

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE WORKFORCE AFTER 2020

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Abstract. *This article analyzes the general impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the workforce with a special focus on Romania after 2020. Our hypothesis is that the COVID-19 has generated a speed-up change in how people work and their attitude towards work. As regards to the employers, COVID-19 made them adapt to the new sanitary conditions by allowing the employees to work from home, which has also led to an increasing trust in the work ethics of the employee and forced the managers to better allocate the tasks in order to continue to perform as a company. Also, this pandemic has led other employers and entrepreneurs to change and to reinvent their businesses. As pertaining to the employee, this pandemic made him more adaptable to change and to prefer work-from-home conditions or a hybrid system.*

Keywords: *COVID-19, work from home, workforce, work ethics, adaptability to change*

The COVID-19 pandemic represents one of the biggest crises in our recent history along with the 1929 Great Depression and the 2008 Financial Crisis because it forced the workforce conditions to change. Many companies, institutions and organizations set up a mandatory work-from-home system and many of them continue to work remotely even in 2022 and beyond. The impact of this crisis on the workforce is in the following areas:

- The physical and mental health of the workers;
- The living conditions when working remotely;
- The work-life balance;
- The unemployment and job loss of millions of people;
- The rise of new businesses and the self-re-invention of other businesses which were physical location dependent;

The demand for new labour skills, such as digital skills and the ability to adapt to change.

The future of work is challenged. Currently, the world of work is undergoing several changes as a result of shifting labour markets brought on by population changes, globalization, climate change, and technological development. Geopolitical tensions, natural disasters, and military conflicts have all been made worse by the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuing to work from the company's location would have endangered the employees to getting infected with the COVID-19 virus, at the same time work-from-home was increasing anxiety and stress levels regarding their job because of.

The lack of connection with other colleagues and the fear of an uncertain post-pandemic future. A longitudinal study conducted in the US on 682 young adults revealed that at the beginning of the pandemic and from March to July 2020, the average steps per day decreased from 10.000 to 4.600, the time spent in real social connection activities decreased to less than 30 minutes per day, the screen time is doubling every 5 minutes. A

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positive outcome was that the average sleep time increased with 25-30 minutes per night. The study shows that the proportion of the ones with risk of clinical depression has increased between 46%-61%. (Giuntella et al. 2021).

The distinction between working and resting during the day has been blurred by the emergence of the telework system. Working from home has intensified and lengthened working hours.

While employment shortfalls maintained in comparison to pre-crisis levels in the majority of middle-income nations with data available in the first half of 2022, employment-to-population ratios had either returned to or exceeded pre-crisis levels in the majority of advanced economies. When compared to low- and medium-skilled occupations, such as service and sales workers, which are still below the level of the same quarter in 2019, data available shows that high-skilled occupations (managers, professionals, technicians, and associate professionals) had experienced a stronger recovery by 2022 Q2 (ILO 2022).

Due to the present COVID-19 pandemic and the economic slowdown brought on by sanitary measures, the number of workers who missed work or worked fewer hours surged at an unprecedented rate, and the number of jobs lost increased as well. Losses from employment income are broken down into three categories: (1) job loss or non-renewal of contract; (2) temporary layoffs while still employed; and (3) working a smaller percentage of regular hours while still employed (Eurostat 2022a). The total employment income in the EU falls by -4.8%, with absences and less hours worked accounting for the biggest drops. Eurostat estimates that during the lockdown in April, the number of people who were missing or worked fewer hours varied among countries from 1% to 50% in the worst affected countries. In addition, the percentage of persons who work 80% or fewer hours is above 20% in almost half of the nations (12), while it is between 11% and 20% in the remaining 11 countries. Because of the absences and working fewer hours, this equates into a 4.2% loss in employment income at the EU level (Eurostat 2022b).

Pozitive impact, negative impact or both?

A study conducted on German and Swiss population shows that about 30% of employees consider that their work and private life had worsened as a consequence of measures to stop COVID-19, whereas about 10% reveal improvements in work life and 13% in private life. Some of them consider that work-from-home has a perceived positive impact on work life, because they get to spend more time with their families (Tušl et al. 2021). As well, participants who lived alone were more likely to report a decline in their private life and less likely to claim an improvement compared to those who lived with a family, or even in shared housing. The COVID-19 lockdown severely curtailed opportunities for social interactions outside of one's own home, especially for persons who live alone.

As a result of the pandemic, existing trends in remote work, e-commerce, and automation have accelerated, and up to 25% more people than previously thought may need to change careers, concludes a McKinsey report (McKinsey Global Institute 2021).

