

Explaining the Autonomy-Control-Paradox With The Rise of Remote Work

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Abstract (500 words)

In the digital age, working remotely has become the new normal for many employees in most European countries. In Austria too, the context of our study, remote work was once considered to be the exception rather than the rule; yet became the daily working routine for more than 30 percent of the working population by the end of the year 2023 and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In line with this transformation, the implementation of new technologies has profoundly changed where, when and how we get work done. This involves a pronounced shift away from traditional forms of centralized and distinct organizations towards a diffused, fragmented and open set of social relations and individual opportunities for personal development. In every day working routines more flexibility over both time and place of work leads to a sense of more autonomy for employees. However, the increase of autonomy comes with paradoxical consequences as employers themselves grapple with the new distance to their employees, thus introduce different modes of control. Although previous research has acknowledged this paradox as consequence in digitalised labour markets (Fana et al. 2022; Gerten, Beckmann, and Bellmann 2019; Mazmanian et al. 2013) “very little scholarly effort has been devoted to the question of exactly how new technologies can cause paradoxical rationalities” (Bader and Kaiser 2017:339).

Thus, in our study we aim to explain how the autonomy-control paradox works from an employee’s perspective whilst going beyond existing research as we (1) We use a two-phase explanatory sequential mixed methods design, in which the quantitative data first provides a general picture of the research problem and is then extended for a more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon by qualitative data. Our results are based on data using the Micro Census as well as the Austrian AKCOVID Panel Survey and a set of 33 problem-centred semi-structured interviews. The findings of our quantitative study indicate that working remotely is especially prevalent within the group of highly educated people and individuals in certain professions (e.g., managers or academics) and especially employees regularly working remotely perceive increased levels of both autonomy and control. The analyses of our qualitative interviews deepen our understanding of this paradox as we discuss eight subdimensions (e.g., forced independence, invisibility or mutual trust) on a continuum of the individual personal preference and the actual work situation.

Keywords: remote work, autonomy-control paradox, mixed-method study, digitalisation, Austria