

# H.R. Insights #03

## Full Remote Skills

WHAT SKILLS DOES AN  
EFFECTIVE TELEWORKER NEED?

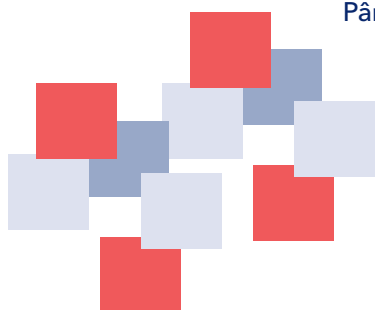


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PERFORMANCE  
CONNECTING DECISION TO TALENT

GROUPE  
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GESTION DES COMPÉTENCES ET DYNAMIQUE PROFESSIONNELLE

# REZUMAT



Până în anul 2020, telemunca integrală viza doar 2% dintre angajați. Însă, după carantina impusă de criza sanitară din martie 2020, telemunca „**full remote**” (integral la distanță) vizează aproximativ 25% dintre angajații din Franța. În plus, performanța telelucrătorilor este, în prezent, esențială pentru a menține activitatea întreprinderilor. Care sunt competențele specifice care trebuie să fie mobilizate pentru a fi performanți lucrând de la distanță? Ce măsuri trebuie să fie luate, concret, pentru a continua să lucrăm împreună cu ceilalți membri ai organizației?

Studiul prezentat în acest document analizează traiectoriile profesionale, performanțele și competențele comportamentale ale unui grup de 317 de telelucrători în perioada 2009 - 2019, aceștia fiind reprezentativi pentru populația lucrătorilor „**full remote**” anterior crizei de COVID-19.

Acest grup se caracterizează, în primul rând, prin eterogenitatea ratelor de succes înainte și după episodul de telemuncă. Grupul a inclus atât colaboratori foarte performanți, pentru care telemunca a fost o recompensă, cât și colaboratori neperformanți.

Aceste diferențe între ratele de succes și traiectoriile profesionale înainte, în timpul și după episodul de telemuncă sunt explicate prin diferențele între nivelurile de stăpânire a unui număr de cinci competențe. Iar aceste competențe ilustrează cerințele specifice telemuncii. Colaboratorul care lucrează de la distanță, prin absența sa fizică și prin neincluderea sa în schimburile informale, riscă, în cele din urmă, să fie marginalizat. Cele cinci competențe identificate în acest studiu descriu un mod de coordonare care permite depășirea constrângerilor telemuncii. Este vorba despre coordonarea narativă, care constă în principal în a le permite celor prezenți să își imagineze ce fac cei absenți.

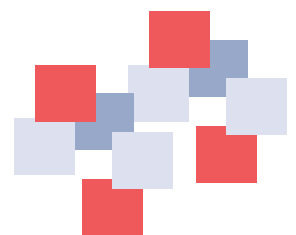


# INTRODUCTION

The study presented herein analyses the career paths, performance and soft skills of a group of remote workers between 2009 and 2019. It was conducted in January 2020 to support the implementation of teleworking in a normal context. However, since then, the situation has taken on a whole new dimension. The global pandemic and fear of contamination has led to an abrupt shift in the working conditions of employees worldwide. At least 25% of them, and even 50%, depending on the countries and estimates, have now become full-time remote workers, in other words, employees who work exclusively from home. Uncertainty regarding a return to normal conditions as well as the personal wishes of many individuals mean that a large number of European employees will continue to work from home in the coming months.

The questions that emerge today concern the performance of remote workers. How, in the unprecedented situation that we are now experiencing, can we maintain optimal operations in organisations? And, more specifically, exactly what skills are needed to be an efficient remote worker?

The study examines the 'full remote' worker population before the Coronavirus crisis. It sheds light on the distinctive features of this population, as much in terms of their past career paths, their functions and skills as in their performance both prior to and following the teleworking episode. The findings lead us to put forward some proposals that both managers and the new remote workers may find useful.



