

Remote Work: Its Potential & Issues



Author Junya Tsutsui

By Junya Tsutsui

Issues of Remote Work

As a result of the spread of restrictions on human contact and movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, interest in remote work has been rapidly increasing. At the university with which I am affiliated, all classes were held remotely during the state of emergency declaration in 2020. However, subsequently face-to-face classes gradually returned, and in the 2022 academic year almost all classes were conducted in person. Even so, the utilization of remote work remains in various forms.

Further, meetings of committees related to academic societies, in which researchers from universities in various regions take part, had changed to being almost entirely online at around the time the pandemic began, and even now remain so. This is true also for conferences sponsored by public organs and interviews by mass media, where the frequency of remote meetings has greatly increased. Before Covid, going on a business trip two or three times a month was not unusual for me, but the frequency of such business trips has now dropped to less than half.

However, as I will explain below, it is not possible to introduce remote work into every kind of employment. Moreover, issues that we had been previously unaware of in relation to the widespread use of remote work have now become clear. In this paper, I will summarize the history and state of remote work in Japan and consider its current and potential future issues.

Discussions on Remote Work in Government & Administration

I would first like to point out a fact that is probably surprising to many people. This is something that becomes clear if we look at the history of how the remote work concept came to be accepted in Japan – it is the fact that the trigger for there to be a discussion on remote work in the national government venue was not for the purpose of co-supporting work and home.

The word “telework” first began to be used in government and administration circles from around the 1990s. In the English-speaking world, the term “telework” is not generally used, but instead terms such as remote work and telecommuting are often employed. Recently, mainly in the private sector, the term remote work has come to be widely used, and there was also an increase in the frequency of appearance of *zaitaku-kinmu* (working from home)

during the pandemic. However, it is necessary to note that the concept of telework as it came to be used in government and administration venues in Japan has a wide range of meanings. The first time the term telework appeared in the Diet or in a national government discussion was in a context of promoting the Regional Information Communications Infrastructure Enhancement Project.

The purpose of this activity is to control the concentration of the population in the capital area. One of the means that can be considered for achieving this is the method of setting up offices called telework centers in the regions, to carry out work by liaising with operation centers in the capital; this project was partially implemented. A telework center could also be called a satellite office, where possession is not necessarily solely by one company, and it is also possible for joint use to take place. Telework in this form is quite different from the image of remote work that came to mind during the pandemic. First, rather than developing a balance between work and home, the objective was to put the brakes on the extreme centralization of the capital area, through the creation of employment in the regions, or a depopulation strategy. Next, the telework centers established in the regions were not personal homes but rather satellite offices, where users need to commute from home. That is, remote work of this type is not work from home.

The first appearance of the word telework in the context of supporting the balancing of work and home was, in the national government venue, in 1996. Thereafter, the concept of remote work as a means for the support of this balance has gradually spread. On the other hand, the significance of remote work in the context of regional revitalization, creation of employment in the regions, and alleviation of population concentration has been persistently discussed.

In the above ways, when considering the significance and objective of remote work in Japan, we must bear in mind that there are two different types of remote work. One indicates cases when companies or local government bodies that have a base in an urban area establish a satellite office in a region; oftentimes multiple companies are intended to use these offices jointly to increase employment in such regions. In this case, users do their work not at home but in offices. The other type refers to when work is done at home with the purpose of enhancing the balancing of work and home. The widely shared concept of remote work falls under the latter category.

The Pandemic & Remote Work

First, let's look at the present situation of remote work in Japan. The term remote work here means the home-based style of work, with one of its objectives being support for the abovementioned work-life balance.

Reliable data concerning remote work can be obtained from surveys by the Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training (JILPT) (Table 1). The survey results show two noteworthy points. First is the fact that, although remote work increased temporarily at the time of the emergency declaration in May 2020, thereafter it decreased, and eventually returned to the pre-Covid level. Second is the fact that in a person's experience of remote work there are dramatic differences depending on gender, position or status in one's work, and income. The greatest difference is the gap in the conditions of use between high-income and low-income groups. In addition, there are also differences related to gender and work status, but these should be seen as being mildly linked. In other words, in regular employment in large corporations there are many men, and since they are deskwork-focused, there are many opportunities for remote work. In contrast, of employees at small companies whose workstyle is not centered on deskwork, there are many female irregular employees, who are commonly unable to utilize remote work.

