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Workplace diversification, workspace flexibilisation and company strategies post pandemic

Lessons from a Paris Region case study

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ABSTRACT

The development of the knowledge economy and the growing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are transforming office work in many ways, including from a spatial perspective. Workplaces are becoming multi-locational, and workspaces located in company premises include a growing proportion of collaborative and shared spaces (open spaces, flexi offices, collective workstation etc.). There is a growing literature on the issues arising from the current reorganisations of workplaces and workspaces, with an additional focus since the start of the pandemic, which has favored the adoption of remote working, especially home-based teleworking, and its spread to new economic sectors and fields of activity. However, there is a scarcity of data about these questions, which are the subject of this article. It investigates companies' policies about the links between remote work, workplaces and workspaces in the Paris Region (France), with specific attention to the impacts of the pandemic. It offers an analytical framework based on a literature review, and some preliminary findings drawn from 20 stakeholder interviews and the first analysis of questionnaires (200) in an ongoing online survey of company head offices. The findings suggest first that previous trends in workplace diversification, such as the regular practice of homeworking have received a boost from the pandemic. Emerging trends were also confirmed, like the use of coworking spaces or satellite offices. In addition, the spread of regular telework has prompted an expansion of the labor market area within and outside the Region. Second, while our survey does not show a clear link between remote working and increased workspace flexibilisation, some interviews suggest that multi-locational working, and in particular regular remote working, could constitute a management tool with the effects of making open-space and flexible offices more acceptable to employees. These ideas will be tested during the next phase of this ongoing research project.

Keywords

Remote work, workplaces, workspaces, pandemic, head offices.

1 INTRODUCTION

The development of the knowledge economy and the growing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are transforming office work in many ways, including from a spatial perspective (Pajevic and Shearmur, 2021; Shearmur, 2021). On the one hand, workplaces (defined here as the locations where employees perform their different tasks) are becoming more diverse: for decades now the fixed and single workplace located in company premises has ceased to be the only (or even the dominant) model (Vilhelmson and Thulin, 2001; Crague, 2003; Lejoux and Pochet, 2019). Hybrid forms of workplaces have developed. In many economic sectors and fields of activity, work can now be done in various locations, either fixed (such as the home, a satellite office of the company, a telecenter, etc.), or temporary (in a train, a café, etc.) when workers are on the move. Consequently, new spatialities of work are emerging at city (Reuschke and Ekinsmyth, 2021) and country levels. For instance, digital nomadism, a lifestyle that combines remote working and vacation, is developing in many countries across the world (Hermann and Paris, 2020). At region and city levels, the geography of new work spaces (NWS), such as coworking spaces, makerspaces, etc. is attracting growing scholarly interest this (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Mariotti et al., 2021). On the other hand, the design and uses of workspaces (defined here as the way office spaces are organised in employer premises) are changing. Workspaces are becoming increasingly flexible and activity-based (Cochard et al., 2019; Eismann et al., 2022). Shared offices, open-space offices and flex-offices are a growing trend (Lai et al., 2021). This raises a number of questions about the impact of such changes in the quality of work (Wheatley, 2021), dehumanisation (Taskin et al., 2019) and employee well-being (Lütke et al., 2021), work efficiency (Nappi and Eddial, 2021; Yunus and Ernawati, 2018), daily travel (Cerqueira et al., 2020; Ellder, 2020; Stiles and Smart, 2021), and urban development (Fiorentino, 2019; Yu et al., 2019), including corporate real-estate management (Jilhä et al., 2019).

There is a growing literature about the issues arising from the current reorganisations of workplaces and workspaces, with an additional focus since the start of the pandemic, which has boosted the adoption of remote working, especially homeworking, and its spread to new economic sectors and fields of activity (Adrjan et al., 2022; De Palma et al., 2022). In many companies, remote working is likely to outlast the pandemic. This may change the nature of office work in terms of both workplaces and workspaces, with more hybrid working (multi-locational workplaces) and more flexible workplaces, and some companies even moving premises, especially head offices, to new locations (Ferranti and Newman, 2021). However, knowledge about these matters remains sparse and it is this scarcity that our article seeks to address.

The article investigates the links between remote working, workplaces, and workspaces, with specific attention to the impact of the pandemic. It analyses companies' policies and strategies. Our research is in the field of geography and planning, enriched by an interdisciplinary approach crossing management sciences and sociology.