# TELEWORKING TO DATE

## Background

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The appearance of telecommuting in the 1970s was as much the outcome of technological advances as a strategic choice. Following the oil crisis in 1973, the search for ways to reduce journeys, traffic jams, pollution and consumption led to the emergence of an initial series of reflections on the advantages of working from home. Jack Nills, a NASA engineer, suggested taking the work to the workers rather than bringing the workers to work, and convinced businesses to examine the issue. They saw two advantages, the first of which was to close the gap between the geographic areas where qualified populations lived and those where the jobs were found. IBM, for example, saw it as a means to hire IT specialists, mainly located on the west coast, who were unwilling to move to the head offices situated in the state of New York. Other companies, aware that job opportunities for women would continue to grow, looked for ways to help these employees to balance their different spheres of life. This led to a form of segmentation right from the outset of the teleworking idea, in other words, remote working for an elite that reflected their bargaining power with their employer, and remote working for lower-level employees, based less on individual bargaining power and more on the collective arrangements available to them.

The impact of these pioneering choices remained minimal, however, as the technological possibilities were still limited and costly. IT networks were only in the early stages and very slow. Computers were not yet personal devices but huge,

unwieldy machines. The emergence of mobile technologies in the 1990s revived the debate. Personal computers, mobile phones and internet made instant interaction between geographically distant colleagues possible. The West's shift towards a knowledge economy and the programmed decline in factory jobs led to a new political awareness. European and national agreements were signed to facilitate the adoption of teleworking (thus avoiding changes to employment contracts) and to guarantee equal rights between remote workers and others. In short, access to legal rights, the democratisation of personal computers, the spread of high-speed internet connections and, more recently, the development of videoconference tools (especially Skype in 2003) gradually made the context more doable.

The number of employees working from home in Europe has been steadily growing since the beginning of 2000. In 2019, it reached 10.9%<sup>1</sup>. However, this growth needs clarifying as teleworking was largely on a partial (a few days a week, every week) or occasional (a few days from time to time) basis, and the number of employees working from home full time remained marginal: in 2019, it was just 1.56%.

<sup>1</sup>Source: Eurostat





## Organisational details

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Full-time teleworking means a complete switch for the employee from working on the company premises to working from home. It thus implies belonging to an organisation (teleworking is not sub-contracting) and requires technical resources. More concretely, the remote worker's activity is considerably influenced by four characteristics that make the situation very different from traditional work.

### **Autonomy**

Remote workers have less access to advice or support from their colleagues and consequently have to make more decisions alone.

### **Schedule management**

Whether an advantage or a handicap, working from home means that the relationship with time is more flexible. Remote workers can organise their time as they wish and are no longer bound by a company's time-based rituals (breaks, lunch, etc.), but it also means that they need to balance their working hours with time spent with the family, which is equally challenging.

### **Task interdependence**

Like all employees, remote workers need others before they can act. This implies adopting alternative means of communication and coordination to traditional forms of interpersonal contact. However, at the same time, they must also manage uncertainty due to a lack of information.



## Isolation and absence

Remote workers can lack emotional and operational social support. The absence of colleagues means they miss out on some positive back up as well as on complementary skills. In remote working situations, requests for help are more formal and less spontaneous. For this reason, individuals working from home are cut off from much of the informal news that informs their everyday understanding of company life, depriving them of the means to understand the decisions and standards that underpin the work. At the same time, their physical absence results in their colleagues constructing an imaginary perception of their work since their performance is less visible.

For all of these reasons, working from home implies changing the way individuals coordinate. In-company work provides opportunities for formal coordination (explicit instructions, processes...) as well as informal interstitial coordination. Chats at the coffee machine or during a smoking break are examples of this type of coordination. It is in the interstices, in other words, the breaks between formal situations, that important information is passed on in a more flexible way. It is also in these moments, when the formal is brushed aside, that employees can ask questions and "talk straight". In short, to maintain their level of performance, remote workers must find alternatives to this kind of interstitial coordination.

