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Reconstructing the Borders and the Definitions  
of Home and Work in the Context of Telecommuting  
in Poland

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### Abstract

This paper presents the results of intensive ethnographic research into a group of contemporary Polish teleworkers and their families. Recent media representations of home-located working activities show that the fusion of work and home in the same space may occur in the near future, but telework remains a new and challenging situation for many households. Working at home on the basis of telecommuting may not represent an opportunity but rather a major challenge, causing significant problems for and limitations on both family and work life. The ethnographic research describes newly established practices of everyday living in the different structures - 'the daily puzzles of real people who live their work and households lives' (DeVault, 1999: 52). Through the use of a mix of qualitative methods (in pair interviews, photography and diaries) research methodology is developed to investigate the household as a socio-spatial situation. Accordingly, the article includes: a) a discussion of the theoretical issues related to telecommuting and work-life balance, b) an overview of the relevant literature, c) a description of the methodology of the study, and d) some conclusions about the issue of constructing and overcoming borders and the definitions of home and work in the context of telecommuting in Poland in the context of the establishment of work-life balance.

*Keywords:* telework, spatial boundaries, household duties, work-life balance.

Many professionals such as scholars and managers claim that the integration of home and work is the perfect strategy for creating harmony between the fields of professional work and private life. In reality, combining the spheres of private life and paid work in one significantly limited space (home) may create significant challenges. The establishment of a personal strategy of working at home depends on many factors. Generally speaking, one can distinguish between two strategies: a) segregation (involving strict internal divisions between paid work and family life at home) or, b) integration (when these boundaries are weaker) (see: López-Estrada, 2002).

### *The unfinished return of work to home*

The separation of home and work in the course of industrialization has had enormous implications for the construction of both individual and group identities. In the preindustrial and early industrial economy, the home was both a place for social reproduction and production. The industrial revolution brought in the separation of those two spheres and has changed the social construction not only of space but also of gender, age, sexuality, leisure, labor and personality (Allan and Crow, 1989). Nowadays, thanks to the dominance of new services in the economy, more flexible working arrangements and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), work is returning to the home. But this return does not simply involve the re-establishment of the conditions and identifications that come with pre-industrialization, not only because of broader civilizational changes that have since occurred, but also due to the shift in the nature of space itself.

The 'return' (the emphasis is obvious and necessary) to the home workplace involves the ongoing invention of new forms of working and the reestablishment of representations. In an industrial economy, the relationships between the time and space of work and non-work were relatively simple and linear, sequential and chronological. Now, because of changes in the location of work, those boundaries are becoming increasingly blurred. The construction of everyday working practices at home is having significant influence on social and symbolic ideas about 'home' and 'work'. Put differently, the process of 'return' is unfinished, and the very task of making progress with this situation is foisted onto individuals, partly due to the lack of coherent social representations of work at home. According to Toffler, who claims that the home will be/is the factual center of social life, this return to a pre-industrial state will strengthen and improve relations between household and community (Toffler, 1981).

### *Defining teleworkers*

To identify a telecommuter, one needs to know how much time they are actually spending on work in the private space of the home. In this context, we draw attention to Gurstein's typology (2001), based on a common-sense division between: 1) those who are employed as telecommuters and who work in a place other than the office of the employer, 2) those who work at home part-time on work-related tasks, and finally, 3) those who 'bring work home after hours'. For our study we were interested in the

practices of the first group; that is, those teleworkers who permanently work at home on a daily basis. Some of these individuals are self-employed, while others are employed at (mainly international) companies.

The second important criterion used in this paper to define telework is the form and the scope of the work itself. While the traditional concept of 'homeworking' relates to work that is based on the production of goods, telework should rather be understood as 'knowledge-based' work (Hopkinson et al., 2002). Employees included in our research operated in the field of the 'knowledge economy'. The authors were particularly interested in examining this sector of the labor market because of the potential tension in this area between private and working life: such work may not offer the opportunity for integration and may cause more conflict than traditional paid work that is undertaken at home (for knowledge workers it may be impossible to take direct advantage of work-related support from the family). In accordance with this goal, we identified many different professions: interpreters, copywriters, architects and interior designers, an IT specialist, a journalist, managers and other specialists.

