

4. Teleworking Houses as Key Opportunities of Jobseekers in the Less Developed Regions of Hungary

Henrietta Finna - Flóra Földi

The opportunities of employment in the countryside are nowadays limited in the agriculture and in the industries; however, the service sector may foster equal opportunities of employment in the urban and rural areas as well. Non typical forms of employment, such as teleworking, part time working, definite period contracts, hiring out employees might be tools for increasing the level of employment in the disadvantaged regions. Also, distant or remote working is getting more usual at workplaces, as a global trend, and another possible solution for providing employment opportunities in the countryside is teleworking.

A teleworking center or teleworking house is a well-equipped office separated from the location of the company and it is independent from the company's organizational structure as well. The employees perform the work and communicate with the company by using IT assets and electronic channels.

The paper aims to answer the question whether teleworking centers have a reason for being based on the experiences with the existing teleworking houses, evaluating the advantages and disadvantages, and finally, whether establishing new teleworking centers would be advantageous and in which region they shall be established in.

The methodology includes analyzing the utilization and future potential of the teleworking houses; analyzing project plans of the telework centers and execution, preparing the SWOT analysis and conducting individual interviews with project leaders of the telework houses and the Hungarian Telework Association. The paper concludes on the competitiveness of the teleworking centers and makes recommendations whether establishing new teleworking houses could act as a tool of regional development and for increasing the level of employment in Hungary.

Keywords: unemployment, teleworking, teleworking center, regional development.

1. Introduction

Some of the regions of Hungary suffer from high level of unemployment, because in the countryside there are limited opportunities of employment in the agriculture and in the industries. However, the service sector offers additional employment possibilities in some urban and rural areas as well. Therefore it is needed to explore new employment policy tools that foster increasing the level of employment and one of these tools can be employing teleworkers in teleworking centers. These centers have positive impact on regional development: migration towards the capital and bigger cities may slow down because

inhabitants can be employed locally; and these centers can attract new employers that results in money flowing into the region that fosters further development (Forgács 2011).

Currently there are two teleworking centers in Hungary in Örkény and Nagykőrös, both of them are located in Central Hungary. The Hungarian Telework Association introduced the National Teleworking Center Program in order to facilitate establishing 3-4 teleworking centers in every region of Hungary, therefore it is a valid question whether new centers shall be opened and in which regions. This paper discusses the current challenges of employment in Hungary, teleworking as one of the potential solutions, the history, advantages and disadvantages of the teleworking centers, and a conclusion whether new centers shall be established.

2. Methodology and hypotheses

Methodology primarily focuses on reviewing and analyzing secondary sources, for example databases of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office, Labor Market Intervention Center of Budapest and market researches conducted by Ipsos and Bellresearch. Moreover, secondary information was used, for instance the internal feasibility documents and project documents of the Hungarian Telework Association, and of course, relevant papers of the topic. Secondary data and information have been supplemented with primary research, i.e. analyzing information derived from the secondary sources and conducting interviews with the representatives of the Hungarian Telework Association and the teleworking center in Nagykőrös). A SWOT analysis is presented, and requirements of establishing a new teleworking center are also reviewed.

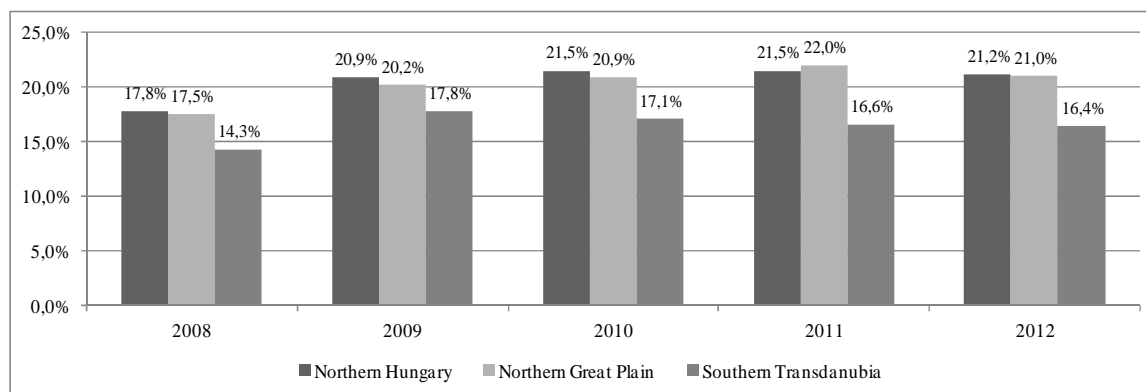
By exploring the experiences and utilization of the centers, we hypothesized that opening new teleworking centers would be reasonable in the underdeveloped regions of Hungary.

