit as much as possible the number of employees teleworking. For their part, the employees were widely in favour of the arrangement, as was evident from talking to people, the voting in staff elections for candidates who supported teleworking, and opinion polls carried out among staff by consultants (hired by the company).

Various executives and members of the board of directors objected to the operational effects of the dematerialization of industrial processes. Those in the technical units pointed to the need to handle machines and use infrastructure in person in order to conduct the company’s activities. They thus attributed the demand for telework to pressure from the administrative services, which were considered less worthy in the professional hierarchy and “should therefore not dictate the rhythm of work”, as a former deputy director put it during an interview. Thus, the refusal of telework requests became a way of maintaining the symbolic ascendancy of the “real work” (Bidet 2011) over the support services by imposing traditional Fordist rhythms on them.

In addition, the management was concerned about discipline, in terms both of monitoring operatives during the production process and of the way in which employees used their time outside the structure of the company. Two directors whom we met considered that the staff lacked the motivation to carry out their work without monitoring by management. On that basis, they made teleworking conditional on the development of monitoring tools, such as real-time dashboards or shared and automatically synchronized calendars. Others thought that telework would undermine the “company culture”. They feared that employees would get used to working without any hierarchical supervision (see Costello 1988). A former deputy director for information systems justified his refusal to accept telework requests by the need to “maintain a team spirit, which is impossible if everyone is teleworking: we would become service providers for our own company rather than committed employees”.

These concerns took on strongly gendered overtones among some directors, who expressed diverging expectations of the men and women in their staff (see Armstrong 1997). One director went so far as to explain that he did not allow staff to work from home because the women would be absorbed by domestic work and constantly distracted. “In his mind, women who work from home will be tempted to vacuum during work hours”, was the exasperated conclusion of one of the women managers reporting directly to him. Such indications of a desire to maintain close control over the workforce as well as of sexist prejudices provided one of the main motivations among women to work remotely (Mirchandani 1998) – an arrangement that allowed them to extract themselves
from certain sexist environments, especially in the distribution and the engineering and assets departments.

Such stances among management encountered opposition from all the staff representatives. We were made aware of this in a number of interviews, in particular in those with employees in administrative and support teams. When the subject of teleworking was raised, they all expressed their frustration at seeing the management neglect the directive on the promotion of telework in the public sector that had come into force in France in 2016.3 For example:

> We know that there is a directive in the public sector to promote teleworking and reduce commuting. Large enterprises have been taking this up for the last five years to save on office space and use the new information and communications technologies. But in our company they decided instead to run an experiment with 20 people over a year [20 people in her department but 50 throughout the company] ... They were already saying, “They are not going to do anything at home.” There is a flagrant lack of trust in the teams. (Internal communications officer, pre-lockdown, February 2020)

Among the support teams, only two directors – in the communications and the human resources and finance departments – explicitly supported this demand from staff. It also received tacit support from the directors of the materials and logistics and the information systems departments. As a result, telework was common in these four departments. Before the lockdown, the arrangement was also used by about a quarter of the helpdesk assistants in the communications department and of the assistants and managers in the materials and logistics department – two departments with a large share of women – and by about half of the IT (information systems department) and accounting staff (human resources and finance department). Telework was therefore relatively marginal and very localized, especially since the directors who supported teleworking did not try to promote it throughout the establishment, for lack of time, but also because they themselves benefited from the exceptional conditions in their departments, as the director of the communications department suggested: “We don’t even have enough time to defend our own projects, so trying to defend the right to telework in departments where the directors refuse to allow it would be too much effort. What’s more, it makes my department more attractive than others. Frankly, I am just making the most of it.”

This state of play – some directors refusing to allow employees to telework, thus directly benefiting those who did – explains the stalemate on the subject within the company. In January 2019, though, pressure from one union on the subject of accidents at work led the general management to seek areas of understanding with the other unions, including on teleworking. But the directors’ timidity reduced the initiative to a simple experiment limited to 50 people over one year. Taking into account the 60 employees already authorized to telework, this brought the proportion of staff allowed to use this arrangement to 12 per cent, for a maximum of three days’ telework a week.