Overview of the COVID-19 impact on the workforce

In 2022, there is visible progress. According to Eurostat, 10.966 million people in the Euro Area and 12.921 million men and women overall were unemployed in the EU as of August 2022. In July 2022, there were 52 000 fewer unemployed people in the EU and 30 000 fewer in the Euro Area. In the EU and the Euro Area, unemployment dropped by 1.682 million and 1.358 million, respectively, compared to August 2021. In August 2022, the unemployment rate in the EU was 6.0%, which was also constant compared to July 2022

and decreased from 6.8% in August 2021. 2.614 million young people (under 25) were unemployed in the EU in August 2022, 2.136 million of whom lived in the Euro Area. In August 2022, in the EU the youth unemployment rate was 13.8%, stable compared to July 2022 and in the Euro Area was down from 14.0% to 13.9%. Compared with the same month (August) of the last year (2021) the youth unemployment decreased. There were 293.000 in the EU and 234.000 in the Euro Area fewer youth without jobs (Eurostat 2022b).

As for the youth, they were more negatively impacted than the rest of the adult working population. Young people (those under 30) still have a difficult time finding jobs or positions that are a good fit for their qualifications and experience. While it fell in 2021, especially toward the end of the year, youth unemployment remained 1 percentage point (pp) higher than it was prior to the crisis (in 2019) (European Commission 2022).

Future employment prospects for young people are influenced by their capacity to compete in the labour market now as well as their ability to adapt their abilities to face the changing demands. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced businesses to further accelerate their efforts in digital transformation, because of the constant increase in the use of digital skills at work in the EU. Although there are significant variations between Member States, young people appear to be somewhat ready for the growing demand for digital skills. In Estonia in 2019, young workers attained 120% of the average EU level of digital intensity, compared to less than 90% in Romania, Greece, and Cyprus. This translates to an average occupation in Greece requiring only 3.5% of digital skills, compared to 5.5% in Estonia. While Nordic countries often have the greatest levels of overall digital intensity, this is mostly because workers over 30 have the highest levels of digital intensity. The geographic variance in work's digital intensity mirrors greater disparities in the EU's member states' digitalization development (European Commission 2022).

Young males tend to have jobs that require more digital proficiency than young women do, and the degree of digital proficiency strongly increases with educational attainment. The highly skilled nature of the work and the predominance of men in several particularly digitally demanding STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) occupations are key contributors to this gender and educational disparity. The green shift could result in job growth for young people, especially in industries like waste management, water supply, sewage, and waste management, sustainable transportation, and renewable energy. The discrepancy in the employment rates of men and women aged 20 to 64 decreased in 2021, reaching 10.8 pp (-0.3 pp from 2020). Women's employment increased to 67.7%, while men's employment increased to 78.5%. Romania (20.1 %), Greece (19.8 %), and Italy (19.2 %) had the biggest gender employment gaps, while Lithuania (1.4 %), Finland (2.0 %), and Estonia had the smallest gender employment gaps (3.7 pp) (European Commission 2022).

Young individuals are generally more prone to experience difficult social and financial circumstances. Young adults struggled to pay their regular bills and rent, and 61% of them expressed concern about obtaining or keeping suitable accommodation over the next ten years. The difficulties that young people encounter are influenced by their socioeconomic status and level of education. Teenagers with a secondary education are 19 percentage points less likely than those with a lower education level to find themselves unemployed and not enrolled in school or training. This risk is 28 percentage points lower for individuals with tertiary education (Commission 2022a).

The research on the "scarring impact," or what it means to be young and unemployed, demonstrates that there are permanent effects. Gianni De Fraja and Sara Lemos (De Fraja et al. 2019), for instance, discovered that "an additional month of

unemployment between ages 18 and 20 permanently lowers earnings by around 1.2% per year.” According to Schwandt (Schwandt et al. 2020), those who enter the workforce during a recession make less money, work more hours and are given less assistance from the government. Moreover, they are more likely to divorce, and they experience higher rates of childlessness. Furthermore, Strandh et al. (Strandh et al. 2014) found that youth unemployment is significantly connected with poorer mental health. It is important to underline that periods of unemployment later in life do not appear to have the same long-term negative effects. Burgess (Burgess et al. 2003) found that unemployment early in an individual’s career increases the probability of subsequent unemployment.

