Telecommuting as a lever for territorial development: From myths to the current health crisis

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Abstract:

On 17 March 2020, the largest experiment with telecommuting ever conducted in France took place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than eight million people were "confined" in their primary or secondary place of residence; and nearly five million of them worked on line, most of them for the first time. More than one million residents in Île-de-France region preferred confinement in the countryside, thus fulfilling, for two months, the dream of many a planner who, since the 1980s, has imagined that "telework" could improve the balance between metropolitan and rural areas. In the lapse between this old dream and the COVID-19 epidemic, work has been ever more digitized, thus opening new prospects for the "day after", for those employees who want a better quality of life with less commuting. Between the initial myths and their contradictions, let us take a look at telecommuting as a lever for rural planning and development.

Engendered at the birth of computer science and modern telecommunications, the idea of "telework" has been defined by IDATE Digiworld as "*work done by a delocalized entity (*i.e.*, separated from its establishment), the activity of which necessitates an intensive use of telecommunications*".[1] In France, the word first cropped up in 1978 in Alain Minc and Simon Nora's report. "Remote work" was initially a futurological concept, a possibility, before increasingly becoming an actuality as tasks have gradually been digitized and the use of the Internet become widespread (as of the 1990s).[2]

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic set the conditions for the largest telework experiment ever conducted worldwide. For the first time, nearly five million people in the French labor force were all at once placed for a long time on work from home in their primary or secondary place of residence. This unprecedented experiment finally carved out a notch for telework. It has lifted many barriers and opened new perspectives for policies having to do with transportation or urban and rural planning. A decisive step has thus been made in this (already) long history of what has also been called "telecommuting".

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[1] https://www.vie-publique.fr/eclairage/273876-quel-developpement-pour-le-teletravail

[2] This article, including any quotations from French sources, has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in February 2021.

# Remote work and territorial development: A long controversy

From the start of telematics and then microcomputing in the 1970s and 1980s, remote work was mentioned as a lever for territorial development. With the coming of the Internet in the 1990s, an official report by Thierry Breton (1994) set up a milestone. It described all dimensions and promises of telework: "*Unlike the world of industry during the 19th and 20th centuries, the postindustrial economy into which we are entering tends to set value on creativity, flexibility, speedy adaptation, innovation, individual initiatives and know-how. In this more decentralized economy, a key issue is to put human skills and resources to optimal use. All tools placed at the service of this rationale will inevitably have a bright future, among them: telework.*" Seizing on ths topic, DATAR launched several calls for projects.[3]

In a highly centralized, "jacobin" France, "remote working" seemed to hold a promise of leverage for urban and rural planning. It could reduce the costs of home-work-home trips and lower corporate expenditures on real estate. Pundits already imagined setting up "relay offices" in the provinces, which they would later call "telecenters" and then "coworking spaces". Telecommuting was correlated with a reduction in traffic and with territorial development. Under several prime ministers, programs were launched; and this topic is as much as ever on the agenda.

However this (now old) promise has never been fulfilled. For Eric Crouzet (2002), it is a "*developer's myth*". According to this geographer, the opposite gradually happened, namely: metropolitanization, a trend boosted by TGV trains and optical fiber. Looking more closely at a few recent experiments, such as the one cofunded by DATAR in 2004 in Cantal (MESSULAM & BARON 2013), we gauge the interest that telework represented for a commune (Murat) as new households were set up in a deserted, hyper-rural area. Nonetheless, economic incentives, the availability of high bit rate connectivity and a "telecenter" did not suffice to reach a critical mass for stimulating a groundswell. Apart from the self-employed and very small firms, it turned out to be very hard to convince employers to place their wage-earners in the telework centers. To make savings, employers had to be able to reduce the surface area of their main plant or offices. Another major impediment was cultural. Unlike English-speaking lands, France is a country where a still traditional management focuses narrowly on office hours and physical presence. In the first decade of the new millennium, few managers were yet convinced about this new way of working, whether from home or from a center set up for it. Besides, basic amenities were lacking: day-care centers, maternities, hospitals, post offices, retail businesses, or even rail lines with regular service. The history of the French railroad network over the past century apparently confirms the existence of a tight correlation between economic development in local areas and the rail grid, as described in detail in Pierre Messulam and Nacima Baron's article.

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[3] DATAR (Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale): https://www.lesechos.fr/1993/05/teletravail-la-datar-va-lancer-un-nouvel-appel-a-projets-904682.