These are just some of the drawbacks traditionally observed in remote working situations. Studies frequently identify increased conflict the workers' private and professional lives, for instance. On the other hand, teleworking also has benefits: e.g., better quality of life, more autonomy, greater engagement and improved health. The main challenge, however, remains the performance of remote workers.<sup>2</sup> Previous studies have shown that the remote work situation has a

<sup>2</sup>Allen, T.D., Golden, T.D., & Shockley, K.M? (2015). How effective is telecommuting? Assessing the status of our scientific findings. *Psychological Science*, 16 (2), pp. 40-68.



globally negative impact on performance and careers. However, the impact is mixed: it affects women more than men, and low-level employees more than managers. These observations give rise to three questions that we examine in the following analysis.

1. Who are full-time remote workers really?
2. What soft skills are needed to be efficient in a remote working situation?
3. What kind of coordination replaces the interstitial coordination that is lacking when working from home?

# THE STUDY

## Methodology

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The data were extracted from a database that, since 2007, has followed almost 200,000 French workers, representative of the working population as a whole. From this database, we selected a group of individuals that had experienced a full-time remote work situation with a permanent contract for at least three years. The database contains a half-yearly assessment of a number of interesting factors:

- Salary;
- Performance (as evaluated by the manager during the last annual performance meeting);
- Hierarchical position and number of steps up the ladder since the beginning of their career;
- 17 soft skills or behavioural skills;
- The job, the status, the tasks, age and gender

Based on this set of data, we were able to analyse the career path that led to them being in the teleworking situation, who performs best and, finally, what happens to their career following the remote working experience.

## **Inset: the 17 soft skills tested**

While job skills are almost endless as they represent all the different jobs out there, soft skills are limited in number as they are transversal and thus common to numerous jobs.

The 17 skills set out below are evaluated by acknowledged psychometric scales. They also share the fact that they form a coherent list that covers the whole spectrum of behaviours meaningfully linked to performance in a wide range of jobs.

<b>UNDERSTANDING ONE'S ORGANISATION</b>	Seeking to understand and put to good use the company's rules and strategy
<b>UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF OTHERS</b>	Being able to relevantly look for and understand the needs of internal and external customers
<b>RESOLVING COMPLEX PROBLEMS</b>	Being able to analyse a complex problem, identify solutions and rationally arbitrate between them
<b>HAVING A CRITICAL MINDSET</b>	Being able to judiciously call common practices into question
<b>CREATING INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS</b>	Being able to use one's knowledge and imagination to draw up alternatives to frequently adopted solutions
<b>BUILDING A PERSONAL VISION FOR ONE'S ACTIVITY</b>	Harnessing present knowledge of one's activity to formulate a relevant personal strategy
<b>IDENTIFYING RESOURCE PEOPLE</b>	Having a good understanding of the skills, influence and potential contributions of the people around you
<b>COOPERATING</b>	Knowing how to work with people from various hierarchical positions and with a variety of skills
<b>KNOWING ONESELF</b>	Developing a keen understanding of one's skills, influence and potential contributions
<b>TAKING RISKS</b>	Taking action by testing new solutions
<b>REMAINING STRONGLY COMMITTED TO THE COMPANY IN THE LONG TERM</b>	Adhering to the company culture and values and identifying with them
<b>MANAGING STRESS IN AMBIGUOUS SITUATIONS</b>	Having the capacity to continue to decide and act, even when things are unpredictable
<b>PROMOTING A PROJECT</b>	Ensuring the successful promotion of an action, a service or a product
<b>DRIVING A GROUP EFFORT</b>	Activating members of a group to boost their engagement and their performance
<b>CONTRIBUTING TO A GROUP OUTCOME</b>	Lending one's skills and support to a group effort
<b>ORGANISING THE WORK OF A GROUP</b>	Knowing how to allocate assignments, tasks or projects with respect to the different resources held by the members of a team
<b>GUIDING THE WORK OF A GROUP</b>	Being able to build shared goals





