

ILS-IMPULSES

The mobilisation of labour and working from home

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The corona pandemic as an opportunity for the sustainable transformation of work-related mobility?

Overview

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- Change of labour
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- Corona: Empty streets and digital work
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The mobilisation of labour and working from home

Work and mobility are particularly affected by the corona pandemic. In the following, we would like to take a look at the system of occupational mobility and the question of how it was changed by the lockdown and how it might develop in the future.

Importance of job-related mobility

The outbreak of the Corona pandemic meets a labour market in motion. Occupationally induced everyday mobility is has a particularly strong influence on transport, accounting for 38 % of all passenger kilometres travelled.¹ The largest share of this is made up of journeys to and from work, the length of which is constantly increasing. Two thirds of the commuting distances are covered by car - the importance of the car has hardly changed in the last decades. In addition to commuting, business trips are also increasing steadily - they account for just under 20 % of the kilometres travelled for work-related reasons. But there is a noticeable range in distances for commuting as well as for business trips - especially highly qualified employees and knowledge-intensive occupational groups are highly mobile and travel long distances (see Table 1).

Overall, daily commuter traffic contributes significantly to environmental pollution and climate change. Typical traffic problems such as congestion, noise and pollution are concentrated in rush-hour traffic and are a particular challenge for urban development. Despite good ideas and measures for a more sustainable and less car-dependent mobility - there is still hardly any evidence for a „Peak Travel“ or „Peak Car“ and thus an end to the growth in commuter traffic.²

Labour in transformation

What is the basis for this continuing dynamic in job-related mobility? Driven by economic but also technological processes, labour is undergoing a structural change whereby the conditions and forms of professional work are changing. Employers often expect a high willingness to be mobile from their employees. It is critically noted that „corporate mobility regimes“ impose severe performance pressure and thus also physical, psychological and social strains on the individual.³

This mobilisation of labour is particularly relevant for the highly qualified, but is also relevant for further groups of workers. The specialisation and limitation of jobs and the change of working places are increasing. Dual earner households often fail to keep the distance between home and work short for both partners, so that commuting distances continue to increase. And even if moving could shorten the distance to the workplace, for many people a moving house does not seem to be an alternative. The so-called residential mobility is not increasing within Germany. In comparison to other European nations, German employees rarely move.⁴ Increased mobility requirements in training and work are instead „taken to the streets“ and result in a longer commute.⁵ Scientific studies show that long periods

of travel can noticeably reduce subjective well-being and even make people ill. „Stress that doesn't pay“ is the verdict of a Swiss study, because the long journey is usually not compensated by better pay.⁶

Shares among employed people	Official channels at an average working day*	Use of home office	Long-distance commuters
Total	9 %	13 %	2 %
Level of education			
Lower than A-levels	8 %	9 %	1 %
A-levels or similar	9 %	13 %	2 %
University degree	11 %	21 %	3 %

Table 1: Mobility of employed people according to level of education (Source: own table according to MID 2017)

* Percentages indicate the ratio of respondents who completed at least one business trip on an average working day (Mon - Fri).

Working at home and yet no end of congestion

The mobilisation of employment relations described above is from the beginning on closely linked to digitalisation processes. The introduction of information and communication technologies into the system of labour from the 1970s onwards also raised hopes of being able to replace physical with virtual traffic. „Teleworking“ was regarded as a modern concept for reducing the volume of commuting.⁷ Model calculations and empirical studies provided encouraging results and promised significant substitution, i. e. the elimination of journeys, and thus a relaxation of commuter traffic.⁸ Gradually, however, disillusionment set in. The dissemination of the new digitally organised work has been slow. While Germany was in a leading position in Europe at the end of the 1990s with a 6 % share of „teleworkers“ among the working population, growth slowed down noticeably. Today, Germany is far behind, especially in comparison to the Scandinavian countries.⁹ 13 % of the employees - according to the current survey „Mobility in Germany“ - work at least temporarily from home. At the same time, commuting requirements and distances increased continuously. The effects of saved distances were thus lost in the „noise“ of the general traffic growth.

Digital and highly mobile

A further explanation for the still low impact of working from home is being discussed. The so-called induction hypothesis states that digitalisation causally provokes contact with people and places at a greater distance and thus creates additional journeys.¹⁰ According to this hypothesis, digitalisation does not lead to a substitution of trips, but rather to more traffic. An anecdote from the origins of technology development shows that this effect is quite typical for the introduction of new communication technologies. „Watson, please come,

"I need you" is said to have been the first sentence ever said on the telephone - addressed by the inventor Graham Bell to his mechanic Thomas Watson.¹¹

The possible traffic-inducing effect is also supported by empirical findings about the complex everyday life of individual occupational groups.¹² Thus, digital exchange in the everyday life of highly qualified top executives does not replace the physical travel, but rather both are interwoven in many ways. Work is done at the office, from home and on the train or plane; people are constantly online and on the way to the next meeting. This certainly characterises only the working life of a numerically small group of „hypermobiles“, but on a smaller scale it applies to many more qualified employees.