Regarding the form of work, some scholars refuse to recognize the self-employed as teleworkers (Pyöriä, 2003), while others argue that this form of employment is typical of a large number of teleworkers. The research presented here assumes the latter point of view. The results of recent studies prove that telework in Poland is widely perceived simply as 'homework', both by employers and employees (Kucharski, 2008) and is often seen as being relatively independent from normal working practice. Moreover, self-employed people should be included in research efforts because this group is strongly represented among teleworkers (many of whom have led, are leading or plan to lead their own small companies in the near future). This characteristic of Polish telecommuting offers the researcher a chance to identify an interesting continuum of different solutions and strategies used by telecommuters for reconciling paid and unpaid work, or sustaining their work-life balance in the context of home.

To draw a line under the aforementioned difficulties with defining contemporary teleworking, we employ the minimal definition of telework and teleworker; namely, *a person who works away from their employer or client, by using computer and the Internet for the purpose of communication* (see Ellison, 1999; Sullivan, 2003). Moreover, in the context of the observed complexity of forms and styles of telecommuters that was captured during our research, it seems better not to refer to 'telework', but rather 'the work carried out at home on the principles of telework', or, - more broadly speaking - the 'worker anchored in the house' (Wilks and Billsberry, 2007).

The adoption of such a broad definition of ways of working, as mirrored in the nature of respondents' professions, is important in the context of examining work-life balance. The sense of control over work and personal life may be internalized to a greater or lesser extent, and is mirrored in the wide range of practices and techniques encountered on a daily basis. On the one hand, it can be assumed that those individuals who work for employers are more strongly embedded in the practice of teleworking due to the existence of forms of external control (personalized in the form of managers or coordinators, or as non-human actors such as pieces of software, etc.). On the other hand, self-employed teleworkers can feel that they are constantly under

pressure from customers and from other cohabitants/family members. This kind of tension may be more overwhelming for the self-employed teleworker, and its moderation requires far-reaching disciplinary practices.

### *Challenges of telecommuting*

This vision, however, focuses more on the symbolic issues than the practical utility of telecommuting (Jackson and Wielen, 1998: 3). The consequences of telecommuting on family relationships are of a paradoxical nature: on the one hand, for those who work in metropolitan areas<sup>1</sup> working outside the office saves time as it obviates the need for commuting and gives individuals a chance to work according to more flexible rules and schedules. On the other hand, working at home increases the risk that the division between the personal and professional spheres of life will become blurred (Halal, 1996); moreover, there is evidence that such types of work enhance the risk of overwork ('workaholism') (Olson, 1988).

The construction of everyday work practices at home has major implications for social and symbolic ideas about 'home' and 'work'. The notion of the home as a place of freedom from the surveillance and control mechanisms embedded in the workspace has lost its symbolic power. Last but not least, it is also important to examine gender roles in the private environment. For women, telecommuting may take on a different character and have different consequences than it does for men: from exploitation to liberation and empowerment (Beach, 1989).

Numerous authors (e.g. Beach, 1989) have claimed that the integration of home and work is a perfect strategy that builds harmony between the fields of professional work and private life. Others point out that working at home can lead to serious conflicts (Christensen, 1993). Moreover, as shown by Salmi (1996), experiences with telecommuting are rarely dichotomous but rather form a broad continuum of possible situations. The exact combination of the spheres of private life and paid work depends not only on such variables as gender, but also on other elements such as the nature of the work (and how much external control the worker has over it), the level of formal education of the worker and his/her partner, the age of the worker, the number and the age of any offspring, and previous experience with working at home (Estrada, 2002).

We assume, in line with what Estrada has stated, that a teleworker applies one of two main strategies to combine work and private life at home: a) segregation (with strict internal divisions between paid work and family life at home) or, b) integration (where the boundaries are weaker). These integration strategies are affected by the worker's control over the labor process, potential for flexible scheduling, family support and the involvement of other household members in the work performed by the worker. Conflict can arise when the spheres of work and family life overlap, and when working days are long and offspring are present.

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<sup>1</sup> In Polish metropolitan areas the average amount of time spent commuting is approximately eight hours per week according to the CBOS report *Mobilność na co dzień 2012 (Mobility everyday 2012)*.