# FINDINGS

## Who were remote workers before 2020?

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The database contained 317 subjects with the target characteristics (permanent contract, full-time teleworking for at least three years). They mainly held managerial positions (53%), were male (57%), working for a company with over 1000 employees (56%) in the service sector (46%), and with an average age of 34 years. Their demographic characteristics are very similar to those found in a study conducted by the *Comptoir de la Nouvelle Entreprise* in 2019 (Table 1). Our 317 individuals are thus representative of the population of French remote workers.

### Demographic characteristics of remote workers according to the two studies

	<i>Comptoir de la Nouvelle Entreprise</i> report (2019)	Study data
Executives	51%	53%
Employees in firms with +1000 payroll	49%	56%
Employees in service companies	45%	46%
Men	57%	56%
Average age	34 years	35 years

As the diagram below demonstrates, the distribution of remote workers varies considerably depending on the job description and hierarchical status. We primarily find them in support roles and among low-level employees. 17% work in low level finance-accounting positions. Despite digitalisation, accounting tasks require a lot of data entry work that can easily be done remotely. 22% can also be found in facilities management but are virtually absent from operations management roles; there were none in management and just 3% in low-level jobs. In support roles, the rarity of remote workers in HR and sales may be due to several factors. There are few low-level employees in the HR sector, which explains why there are so few among remote workers. However, many work in sales and marketing positions, although employees in this sector are mainly sales people, highly connected to the point of sale and thus more difficult for remote workers to manage.

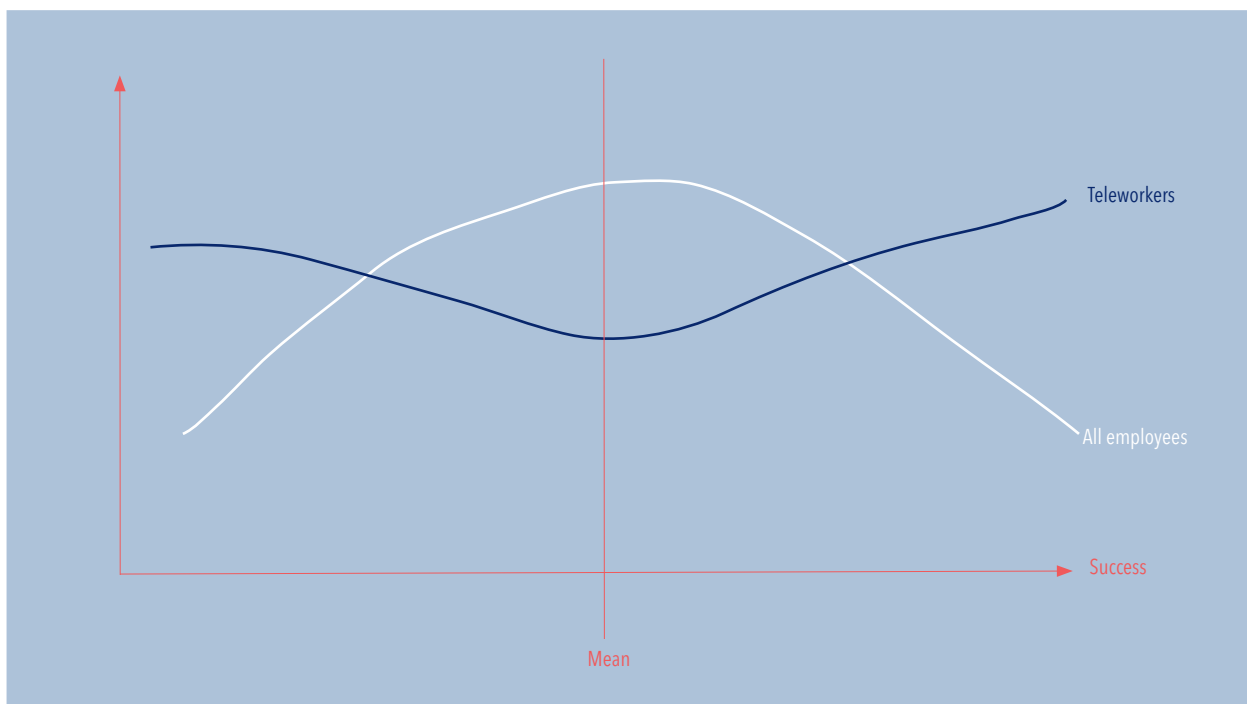
### Distribution of remote workers by role and hierarchical status

