

Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania & Sweden

Reflections on an EU initiative on telework and a right to disconnect

Increased digitalisation continues to influence the world of work and provides new opportunities for workers and companies, carrying a great potential for boosting European competitiveness. Many workers are now able to work remotely and at any time. This offers great potential for making it easier to reconcile work life and private life. However, for some workers, digital tools may inadvertently make it more difficult to *disconnect* – with the risk of promoting an unhealthy ‘always on’ work culture. Work-related burnout should not be part of modern work life, nor the unintended consequence of modern technologies.

For European prosperity, social fairness and competitiveness to thrive, we should strive to benefit from the opportunities of flexible working arrangements for companies and workers alike, while ensuring that the balance between work and leisure time is healthy and sustainable for workers across sectors.

To address those challenges, the President of the European Commission has proposed to introduce a *right to disconnect*. Designing a European initiative on a right to disconnect – while maintaining the positive aspects of telework – is a complex endeavour, spanning diverse sectors and labour market models across the EU Member States. In Member States, where national or local initiatives and mutual agreements between workers and employers are already in place, these should be carefully taken into account.

It is crucial that we foster healthy and sustainable working conditions as part of a competitive business environment in Europe. The impact of action in this area should be considered from multiple policy perspectives calculating the possible costs and benefits, both economic and social.

At a time, when competitiveness is a top priority of the EU, we need to find solutions that contribute to this overarching objective and cannot afford to hamper competitiveness:

- Any initiative in this area should leave room and flexibility to accommodate specific circumstances, different sectors, and respect differences between Member States. This is best achieved by keeping the level of detail to a minimum. Applying identical rules across very different sectors and circumstances is not effective; any initiative would have to consider differences in for example the hospital sector compared to the financial sector and would also have to recognise differences across employee groups within sectors. Employers and workers already navigate complex sets of rules related to working time, health and safety. While new, burdensome and rigid initiatives should be avoided, the potential consequences associated with increased connectivity and availability demands should not be ignored.

At a time, when fostering social dialogue is a top priority of the EU, we must ensure the autonomy of the social partners:

- Any initiative should closely involve actors with knowledge of the challenges and how to best address them. At the national level, some Member States already have experiences with establishing a right to disconnect. At the local level, employers’ organisations and trade unions possess crucial information on potential challenges and solutions. Any initiative should consider those experiences and perspectives and must leave room for these, including the possibility for the social partners to agree on solutions via collective agreements.

We hope that the above reflections can be helpful when considering ways forward on this topic.

November 2024