Corona: Empty streets and digital work

Since the outbreak of the corona pandemic in early March 2020, completely new conditions apply to physical and virtual work-related mobility. Employment and occupational travelling had to be reorganised overnight to make them suitable for a pandemic. In fact, we can observe a situation, that some people hoped for at the beginning of digitalisation some decades ago. The frequency and intensity of working from home has risen dramatically, business trips have almost ceased.¹³ The interest in and use of digital solutions has accordingly increased enormously (Fig. 1). Video conferences and working from home replace the journey to the office and to the client, virtual mobility replaces physical mobility.

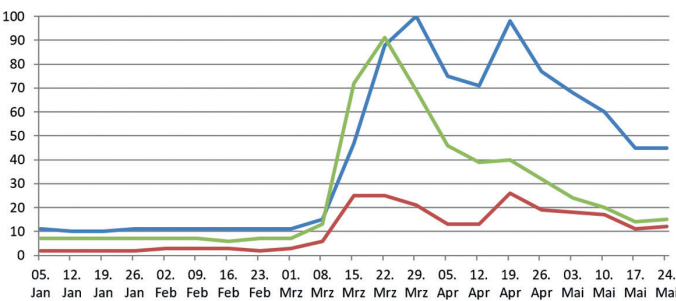


Fig. 1: Google search queries in 2020 for business software for digital communication and video conferencing (index value: 100 corresponds to the highest number of search queries in one week during the observation period; analysis: T. Handke, ILS)

Instead of the usual morning traffic jams, there were now empty streets and clean air - this unusual picture in the cities was partly caused by working from home.

Professional mobility as a task field for companies ...

Will the corona crisis act as a driver for the transformation of professional mobility and the breakthrough of working from home? According to the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), 30 - 40 % of the work performed at the workplace could be shifted mainly or occasionally to home.¹⁴ Even if, as noted above, working from home can have a traffic-

generating effect - in sum, it offers the chance of reducing and easing work-related journeys. However, it should be borne in mind that working from home is not only perceived as an extension of work opportunities, but can also be a burden. This is particularly true for those employees with children or relatives in need of care. Especially during the exceptional situation of the lockdown, many - especially women - have reached the limits of these double work load.



Pop-up bikelane in Berlin. Photo: Burkhard Horn

What needs to be done to use the abrupt changes in times of Corona for a lasting turnaround in commuter traffic and at the same time avoid disproportionate strains? For one, employers would have to use their possibilities for action. Strong reservations of companies are largely responsible for the fact that digital possibilities have not yet been fully exploited in the context of more flexible working time models and in everyday working life. The digital competence and IT infrastructure that has now been acquired could be used as the starting point for a systematic push towards home office and against excessive business travel. However, in regard to the strains outlined above, this should not lead to an increase in individual performance requirements. The „mobility regime“ would rather have to be replaced by a reflective and socially oriented mobility policy initiated by the companies.¹⁵ It is also the responsibility of companies to make use of the extensive range of corporate mobility management measures and to promote mobility for all employees.¹⁶ The pandemic can help in this respect: the current popularity of bicycles could possibly be used to establish this means of transport on commuting and business trips if incentives such as showers and safe parking facilities are created at the workplace.

... and of urban planning and urban policy

Cities, too, are called to create a suitable framework for more sustainable mobility. The need to keep a distance can be used as an occasion to promote environmentally friendly and space-saving mobility and a fair redistribution of public space.¹⁷

Individual cities such as Berlin and London are doing this by establishing pop-up bikelanes, i. e. temporary cycle lanes and

closures for car traffic. Their permanent provision is currently being discussed. The combination of home office and cycling promotion also offers considerable potential for local orientation and the rediscovery of one's own neighbourhood. Those who work at home and do not drive to work are more likely to shop in the store around the corner rather than in the supermarket on the outskirts of town.

At the same time, the confidence in public transport shaken by Corona must be restored, as this is the only way to cope with high volumes of traffic in an urban-regional context and to support households without cars.¹⁸

The use of the home office and other flexible forms of work can help strengthen public transport by reducing rush hour traffic and providing more space inside the vehicles to keep sufficient distance.

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Work-related mobility during and after Corona

The French sociologist and philosopher of science Bruno Latour recently emphasised in an interview that the pandemic puts us in a position to decide what is and is not useful.¹⁹ This positive interpretation can also be applied to the system of occupational mobility. The behavioural changes in the wake of the pandemic have highlighted the great potential for adaptation of mobility systems and practices. Experiences with other disruptive events, such as environmental incidents or motorway closures, show that a permanent activation of this potential seems possible.²⁰

In all strategies, it is important to participate citizens and to show what positive added value the perpetuation of some pandemic-related changes in behaviour can have. Whether the Corona crisis will retrospectively be assessed as a start towards a resilient, socially just and sustainable design of working conditions and mobility systems depends on courageous and far-sighted decisions by all actors.

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