It proposes an analytical framework based on a literature review, and some preliminary findings drawn from 20 stakeholder interviews and the first analysis of recent questionnaires survey of company head offices (200 completed ones). It is structured as follows. The first section offers a brief literature review and describes our analytical framework. The second section presents the case study (the Paris Region) and the methodology used. The third section gives some preliminary results from our ongoing research. The conclusion summarises the main findings, exposes the limitations of our work, and proposes avenues for future research in this field.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

For decades, office work has been evolving in the direction of greater diversity in the workplaces used by employees, and greater flexibility in the workspaces located in employer premises. These trends, which are not unconnected but have mostly been analysed separately, may accelerate with the Covid-19 pandemic and the development of remote working, especially home-based teleworking (Athanasiadou and Theriou, 2021).

With growing use of ICT and greater employee mobility, workplaces are becoming more and more diverse (Di Marino and Lapintie, 2018). They now encompass fixed locations such as the office, the home (and even a second home, whether owned or rented), and a myriad of private and public “third places”, whether work-specific (such as telecenters, coworking spaces, etc.) or not (cafés, libraries, trains, airports, etc.). Moreover, some multi-site companies use satellite offices, particularly to reduce commuting distances (Bailey and Kurland, 1999) or, more recently, to reduce the risks of infection in the workplace (Kim et al., 2021).

These trends are difficult to measure since statistics are lacking. The traditional office and the home seem to remain the main places of work for most employees, i.e. the places where they spend most of their working time (Shearmur, 2021). However, the development of multi-locational working is attracting increased attention in the academic literature, around questions such as the organisation of tasks between multiple workplaces (Hislop and Axtell, 2009), impacts on travel behavior, gender factors (Burchell et al., 2021), gentrification (Besson, 2021), urban and rural development (Di Martino and Lapintie, 2018), etc. Furthermore, by accelerating the adoption of remote working practices and their spread to new economic sectors and fields of activity (e.g. support function), the pandemic may increase the practice of multi-location work for many employees (Tagliaro and Miglione, 2021). Work from home will probably remain the main form of remote work. However, remote work from second homes (or vacation places), in satellite offices or in third places may also become more common practices in the coming years (Nanayakkara et al., 2021), especially in large urban areas subject to serious transportation problems.

The development of remote working and multi-location working practices may also have an impact on the size and design of office spaces. One question is whether the spread of remote working, and particularly home-based teleworking, may encourage companies to reduce the size of office space? Another is whether it may accelerate the flexibilisation of work with impacts on office spaces (i.e. the flex-offices organisation, use of shared offices, etc.), since fewer employees may be simultaneously present on company premises. With the development of remote work, and especially home-based telework, company premises are increasingly used for interactions between employees: meetings, collaborative work, informal discussions, etc. (Tagliaro and Ciamarella, 2016). Consequently, the conventional office is likely to continue evolving in the coming years in the direction of activity-based working areas. In particular, companies' premises may host a growing number of open and collaborative spaces, such as meeting rooms and some informal areas, in order to adapt to the growing need for formal and informal interactions

between employees on the day(s) when they are working in company premises. Moreover, previous research has demonstrated that teleworking mitigates the drawbacks associated with open working environments (open-space, flex-office), such as interruptions to professional activity and the stress they generate (Vayre, 2021). The development of remote working could thus make the reorganisation of conventional workplaces more acceptable for employees.

Finally, the development of multi-location working practices could have an impact on – and reciprocally be fuelled by – companies' location strategies (Naor et al., 2021). Remote working can contribute to changes in real estate strategies, with the idea that need for office space could be reduced – or reduce the surface area needed for office work – which could in turn encourage some companies to relocate either within the same urban area (whether in the city center or in the outskirts) or to another urban (or rural) area (Haider and Anwar, 2022).

3 CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Paris Region

The Paris Region (France) corresponds to the administrative region called Île-de-France. This Region accounts for 19% of the French population, 23% of jobs, and 37% of executive personnel (compared with 15% in the rest of France), notably because of the presence of numerous corporate head offices (Insee, French institute for statistics). Three out of 10 jobs are located in the municipality of Paris. More than 8 out of 10 jobs are in the tertiary sector (scientific and technical activities, commerce, information and communication, etc.). Knowledge-intensive activities and head offices are primarily concentrated in Paris and in the adjacent Department to the West, Hauts de Seine (business district of La Défense).

