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Interview with Bettina Kohlrausch on “Home Office: Potential and Use”

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<https://www.wsi.de/de/ansprechpartner-innen-14509-prof-dr-bettina-kohlrausch-22376.htm>

Bettina Kohlrausch has been Director of the Hans Böckler Foundation's Institute of Economic and Social Research and Professor of Social Transformation and Digitalization at the University of Paderborn since the beginning of May 2020. Previously, she was a visiting professor at the DZHW and a research associate at the Sociological Research Institute Göttingen (SOFI). She received her PhD from the International Graduate School in Bremen (BiGSSS) and spent time abroad at the London School of Economics and the European University Institute Florence. Her research and publications focus on labor market research with a focus on digitalization and social inequality, (vocational) education research, and research on the causes of anti-democratic attitudes.

BISE: Prof. Kohlrausch, you are academic director of the Institute of Economic and Social Research (WSI) of the Hans-Böckler Stiftung. What is the vision and mission of WSI and what are the core research fields of WSI?

Kohlrausch: The WSI explores work in a very broad sense. First of all, we define both paid work and care work as work. We are interested in how it is regulated by the institutions of the welfare state, but also by collective

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bargaining policy and co-determination in companies. We are also interested in how work structures social inequality and gender inequality.

BISE: What is your personal background? What are your research areas and how do they relate to the home office phenomenon?

Kohlrausch: I am a sociologist and professor for social transformation and digitalization. So I don't come from – also very exciting perspective of the sociology of technology, but rather deal with the question of how transformation processes change work and thus also the possibilities of social integration that are associated with work.

BISE: Home office is connected with advantages and disadvantages for individuals, companies and the society. What are the most important aspects from your point of view?

Kohlrausch: We know from current research, including our own labor force survey, that many people perceive the gain in flexibility that home office allows as an advantage. For example, it facilitates the reconciliation of family and work or saves commuting time.

The main disadvantage is the increasing dissolution of work and life. It is no longer clear where life begins and work ends, for example, when, as was common in many families during the pandemic, people work and at the same time look after their children. Many people find this simultaneity and the blurring of the boundaries between work and life stressful. Moreover, on average people work longer in the home office.

BISE: WSI has performed several empirical studies focusing on the home office. Can you provide more details about the background of these studies?

Kohlrausch: Our institute has been conducting a labor force survey since the beginning of the pandemic. The Corona crisis has been influencing social and economic life worldwide since the beginning of 2020. Against the background of this development we started to monitor and record the working and living conditions of people in employment in Germany. So far, eight surveys have taken place – in April, June and November 2020, end of January/beginning of February, July and September 2021, and January, April and November 2022. The survey is a computer-assisted web interview (CAWI) based on an online sample. In the first wave, 7,677 people were interviewed. These people were contacted again for the subsequent survey waves, in which between 6000 and 6500 people

participated in each case. The respondents represent the labor force in Germany with regard to the following characteristics: gender, age, education and federal state. Due to the panel structure it is possible to identify changes over time.

BISE: What are the key insights from these studies?

Kohlrausch: There are several aspects to this answer:

First, we found that working from home has skyrocketed as a result of the pandemic. While before the pandemic about 4% of respondents said they worked mostly or entirely at home, that figure was 27% in the first lockdown in April 2020. However, this percentage has never been reached since. Even under occupational health and safety regulations enforced by the federal government in January 2021, which included a so-called “home office” requirement, only 24% of respondents worked at home. In our last survey in December 2022, it was about 11.5%. So we can conclude – the proportion of people working in a home office has increased significantly as a result of the pandemic. However, this only affects a good tenth of the workforce. There is much greater potential yet.

In January 2021, we asked whether the job of the respondents is suitable for the home office. 48% of our respondents said their job was not suitable for home office, while 14% said they could at least perform “certain work processes” from home. 20% and 19%, respectively, said that “a large part” of their work could be done from home or that their work was even suitable for the home office “without restrictions”. Thus, the home office potential was not exhausted at any time during the pandemic. This also appears to be due to the attitude of employers: in January 2021, the second lockdown, just under 5% of all respondents worked predominantly at home although they actually wanted to reduce their presence work further and considered their work to be suitable for home office. Of this group, around 70% said that their employer discouraged them from working at home more.

A second question concerns the experiences of people working in home offices. In fact, during the pandemic many people organized homeschooling and childcare alongside their home office work. This raised the fundamental question of whether the home office facilitates work-life balance. In particular, we have seen that this double burden has put a lot of pressure on mothers. So it is definitely no substitute for sufficient state childcare.

In principle, the respondents have already stated that the home office makes it easier to reconcile family and work. At the same time, about a third of those surveyed felt that working from home was more stressful, and a good half complained that the boundaries between work and life were blurred in the home office.

BISE: In a recent article at “Zeit Online” you argued that the home office is a privilege of the rich. What do you mean by that?

Kohlrausch: That was certainly a somewhat pointed wording. However, if we look at the correlation between income and home office use, a clear picture emerges. The higher the household income of employees, the more frequently they work in the home office. The reason for this is the differing industry and activity structures of the various income classes. Moreover, we know from already existing research on this topic that employees in higher status positions, who have a higher income, are also more likely to use flexible forms of work.

BISE: The home office is a complex phenomenon. Which role does interdisciplinary research play here? Which disciplines should collaborate to tackle the challenges of the home office?

Kohlrausch: The home office was only enabled by the digitization of work. Without the appropriate technology, it would hardly have been possible for so many people to work from home during the pandemic. In this respect, I see an interface here for the cooperation of technical subjects and social sciences. This new form of work also is, however, interesting from the point of view of psychology and occupational medicine because new forms of stress and health hazards can arise here. For example, with regard to the dissolution of boundaries between work and life that I mentioned earlier.

BISE: The BISE community is specifically interested in the interplay of social and technological elements. Which areas should be investigated at the intersection with regard to the home office?

Kohlrausch: On the one hand, interdisciplinary work seems important to me in the design and development of technical possibilities for work in the home office. Working with new software for collaborative work from home brings along new opportunities but also new risks; for

example, entirely new possibilities for controlling work arise. Here it makes sense to decide not only in terms of the technical possibilities, but also against the background of the socio-political question “how do we want to work in the future?”, how this technology will be further developed and also used. Furthermore, new challenges also result for occupational safety and the organization of work, for example in the recording of working hours.

BISE: The home office is here to stay. What will the workplace of the future look like?

Kohlrausch: In future, more people will work in a home office than in the past. However, this is certainly not a model for all employees. Even of those employees who could do so in principle, only a fraction will work from home. At the same time, we have seen in our surveys that during the pandemic many employees wanted to work from home even after the pandemic. However, usually not completely, but for a few days during the week. It can therefore be assumed that a larger proportion of employees, but by no means the majority, will continue to work from home. However, as I said, this also requires rules and other forms of occupational health and safety.

BISE: Mrs. Kohlrausch, thank you very much for your time and for this interview.

Kohlrausch: Thank you as well. It was my pleasure.

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