As Nippert-Eng (1996) has noted, working at home means continuously dealing with internal borders. This performative aspect of boundary-making is affected by three factors:

1. the extent to which one sphere (e.g. work) overlaps the other sphere (e.g. private life),
2. the extent to which particular objects (including tools, technologies, and scenery) and ambience are similar in both spheres,
3. the extent to which employees' ways of thinking, acting and presenting themselves in both spheres are similar (Nippert-Eng, 1996: 8).

It is crucial to establish different types of borders, including (1) physical boundaries (e.g. a separate and permanent workplace/workspace) in order to enhance behavioral and psychological boundaries and clarify the division between work and leisure. While physical borders are relatively easy to set up and maintain, there are, however, (2) other boundaries (social, psychological and behavioral) that are more difficult to manage. Success in maintaining boundaries depends on the expectations of other family members, including children (Heck et al., 1995). While recognition of a worker's needs is the basis for the negotiation of borders, additional steps may need to be taken to sustain these borders.

### *Representations of telecommuting*

Telecommuting is presented and promoted as a way in which women can successfully combine work and family life. Working at home locates gender roles in the household at the very center of scrutiny (Felstead and Jewson, 2000). Recent media representations (in Polish media) of working activities located at home show that the fusion of work and home in the same space may once again become the norm, and that this situation may become reality for those engaged in postindustrial professions: for example, members of managerial and professional staff are often shown as being located in 'middle-class' domestic settings, surrounded by high-tech equipment, engaged in work via the use of ICT. Telecommuting as a form of home-based work is presented as being supportive of the greater involvement of parents in family life, greater equality with the sharing of domestic work and the partial erosion of traditional gender differences.

But, as research has proved, these advantages may not arise within double income families in which women are still responsible for the majority of unpaid work at home (Mirchandani, 2000). The decision to take up paid work at home means that teleworkers and other family members are forced to articulate and implement principles and beliefs about domestic space and time which are not normally expressed in a clear and direct form (Felstead and Jewson, 2000: 143). Telecommuting has different implications for male and female telecommuters. Studies suggest that a so-called 'integration strategy' is more commonly applied by women than by men (Haddon and Lewis, 1994). This is especially true of women who have small children (Salmi, 1996). On the other hand, in certain circumstances home-based work can be a source of power and control (see: Felstead and Jewson, 2000: 149-150; Estrada, 2002).

Several studies have highlighted the fact that both men and women evaluate paid homework as positive only when such work does not lead to changes in the performance of unpaid housework, defined traditionally as a female task (Gringeri, 1994: 103). Betty Beach (1989) found that women were more likely to treat the home as a place of work when children accompanied them during working hours. However, the presence of children also had significant impacts on working schedules: research revealed that when children were present women's working days were relatively shorter, often interrupted, since women are increasingly responsible for domestic duties. In the context of more equal societies, Michelson and Lindén's (1997) examination of 22 Swedish teleworkers indicated that gender was less significant in determining teleworkers' strategy than the status of the persons involved in such work (owner/employee/self-employed), working hours (full time/part-time job), and/or the amount of time spent at home.

### *Methodology*

The research described in this paper captures the tension between the daily lives of individuals caused by telework. A qualitative approach was applied since such methodology allows the examination of how the public-private dichotomy is realized on a daily basis in particular households. Thanks to the use of semi-structured interviews, the dynamics and multiplicity of *representations* and *techniques* which define the public and private and create the borders between workplace and home could be examined. Through these interviews with teleworkers and their partners the authors closely examined strategies employed on a daily basis and continuous changes in the sphere of representation.

36 households in three Polish metropolitan areas (Warsaw (1), Krakow (2), Tricity (3) including Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot) in which at least one teleworker lived and worked at home were included in the research. The authors chose 3 metropolitan areas because, according to statistics, there exist a greater number of jobs in the new economy in metropolitan areas in Poland<sup>2</sup>. To generate a heterogeneous sample of individuals who met the criteria mentioned above, the researchers organized by themselves informational companies and distributed information through local web pages and teleworker web-based services. Qualitative analysis software (MAXQDA) was used to assist in the latter part of the data analysis (both text and photos). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken directly with 36 teleworkers and their partners. These two types of interviews were supplemented by in-pairs interviews conducted at the last stage of the research. The construction of the research agenda allows examination of the impact of teleworking not only on the individuals directly involved, but also on their families.