Society considers digital transformation as a major positive disruption. But, a study conducted on digital transformation (Andreas et al. 2022) underlines that they could not find any solid proof of business model modification. The companies have not updated their digitalization plans. Businesses are still operating in an exception mode and are hesitant to make long-term choices after nearly a full year of operations during a pandemic and now a year after.

COVID-19 and its impact in Romania

With the primary goals of maintaining employment and assuring the social protection of workers whose activity has been interrupted as a consequence of the measures of limiting the spread of COVID-19, the Romanian government has launched efforts to lessen the impact of the coronavirus on the labour market. A total of 1.5 billion EUR were paid for around 1.4 million recipients for certain measures to counteract the effects of the lockdown:

- paying an indemnity for technical unemployment to those whose employment contracts have been suspended due to COVID-19's impacts.

The Romanian Labour Code states that employment contracts may be suspended temporarily (technical unemployment) if an activity is temporarily reduced or stopped, provided that the employer pays a compensation equal to at least 75% of the basic salary for the position held up to a maximum of 75% of the medium gross salary specified by Law No. 6/2020 (i.e. 75% of 5,429 lei) throughout the period of emergency declared by Decree of the Romanian President on March 16, 2020.

- allowance for self-employed and non-standard workers (day workers, self-employed), whose activity was interrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic but whose social rights are not covered by any social protection mechanism;
- technical unemployment benefit in case of epidemiological investigation.

Another set of policies addressed working conditions, changing work schedules, workplace safety, encouraging people to participate in the labour market, and encouraging employers to use alternative forms of employment. Therefore, it was also during this time that the possibility of reducing working hours, staggered work schedules, flexible working hours, job rotation formula, and paid leave for parents and caregivers for childcare purposes during "severe conditions" were established (Eurofund 2021).

Certain initiatives to stimulate the labour market were put into place during the second phase of the pandemic response to counter the lockdown measures. The measures attempted to support employers and employees to ensure continuing activity in all economic areas, for employment and business consolidation, once the detrimental consequences of the economic activity blockade have been evaluated. There was set up a Recovery Plan developed at EU level, tailored for each Member State.

A study developed by the European Parliament on the impact of teleworking on Romania (Vasilescu 2021) shows that:

Work-life balance: While telework, in some situations, provided the flexibility of work schedules, it also led to longer work hours that put the work-life balance at risk. Increases in work schedules, according to Wisemetry and Impact Hub Bucharest (Wisemetry and Impact Hub Bucharest 2020), were caused by unanticipated problems that needed to be resolved, a desire to demonstrate that people can work more productively and effectively from home or to avoid interrupting the work/concentration rhythm, interruptions from family members, and household responsibilities. According to the study, 78% of women and 22% of men who reported halting their employment to take care of household and family responsibilities.

Increasing personal expenses like those for internet and energy are sometimes not covered by employers.

Issues with workplace safety and data security: Stakeholders' opinions on how well these processes are followed varied. While some said that many businesses (particularly in outsourcing) developed stringent policies and trusted workers to follow them, others emphasized how difficult it is for businesses to regulate the degree to which employees adhere to work and home data safety procedures.

The stakeholders questioned stated that telework resulted in a lost bonus for hazardous and harmful working conditions for public sector employees, totalling to 15%.

Also, during the lockdown, school from home overlapped with work-from-home, and this has conducted in more stress for parents and longer hours to work because they had to offer support to their children, or just to care for them if they were in kindergarten.

The positive effects on the employees are (Vasilescu 2021):

- 1) the ability to continue their operations during a lockdown;
- 2) a decrease in COVID-19-related absenteeism;
- 3) a decrease in the cost of utilities, cleaning services, and some employee benefits, including rent;
- 4) more of the businesses are being digitalized;
- 5) an increase in staff productivity, with 29% of those polled by PWC (2020) reporting an increase and 44% reporting a stable level of productivity.

The following negative impacts were identified (Vasilescu 2021):

- 1) costs associated with the widespread adoption of telework: providing IT equipment, adopting new cloud platforms;
- 2) assuring the successful collaboration of new teams through entirely virtual collaboration;
- 3) managing teams due to managers' limited/ lack of soft skills;
- 4) assuring professional development of staff, with 50% of planned training being delayed or suspended.

Telework has doubled since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, while still being at low levels, and it appears that it will continue long after the health crisis is over. And it will impact the way we see work: the way we design workspaces, the way we design our homes, the productivity, the work performances and the tasks that can be outsourced to the Artificial Intelligence.