EXECUTIVES		5 %				
	HR	Finance-accounting	Sales Marketing	Operations	Support roles	
SENIOR MANAGERS	2 %	1 %	2 %	0 %	0 %	53 %
LINE MANAGERS AND MANAGERS	15 %	15 %	17 %	0 %	0 %	
LOW-LEVEL EMPLOYEES	2 %	17 %	3 %	3 %	22 %	47 %

Managers in support roles make up the largest ratio of remote workers with 15% in HR and finance-accounting, and 17% in sales and marketing. Assuming that managers in marketing and sales positions are mostly marketers, this means that they hold jobs where the impact of digitalisation makes working from home possible. Finally, it is extremely rare to find senior managers and directors working from home.

Their distribution in terms of roles and status is not the only difference that distinguishes remote workers from other employees. We constructed an aggregated success indicator that links salary with job performance and the number of steps up the ladder since the start of their career. The distribution of these individual success scores is significantly different among remote workers.

### **Distribution of career success among remote workers vs. the overall population**





Comparison of these two curves shows a fundamental characteristic of remote workers before 2020. Individuals from this group with an average success score appear under-represented. On the other hand, individuals with a high or a low success score are overrepresented. In short, the absence of middle-of-the-road employees is a specific feature of remote workers.

This can be explained by interindividual differences.

## Who worked from home before 2020?

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Separating the performance variables allows us to identify the existence of two clearly distinct subgroups of individuals who became teleworkers. The data is collected from the period preceding their remote working situation.

### Characteristics of the two groups

	Group 1 Teleworking reward	Group 2 Teleworking opportunity
Status	Managers	Low-level employees
Age	37	34
Gender	Men	Women
Role	HR, marketing	HR, finance-accounting
Aggregated success	Above average	Below average



The first group is made up of successful male executives with higher than average success scores. For them, the chance to work from home was a reward and a retention strategy. Companies undoubtedly allowed them to work from home to ensure they remained in the company. However, they had to be excellent to belong to this group.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the second group concerns non-managerial women whose success score is below average. They are younger than the members of the preceding group. In their case, being able to work from home is seen as an opportunity. It is neither a sanction nor a reward, but rather the possibility to take advantage of a corporate policy or locally based remote working agreement. The employees who benefit from this option have a low skills level and are unlikely to be acknowledged for their potential. It is probably not considered important to keep a close eye on them.

