

# The COVID-19 pandemic as a catalyst for digitalisation and remote working in Germany

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## Abstract

Remote working is ideal for medical writers, but up until a few years ago, was not widely available to those looking for a remote position with a German employer. Even though Germany is a developed country, its digitalisation has long been lagging, and moreover, the work culture is still in many places characterised by presenteeism. The COVID-19 pandemic has given the country a well-needed push in the right direction; one year after the first lockdown, five times as many people worked from home than before, and hopefully, many of those who appreciate it will retain this option. This article will give an impression of the 2020–2022 “home office revolution” in Germany. Hopefully, remote working will continue to be a possibility for German medical writers in the future.

## Introduction

**B**ack in 2019–2020, I was looking for a career change. The term “medical writing” had not really crossed my mind until then, but I was contemplating *what* I wanted to spend my workday doing, and *how* I wanted to do it. I discovered that I was going to become a medical writer, and importantly: one working *remotely*. This job seemed a perfect way to combine my professional and personal skills with my wish for flexibility. Unfortunately, I lived in a small town in Germany that was about 2.5 hours drive to either Munich or Stuttgart, the nearest metro-poles with a pharmaceutical/medical device

industry, and I could not relocate for family reasons. Originating from Scandinavia, where life is largely digitalised, and being an efficient and active person, I thought my geographical challenges could be easily overcome by working remotely. However, none of the potential employers who were hiring professional profiles like mine were willing to offer a regular home office arrangement. If I was lucky, it would be allowed occasionally – as an exception. I was both amazed and frustrated by this. Luckily, I widened my horizons beyond Germany, looked abroad, and was offered a 100% remote job with a Belgian company. I now work remotely, flexibly, and happily.

## Development of remote working in Germany from 2019 – 2021

Digitalisation is one of Germany’s greatest challenges in modern civilisation. It has been a

struggle, not because of financial constraints, but because of “the approach to innovation, the lack of specialists on the labour market, Germans’ sense of unease towards new technologies, as well as previous mistakes made during the development of the transmission infrastructure”.<sup>1</sup> Remote working depends on, among other things, digitalisation. The COVID-19 pandemic made “home office” a buzz-phrase in Germany; the topic was heavily discussed across society and the pandemic created a well-needed wave of digitalisation for many. Employees were freed from their offices (or shut out, if looking at it from the other side), enabling them to experience working from home. The proportion of Germans working exclusively or mainly from home increased rapidly from 4% before the pandemic to 27% during the first lockdown (March 2020 through May 2020), then sank to 14% in



November 2020, before it again rose to 24% in January 2021.<sup>2</sup>

#### Regulatory changes in Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic

The Infection Protection Act (Infektionsschutzgesetz), was adapted/amended several times, especially when the disease incidence rose, and regulatory changes were implemented to ensure more people stayed at home. In some amendments, the employer was obliged to offer certain employees home office arrangements, while in others, the employees were obliged to accept this offer. Despite the joys of having a home office, keeping an overview of all the discussions and changes must have been exhausting to many

people. The changing rules were mixed with discussions about data protection, occupational health and safety, surveillance by the employer, technical equipment,<sup>3</sup> among many other discussions. The latest legal obligations to offer employees home office arrangements were in effect until March 19, 2022, after which employees could have been required to return to their offices.

#### Will remote working remain a possibility in Germany?

Currently, there is no legal entitlement to working from home in Germany, and many must enter a dialogue with their employer to try to retain the opportunity for remote working after

the pandemic. The discussion about what will be the new “normal” is ongoing. Spatial and temporal work flexibility are seen by many as a trademark of the modern working world and its digitalisation, and a way to accommodate the personal needs of employees better. Unfortunately, to some extent, it becomes “employers against employees” and vice versa. Many employees wish to continue to maintain a home office. However, especially in small companies, this conflicts with the plans of the employers, who may refuse a home office facility even if the nature of the job tasks allows it.<sup>4</sup>

A report by the German Institute for Employment Research,<sup>5</sup> based on surveys of 513 employers (in 2016) and 4830 employees (in 2017), showed that an incompatibility between work tasks and the home office was the most frequent argument employers gave against home office facilities (90% of respondents). This was followed by a difficulty to work with colleagues (22%), caution regarding data protection (16%), impossibility to lead/control (10%), lack of interest from employees (10%), lack of technical requirements (9%), and “has not been an issue” (3%). The employees also rated incompatibility between work tasks and a home office the highest (76%), but this was followed by other factors, such as: “presence is important to the supervisor” (66%), difficulty to work with colleagues (59%), importance to separate work from private life (56%), lack of technical requirements (54%), home office not allowed even though it would be technically possible (16%), and home office is harmful for the career (7%).<sup>5</sup> The employees’ high rating of supervisor control as a hindrance to the home office is worth noting. German work culture is traditionally a culture of presenteeism.<sup>5</sup>

When one is working in a well-functioning remote position, these discussions may feel distant and unnecessary, but if you are not allowed to work remotely/flexibly, even if the requirements for the job could allow it, you may likely be frustrated. What a relief it was for me to have had a normal remote position throughout the pandemic and beyond, without having to bother about any of the constant changes. I am happy about the awareness of this type of flexible working that has finally reached Germany. I hope the opportunities for flexible work for medical writers will not be dependent on various laws, but on openness, creativity, modern thinking, and trust.

**Flexible working** is an arrangement in which an employer allows people to choose the times that they work, whether they work in the office or at home, etc.”<sup>6</sup>

In Germany, the terms “teleworking” and “mobile working” are often used synonymously, even if they are different, and “working from home” is often used to refer to both.<sup>3</sup> This article uses the terms “remote work”, “home office”, “flexible/mobile working” etc. interchangeably, without regard to the slight differences in the definitions of these and other related terms.



For the sake of completeness, it must be mentioned that some people may feel discomfort with flexible work facilities like a home office. Potential negative mental impact and other disadvantages of working from home are, however, beyond the scope of this article, which advocates flexible working for medical writers.

### Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by her employer or EMWA.

### Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Wendy Hartig-Merkel is a veterinarian who progressed from "real veterinary work" to a PhD, and from there to the veterinary nutraceutical and pharmaceutical industry. Her work aspirations and some very inspiring encounters with EMWA brought her to medical writing and a 100% remote position in 2020.