Studying the private environment involves significant problems. As Vetere and Gale (1987) have observed, in this context it is difficult to gain access and conduct

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<sup>2</sup> The second reason is the fact that Gdańsk (plus Gdynia and Sopot), Kraków and Warsaw are located at over 300 km distance from another. For historical reasons, the cities have a different history of industrialization, entrepreneurship, work and employee rights, although the goal of the research was not to investigate the impact of these differences.

studies for a long period of time. Furthermore, when observing domestic practices, researchers may unintentionally infer the existence of specific patterns of practice. This is why several methods were used to find a balance between methodological correctness and full access to the day-to-day practices of households. The elements of observation were reduced to a minimum (limited to three interviews per household, unless the respondents agreed to further participate) and research was supported using other methods such as a detailed online diary (lasting one week per teleworker), and photo-essays which included comments and photos (27 individual shots) created by teleworkers by using disposable cameras.

### *Flexible timetables and personal needs*

Respondents claim that working at home requires the maintenance of a flexible timetable. According to one female respondent (Interviewee 1, a 54 year-old female headhunter living in Warsaw), if you work in an office and have a desk, you also have a strict timetable. Without this spatial delimitation, your timetable is flexible. Another female respondent (Interviewee 3, a 34 year-old female consultant based in Warsaw who writes articles about IT) claimed that having a flexible timetable allows her to adjust to home obligations: *'Thanks to this, I can schedule my working time. For instance, I may prepare dinner, and later, let's say, start working. After this, if my child calls for me, I can go to see her, do what is necessary and come back to work after I have finished with my domestic obligations.'*

Respondents evaluate the strategy of maintaining a flexible timetable positively, highlighting that having such a strategy allows them to adjust their work to their personal needs and the needs of dependent family members such as offspring and the elderly. For those who are not taking care of children, having a flexible timetable allows them to adjust their working hours to their personal needs. One female respondent (Interviewee 2, a 37 year-old female business coach based in Warsaw) claimed that working at home is different every day: *'As for the "phuses", I can schedule my timetable according to my needs. If I need to work two hours per day, I just work two hours. But if I need to work 10 or 12 hours, I can also do this. But it's up to me, not up to an employer who would be dissatisfied if I left the office after eight hours if I had enough work for 12.'* Another female respondent (Interviewee 1) stated that having a flexible timetable mirrored her personality and met her individual needs: *'Yes, I am happy because I am finally coherent [...] this gives me internal coherency, which means I do not do things that are not my strengths; that I am sure that I am an expert in what I do.'* The same attitude was identifiable with another female respondent, a filmmaker, who says that flexibility in terms of time is the very concept of personal freedom (Interviewee 6, 32 year-old female film director living in Warsaw): *'Why do I like to work at home? Because by doing this I express myself, I constantly develop - there are no limits to this development - nobody limits my freedom.'*

But having offspring means that telecommuters may develop alternative strategies: *'In fact, sometimes I get absorbed in my work. I wake up at 7, have lunch at my laptop, and I do not communicate with my family for a whole day, even though they are near to me during this time'* (Interviewee 1). The same female respondent

has developed another interesting strategy for maintaining separation: she stresses that one cannot work, sleep and eat in the same place: *'One has to get out from time to time, to change their environment'*.

In comparison, other female respondent who works as a copywriter (Interviewee 24, a 33 year-old living in Warsaw) finds that the need to continuously switch between meeting work and family obligations is annoying *'I would love to work in an office and focus only on my work. Working at home forces me to do things in my spare time: prepare dinner, take care of children, do the shopping; the result is that my work is of lower quality [...] Drawbacks to this work? A lack of time for working, sitting down and starting to work no matter what'*.

But flexibility may also result in the blurring of the boundaries between work and life. One female respondent hesitated when she was asked if she knew how to differentiate between work and non-work. She stated that she did not even call her work activities 'work' - instead, she talked about 'identity activities' which generate money (Interviewee 2). The same semantic shift occurs in the answers of a female respondent, a freelance journalist, whom claims that her work is 'a passion' (Interviewee 15, 39 year-old female, writer and journalist based in Warsaw).