Finally, because of the structure of employment and the spatial distribution of population and jobs, which generate long commuting distances, remote working was more common than in the rest of France before the pandemic (Aguiléra et al., 2016).

3.2 A mixed research methodology

Our work, which is part of an ongoing two-year research project at Gustave Eiffel University funded by the Paris Region (until January 2023), is based on a mixed methodology utilising both qualitative and quantitative methods (Perrin et al., 2022). It comprises 3 phases:

- An exploratory phase based on a review of the literature and documentation, with the addition of 20 interviews conducted with different stakeholders in companies, public organisations, and in the real estate sector.
- A questionnaire-based survey of private company head offices (in all locations and of different sizes, mono or multi-site) located in the Paris region.
- Interviews with managers in selected companies, identified during the questionnaire survey (work in progress).

This article presents the first analyses of the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire was targeted at executives or human resources (HR) managers. Because of government restrictions

and the need to work remotely, we had to postpone the launch of the online questionnaire-based survey twice. After distributing the questionnaire online (February-April 2022), due to the difficulty in reaching the target, the questionnaire was adapted and administered by phone in May 2022. The phone survey yielded 200 completed responses. Companies with head offices located in the Paris Region were surveyed. This survey focuses on private companies with office activities, with at least 20 employees. We have chosen to survey small, medium and large companies in order to identify the issues and constraints related to size. The aim of this survey is to establish a typology of the ways companies manage the diversification of workplaces and the reorganisation of workspaces.

After a short set of standard questions about the company (economic sector, number of sites in the Paris Region and outside, number of employees, etc.), the questionnaire covered the following ground about the head office:

- Location (at municipality level), design of office spaces, and assessment of current location and premises (in terms of accessibility by car and public transit, size of activity space, design of office space, etc.).
- Plans relating to location, workplaces, and workspaces (for instance in terms of the development of collaborative spaces) in the coming years.
- Organisation of work: number of employees, remote and multi-locational working (practices and support policies) before the pandemic (in 2019) and now, workspaces allowed, and policies for remote work in the future (after the pandemic).
- A set of questions about the impacts of the pandemic on the development of multi-locational work and recruitment policy.

Based on the results of this questionnaire survey, and in order to better understand the constraints and trade-offs involved, executives of representative companies will be interviewed during a next phase of the research.

4 PRELIMINARY RESULTS

The results presented here are preliminary, they are based on the first analysis of the 200 completed questionnaires (phone survey), and the 20 exploratory interviews. They show two main interesting trends that will need to be confirmed by further statistical processing and the third phase of interviews with company executives (started in summer 2022).