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3 Decree No. 2016-151 of 11 February 2016 concerning the conditions and modalities for the implementation of telework in the civil service and the judiciary, *Official Journal of the French Republic*, No. 0036, 12 February 2016.
3.2. An unequal distribution throughout the departments

Teleworking ceased to be an exceptional arrangement in March 2020 when the water company was classified as “essential” and kept open. Most employees began working from home full-time (64 per cent), which put pressure on the work–life balance of employees who had previously been less concerned about this problem (Warren 2015). Two other groups consisted of technicians who worked on site for all or part of their work hours (15 per cent of staff), and the staff “on furlough”, meaning employees who had to stay at home because their activities had been suspended but who nevertheless continued to be paid (18 per cent). The establishment did not use short-time work arrangements, generously opting to maintain their employees on full pay. However, the obligation to work from home, which could now be imposed on employees (Vincent and Clouet 2020), was applied to the great majority of staff, this arrangement being adopted en masse without any collective bargaining.

However, these three scenarios were unequally distributed across the water company's departments (figure 1). Only four departments continued to be present on site: the water flow regulation department, where the majority of staff continued to control from the monitoring centre the real-time pressure in the pipe network; the water treatment laboratory, which studied samples and was put to the task of testing for residues of COVID-19 in waste water; the production team, which collected the samples for the laboratory and carried out maintenance of the supply infrastructure; and the distribution team, whose technicians carried out day-to-day maintenance on the pipes in anticipation of incidents or malfunctions. It was essentially only in the distribution and production teams that employees found themselves with nothing to do and were sent home on furlough. Their regular activities – for example, upgrading activities – were considered subsidiary and could not be dematerialized. Otherwise, working from home was the norm and it spread through all the departments. It was applied to almost all staff in the departments in charge of support activities (IT, logistics, communications, human resources, finance). In these cases, tasks were now carried out in employees’ homes, including tasks that required IT expertise, the drafting of documents, and answering calls with a headset or through a connection to web-based applications. Most staff received specific technical equipment: either a laptop, a smartphone or a regular mobile phone.

But an analysis of the employees in each scenario reveals this distribution by management to appear highly gendered. Two thirds of male employees were working from home and the remaining third was equally divided between those on furlough and those working on site. This stands in sharp contrast to the distribution among women, 78 per cent of whom moved to working from home.

The widespread move to working from home affected views of this arrangement on both sides of the fence. From the management’s perspective, the move demonstrated that services could continue despite people teleworking. During an informal conversation, one of the directors who had been most strongly opposed

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4 A fourth group comprised employees on sick leave or absent for various other reasons (3 per cent).
to the arrangement in January admitted that his opinion had changed: “It’s true that I didn’t think that it would work, and I am still surprised. I’ll wait to see how things go over the next few weeks, but I am less opposed to it.” The managers of the technical units also welcomed the widespread move to teleworking, but they mainly did so because it highlighted the central role played by their teams. As one of the managers of the production department explained, “This move to teleworking shows that our teams are essential. You can send accounting, services and others home, but not the technicians who work on the aqueducts and pipes. It’s a reminder of what our work is all about: one essential profession, around which the others revolve, and others don’t even need to show up.”

The employees, for their part, were still in favour of opening up the option of telework to everyone, as indicated by the answers to the questionnaires sent out by the water company to the staff concerned. Even some previously reticent employees had been won over:

COVID has made some people, me included, realize that telework is possible. I was among those who did not want to telework but I am now pretty much in favour of a fixed day per week and I plan to request the management’s permission to do that. The management is pretty open now ... But if they extended it to three days a week, I would stop at one. I see the advantages of having one day, but I also see the limits. I wouldn’t want any more than that. (Production centre manager working on site, in-person interview, September 2020)

But almost all the respondents and the people interviewed pointed to a series of conflicts caused by the widespread move to working from home. Some continued to be in favour of the arrangement, whereas others had already moderated their enthusiasm. Across the board, though, all agreed that working from home had brought about a shift in work conflicts, placing family at the heart of arrangements and changing the stakeholders involved in negotiations of working time.
4. Home versus overtime

Working time increased during the lockdowns, especially in the case of those who lived alone. Most of the employees with whom we spoke said that their working day had become longer, by minutes to hours. This does not appear to be extraordinary, first because working from home seems to lead to (unpaid) overtime in most cases (Goussard and Tiffon 2016), but also because many workers in “essential establishments” have experienced similar increases in their working time (Barthou and Bruna 2021; Haute 2020). Overtime resulted from situation-specific activities. For instance, reorganizing one’s home and acquiring the necessary IT skills took time for which employers had not necessarily made allowance. But working days were also extended after the first weeks of lockdown as pressure from both managers and colleagues made it harder to disconnect.

However, family can exercise a formidable resistance. Individuals who were locked down with family were somewhat spared such inflation of working time, which was kept in check by home duties and other welcome pretexts. Extended working time mainly affected those who were alone. Thus, under certain conditions, family settings limited the pressure towards working extra hours that was imparted by management and colleagues.