In concluding, respondents may see the blurring of borders between home and work offered by telecommuting as a form of flexibility. This is regarded positively, since it provides these individuals with the opportunity to express themselves, to develop and to self-manage. Yet there is a difference between those telecommuters who take care of offspring and those who do not. For the latter, domestic obligations impact their working timetables, in some cases critically. These telecommuters develop different strategies to deal with this problem.

### ***Blurring boundaries between work and home***

The boundaries between home and work are weak, elastic and changeable. Sometimes this is useful for teleworkers. An architect who works at his father's architectural office located at his parents' house (in which he also grew up) provided an example of this: *'It's comfortable. Around lunch-time someone shouts: "Mark! Lunch is served!"; this is very convenient. When you are tired you can go to the TV room, sit down for a while and watch some news on TV. [Working hours] are not rigid'* (Interviewee 13, 36 year-old male living in Sopot). A marketing specialist said: *'I am a tennis fan. I can watch the Australian Open in real time while working - I couldn't do this at a regular office'* (Interviewee 23, a 37 year-old female marketer at a publishing house, living in Sopot).

But on the other hand, the overlap between private, public, work and private life is hard to maintain. Respondents admit they apply a 'shut-the-door' policy, having to convince themselves that their working day is over:

*'I have to watch myself. I have to find a moment, the moment I can decide: this is the end. Literally and mentally, I loudly close the laptop lid. ... And then this is the end'* said one respondent (Interviewee 21, a 39 year-old male engineer living in Gdańsk; an IT specialist working three days at the office, two at home for a major airline company).

The boundaries between the different social roles they play are far more difficult to maintain. In terms of the multiplicity of social roles ascribed to teleworking, one needs to stress not only the problem of establishing such roles but – and this may be even more important – of maintaining such roles. As Michelle Shumate and Janet Fulk state: *‘Communication is necessary not only for establishing roles, but also for maintaining boundaries among an individual’s multiple roles, such as worker versus parent versus spouse. A role boundary is a set of acceptable or expected activities that are negotiated between people in specified and understood roles. For instance, a homemaker’s “work” role behavior might consist of conference calls, e-mail, and creating computerized documents. Taking care of a sick child or doing laundry would be considered outside the boundaries of that role, but within the boundaries of the role of “parent”, “spouse”, or “family member” (Shumate and Fulk, 2004).* The respondents admit that they multitask and juggle different ‘off work’ roles during their working day such as the role of mother (*‘I feel I have to take care of this because I am at home’*; Interviewee 11); the role of neighbor (*‘I am a gatekeeper. Everybody knows now that I am at home so I have to open the gate to refuse collectors, to couriers, to the mailmen. It disturbs my work a lot’*; Interviewee 9, a 36 year-old female project manager for a clinical research organization living in Gdańsk); the role of father (*‘the events occurring at the kindergarten – I can always go there and watch. No need to take day off. It is good for the children’*; Interviewee 13, a 36 year-old male architect living in Sopot); the role of housewife (*‘there are some domestic duties you have to care of: dealing with the plumber, the electrician, etc. The service people appear and you have to take care of them’*; Interviewee 25, a 42 year-old male, web marketer and company owner living in Gdańsk); and the role of family member (*‘often, people think that I am just sitting at home, so they can ask me to do different things for them. They are surprised that I say I have no time. No time to do something for them. [...] And, OK, I am at home, theoretically I could do these things, I don’t know, transport something, do something, yes, theoretically I could. But I wouldn’t be able to work then’*; Interviewee 16, a 41 year-old female interior designer based in Gdańsk).

### ***Setting space and time boundaries***

This kind of inter-role conflict experience may be overcome by the use of the spatial strategies mentioned earlier. For example, by applying a ‘closed door policy’, or by simply deciding to close a laptop. In the first round of research (in-depth individual interviews) we first examined the boundaries between work and home by asking interviewees and interlocutors about the limits to their spatial, temporal, social and related behaviors.