4.1 Brief description of the sample

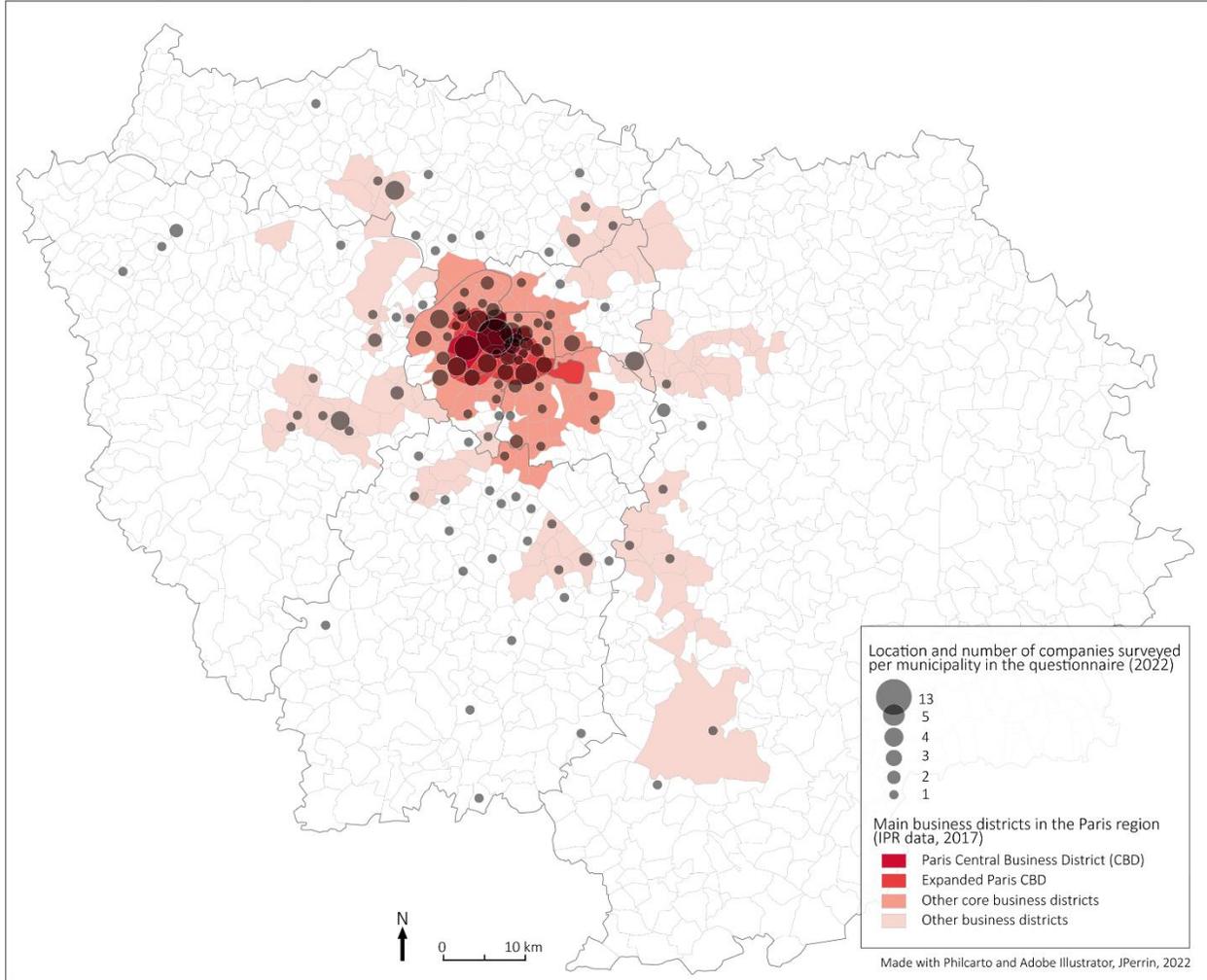
The panel was sampled according to company size and includes 40.5% small companies (20 to 49 employees), 39.5% medium-sized companies (50 to 249 employees) and 20% intermediate or large companies (over 250 employees). The third category is deliberately over-represented in order to be studied¹. Concerning the profile of the people who answered the questionnaires, a majority are HR managers (41%) or executives (33.5%), other are CFO (18%).

Regarding the companies surveyed, the most represented sector of activity is services (54%), and in particular the sector classified as “Scientific and technical activities, administrative and support services” (26% of the sample). The spatial distribution of the companies surveyed (head offices) (Figure 1) is consistent with the distribution of the major business centers in the region, with the

¹ In Paris Region, 61% of companies have less than 50 employees, 30% have 50 to 249 and 9% have more than 250 (Insee, SIRENE data, 2020).

Paris (32.5%) and La Défense (20.5%) areas mainly represented. 47% are multi-site companies and among these companies, 79% have several sites in Paris Region. About head offices, 60% companies surveyed are in rented premises. We observe an emerging trend: 2% of the panel is domiciled in a coworking space. For 68% of the panel, more than half of the premises are used for office activities (43% only for that).

