



Karl Brenke, Researcher in the Department of Forecasting and Economic Policy of DIW Berlin

## SIX QUESTIONS TO KARL BRENKE

# »Working from home: Germany lagging behind other European countries«

1. Mr. Brenke, you've been conducting research on working from home in Germany. DIW Berlin produced a similar study two years ago. What distinguishes the recent study from the previous one? The main difference is that we now have data on how many people would actually be able to work from home, given their employment conditions. We didn't have this information last time. Of course, someone who sits behind a cash register in a store or has to carry out their job on a construction site can't work from home, but now we can distinguish whether an individual's employment conditions allow them to work from home and whether the person in question would actually want to do so.
2. Who can work from home then? According to what respondents themselves reported, it would be possible for approximately 40 percent of all employees to perform all or at least part of their job from home. Of course, the study showed that working from home is more of an option for those in certain branches, primarily in the service industry, banks, insurance companies, and in public administration. Highly qualified salaried employees are more likely to be able to work from home but it is much less likely for unskilled or even skilled workers.
3. Would more people work from home if their employers allowed them to? Yes, they would. Of those who have not worked from home so far but whose job would permit them to, two-thirds would work from home if their boss gave them this option. This equates to one in five employees in Germany. Only one-third prefer to work in the company premises. Often the only problem is that it doesn't occur to employers to give their staff the chance to work from home. This gap between the desire and opportunity to work from home is particularly wide in banks and insurance companies, as well as in public administration. Here, apparently, human resource policy is still stuck in the Stone Age.
4. How high is the share of people who work from home in Germany compared to other European countries? If we take a figure that can be compared with other countries in Europe, only around eight percent mainly or occasionally work from home. This is a low proportion compared to other European countries. This is also partly because, in Germany, the number of employees working from home has declined over the past few years. In the last two years, this decrease has ground to a halt while in Europe as a whole, the number of people working from home has actually increased. Germany has been left behind here.
5. What are the advantages or disadvantages for employers whose staff work from home? In fact, there are no disadvantages for employers. We see that employees already working from home put in longer hours than average and sometimes even take on extra work without being paid or taking time off in lieu. People working from home have to prove they have accomplished something. The same will often also apply to someone who works in the company premises but in many cases, just being present is what counts most. So employers have to reconsider their position and use other criteria to assess performance, not just presence, which may be difficult for some. Perhaps another factor is that some bosses think it reinforces their legitimacy if they're surrounded by their employees.
6. Is working from home compatible with regulated company hours? An employer cannot monitor the hours an employee works at home. As a result, the employer and employees are expected to be able to produce a particular product or prove a certain level of performance. Of course, this has to be predefined by the employer. It's possible to work out what needs to be done in a particular time frame, for instance, writing a report or making some specific calculations. It's all feasible.

Interview by Erich Wittenberg



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