4.1. Getting used to working from home

Most of the water company’s employees said that their working time increased. Working days, which were set at 8 hours and 20 minutes under an enterprise agreement, increased to at least 9 hours. This increase relates to calculations made by the employees themselves, but it can be objectively contrasted with the working hours revealed by the interview invitations that we sent out. Outside periods of lockdown, when employees were working from their workstations on the company’s premises, many suggested interviews “before” or “after” their working hours, at either 8–9 a.m. or 5–6 p.m. During lockdown periods, the survey participants sometimes proposed times in the middle of the day, but when they talked about meeting before or after work, they meant at 7–8 a.m. or 6–7 p.m. The times of the meetings to which we were invited also shifted to earlier in the morning or later in the evening.

However, this extension of working time was neither intended nor accepted by the water company’s management and unions. On the first day of the lockdown, 17 March 2020, the general management published guidance on work arrangements without consulting the trade unions. From then on, two forms of regulation of working time were developed simultaneously: one by the management and the other by the unions. From 18 March 2020, various departmental guidelines mentioned the potential for an increase in working hours, warning of the psychosocial risks that it could entail. The management actively tried to ward off such an increase by sending out regular emails (as “newsflashes”) reminding employees that they should respect their contractual working hours. For their part, the trade union leaders offered their “prudential expertise” (Cru 2015) through remote coaching. With the approval of their line managers, they created WhatsApp groups through which they tried to re-establish work
limits: “In the morning, we signal the start of the day, and in the evening, we wish everyone good evening, to signal the end of the day. We try to make sure that there are exactly 8 hours and 20 minutes between those two messages, to prevent people going into burnout in front of their computers”, explained a union member in the distribution department. In April 2020, the two forms of regulation converged through the establishment of a weekly meeting with staff representatives, using the establishment’s communication tools.

Despite the company’s attempts to limit the working day, most employees experienced some increase. This reflects one of the hidden effects of working from home, in that the conditions created by the widespread adoption of working from home prompted an increase in working time, regardless of guidance. The most immediate increase in working time was transitory, being caused by employees having suddenly to reconfigure their homes. Employees often told us that they had spent a number of hours trying to make their homes more practical for work (Letourneux 2020), changing the layout of rooms, moving furniture about and trying different set-ups, going so far as to repeat the exercise sometimes twice a week (before and after the weekend):

I have to take into consideration that, after I finish work on Friday evening, I have to move all my things out ... so that we can watch a film or invite the neighbours over, or something. It's not a big deal, but still, on a Friday I finish work at 5 p.m., and I finish tidying everything away at 5.30 p.m. I then set everything up again on Sunday evening, because it would stress me out to have to do it on Monday morning. (Design and project officer working from home, distribution department, Zoom interview, November 2020)

People reported other ways in which they had tried to adapt the interiors of their homes. Some had curtained off an area of their living room, others had tried to make their workspace more comfortable by repairing a chair or investing in new furniture, and some had tried to improve the insulation of their workspace – temperatures in the region fell to 7°C in March and were felt by those who were less active than they would have normally been.

Far from always falling on one person, the burden of such activities was greatly lightened by the division of work within the family. When others in the household took an interest or participated in the work, it was not only easier but also changed in its significance, becoming a fun and pleasant activity, which stood outside people’s normal perception of “working time”. Various survey participants made the most of refurbishments required by the circumstances to make changes they had already been planning:

“At first, it took my partner and me some time to set up our individual offices in separate rooms. But it was great [laughs].”

“What do you mean?”

“It took us a few hours; not entire weeks, like some colleagues who really struggled! But it wasn’t a hassle. We did things that we were planning to do anyway, and it’s more fun when there are two of you. It was something to keep us busy during lockdown. If I had been on my own, it wouldn’t have been so much fun.” (Design engineer back at the office after three months’ working from home, engineering and assets department, Teams interview, May 2020)

5 Outside periods of lockdown, the same employee was observed on three occasions on a Friday. On those occasions he finished his day at around 4 p.m.
For most people, the entry costs for working from home also included a steep learning curve on new IT tools. In this company, this chiefly concerned Teams, which was installed on all the computers that were distributed to 75 per cent of the employees. The latter were left to get to grips with the software at home, without any specific time allocation, through a process of trial and error rather than any formal training. At the end of April, the information systems department published a 27-page manual on “Getting started” (figure 2). However, our videocall interviews with employees during lockdown periods provided direct evidence of the difficulties that some people had when using the software. Whereas half of the survey participants – in particular those in the IT, logistics and communications departments – had no trouble using Teams, employees in the operational and technical departments found it harder. Half of all the survey participants called us to say that they could not establish a connection, activate the right audio device or share documents. Such difficulties probably arose throughout the day.