It is mainly ‘office opening and closing’ (that is, closing doors to bedrooms or opening a laptop) that determines spatial boundaries, and how working days are described by respondents: *‘Yes, this is my office, the kitchen, I really like the kitchen, especially when I close those doors. [Then] I feel so separate and so safe’ (Interviewee 15, a 39 year-old female writer and journalist living in Warsaw).* Respondents talk about the strong desire they have to assign meaning to a particular gesture or object. Through doing this, a teleworker can clearly communicate that the working day has started: *‘I am surrounded by a screen, I’m not fully closed in but I am slightly “cut off”*

*from the rest of the house*' (Interviewee 31, a 43 year-old male information broker based in Krakow). *'Well, I make the bed, basically, I always make my bed, then my bedroom is not like a bedroom, but simply an office'* (Interviewee 35, a 42 year-old female engineer based in Krakow). Spatial borders are also auditory borders. Respondents admit that sometimes it is difficult for them to pretend that they are *'in a real office'* because of a barking dog or crying child: *'It's hard here, in the kitchen, you cannot say to your dog "be quiet!"'* (Interviewee 25). Another female respondent described working at home with children: *'I've learned not to pay attention to the kids. Once, Alice - the nanny - asked if I had heard that Gilly was crying... and I hadn't even heard her...'*

Chronological borders are created quite independently in the case of teleworkers. The opportunity to self-regulate such borders is treated as one of the most important privileges: the ability to control the start and end points of the working day, as well as to insert breaks, appears to be seen as the main advantage. Teleworkers can go out for a walk, a jog or a bike ride during the working day. Often, working hours are similar to a traditional eight-hour work day (8.00 a.m. - 4.00 p.m., or 9.00 a.m. - 5.00 p.m.). Sometimes teleworkers have free time for doing other things than taking casual breaks from the office: *'I go for a walk, every day I go for a walk on the pier, somewhere next to the seaside and for me that is the biggest advantage [of working at home]'* (Interviewee 23, a 37 year-old female marketer at a publishing house who lives in Sopot). Regardless of the form of employment (self-employment or having an employer) respondents have difficulty with time management and sticking to the amount of time they planned to devote to work. Some teleworkers finish work on their own initiative - distracted by domestic duties and family - and others cannot 'concentrate on finishing their work', or 'leave work'. Time limits may also determine the coming and going of other family members of the house. Then the house becomes (or ceases to be) 'mine', 'my own' and becomes a shared space, a place of 'non-work' for others; *'virtually the whole day of work ends at 4 p.m. when we bring back J. from the kindergarten'* (Interviewee 32, a 33 year-old male sales manager living in Krakow).

## **Conclusions**

The borders between work and life in the case of telework are becoming increasingly blurred. Additionally, teleworkers' need for constant and more rigid control is greater than with the borders imposed on work that is executed in a 'classic office'; i.e. outside the home. This more complicated situation strongly influences the work-life balance of teleworkers and their families.

Obstacles to teleworking arise at all levels, as previously described: in-house relations, relations with co-workers and employers, the goals and importance of telework and the technologies which are used to manage the work. For this reason, teleworkers must make significant individual efforts to organize their place of work, to plan the frames of work and leisure and to maintain established divisions, with varying degrees of success.

Broadly speaking, the strategies of coping with work at home that have been depicted may be understood as individualized strategies that are introduced in a

situation which lacks social, coherent representations of the phenomenon of telework. Moreover, this situation also influences the very notions of home and work and changes their meaning and function. For teleworkers, 'home' and 'work' are blurred concepts and reflect Deleuzian comments about the contemporary status of space, which is, the author claims, in crisis, or – differently expressed – going through a time of change.

Flexible working policies are being established to offer employees a degree of choice in how much, when and where teleworkers work, and to help them achieve a more satisfactory work-life balance. The findings we have presented here based on employees' experiences of working from home show that such policies are only partially successful, and this success depends on whether employees have offspring. For some who telecommute, working life is intensified.

Regarding further research, three issues are of interest. First, an analysis of gender differences along the three dimensions (place of employment, role of technologies used in everyday activities and the role of telework in the time and economy budgets of the household). Secondly, a psychological analysis of work-family and family-work conflict. Does teleworking increase the level of conflict? Does gender matter in this regard? Finally, there is a need for research to be undertaken among employers with a focus on identifying the obstacles and advantages of the uptake of tele-employment.

One recommendation for actors in the public sphere is that they fairly analyze the real rights and duties of teleworker employees. Social programs should not simply encourage people to 'stay at home' but should offer them support in decision-making processes and promote the organization of a home office through provision of tailored architectonic and psychological advice, as well as information about the potential disadvantages of such kinds of employment.

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