Differences according to type of work and type of occupation are also substantial. Table 2, based on a survey carried out by the Cabinet Office from November to December 2020, indicates the results of questions asked in relation to work-related stress experienced during the pandemic. Here I use two of the question items. The first is "Do you feel a risk of infection at work?", while the second is "Do you find working at home difficult?" For each of these items, the percentage of respondents who answered "yes" is shown in the table. From this, we see the existence of groups of people who work in medical or healthcare settings and have a strong sense of risk of infection, and also of the relatively high percentage of people who answered that working at home is difficult. That is, rather than remote work being introduced because there is a high risk at workplaces, the deciding factor is whether working remotely is easy to introduce when carrying out the work in question. In industries such as data transmission, there is a low incidence of infection risk, but it is easy to introduce remote work. Although remote work spread during the Covid pandemic, it is doubtful whether that actually suppressed the risk of infection. Nonetheless, as a resulting secondary effect, the potential of working remotely became recognized by society.

TABLE 1

Proportion of respondents who experienced remote work or working from home more than one day a week (%)

	Before covid	May, 2020 Before the removal of the emergency declaration	July
Total	9.3	27.6	11.5
Men	11.7	33.9	14.9
Women	6.6	20.3	7.5
Irregular employment	5.2	13.4	4.9
Regular employment	11.5	34.9	14.8
Low-income group	4.4	8.7	2.4
High-income group	21.4	64.1	29.0

Note: The novel-corona virus and the women's employment crisis (Yanfei Zhou)
Source: <https://www.gender.go.jp/kaigikento/covid-19/siryol/pdf/3-2.pdf>

TABLE 2

Proportions of respondents who gave positive answers to questions regarding the stress in workplaces under the pandemic

		Feel a risk of being infected	Difficult to work from home
Type of Job	Nurse	0.49	0.41
	Caregiver	0.50	0.47
	Transport, communications	0.27	0.46
	Office work	0.12	0.35
Type of Industry	Medicine, welfare	0.44	0.42
	Transport, postal	0.20	0.46
	Accommodation, food and drink	0.29	0.37
	Retail	0.22	0.38
	Education	0.25	0.37
	Manufacturing	0.11	0.39
	Data transmission	0.09	0.14

Note: Junya Tsutsui, "The Pandemic of COVID-19 and the Gender Gap" in K. Endo et al (eds.) *Sociological Studies under the Age of Disaster*. University of Tokyo Press (in printing).

Source: *ibc*

Issues Related to Home-Based Type of Remote Work

A breakthrough in government involvement in the promotion of remote work with the purpose of co-establishing work and home was the Liaison Conference of Telework-Related Ministries held in 2016. On the telework comprehensive portal site, the relevant portal site, examples of cases of companies introducing telework, a guide to consultation and support, and an explanation of subsidiaries are featured. In the questionnaire survey of employees of companies that introduced remote work implemented by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2014, before the abovementioned conference, extremely positive evaluations of remote work by its users are seen (FY 2014 Telework Model Verification Project) (<https://telework.mhlw.go.jp/info/pdf/H26kojirei.pdf>).

Of 118 survey subjects, about 95% replied either that “I feel a strong necessity for remote work” or “I feel a certain necessity for remote work.” Generally, the evaluation was that the benefits of remote work greatly outweigh the drawbacks. Even so, the introduction of remote work was progressing only slowly before the pandemic. Certainly, for some time the government had been streamlining issues related to the introduction of remote work, but these were mainly issues on the side of the corporations introducing remote work. Of the main issues for these corporations, one is how to handle data security, while another is related to labor management. The former is a technical issue, and the means to achieve resolutions can be clarified relatively soon. However, the latter issue tends to cover a wide range of ground.

For example, in the introduction of remote work there are many instances of the need for the revision of employment regulations. Further, there will be numerous cases where the introduction of remote work means that the knowhow of the operation of workplaces that was the premise of workplace attendance, cannot be applied, such as how to manage labor hours, how to pay allowances in response to the extra costs arising in relation to work at home, whether or not there are laws to be considered in regard to remote work done by temporary workers that have been substantially increasing. There will also be some changes where consideration must be given regarding compliance, such as whether or not appropriate operation of personnel transfer occurs when employees are ordered to work at home, for administrative convenience. At large-scale companies, specialized departments may be able to establish guidelines to enable the smooth operation of remote work, but for relatively small companies the cost of introducing remote work is a barrier. The government has set up a subsidiary fund for

operators of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and is striving for its diffusion.

However, in the pandemic from 2020 on, new issues in relation to the widespread acceptance of remote work have become apparent. These are issues on the home side of the users of remote work, not on the side of the business operators. According to the Cabinet Office survey mentioned earlier, there were many answers stating that users wanted to use remote work more actively, especially in homes where there are children aged six years or younger, and we can see that remote work has a certain kind of function in regard to the balancing of work and home.

Meanwhile, some differences were seen between men and women in their evaluations of their experience of remote work. Specifically, more than for men, there was a clear high trend for women to express a minus evaluation on the point of “housework has increased” because of the increase in remote work. Further, in regard to full-time housewives having husbands with the experience of remote work, results obtained included negative evaluations such as “my own time has been taken away” and “time with my family has increased, giving rise to more stress.” Certainly, we can imagine issues on both the operator’s side and on the users’ side concerning remote work. Generally, it is common to assume that, in the introduction of remote work, the issues are all on the operator’s side and the main advantages are on the home side. That is, there tends to be the view that “in the introduction of remote work for the purpose of co-establishment of work and home, there are issues that should be resolved by the company side.”