But here again cohabitation made things easier, since other household members might have better IT skills. They might either help with a particular problem or spend time explaining particular processes. A management assistant told us that “without her husband” she would have had to “decipher the instruction manual or consult online forums to learn how to apply a filter or set the audio parameters” and would not have been able to “finish before 7 p.m. last week” (production department, Teams interview, April 2020). These helpful household members included not only partners but also adolescents (over the age of 16),

Figure 2. Table of contents of the Teams instruction manual

| Getting started |
|-----------------|
| Table of contents |
| Teams, what is it? | .......................................................... 2 |
| Installing Teams on your computer | .................................................. 2 |
| Logging in for the first time | .................................................. 3 |
| Teams window overview | .................................................. 3 |
| Conversations | .................................................. 7 |
| Teams | .................................................. 9 |
| Joining a team | .................................................. 10 |
| Talking with a team | .................................................. 10 |
| Sharing files with a team | .................................................. 11 |
| Editing an Office document | .................................................. 11 |
| Calendar | .................................................. 12 |
| Planning a Teams meeting | .................................................. 13 |
| Planning a Teams meeting in Outlook | .................................................. 13 |
| Participating in a Teams meeting | .................................................. 14 |
| Sharing information | .................................................. 15 |
| Displaying the conversation | .................................................. 16 |
| Displaying the participants | .................................................. 16 |
| Ending the meeting | .................................................. 17 |
| Calls | .................................................. 17 |
| Files | .................................................. 19 |

Source: Company documents gathered during the water company staff survey in 2020.
who were often part of the skill transmission process owing to generally superior IT skills (Martin 2004). Working from home thus lent itself to “retrosocialization” (Roux 1994), whereby knowledge was transmitted from younger to older members of the household, limiting the length of the working day for those who were spending lockdown with an adolescent, whereas those who lived only with other adults or with children had less access to technical support. This is clearly illustrated in the questionnaire (various results are given in table 3); many people working from home during lockdown with under-16-year-olds (34 per cent) indicated that their workload had increased in the absence of support on these additional activities from a spouse or other family member.

### 4.2. Trouble disconnecting

Even once employees had adapted their homes and become familiar with new tools, the number of hours spent working from home remained higher during the successive periods of lockdown than during the periods when lockdown was lifted. The suspension of various time-limiting institutions, such as school, weakened people’s control over their working hours. Household composition also had a role to play.

Among its other effects, the closure of schools in France\(^6\) removed one of the strongest pre-COVID-19 arguments – strongly gendered and concentrated among female employees – for ending the working day, bringing a meeting to a close or leaving such a meeting. The school run was something that one of the human resources managers missed: “I have lost all the good excuses for going back home when I have too much work. I can’t use the ‘school’ or ‘playschool’ cards now” (human resources and finance department, Teams interview, May 2020). These generally accepted excuses structured a considerable number of

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6 The French Government closed teaching establishments from playschool to the end of secondary school for 11 weeks, from mid-March to mid-May 2020.
employees’ working days, given that 50 per cent of respondents to the internal questionnaire indicated that they were working from home with children under the age of 16. The effect was also felt by those beyond the immediate family nucleus who would have previously picked up their nephews, nieces or grandchildren from school. Of course, the argument was not entirely invalid, since employees still had to feed and bathe their children, but these activities happened later in the day: “I can say, ‘I have to pick her up from school at 4 p.m. or she will be all alone’, but ‘I have to give her a bath at 4 p.m.’ doesn’t work. We still have pretexts, but later in the day, and everything seems less urgent”, so one of the company’s legal experts told us (materials and logistics department, telephone interview, March 2020).

Working hours increased not only as a result of organizational and technical decisions by management but also as a result of colleagues’ practices. In order to compensate for the loss of face-to-face socializing and informal conversations, many employees explored a number of online communication platforms as means of working together. WhatsApp groups for production and treatment sites, management groups, and teams, for instance, played such a role. However, according to staff, such online groups were the main cause of increasing working hours. The purpose of many meetings was ambiguous and difficult to classify, falling somewhere between work and socializing. Discussions did indeed refer to projects, schedules and progress, but they were peppered with comic interludes and personal anecdotes, with an atmosphere resembling that of a social event – many participants swilling glasses. This indicates how the widespread adoption of working from home contributed to extracurricular time as an integral part of work (Pruvost 2011), thereby expanding it.