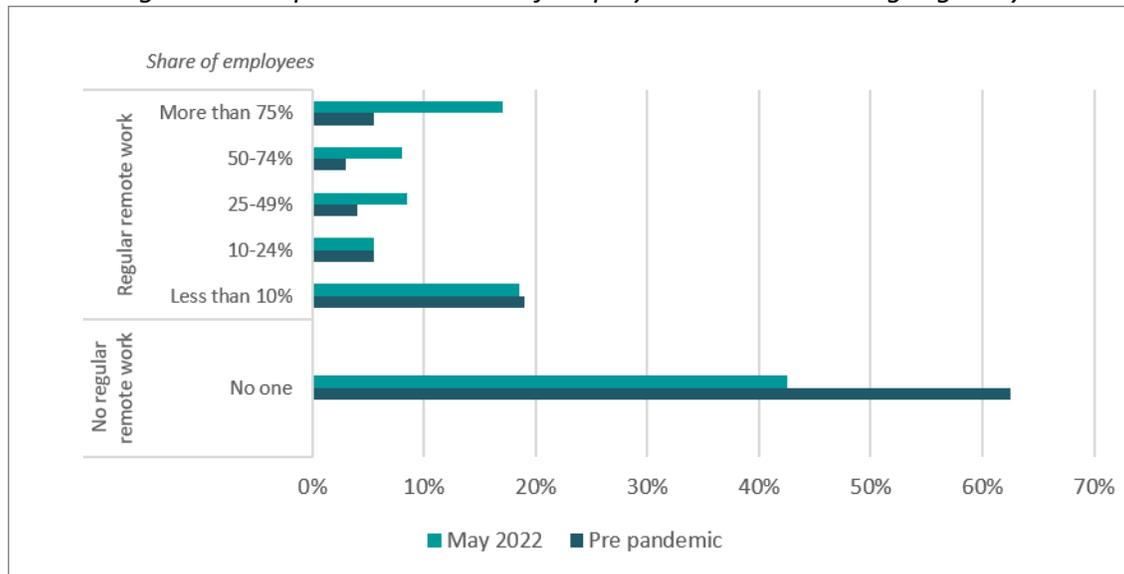
Figure 1. Companies surveyed and main business districts in the Paris region



4.2 Spread of remote work, workplace diversification, and geographical expansion of the labor market

Our data allows us to analyse company's policies on remote work. The practice of regular remote work (i.e. working away from the conventional office at least 1 day per week) by a part of the employees is here a key indicator. Regular remote work has spread since the beginning of the pandemic (Figure 2). More companies are concerned: from 38% before the covid-19 pandemic to 58%, with a stronger spread for medium-sized companies (+25 points). Within companies, the share of employees remote working regularly has increased: 25% of companies, this now concerns more than 50% of employees. In companies with regular remote work, the most common patterns are 2 days (37%) and 1 day (36%) per week.

Figure 2. Companies and share of employees remote working regularly



Source: Questionnaire – Lablity research, 2022

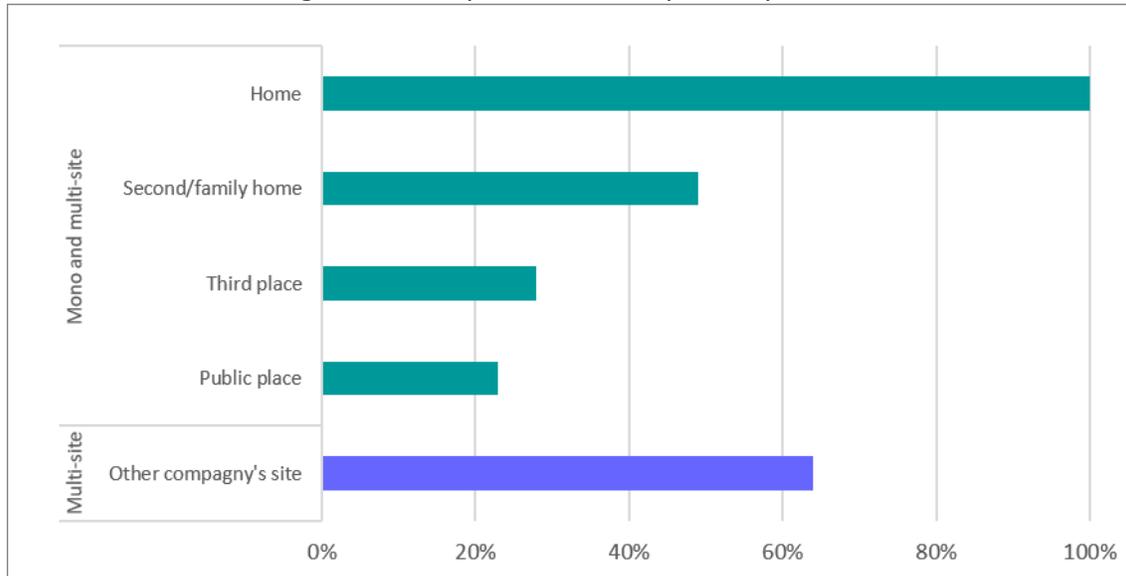
The first parts of the research gave some insight into this increase: it reflects (i) the preferences of employees, (ii) would allow a higher productivity and (iii) enhanced attractiveness on the labor market. The pandemic thus maintained remote working or extended it to jobs to functions that were not previously considered *teleworkable*. It changed the perception of remote work: it is now less about teleworkable jobs than about teleworkable tasks. However, full teleworking is not the rule (less than 2% of the companies with regular remote work have a main pattern of more than 4 days per week). Hybrid work arrangements, where people continue go to the office about 3 days a week, seems to be becoming the “new normal” in many companies.