3. Challenges of employment in Hungary

Compared to the EU countries, the number of unemployed and economically inactive people is very high in Hungary, more than 40% of the people in working age (15-64 years), according to Hungarian Central Statistical Office (HCSO 2013a). The (registered) unemployment rate exceeded 11% in Hungary for the period of December 2012 – February 2013 (HCSO 2013b). Moreover, 45.6% of unemployed people have been looking for a job at

least for a year. The monthly average percentage of registered jobseekers compared to the economically active population in Hungary was 12.6% in 2012. It was the highest in Northern Hungary region (21.2%), followed by the Northern Great Plain (21.0%), while it was 16.4% in Southern Transdanubia (National Employment Service, 2013). Figure 1 shows the unemployment rate in these NUTS-2 regions¹ from 2008 to 2012.

Figure 1 Unemployment rate in NUTS-2 regions with the highest unemployment from 2008 to 2012



Source: author's own construction based on National Employment Service (2013)

4. Active employment policy tools and teleworking

Based on the above, there is a vital need for increasing employment all over Hungary, but especially in the regions with unfavorable positions. Active employment policy tools are used with the purpose of reducing unemployment. These tools include for example fostering training and education, supporting activities that help improving the level of employment and those that endeavor keeping existing workplaces, mobility support, labor market services and subsidizing communal workers. Active employment policy tools also include fostering non-typical employment forms. Typical or regular employment forms usually mean full time employment with indefinite contract and regular working hours (eight working hours per day, five days per week, fixed workplace etc.). Non-typical forms (i.e. fixed-term employment contracts, part time jobs, tasks performed on a contractual basis, teleworking) are different in some aspects, – in these types of employment the conditions of work (work time, work schedules, workplace) are agreed among the parties (HTA 2011a). In the international

¹ „The NUTS classification (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the EU. NUTS-2 includes the basic regions for the application of regional policies” (EC 2013).

Telework Enhancement Act of 2010, telework is defined as “a work flexibility arrangement under which an employee performs the duties and responsibilities of such employee's position, and other authorized activities, from an approved worksite other than the location from which the employee would otherwise work and pass the results of work with help of electronic tools (via email) to the employer” (Public Law 111-292. 5 USC 101, 2010). In Hungary, teleworking has an additional legal requirement: it can be performed only in employment, and it has to be reflected in the employment contract as well (Hungarian Labor Code 2013). According to the Hungarian Telework Association (2011a) the types of teleworking can be:

- according to the place of work: home office (working from home at least once per month), mobile teleworking (the place of work changes according to the tasks, i.e. in case of sales persons), performing work from a teleworking center,
- according to the frequency of teleworking: occasional (case by case for some tasks, i.e. reporting), partial teleworking (pre-defined as 2-3 days per week), continuous. International studies consider at least 1 day/month frequency as teleworking.

Table 1 shows the number of recommended new teleworking jobs that were to be created in 2005-2010, based on the reports about the winner companies by the Labor Market Intervention Center of Budapest².

Table 1 Number of offered new teleworking jobs at the winner companies by NUTS-2 regions

NUTS-2 regions	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	Total
Central Hungary	473	266	333	447	550	336	2405
Central Transdanubia	37	9	12	9	4	26	97
Northern Great Plain	140	141	196	64	47	41	629
Northern Hungary	72	56	60	58	38	28	312
Southern Great Plain	25	192	146	19	36	24	442
Southern Transdanubia	8	41	4	1	22	24	100
Western Transdanubia	14	10	23	2	4	54	107
N/A	3	0	5	0	0	0	8
Total	772	715	779	600	701	533	4100

Source: author's own construction based on Labor Market Intervention Center of Budapest (n.d.)

² Between 2002 and 2010, the Labor Market Intervention Center of Budapest (Budapesti Munkaerőpiaci Intervenció Központ) was operating a Teleworking Program Office that aimed to promote teleworking and it was participating in elaborating tenders and evaluating applications. The organization was keeping contact with companies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), municipal governments and chambers.

Most of the winners are from Central Hungary (2405 jobs) and Northern Great Plain (629 jobs). Although the unemployment rate is historically the highest in Northern Hungary, winner companies from this NUTS-2 region had the opportunity to establish only 312 new jobs within 6 years.