A study conducted in 2020 by professors at Bucharest University of Economic Studies revealed that the advantages of engaging in a professional activity as it follows: saving time resources otherwise allocated to commuting between home and work, elimination of stress caused by congestion in traffic or public transport, a greater level of flexibility in organizing

one's own program, more time spent with family and a higher level of promptness in organizing business meetings due to the use of technology. 548 people completed the questionnaire, and the confidence interval is 4.19%. There were 18 questions in total, 5 of which were socio-professional. The main objectives were: determining the current status and professional field; figuring out the primary method of carrying out the professional activity during the COVID pandemic; figuring out the major challenges, as well as the advantages; selecting the best option for the program to carry out professional activities in the future from the respondent's perspective. (Rădulescu et al. 2021)

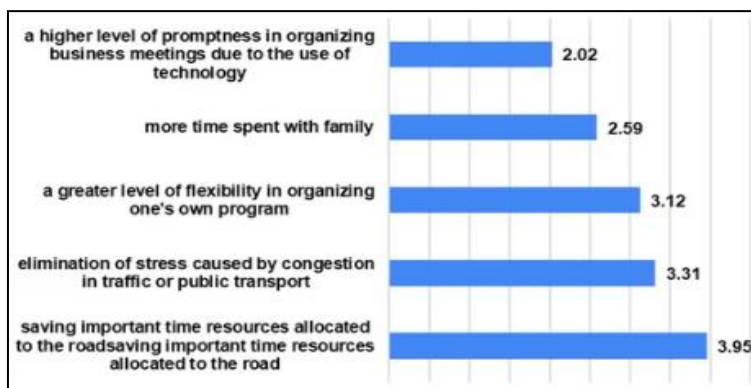


Figure 1. The advantages of engaging in a professional activity

Source: Rădulescu et al. 2021

According to the results of the questionnaire's analysis, over 70% of the respondents worked in a telework regime during the lockdown; at one point, 46% of them did so exclusively, and 25% did so in a mixed regime.

Retrospective analysis revealed that about 70% of respondents said they produced better outcomes under these circumstances, 37% said they put in more labour, and 32% said they produced better results with less hours. The primary challenge for respondents was having access to current technology (devices, internet connection, etc.), but they recognized the advantages of using technology to schedule business meetings more easily and to spend more time with their families. More than half of the respondents claim that in the near future they would prefer to work in a hybrid work environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compelled the Romanian Government to regulate telework faster is regulated in both commercial and public organizations and to accelerate digitalization in all economic sectors. Romania had one of the least "digitalized" employment rates, the lowest percentage of flexible work schedules, and the lowest percentage of remote workers compared to other nations, according to an Eurofund working paper (Vasile et al. 2021).

Post 2020, according to the data provided by the National Institute of Statistics, the resident population of Romania on January 1, 2021 was 19.2 million people (National Institute of Statistics 2022). The civilian employed population was 8.4 million people, of which 5.4 million were employees. Most employees worked in the service sector (3.4 million people) and 1.8 million people were employed in industry and construction. 0.1 million people were employed in agriculture, forestry and fish farming. In 2021, the labour force employment rate was 69.1%, with higher values for men (72.2%) compared to 65.6% for women.

In Romania, the occupancy rate has significantly dropped out in 2021 as compared with the previous years, from 69,1% to 62,3%. We only can speculate that this is due to the fact that during the 2020 many businesses were closed down and maybe because some of the other businesses downsized their employees.

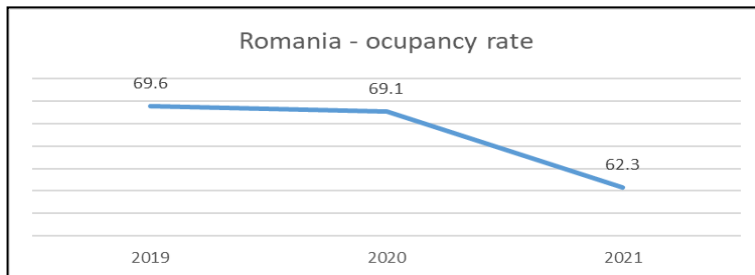


Figure 2. Romania - occupancy rate

Source: <https://www.macrotrends.net/countries/ROU/romania/unemployment-rate>

Unemployment refers to the share of the labour force that is without work but available for and seeking employment. Romania unemployment rate for 2021 was 5.17%, a 0.14% increase from 2020.