Our data allow us to qualify these company policies regarding remote work, about possible accompanying measures. We also have the workplaces (outside the traditional office) allowed by company policy (Figure 3).

All companies with regular telework put measures in place: 90% provide ICT equipment and tools and 42% provide or finance office furniture and supplies. Also, all companies with regular remote work allow work from home (25% offer a monetary compensation for that), and almost half allow work in second or family home. Third places are allowed by 28% of these companies and 19% finance (partially or totally) the access to coworking spaces. For companies with regular remote work, 61% observed more employees working from home compared to before the pandemic. For those that allow third places, 44% have more employees working in these spaces.

Another indicator of workplace diversification concerns multi-site companies. 64% of them allow their employees to work in other sites than their main place of work (Figure 3): for 51%, more employees practice it. In the next few years, 11% of the companies surveyed are considering developing the use of satellite offices.

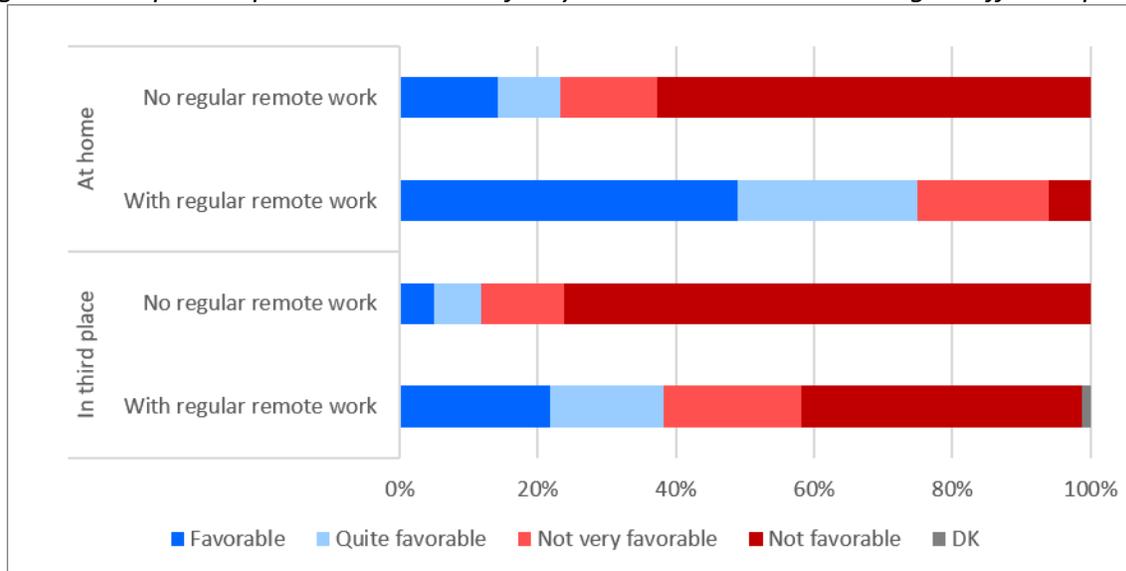
Figure 3. Workplaces and companies' policies



Source: Questionnaire – Lability research, 2022

The first phases of the research enabled us to collect the feelings of both office real estate stakeholders and company representatives about the development of remote work. We observed a convergent discourse on the *search for balance*. In the questionnaire, we asked what the company's position is in the next few years regarding the use of remote working in different places (Figure 4). Companies with regular remote work are more open about it. However, the answers are nuanced and seem to us to translate this present floating on the search for balance.

