What Makes Work-from-Home Work? Evidence on Telework and Worker Tasks
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The Covid 19 pandemic abruptly and dramatically increased the use of telework across a broad range of occupations. Telework, which had previously only been available to a small group of workers, was put into practice in a broad manner. Even as the threat of the pandemic lessened, many workers and employers sought to retain the increased use of telework. While the use of telework dropped from the levels seen early in the pandemic, a variety of jobs across a range of employers continued with high levels.

Telework has benefits for workers and employers, but there is substantial variation in the extent to which it is utilized. Researchers have identified several characteristics of workers and firms that are associated with higher levels of telework. Beyond employer and employee preferences, the duties of a job often make telework either impossible or appealing. However, even within narrowly defined occupations, there is variation in the availability of telework. This paper focuses on the employer's decision and takes a deeper look at the availability of telework at the job level based on employer characteristics, job characteristics, and job tasks as determining factors.

Prior evidence on work from home comes from a variety of sources. Job vacancy data provides information on numbers of new jobs offering either hybrid or remote work. Surveys of workers can provide information on the prevalence of work from home along with worker preferences and detailed demographic information. Case studies dive deeper into individual firms to better understand the impact of work from home on worker hours and productivity along with mentorship and innovation. This paper focuses on job level information on the availability of telework alongside detailed job tasks for a representative sample of jobs in the US economy to gain insight into specific job tasks that are associated with telework.

The Occupational Requirements Survey (ORS) collects information on telework as well as the requirements of jobs including work-related physical demands; environmental conditions; education training and experience; and cognitive and mental requirements by detailed occupations. In addition, ORS collects job tasks which are defined as "a distinct activity assigned to, or performed by, workers who are carrying out job duties that result in a specific outcome." The task information generally includes context on how and where the tasks are performed, what materials are used as well as their origination and destination, and with whom the worker interacts while performing the task. A key contribution of this paper is transforming the unstructured task statements into output that can be linked to O*NET's work activity classification by using a semantic similarity method.

Using this rich job-level ORS data will allow for a deeper understanding of which job tasks and business characteristics are more compatible with telework. Can these job details explain variation in the availability of telework? Alternatively, are employer characteristics or the local labor market more important determinants of when telework is offered? These insights will add to the growing knowledge on the drivers of the availability of telework and what we might expect in the future.