The reception of this sociability was very segmented (see table 3). Teleworkers in favour of such initiatives included most of those spending lockdown alone (19 per cent of staff, according to the questionnaire), who were keen to break their isolation, as illustrated by this hydrant technician: “It means that I end up working more, but it’s the price to pay to avoid twiddling my thumbs at home on my own” (Zoom interview, April 2020). The increase in his working hours absorbed time when he would have otherwise had nothing to do. The questionnaire confirms that people working from home alone benefited from such socializing: 66 per cent of them spoke to their colleagues every day, compared with 48 per cent of all company employees working from home.

But these exchanges were a drain on the time of employees locked down with their families. They did not feel the need for such interaction; 12 per cent of them only spoke to their colleagues once every 15 days or more. They saw the resultant increase in working time as an annoying incursion into their free time that blurred the line between their professional and private lives (see Boboc 2020):

We carry out our water quality assessment like every other week, but since the lock- down started the meeting has become a Skype drinks session. And, quite frankly, two more hours online for drinks, instead of seeing my family, is exhausting. It’s just two more hours of work and the atmosphere is fun, but it is still work. I can’t turn up on screen with my family! (Microbiologist working from home, quality and treatment department, Teams interview, March 2020)
The only notable exceptions to this observation were employees on part-time contracts. Their availability had already been limited before the pandemic and their colleagues were used to that. They were also usually accustomed to broken-up or alternate working days, in which time was shared between professional tasks and childcare (see CAFC 2021). Spending more time outside work generally led part-time employees, after negotiations with partners working full-time, to allocate much more time to their children than their partners. In contrast, for their colleagues working full-time, disconnecting was a real challenge. In the course of their efforts to do so they would reprimand colleagues who extended their working day excessively, set alarms to make it sound as though they were receiving an urgent call, or direct their camera towards the living room to capture their children arguing, crying or asking to be fed in order to leave meetings without their colleagues’ disapproval.

Family configurations provided a toolbox used by some employees to limit the extra hours imposed by their management or by other colleagues at work. These configurations helped to halt the lengthening of the working day, something that particularly affected single or isolated employees. But, although the fact of living with others set boundaries against overtime, it also tended to break up working time.

5. Home versus Fordism

The lengthening of the working day described above was accompanied by a growing discontinuity in working hours. The presence of other members of the household interrupted, chopped up or destabilized teleworking days. Whereas telework is ordinarily associated with better concentration on one’s work (Biron and van Veldhoven 2016), confinement with others removed or even inverted this characteristic. Working from home during the pandemic thus contributed to challenging the Fordist rule (Bouffartigue and Bouteiller 2002) of a continuous full-time day, identically reproduced day in, day out.

The presence of family introduced new uncertainties in day-to-day life, depending on the compatibility of the practices of others working from home and the expectations of children. When the employees working from home were not able to quell these uncertainties, either through discipline or through a bargaining process, some paradoxically turned to their place of work, which provided a refuge from the strain of family life.

5.1. From family obstruction ...

Recurrent discontinuities arose when all the time allocated to work, both salaried and domestic, and commuting was brought into one’s living space. Most of the water company’s employees working at home lived with others, a third of them without young children, and half with at least one child under the age of 16 (figure 3). The presence of other household members sometimes made it difficult to work from home with any continuity. It led to sudden interruptions: a child falling over required the parents’ immediate attention, whereas they would have only heard about the incident at the end of the day if it had happened at
playschool. Other household members, too, imposed a daily mental demand that divided the worker’s attention:

> It is sometimes difficult to really concentrate on my work. I would say that that has been the main change: I’m constantly on alert to make sure that nothing is happening in the next room, that the internet is working, or, outside school hours, that my daughter is doing her homework and not wasting time online. There are lots of different things to think about at the same time as work. (Prevention engineer back at the office after six months’ working from home, production department, in-person interview, November 2020)

Although household composition and the resulting interruptions might not initially appear to have a gendered effect, women working from home appeared to be more specifically affected by domestic interruptions. The Fordist model of employment was thus particularly challenged among women employees, since working from home introduced a highly gendered logic of organization (Acker 1990). Indeed, working from home was interrupted by tasks that are traditionally assigned to women by the classic division of labour and that are absent at the office. These included washing a mug used to drink coffee instead of using a throwaway coffee cup, or worrying about the coffee stain on the carpet rather than leaving it to be dealt with by an external cleaning company (a task often carried out by women contractors thus being transferred to women employees). Furthermore, when women worked from home while their partners continued to work on site, the imbalance in the share of tasks increased (Sullivan and Lewis 2001). In 2020, more men than women worked on site both at the national level (Jauneau and Vidalenc 2020) and in the water company studied here. The domestic tasks of women working from home would increase when they took