Figure 4. Companies' position in the next few years about remote working in different places



Source: Questionnaire – Lability research, 2022

Our questionnaire survey confirmed finding from the interviews: the growth of remote working favors a geographical expansion of the labor market area. Companies seem less reluctant to hire

employees living a long way from their premises than before the pandemic. 77% of companies in our sample agree that they expanded their labor market area within the Paris Region as a result of the pandemic, 15% report that their recruitment area has expanded outside the Paris Region, though 4% outside France. This enlargement of the recruitment pool seems to be an indirect spatial effects of remote work: because of the pandemic and its spread, in Paris Region companies seem less reluctant than before to hire employees living further from their premises, at least in the case of head offices.

To sum up, earlier trends in workplace diversification, especially regular homeworking, were boosted by the pandemic, a finding largely confirmed by the interviews with the different stakeholders. The use of third places and satellite offices is not the norm, but are more considered in company policies. Workplace diversification is not just linked to remote work, as evidenced by the evolution of the use of different company premises.

4.3 Increased workspace flexibilisation

About workspaces, in 72% of the companies studied premises, there are open space offices. 42 % has flex office organisation (at least partly) and 18% of the sample have fewer workstations than employees.

The companies were asked about possible projects in the next few years involving (i) a move of the head office, (ii) a change in the size of the premises (iii) a reorganisation of the workspaces (Table 1).

Table 1. Companies with projects concerning head office workplace and workspace in the next few years

		Share of panel responding yes
Move	<i>Decided</i>	3%
	<i>In reflection</i>	7%
Surface	<i>Increase</i>	15%
	<i>Decrease</i>	1,5%
Reorganisation	<i>Decided</i>	7%
	<i>In reflection</i>	16%

Source: Questionnaire – Lability research, 2022

Our data do not show, at this point, a clear link between work reorganisations changes in working arrangements and relocation projects. Also, while the idea of reducing the size of office space was highly reported by media in the early months of the pandemic, it is little considered by the companies surveyed (1,5%). More companies are considering changing the layout of their offices (23%): 7% have decided and 16% are thinking about it. The projects are diverse and concern both open and closed spaces (individual offices), as well as collective spaces. This last point confirmed finding from the interviews, with new expectations concerning meeting rooms and other collective work spaces, as well as catering areas, which are now more and more designed to be both convivial and supporting collaborative uses. These projects concerning workplaces and workspaces are combined in a significant proportion of observations: 22% of companies considering a reorganisation are also considering a move and 45% also a change in the surface

area of the premises. 18% of companies with projects are considering changes to all three spatial levers (which is 5% of the total panel).

In 46% of cases, these projects have emerged since the pandemic. However, only a quarter of companies link these projects to remote work: 10% strongly and 15% partially. While it is difficult at this stage of our research to qualify the link between the development of remote working and increases in workspace flexibility, we make the assumption (based on the exploratory phase) that the spread of regular remote working could be a management tool intended to make flex-office organisation more acceptable to employees. This hypothesis will be tested during the third phase of this research project.

5 CONCLUSION

The changes in working organisations and practices during the pandemic were an adaptation to health issues and public policies, and represented a boost to earlier trends. Our results show that remote working is part of an ongoing change by companies in the management of workplaces, in the direction of increasing diversity, and also in the management of workspaces in and out of offices. However, the home and the conventional office will remain the main workplaces, although satellite offices, coworking spaces, etc. will also develop in the future.

This article presents the first results of the questionnaire survey. These show that, while changes are underway, the management of the organisation and places of work by companies are following different trajectories. The spread of remote work is part of bigger changes in the organisation of work. As an opening question, companies were asked about the current period affected by the covid-19 pandemic: (i) for 14%, it is a period of acceleration of changes initiated earlier, (ii) it is a period of adaptation that will strongly reorient the future organisation for 26% and (iii) that will partially reorient the future organisation for 28%, (iv) for the remaining third, it is a temporary period of adaptation. Here we find a first group, referred to as *leaders* in several interviews, who are proactive in terms of changes in work organisation and whose strategies or policies have been widely publicised. While this group is notable, it is not in the majority. We also find those *searching for balance*, mentioned earlier about remote work roles. Our first findings also strongly nuanced changes in progress or to come.

Our work has many limitations, and present preliminary findings. Future analyses of our data, and the final phase of the research (interviews with company executives) will make it possible to establish a typology of (i) adaptation modes and (ii) the link between management of the work organisation and the workplaces. It will allow a better understanding of the trade-offs and constraints that explain these different company policies. Our first results strongly nuanced the weight of the diffusion of remote work in the current evolution. Interviews will allow us to better qualify its role.

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