It is true that, in cases where the person working remotely cohabits with family members, remote work definitely has an influence on the daily lives of the family. But there is also the positive evaluation that the time saved by the remote worker can instead be utilized for participation in housework and child-rearing. At the same time, we must also recognize the side effects arising from the increase in family time at home as a result of remote work. In regard to the experience of wives who feel that their own time has been stolen as a result of their husband’s home-based work, there is a need to clarify further details of this in future surveys, but it can be surmised that, because of the increase in the family’s time at home, there has been an increase in time spent on housework. Moreover, there has simultaneously been a decrease in the time and space that the wife could previously use freely when the family was not at home.

For example, having a husband who has come to be home-based does not necessarily mean there is a reduced burden in housework and child-rearing; indeed, there is the possibility that instead the

burden on the wife has increased. If a husband is at home all day for remote work, it is fine if he is able to make his own lunch, but considering the low level of housework skills of many Japanese men, it is unlikely that all men will do this; rather, there are bound to be cases where the husband expects his wife to make his lunch. Also, given the small size and limited number of rooms in Japanese homes, it is possible that the husband is doing his remote work in the living-room or dining-room, which could have a major effect on his wife's use of time and space.

In order to resolve issues such as these, firstly there is a need to lighten the wife's burden by improving the at-home work (i.e., housework) skills of Japanese men. Next, issues such as society's bearing the cost of nearby rental offices rather than using small individual homes or setting up common shared spaces for the use of remote work in apartment houses, are also likely to need addressing.

Promotion of Regional Employment-Type Remote Work

So far I have discussed issues regarding home-based remote work, but there is also considerable value in considering the possibility of the regional employment-type remote work that I mentioned at the start. In the venues of national government and administration, there is a gradual trend to set up a promotion system for the use of the remote work system in the activation of regional employment. The Cabinet Office's Regional Creation Promotion Office, regarding the Comprehensive Measures toward Regional Revitalization, allocated a budget of 100 billion yen. Of this, a budget of 10 billion yen was allocated in 2021 to the Regional Revitalization Telework Subsidy (see "Concerning the Regional Revitalization Telework Subsidy, Cabinet Office Regional Creation Promotion Office" at https://www.chisou.go.jp/sousei/about/mirai/pdf/teleworkkouhukin_gaiyou210820.pdf).

This is basically support following the model of the aforementioned telework center, in which we can assume not home-based work, but rather a grant provided in the case of the establishment of a satellite-type office. Both local government bodies and private companies became the established subjects, and it can be assumed that multiple companies use the established satellite office in common. Further, the number of people who move to regions with satellite offices during a certain period is established as a target numerical value.

A point to be considered here is, as I have already mentioned, that in the model in which a satellite office is established in a region and work is done via remote connections with metropolitan areas where

the head office is located, basically home-based work is not envisaged. That is, this model has as its concept the idea that the cost involved when a company develops an office in a region, thus creating employment, will be borne through making it shared and through public subsidies. However, if we say we want to utilize remote work for the revitalization of regional employment, then we should promote not the satellite style but rather the formula that directly links companies and regional employees through remote work, that is, the home-based work style.

As we have already seen, even though there are also issues regarding the home-based style of remote work, from the perspective of the balancing of work and home the potential advantages are great. Furthermore, the drop in the birth rate in Japan, stemming from the trend for people not to get married, is a serious social and political issue. The fundamental dilemma experienced by Japan is that in areas where the birth rate is relatively high, there are few employment opportunities, while in major urban areas, with their comparatively low birth rate, there are many beneficial work opportunities. As a result, young people move to big cities for work, and so may have to consider marriage and child-rearing in a situation with poor support from relatives and neighbors.

If one could live in a region and be remotely employed through home-based work by a company with its headquarters in a major city, and receive a higher level of wages than the average wage for the region, it would be possible to develop a family life with the support of the local communities and of one's relatives. The company could both reduce the cost arising from the commuting and accommodation for its employees and have the possibility of employing talented personnel who for some reason are unable to move to city areas. While it is common to think of remote work as often denoting a means for those presently working in urban areas to move to the regions, in that case the convenience of their co-residing family members is an obstructing factor. If both partners in a relationship are working, there has to be a condition where full-time remote work is possible for both of them, but this possibility is small. Following up on the possibility of remote work as a means for people to continue to live in the regions is an issue worth pursuing.

JS

Junya Tsutsui is a professor of the Department of Sociology at Ritsumeikan University. His major research interests are women's labor force participation, Japan's low fertility problem, and theoretical issues in sociology.