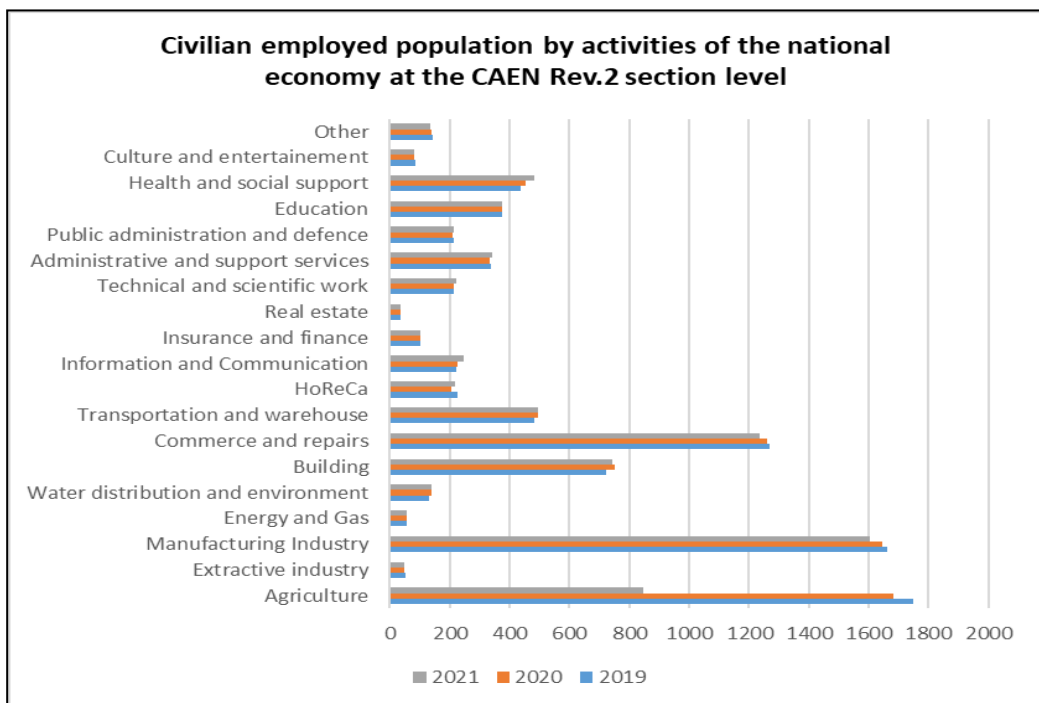


Figure 3. Civilian employed population by activities of the national economy at the CAEN Rev.2section level

Source: National Institute of Statistics

As one can observe from the table above, the most affected industries by the COVID-19 in 2020 are: Commerce and repairs, Manufacturing industry, and surprisingly the Agriculture. The HoReCa industry has recovered in 2021 pretty well.

Conclusions

In the EU, the COVID-19 pandemic made 1.8 million people lose their jobs. The estimates for US are that 4 million people lost their jobs. But, the recovery of the European economy and labour market had progressed in the third quarter of 2021. The majority of nations advanced and kept reducing the social isolationist measures brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic's health problem. Other special measures, such financial aid to enterprises in various EU Member States, that had been adopted to mitigate the COVID-19 crisis' consequences on employment and businesses gradually came to an end. This third quarter of 2021 confirmed the economy's recovery, which was amply demonstrated by the development of employment relative to the pre-COVID-19 pandemic (Eurostat 2022a). At the same time, the people's freedom of movement restrictions and the abrupt cessation of economic activity to stop the spread of the COVID-19 have resulted in a reduction in production systems and a loss of revenues, putting the survival of millions of businesses, especially micro and SMEs, and jobs in the majority of countries at risk. Productivity growth should be one area of emphasis in order to combat COVID-19's effects because it improves financial performance. The International Labour Organization shows in their report, *Driving Up Productivity. A Guide for Employer and Business Membership organizations*, that:

Businesses have increased productivity as a result of better management techniques and have seen exponential development.

Without necessarily raising taxes or public spending, an economy can stimulate economic growth by using its resources more effectively as a result of increasing productivity.

The economy becomes more resistant to outside shocks when the business environment fosters productivity growth.

The performance of an organization can be improved through increased productivity without the requirement for significant investments (ILO 2020).

