



# Weekly Briefing

**Serbia social briefing:**  
**Working at home during pandemic**  
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## **Working at home during pandemic**

Before the pandemic, those who were entitled to working at home mainly were considered lucky ones. Those were the people who, for instance, were able to get up later. Then, they were able to enjoy advantages of home office and possibility to stay in pajamas or to jump to the stove quickly and get back to computer. In case that those people had children, they were considered a million dollar prize winners because they could be with them all the time. But, after the months of pandemic, after “enjoying” working at home, positions has gradually changed. Working at home turned to be very challenging especially for those working at state administration.

After the introducing of a state of emergency on the territory of the Republic of Serbia, in March 2020, due to the declaration of a pandemic of the corona virus in the world, the Government adopted measures to control the spread of the virus. Recognizing physical distance as a key instrument in preventing the spread of the infection, all measures were basically based on reducing movement and mutual contact of citizens. This produced direct consequences for the lives of all people. Also, employers and employees found themselves in a completely new situation, because the Government Decree on the organization of the employer's work during the state of emergency prescribed that employers are obliged to enable employees to perform work outside the employer's premises, i.e. work remotely or from home, in all situations where this is possible.

These novelties also referred to state administration bodies. Thus, the state, in addition to the basic problem of fighting the virus, was faced with another: necessity to ensure smooth operation and functioning of state administration bodies, while protecting the health of its employees. Numerous institutions have, in accordance with the Regulation, introduced work from home as a regular way of working in these circumstances. This posed a great challenge to the authorities and civil servants as they found themselves in completely unknown territory. Lot of issues have been raised regarding the conduct of administrative proceedings, the signing of documents, the provision of basic public services - essential compliance with the procedures prescribed by law in the conduct of state bodies. The state authorities had to make special decisions for each employee (although in some bodies collective decisions were made) in order

to formally enable the civil servants not to have to come to work, and to be able to work from home.

As civil servants encounter this way of working for the first time, all - and especially managers - face new obstacles in their work. Only some of them are lack of face-to-face communication and availability of colleagues (especially superiors to sign a paper), poor internet connection, lack of office supplies and equipment (e.g. scanner, printer, etc.). In addition to these problems that would be present when working from home in any period, the current crisis has brought other problems at home, due to the care of children and their schooling from home, the purchase of groceries that must be done during working hours, as well as general psychological pressure due to confinement and lack of movement.

It often happened that civil servants used the working part of the day for telephone conversations and meetings, doing household chores and responsibilities around children, and then devoting the evening hours to work obligations that require greater concentration such as preparing opinions, drafting solutions or resolving cases. An additional problem, which was especially present in the first days after the introduction of the new way of working, is the organization of meetings and mutual harmonization of time. This was partly due to the previously mentioned problem of performing private duties during working hours, and partly due to the lack of managerial skills of managers in public bodies, because modern tools for managing processes and teams are not used in public administration, as is the case in large private firms. The system of control, monitoring the work of employees and organization of work is based on established practices of personnel management in the administration, while modern tools for project and human resource management are mostly just in their infancy.

It is most likely that the current crisis will actually accelerate and encourage the changes that have already been considered in the past, although they may not have been popular with decision makers. It is about introducing more flexible arrangements for the work of civil servants. The state administration, like any employer, could implement a range of flexible working arrangements, including teleworking (from home), flexible or sliding working hours, part-time work, compressed work weeks, and so on. Some of these possibilities are already defined and provided for in the domestic Labor Law.

Until this crisis, a small number of the mentioned arrangements were used in the administration in Serbia or were used partially, only for specific categories of officials, such as inspectors, who spend most of their working time in the field. The reason for the rigidity so far is primarily the fact that the details of the employment of civil servants are regulated by fairly conventional rules, the Law on Civil Administration, the Law on Civil Servants and accompanying bylaws. The basic setting is as follows: eight-hour working hours from 7:30 to 15:30 with the obligatory "knocking" when entering and leaving the building. However, the crisis has forced state authorities to find creative solutions to reorganize their work and introduce telework, thus opening space for more innovation in addressing challenges.

Despite the difficulties created by the current crisis, the new circumstances have opened up many advantages for civil servants. They primarily refer to the improved balance between work and life, promoting the well-being of employees, because without stress in public transport on the way to work, without pressure whether there will be time for lunch today, and without long hours in the office, part of the stress decreases. Greater presence and relaxation at home simultaneously and positively affects employee satisfaction. The advantages can be especially pronounced if the management processes and methods are well set up and if the employees are equipped with adequate software and technological solutions for working from home. While the managerial capacity and hardware aspect of the technology are questionable and require deeper analysis, software solutions that could enable seamless process management and remote meeting meetings are already available, as Microsoft Office and all its tools are widely used, served for these purposes.

Additionally, when it comes to benefits, they are not reserved only for employees, on the contrary. There is a whole range of those that concern the employer, that is, in this case the state. The most obvious of them are the accelerated digitalization of the process and the modernization of the work of employees, the reduction of office maintenance costs, office supplies, as well as the increase in the attractiveness of the state administration as an employer. This last advantage is especially important when considering the inability of the state administration to match the private sector with salaries, as a result of which the administration loses the highest quality and often most needed staff. The policy of retaining priority staff has been a persistent topic in public administration reform for the last two years, and the discussion on flexible working conditions for officials can be integrated into that discussion.

Given that a large number of civil servants currently work from home, it can be said that an opportunity has been created to examine the potential of institutionalizing new models for the employment of civil servants, giving them more flexibility in organizing their time and fulfilling work tasks. In order to reach the best solutions, it is necessary to conduct a detailed analysis and determine how civil servants adapt and what works and what does not, related to working from home in such circumstances. Prior to the institutionalization of these new elements of human resource management policy, it will be necessary to address the security issues of communication networks and data handled by officials, which further indicates the need to conduct an in-depth and comprehensive study. The answers to all these questions may be important for potential future outbreaks of the epidemic, but their greatest importance is reflected in the possible long-term improvement of work flexibility and attractiveness of the civil service as a modern employer in Serbia.

## **Conclusion**

As is usually the case with changes, certain resistances should be expected towards this one as well. Some resistance may arise among officials themselves, and some at the political level, due to fears that flexibility in work will not lead to a reduction in control and discipline or reluctance. And for that reason, it is important that future solutions are designed based on a thorough study of the current situation, problems and benefits that the coronavirus crisis has brought to the surface, as well as fears and expectations of change that both managers and servants have.