![Figure 3. Lockdown situation of employees working from home (percentages)](image-url)

Source: Author’s compilation based on answers to the questionnaire sent out by the water company to staff working from home in 2020.
on some of their partner’s tasks (Boring et al. 2020). Women, who were more likely to be working from home, were also more likely to identify “problems” that needed resolving and shouldered a burden of work that was supposed to fit into the time they had reclaimed from their commute. Situations like the following were common: “Before, if we were running late in the morning, we would leave all the dirty dishes in the sink. But now, as I am there, it seems strange not to do them, so I do a bit more of the housework” (project designer working from home, engineering and assets department, telephone interview, May 2020).

This dynamic came to the fore during the interviews themselves, which were often interrupted by children, the family circle or other members of the household: a child throwing a ball at the computer, the partner looking for the car keys, or a friend calling by on the off chance, assuming that someone would be in. Such distractions illustrated how some workers would find it difficult to work in continuous stretches.

En masse working from home also impacted on the dynamics of home and family solidarity. In an employment universe removed from the home (which employees leave to go to work for a defined period of time), care and support are largely the preserve of the family (Schultheis 1991). In the new configuration, partners shared their place of work, which resulted in mutual support but also in competition. In some cases, they were able to help and support each other and cooperate during the working day. In most cases, though, their work was too different and people complained about the competitive relationship that throwing working couples together created.

Those sharing the same space controlled “areas of uncertainty”, that is, spaces in which they could behave unpredictably (Crozier and Friedberg 1977, 386). Some people had anticipated these areas and had equipped themselves with instruments of control, whereas others were unprepared. “I should have bought myself some noise cancelling earphones straight away – there are times during the day when I can’t follow the videoconference because of all the noise in the house. My partner bought some earphones immediately and is able to work comfortably”, complained an administrative secretary who had to take frequent breaks owing to migraines that she blamed on all the noise (distribution department, Teams interview, March 2020).

Using shared equipment, accessing a 3G connection to avoid relying on the shared Wi-Fi or the only peripheral device capable of providing a good connection despite a weak bandwidth, finding adequate isolation from noise, and coordinating with neighbours to establish quiet times of the day without construction work or other noise – these were just some of the ways in which cohabitants sought to control some of the contingencies that might hinder their work. The following case illustrates the way in which the wife of one employee maintained control over an important contingency and an advantage over her husband (whether or not deliberately) by not telling him how to log into their shared computer. According to her, she had not had the time, even though it made her husband reliant on her when he needed to use the computer:

My wife lets me have the desktop computer in the afternoon, so if she doesn’t finish her [accounting] work in the morning, by the time she has had some lunch ... I don’t end up finishing until late in the evening. I need four hours on it, as I have
only been given a smartphone. And I can't really use the computer before her in
the morning, or if I do and she isn’t with me, I risk losing my files if the computer
 crashes. (Project designer, distribution department, telephone interview, April 2020)

A number of survey participants complained about the “area of uncertainty”
controlled by their children, who were entirely capable of unpredictably disrupt-
ing the working day to exert leverage to obtain outings, purchases or family
activities. This area of uncertainty was especially wide-reaching, since there was
little obligation for children participating in remote schooling to appear on video-
calls during their online classes, and thus they could readily absent themselves
for a few minutes. They also spent a lot of time working on their own, which
gave them much greater flexibility than their parents. One teleworker sums it
up as follows: “If my sons [13 and 16 years old] really want something, the little
brats turn to blackmail, or if we have had an argument, they can really stick it
to me, and they obviously work as a team” (quality and environment engineer,
materials and logistics department, Teams interview). Eating at different times,
turning the music up, vacuuming at an inconvenient time, unplugging the Wi-Fi
box, hiding a peripheral device – many methods of sabotage were available to
children whose parents’ work went against their interests. Working from home
was singularly effective in giving children the means of developing the “resis-
tance policies” (Karlsson 2018) their parents described during interviews, keenly
aware of their reliance on their children’s cooperation.