There are three phenomena affecting jobs and employment that could continue in diverse degrees after the pandemic. First, hybrid and remote work it is very likely to continue even after 2023. A McKinsey report shows that between 20 and 25 percent of employees in advanced nations and roughly 10 percent of those in emerging economies could work from home three to five days per week, primarily in the field of outsourcing work (computer-based office work: IT, financial work, digital marketing): "In the computer-based office work arena, 70 percent of time could be spent working remotely without losing effectiveness, compared to most other arenas, where as little as 5 to ten percent of work could be done remotely.", underlines the McKinsey report (McKinsey Global Institute 2021). Rather than the occupations, the tasks and activities determine the likelihood of working remotely. There are jobs that depend more on the location of the company and the customer, and there are jobs that can be done anywhere from the planet. Secondly, the expansion of the "delivery economy" and e-commerce is also anticipated to continue. Finally, businesses have turned to automation and AI to deal with COVID-19 disruptions, and they may speed up adoption in the years to come by installing more robots in warehouses and manufacturing facilities as well as self-service customer points and service robots in areas where customers interact with businesses. (McKinsey Global Institute 2021).

The McKinsey report was developed based on US companies, but we think the results translate to the EU economy as well because there are similarities in regards to what measures the EU and US have conducted so far to counteract the COVID-19 effects.

The possibility for remote work differs amongst nations, depending on their industry, occupations, and balance of activities. The United Kingdom among the following eight nations has the biggest potential for remote work, largely because commercial and financial services in the realm of computer-based office work account for a sizable portion of its economy. According to the McKinsey model, 26% of the UK workforce could work remotely three to five days a week without losing productivity, and just under 50% could do so one to five days a week. Work-from-home is less likely to be used in emerging economies where employment is centred on jobs requiring physical and manual labour because they are low technologically developed (agriculture, manufacture, warehousing, maintenance and repair). For instance, in India, only 5% of the workforce could effectively work remotely three to five days a week with the existing mix of occupations, and an additional 15% could do so one to two days a week without losing output. Because Romania is almost always bellow the line, at the end of any performance top from any EU country, we could predict that maybe 10% from the employee population could continue to work remotely in the following years. The Employment and Social Developments in Europe Towards a strong social Europe in the aftermath of the COVID-19 crisis: Reducing disparities and addressing distributional impacts (European Commission 2021) draws similar conclusions to the ones from the McKinsey report.

Jobs that require little social interaction can be done from home, and are vital to society saw an increase in employment. For example, this was true for the insurance, computer programming, and telecommunications industries. Employment fell for jobs that couldn't be done from home. This was highest in the industries most severely impacted by the lockdown measures, including lodging, dining, and transportation. Doctors, nurses, personal care aides, and childcare providers are examples of occupations in the front lines with high levels of social interaction where the decline was less pronounced (European Commission 2021).

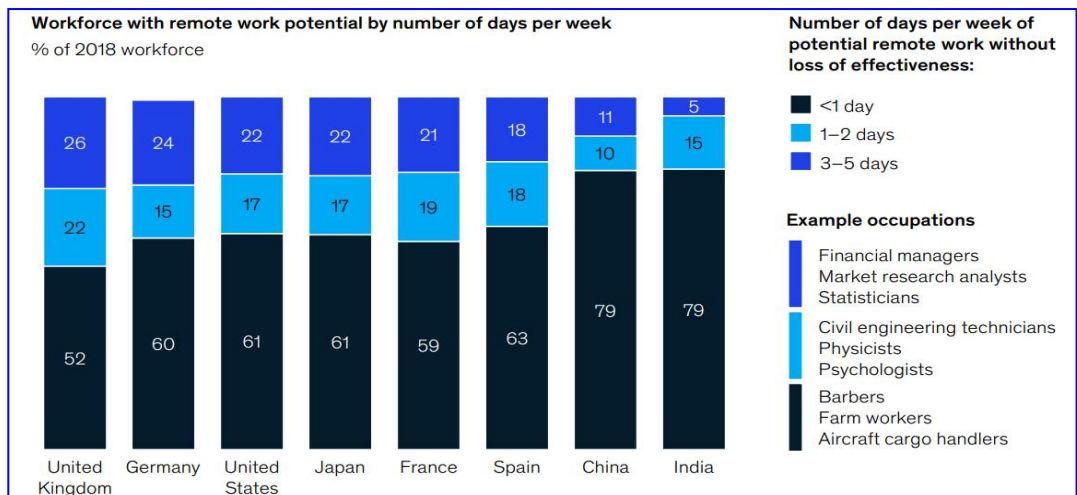


Figure 4. Workforce with remote work potential by number of days per week

Source: McKinsey Global Institute 2021

For many jobs, a hybrid model (online and offline work) is likely to persist in the future. Also, the AI impact on the economy will be higher and higher and it will cause another disruption, greater than the COVID-19 and it will force businesses and employees to reinvent themselves and innovate.

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