Figure 1: The French railroad system's rail lines reached their maximum length in the 1930s.
Source: MESSULAM & BARON (2013).
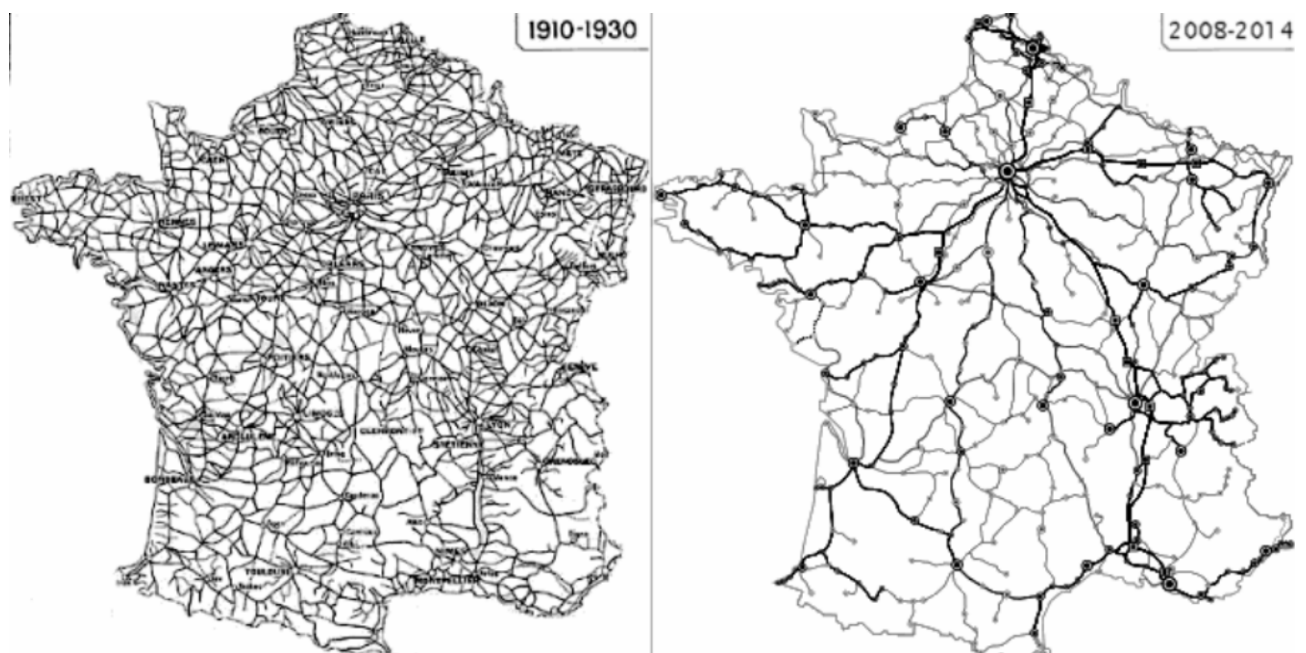
The digital revolution at the workplace: From coworking to flex space

The turn of the century was synonymous with the democratization of the Internet. The individual ownership of computers and smartphones along with a generalization of high and then very high bit rates for connectivity laid the conditions for the coming of the information society, which had been announced several years earlier by many pundits and popularized by Al Gore, vice-president of the United States. Originating in Berlin in 1999 and then developed in Silicon Valley ten years later, coworking received a stimulus from the financial and economic meltdown in 2008, when many people in the labor force were suddenly laid off and became self-employed. Coworking gradually spread among firms, and the digital revolution became a catalyst for transforming jobs. Thanks to the hyperconnectivity due to very high bit rates on land lines and via mobile connections, people can work anywhere when they want to.

The traditional office's spatiotemporal constraints were loosened, as office space became more flexible ("flex offices" or "flex space"). Why keep a full-time office when a variety of workplaces are used from week to week: the head office, home, a branch office, a coworking center, an office in a client's firm, or a seat, comfortable and connected, in a high-speed train? For many working people, the office amounts to a computer connected to a network (like the name of the most used sort of software in the world: "office suites"). Offices have been dematerialized. According to ARSEG's regular surveys, the annual cost of a work station amounts to about €12,000 (apart from travel expenses). This pushes many a firm toward flex spaces. According to Jones Lang Lassalle IP, Inc., "*flexible office space will account for 30% of some corporate portfolios by 2030*".[4] This digital revolution in the world of work is an irreversible, worldwide trend. According to the French Ministry of Labor, it will affect nearly eight million people, almost a third of the country's labor force.[5]

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[4] https://www.jll.fr/fr/espace-presse/flexible-office-space-grow-30-percent-per-year-five-years-report-flex-space-jll

[5] https://www.journaldunet.com/management/ressources-humaines/1490139-l-apres-coronavirus-la-generalisation-du-teletravail/