## **What happened to the teleworkers?**

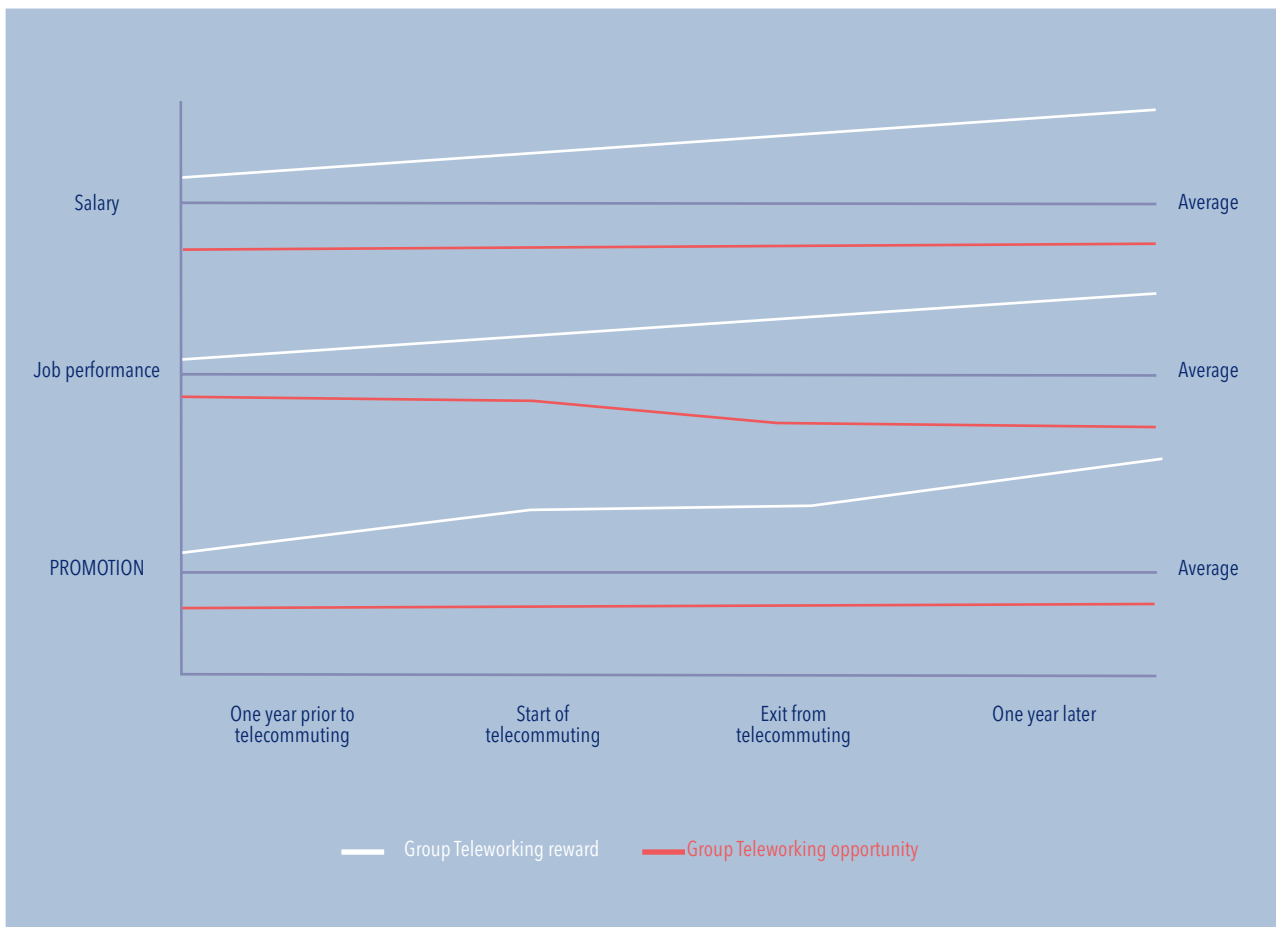
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The same data allowed us to analyse the careers of remote workers who returned to work in the company premises. 378 individuals fit this description. The average length of the remote working period was 3.7 years.

Their performance prior to the working from home episode (see above) is a strong predictor of the following stages and the performance level that is subsequently reached. When the remote workers have enjoyed a successful career path (group 1, teleworking reward), their success continues throughout the teleworking period and again when they return to an on-site activity. Their salary, their hierarchical

level and their performance all increase. In short, working from home extends their success curve. On the hand, remote workers with more modest jobs re-join their on-site jobs with no particular gain. In these cases, their previous performance begins to stagnate or even decline and their performance appears to be slightly less appreciated when they return to their on-site job;

### SUCCESS FACTOR TRENDS FOR THE TWO REMOTE WORKER GROUPS



## Which soft skills make effective remote workers?

Do the 17 behavioural skills measured in the remote workers in our sample determine their success in general? Are there any differences according to hierarchical status?

