

The number of people who can telework is higher than was estimated

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March 2020 marked the beginning of a new experiment in the American workplace. Millions of people began working from home in an effort to inhibit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, also known as the novel coronavirus. As more people than ever are skipping daily commutes and holding virtual meetings, a fundamental question arises: how many people can actually perform all of their work duties from home? In their working paper “[How many jobs can be done at home?](#)” economists Jonathan I. Dingel and Brent Neiman (National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 26948, April 2020) use data from the Occupational Information Network ([O*Net](#)) and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) to estimate how many jobs in the United States can be performed entirely at home.

The authors find that 37 percent of U.S. jobs can be performed entirely at home—a number that greatly exceeds any recent estimate of how many workers telecommute on an average day. According to the 2018 American Time Use Survey, “less than a quarter of all full-time workers work from home on an average day, and even those workers typically spend well less than half of their working hours at home.”

Dingel and Neiman determine whether a job should be classified as “feasible for telework” using responses from two O*Net surveys covering “work context” and “generalized work activities.” If a job requires daily “outdoor work,” for example, they determine that it cannot be performed at home. Then, the authors merge their classifications with data from BLS “on the prevalence of each occupation in the aggregate U.S. economy as well as in particular metropolitan statistical areas and 2-digit NAICS industries.”

According to Dingel and Neiman, workers in telework-capable occupations typically earn more: the 37 percent of U.S. jobs that can plausibly be performed at home account for 46 percent of all wages.

The authors note that findings varied across cities and industries. For example, more than 45 percent of jobs in San Francisco, San Jose, and Washington, DC, can be performed at home, while only 30 percent or less of the jobs in Fort Myers, Grand Rapids, and Las Vegas can be performed at home. The findings also indicate that most jobs in finance, corporate management, and professional and scientific services can plausibly be performed at home, while very few jobs in agriculture, hotels and restaurants, or retail can be.

The authors then analyze countries other than the United States and find “a clear positive relationship between income levels and the shares of jobs that can be done from home.” They find that fewer than 25 percent of jobs in Mexico and Turkey can be performed at home, whereas more than 40 percent of jobs in Sweden and the United Kingdom can be. These results suggest that developing economies may face challenges in continuing to work during periods of social distancing during the spread of the COVID-19 virus.