Peripheral France and the Yellow Vests

Nonetheless, the majority of the labor force — drivers who make deliveries, nurses, cash register clerks, gardeners, craftsmen or small merchants — will never be able to "telecommute". Quartered in the suburbs of big metropolitan areas or ousted to what has been called "peripheral France", these workers were the grassroots of the Yellow Vest movement, which sprung up in opposition to a gasoline tax. For them, work is still a place where they go, most of them by car, sometimes at more than fifty kilometers from home. Gasoline costs account for up to a third of their monthly earnings. They pay a high cost to go to work. For these socioeconomic categories, telecommuting is not possible and probably will never be. In addition, their jobs figured on the "front line" during the pandemic. Inside firms and French society, the social "fracture" between blue- and white-collars is probably going to become more severe owing to the growing divide separating those who are eligible for "remote work" from the others.

As much can be said about coworking, which is still mostly an urban phenomenon that affects the social classes with an "educational endowment" who are "comfortable" with digital technology. The greater urban area of Lyon has 64 coworking centers, but 82% of them are downtown.[6] Viable business models are hard to come by far from the downtown areas of big cities that exercise a centrifugal force.

The emergence of shared work spaces

With the backing of CGET, the foundation Travailler Autrement carried out a long survey of shared work spaces in France (LEVY-WAITZ *et al.* 2018). This report, which detected about 1463 shared work spaces, has exposed a geographical imbalance in favor of metropolitan areas. More than half (54%) of these spaces are located downtown in 22 cities, which concentrate but a third of the country's population.

However the government has asked CGET to facilitate the installation of such spaces in rural areas and underprivileged urban zones.[7] We wonder whether this decentralization will have any more impact than the many projects previously launched by DATAR. Despite the good intentions, is there not much too inconsistency between public policies (national and European) in favor of metropolitanization and these less regular "initiatives" that lack impact?

The sanctification of telework during the COVID-19 pandemic

Working from home became much more common during the period of sheltering in place, even under conditions that were very often unsatisfactory: child care, home schooling, firms' lack of preparedness, problems with equipment and connectivity, or the poor ergonomics of home work stations. Nonetheless, this experience is probably going to be decisive for wreaking structural changes. Beyond persistent problems related to the infrastructure, equipment and metropolitanization, the main factors preventing this paradigm switch have been cultural. As Jean Monnet said, "*People only see change when of necessity and only see the necessity when in a crisis.*"

Upon reading the many surveys on telework during the COVID-19 pandemic, we notice that a large majority of wage-earners now want to work more regularly from home despite the poor conditions. This comes as no surprise since they were already won over to this idea. What is new is that employers and managers are embracing it. They have had to face the facts: what seemed impossible has turned out to be possible. Within a few hours, firms switched to telework (sometimes 100%), and they have observed that this way of organizing the labor force allowed for continuity

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[6] https://www.rue89lyon.fr/2019/12/15/la-difficile-implantation-des-lieux-de-coworking-a-la-campagne/

[7] The so-called "Fabriques de territoires": https://www.cget.gouv.fr/actualites/lancement-de-l-ami-pour-les-300-fabriques-de-territoires

without lessening output. Without telework, the economy would have ground to a full stop. Assembly lines and services depend on digital technology and connectivity.

Employers and managers now have difficulty finding reasons for refusing telework to wage-earners who have successfully worked from home during the pandemic, even in poor conditions. Some big firms like PSA or Facebook have already announced that they are going to have massive recourse to telework.[8] This trend will redesign, on a large scale, a new geography of the world of work.

Drawing a roadmap for this new geography of work

The current health crisis has accomplished a feat. During eight weeks, the two major promises of telework have been fulfilled: a drastic reduction of automobile circulation and a deconcentration of the urban population by moving part of it to the countryside. According to statistics,[9] nearly 1.2 million inhabitants of Île-de-France (the region including the city of Paris) took refuge in the French countryside during the period of sheltering in place; and about half of them worked from their place of residence. Although it is unlikely that a significant number of people will move permanently to rural areas during the coming months, the democratization of telework will probably have an impact on commuting and on territorial development in the middle and long run. The awareness of the benefits in terms of the quality of life, financial savings and the reduction of transportation time will decisively affect behavioral patterns.

What remains to be done is to draw a "roadmap" for this massive shift toward remote working. After all, abolishing spatiotemporal borders does not at all mean that a roadmap is not needed. A new equilibrium has to be found between being physically present and at a distance so as to preserve the quality of life of people in the labor force and the quality of their social relations. Once the drawbacks of working from home have been measured, shared work spaces will probably have a major place in the future of work and its new geographical distribution.

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[8] Respectively:
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