In an attempt to deal with this power struggle, many survey participants
tried to achieve some control over the situation by bartering with the other
household members (see Friedberg 2009). In the most common scenario, they
would offer to provide new services at home in exchange for greater efforts
on the part of other household members. It was a process of give and take: by
granting access to something, they asked the beneficiary to make a comparable
concession, creating a virtuous circle in which the other’s needs were respected.
The giver entered a “giving dynamic” (Mermet 1991). The following household
situation illustrates this dynamic. One partner talked to the neighbours to ask
them not to do any drilling during his partner’s work meetings, hoping that she
would then reciprocate in some way:

“For example, to begin with it was a bit difficult. The situation was really unbal-
anced. My partner had better working conditions: a better chair, better gear and
everything.”

“Has that changed or is it still the case?”

“No, it has changed a bit. In particular, we had noise coming in from next door
so I went to see our neighbours to try to sort out a schedule. I mean, they are doing
work to their place – they could only do so much... But we managed to avoid it hap-
pening while my partner was in important meetings. So, in exchange, she started
asking me if I wanted to use the noise-cancelling headphones sometimes and that
gave me some quiet time when the kids were running around the place.” (Artistic
director back at the office after four months’ working from home, communications
department, Zoom interview, June 2020)

Another tack among teleworkers was to identify new areas of uncertainty
that could be used to their advantage in negotiations with other household mem-
bers. In other words, they looked for ways in which they might inconvenience
others simply to be able to negotiate the conditions under which they would
refrain from doing so. Rather than follow a logic of giving, they negotiated their cooperation. The strategy was illustrated by this employee:

I have stopped making meals in large batches and freezing portions. I now mostly make just enough so that the children, and my husband, have to wait until I have finished work [laughs]. If they make me waste time, they won’t be fed until later...

That works well. Every morning they worry that they will get hungry so they ask me how I want to schedule my day [laughs]. (IT officer working from home, information systems department, telephone interview, September 2020)

Areas of uncertainty affected work from home and on site differently. Moreover, being assigned to working from home increased the power of those who had control over these areas of uncertainty (Friedberg 1988). Such assignment made it difficult to substitute or get around such uncertainty: the space and equipment available and the immediate environment were factors that could not be changed without concerted effort. In this context, some employees preferred to adopt avoidance tactics rather than enter into negotiations with their families.

5.2. ... to clandestine escape routes

Whereas some workers negotiated their teleworking conditions through “voice” tactics – the open expression of their grievances – to use Hirschman’s (1970) classification, others preferred “exit” strategies of returning to work on site, even when they were not permitted to do so. They chose to relocate conflict away from their family and back with their usual bargaining partners. Resistance to working from home thus took the form of a clandestine move, to a place of work that was officially closed. Among the 57 interviews that we carried out with employees working from home or having done so in previous weeks, 11 people admitted having resorted to such avoidance tactics (table 4).

To this end, they told their family and managers that they had pressing work to do. They said, for example, that they absolutely had to inspect infrastructure (such as the control screens) that had already been inspected only a few days before, to conduct provisional maintenance that appeared to be largely up to date, or to print out certain documents required by building or enterprise managers. On these grounds, they left their homes and went back to their usual place of work. This tactic, however, was only available to employees whose partner did not also work at the company.

“When I’m fed up, I feel like I’m getting nowhere at home and we are arguing... I just need some space to concentrate on my work without interruptions and everyone tripping over each other at home. You can’t say anything, but I just go to work.”

“On site?”

“Yes, I go to the office.”

“Are you allowed to?”

[Laughs] “Not really! But it is so much better than being crammed in, two to a room, back home. (Project manager working from home, distribution department, telephone interview, April 2020)

Once on site, sympathetic authorized colleagues signed the forms that these employees needed to be able to present to the police if they were stopped7 and

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7 In spring 2020, trips outside the home for professional reasons were authorized in France, but only if the person carried a declaration signed by their employer and indicating the nature and location of their activity. The police were authorized to check these documents and fine anyone found to be breaking the rules.
to their families on returning home. Employees confined with others frequently changed the reasons they gave on the form, whereas single employees always used the same reason: “I wrote ‘surveillance of renovation project’ every day”, explained an engineer who had been confined alone from Monday to Friday (engineering and assets department, Zoom interview, May 2020).

On site, employees adapted their working environments and re-established social networks. They set up meetings with other colleagues working at the office in order to work together on projects in person rather than via videocall. Over coffee, they would swap stories about working from home and discuss what might be changed to minimize both work and family constraints. All these topics of conversations would be unthinkable on a videocall, within earshot of the family and liable to be recorded by the management’s digital monitoring tools. These concerns explain the concentration of exit strategies among the technical service employees, who worked in larger teams and were therefore more likely to have company in their illegal presenteeism.