6 of 17 behavioural skills have a significant impact on remote workers' performance: i.e., knowing oneself, resolving complex issues, identifying resource people, and promoting and understanding the company. Most of the other skills on the list have only a marginal impact on performance. This is especially true of management and leadership skills. Finally, stress management skills, risk-taking and creativity have a significant negative impact on the performance of remote workers.

### Influences on the performance of teleworkers

Negative influence	Positive or negative but non-significant influence	Positive influence
Creating innovative solutions Taking risks	Having a critical mindset Building a personal vision for one's activity Cooperating Remaining strongly committed to the group in the long term Managing stress in ambiguous situation Driving a group effort Contributing to a group outcome Organising the work of a group Guiding the work of a group	Understanding one's organisation Understanding the needs of others Resolving complex problems Identifying resource peoples Knowing oneself Promoting a project

This configuration is relevant at all levels of the hierarchy, but it intensifies at management level. The higher up the career ladder, the closer the link between these 6 skills and success.

## Skills portrait of the effective remote worker

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High-performing remote workers have a good understanding of their resources and those of their organisation. They are also comfortable with complexity. We can assume that they have numerous points of contact with the different departments and that their interactions with the company do not go exclusively through their line manager. These skills match the remote working characteristics mentioned earlier, in other words, they support autonomy, the new relationship with time and task interdependence. Effective remote workers also know how to promote their achievements. They can therefore manage being cut off from others thanks to behaviour that allows them to showcase what they have done. This skill means that other workers can visualise their output despite not being able to see it with their own eyes. It means that they are not forgotten and that their actions form part of the company's day-to-day operations. Finally, they know how to get acknowledgement for their projects and achievements. They work on remaining visible and boosting their image to compensate for their physical absence. On the other hand, they do not invest in innovation. Effective remote workers no doubt understand that in order to be visible, they must be intelligible. They are therefore more likely to emphasise respect for processes and conformity than innovation. In fact, the main pitfall that can threaten remote workers is invisibility. Absence feeds imagination. How do other members of the company envisage what the remote workers do when they are not there? Are they perceived as absorbed in their work, or as immersed in their family, busy with all sorts of activities other than work? Remote workers thus need to compensate for their absence with demonstrations and information that allows other staff members to construct a favourable image of them. Finally, they must tell the story of their work to compensate for not being able to demonstrate it on a daily basis. Effective remote workers thus replace interstitial coordination by storytelling coordination, acting as the *storytellers* of their lives as remote workers.





# CONCLUSION

## **Working from home, success, skills and coordination methods**

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Until 2020, only a small minority of workers were able to work from home full time. This group was characterised first by its uniformity in terms of success. The salaries, promotion and performance of teleworkers was either above or below average. The absence of middle-of-the-road career success was a key characteristic of this population, reflected in the different career paths prior to the teleworking situation. In exchange for their loyalty, an elite group with hard-to-find skillsets had the power to negotiate remote working conditions compatible with their specific lifestyle choices. This is the “teleworking reward” group. The “teleworking opportunity” group, on the other hand, concerns more readily available, less essential employees, who are also less productive. For them, being able to work from home was a solution to a specific need in time (maternity in particular, as this group is largely young and female), with a process written into the company convention being activated rather than the power of individual negotiation.

The two groups are also characterised by their career paths after the period of working from home. Individuals in the “teleworking reward” group continue to forge ahead with a successful career, while the members of the “teleworking opportunity” group pursue their careers in the same way as before, continuing to follow below average career paths. Differences in their ability to apply five skills explain these variations in success and career paths before, during and after the period of working from home. The five skills are Knowing oneself, Resolving complex problems, Identifying resource people, and Promoting and Understanding one’s organisation. These skills also illustrate the specific demands of working from home which, above all, involve coping with the disappearance of informal communication channels. Informal chats in the interstices of time, when

'off-the-cuff' information can be passed on, disappear. Nothing spontaneously replaces them. Given their physical absence and their distance from informal discussions, employees working from home may eventually be faced with the threat of finding themselves on the periphery of the organisation. The five skills identified in the present study describe a form of coordination that can help to overcome the challenges of working from home: this is the storytelling or narrative coordination, whose main contribution is to allow on-site workers to visualise what their absent colleagues are doing, replacing the interstitial coordination.

## **Working from home in the time of the Covid-19**

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Since March 2020 and the nationwide lockdowns to fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, 25% of active workers have become telecommuters. This is a massive change as, in the first instance, it led to a major shift in the remote worker population. At management level, remote working became the norm for executives of every kind. The diversification of profiles has given a wider range of employees the chance to work from home, and not just the "reward" or "opportunity" categories described above. Teleworking is now moving to the mainstream. At the time of writing, no one knows when people will be able to return to normal on-site working conditions. No one knows how long the teleworking situation will last and how this unprecedented situation will permanently change people's behaviour.

**Below are a few suggestions based on the study findings**

**During the lockdown: promote the storytelling coordination strategy and measure its impact**

Storytelling coordination underpins the success of remote workers. It helps them



to ensure that their contributions are visible despite their physical absence. It is therefore useful to foster its emergence in all remote workers. One way to do this is to let everyone share what they have done during the day in virtual meetings, together with their schedule for the coming days. These narratives can include personal activities as well as professional ones, making them more authentic. Not everyone finds it easy to promote their actions and achievements: managers therefore need to ensure that everyone is given the time and means to express themselves. As we have seen, teleworking leads to greater conformity and respect for processes rather than innovation. The Covid-19 crisis and the obvious anxiety it induces has a similar effect. However, the situation should provide an opportunity for innovation, as much for clients and products as for the work organisation. Not only does it provide a chance to respond to this challenge, but also to create project teams, test ideas and tools, and to develop feedback of individual experiences. Finally, managers and business leaders may find it useful to introduce applications that can measure the firm's social climate in real time.

#### **After the lockdown: creating conditions conducive to teleworkers' performance**

Remote working could find itself a victim of the 'swede effect': these easily-grown vegetables were so closely linked to rationing and the German occupation that they were completely rejected after the liberation. It is possible then that when the lockdown is lifted, teleworking will be rejected and there will be an enthusiastic return to open-spaces. However, it is also possible that, on the contrary, it will have given more workers an opportunity to discover the benefits of a different form of organisation that is hard to abandon. Identifying workers who can benefit from teleworking will no doubt be the key to its renewed interest as, in every business organisation, the lockdown will have its stars, its unsung heroes and maybe its losers. As teleworking becomes more widespread, ensuring the success of these workers from home will be crucial and managers will need to make that their skills are closely aligned with those needed for effective performance. Failing that, such skills will need to be developed.





# METHODOLOGY

Data collected between 2007 and 2019. Data processed in January 2020.

## **Aggregated success indicator**

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Factorial analysis. One factor aggregates all the variables and explains over 50% of total variance.

## **Determinants of aggregated success scores**

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Linear regressions.



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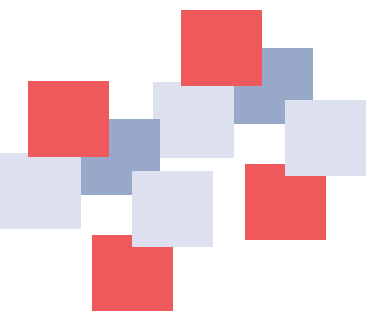
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The AKSIS group offers support services for career development across France. By taking the needs and potential of individuals as well as companies into account, its goal is to give employees, job seekers and young graduates and school leavers access to jobs, or helping them define and implement their career plan.

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