Although some managers were indifferent about such practices (“I am sure that they work better that way,” explained a director of a distribution agency), and others gave their employees’ complicated justifications the benefit of the doubt (“Last week two people told me that there was an emergency with the IT cables ... I actually think that they were pulling the wool over my eyes, but who cares?”), most managers were more intransigent. They cited the health protocols in force and their concerns about possible charges for individual criminal responsibility. They made surprise visits to the company facilities to ensure that the work-from-home mandate was being respected by checking the reasons for staff’s presence. One factory director saw the funny side, but highlighted the extra work created by this unappealing task (Hughes 1997), which was not recognized by the company and was unproductive:

I came into a new job during the confinement: chasing away those who turned up to work! [Laughs] I can’t believe it came to that. Once or twice a week I turned up on site in person. I stopped everyone I saw and asked them to justify their being there. I sent half of them back home with a flea in their ear. (Distribution department, Teams interview, May 2020)

The widespread move to working from home created two types of conflict: a traditional conflict between employees and their line managers, and a new

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8 A widespread concern dismissed by almost all the managers, who explained that they did not have the time to listen back to meetings or consult the recordings.

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Table 4. Proportion of employees assigned to work from home who made clandestine visits on site

| Department                          | Proportion of employees |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Production department              | 4 out of 15 interviewees|
| Distribution department            | 3 out of 15 interviewees|
| Water flow regulation department   | 2 out of 7 interviewees |
| Information systems department     | 1 out of 4 interviewees |
| Materials and logistics department | 1 out of 5 interviewees |

Source: Author’s compilation based on the data from the water company staff survey in 2020.
kind of conflict, within the family, between employees and their family circle. These two conflicts were closely linked, since employees who could not cope with the pressure from their family and tried to escape back to the workplace then had to deal with their managers. Thus, during the COVID-19 pandemic, active employees were forced to choose between dealing with their families or with their employer. This dilemma highlights the importance of the relationship with employers when it comes to teleworking, in terms not only of organizing one’s conditions of work (Tremblay and Mathieu 2020) but also of managing one-off and illegitimate attempts to evade the arrangement.

6. Conclusion

The lockdown brought the negotiation of industrial relations into the home, which became the locus for the regulation of work. This transfer had two dimensions. First, it gave household members a prophylactic role against pressures from employees’ management and peers, since the employees’ immediate circle exerted a direct downward pressure on the length of the working day. Second, it set the family circle up as the direct regulators of work, whose continuity and consistency they determined, depending on the family’s way of living together, their daily expectations and the areas of uncertainty that they controlled. The rhythms of telework were the result of a mixture of influences from management, colleagues and family, which explains their variation across the workforce. Uninterrupted extended days were the preserve of individuals confined to their homes alone, whereas individuals confined with their families experienced fragmented days that were only slightly longer.

With respect to the period of lockdown, these results highlight a surprising quality of telework: its characteristics change as the scale shifts, and the advantages that are generally associated with it become formidable problems. Its widespread use implied the desocialization of reproductive labour: everyone had to care for their own children and was responsible for the upkeep of their workspace, no longer delegating it to professionals or external institutions. As a result, the family circle took the upper hand over the other moderating factors identified by the literature on telework, such as the ratio of on-site work to telework, location, forms of bargaining, the skills of teleworkers, and their relationships with management or peers (Vayre 2019).

Far from the myth of achieving work-life balance through telework – which presumes a separation into two distinct spheres (Land and Taylor 2010) – in this case, work rhythms were indexed to conflict within the family circle. The latter substituted direct capital-labour conflict, which took a back seat in the everyday experience of many employees, owing to their physical distance from their management. This ascendancy of family over company negotiations led to a surprising role reversal, whereby a proportion of staff chose to return clandestinely to the workplace rather than deal with family conflict. But it is difficult to talk about conflicts that happen in one’s personal space, where power struggles are often downplayed or laughed off (Lambert 2015).

In this context, work from home underlines how the roles given to the family and to professional establishments interact. The family home is often a place to
which employees are happy to return, precisely because they consider it to be a space away from work. By fusing the two places, telework changes the logic underpinning the very meaning of family and work spaces (Greenhill and Wilson 2006). As a result, the office or workplace may suddenly appear more attractive, less work intensive and less susceptible to externalities than the home, which when imbued with all the characteristics of the workplace imposes exacting relationships of dependence.

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