These numbers suggest that teleworking has been spread across Hungary, however, studies show that number of teleworkers is still very low (3% according to Ipsos 2012a) and focus was not on the right regions. The Hungarian Telework Association (HTA 2011. p. 29.) has argued that teleworking is not (or not supposed to be) an instrument of social policy, however, teleworking can target some the following groups:

- employees living in an isolated location and cannot commute to work on a daily basis,
- employees having a special knowledge or competence that can be leveraged remotely as well (i.e. IT knowledge for programming, software development),
- employees with proper self-discipline and work ethics – therefore fresh graduates and people being unemployed for a long period of time are not recommended targets.

Teleworking might provide solution for some of the above cases, but it cannot be the only one tool for resolving employment difficulties of these groups. According to the study of Bellresearch (2010), those companies are more likely to implement teleworking successfully that have already had the knowledge and experience with non-typical work assignments.

5. Teleworking centers as tools of regional development

Based on the research conducted by Ipsos (2011b) for Reuters News with 11,383 teleworkers from 24 countries, emerging markets (Middle East and Africa, Latin America and Asia-Pacific) have a leading role in teleworking. The poll shows a very low (3%) penetration rate of teleworking in Hungary (European average is 9%) (Ipsos 2011a). Despite of the lack of opportunities, 37% of Hungarian employees would opt for trying teleworking (Ipsos 2011a). On the other hand, Hungarian employers are averse from this new model, most likely because they believe that their activities, tools and equipments, availability of information do not make the job suitable for teleworking (Bellresearch 2010). Some of these concerns can be resolved by the teleworking centers (i.e. offering tools and equipments), while some others have to be looked at with a new approach.

A teleworking center or teleworking house is a well-equipped office separated from the location of the company and can be accessed only by the teleworkers. The (permanent or

temporary) employees perform work and communicate with the company by using IT assets and electronic channels. Jobs being accomplished from a teleworking center usually include white collar roles, for example administrator (i.e. recording data, digitizing), market researcher, call center roles, webpage designer or IT software developer, translator or direct marketing specialist. A teleworking center may function as an external site (for business continuity plans), as a satellite office or as a training site as well. The teleworking center is usually operated by a third party, i.e. municipal government or NGO (HTA 2011a). Infrastructure set-up can accommodate the needs of the company.

The first teleworking center in Hungary was opened in October, 2007 in Örkény, Central Hungary NUTS-2 region (Pest County). In 2009, a National Teleworking Center Program that aimed to open 3-4 teleworking houses per regions had been introduced (Forgács 2010). The Program had been successful in a tender called “Joint development of telework infrastructure for the establishment of cross-border opportunities of corporate telework”. Within the confines of this project, two additional teleworking centers were established in the end of 2011: one in Nagykőrös³ in Central Hungary NUTS-2 region (Pest County), and one in Szőgyén, Slovakia⁴. The Hungarian Telework Association has selected and trained approximately 300 individuals for being able to work from the teleworking centers. Table 2 shows the most important characteristics of these two teleworking houses.

Table 2 The main characteristics of teleworking houses in Örkény and Nagykőrös

	Örkény	Nagykőrös
Opened at	October 2007	December 2011
Location	50 km from Budapest, 40 km from Kecskemét	90 km from Budapest, 15 km from Cegléd and Kecskemét
Owner of the property	Municipality Government of Örkény	Bács-Kiskun County's Association of Job Seekers
Number of workstations and additional functions	22 workstations in 4 premises	15 workstations in 4 premises, 1 meeting room plus civic center and labor advisory office.

Source: author's own construction based on HTA (n.d.a.)

One of the biggest advantages of teleworking centers is that they are able to increase the employment rate without establishing industrial centers or significant investments into transportation and properties. According to Forgács (2011), if a region realizes this opportunity and creates proper environment for companies for leveraging teleworking, then

³ The project was part of the Program under the European Territorial Cooperation Objective, co-funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)

⁴ This paper focuses on the teleworking centers in Hungary, in Örkény and Nagykőrös.

the money flowing into the region leads to economic growth (push-effect). This process can be driven centrally as well, by defining the centers of growth and developing them consciously (pull-effect).

6. Evaluating of teleworking centers in Hungary

Based on the experiences of teleworking centers' operation, we prepared a SWOT analysis to point out the opportunities for developing some new houses in unfavorable regions (HTA n.d.a, HTA n.d.b, HTA 2011, Ipsos 2012a, Forgács 2011, Forgács 2013, Duxbury et al. 1998, Paprika 2013, Taylor – Kavanaugh 2005, Tóth 2013). Figure 2 shows the summary of the SWOT analysis.

Strengths:

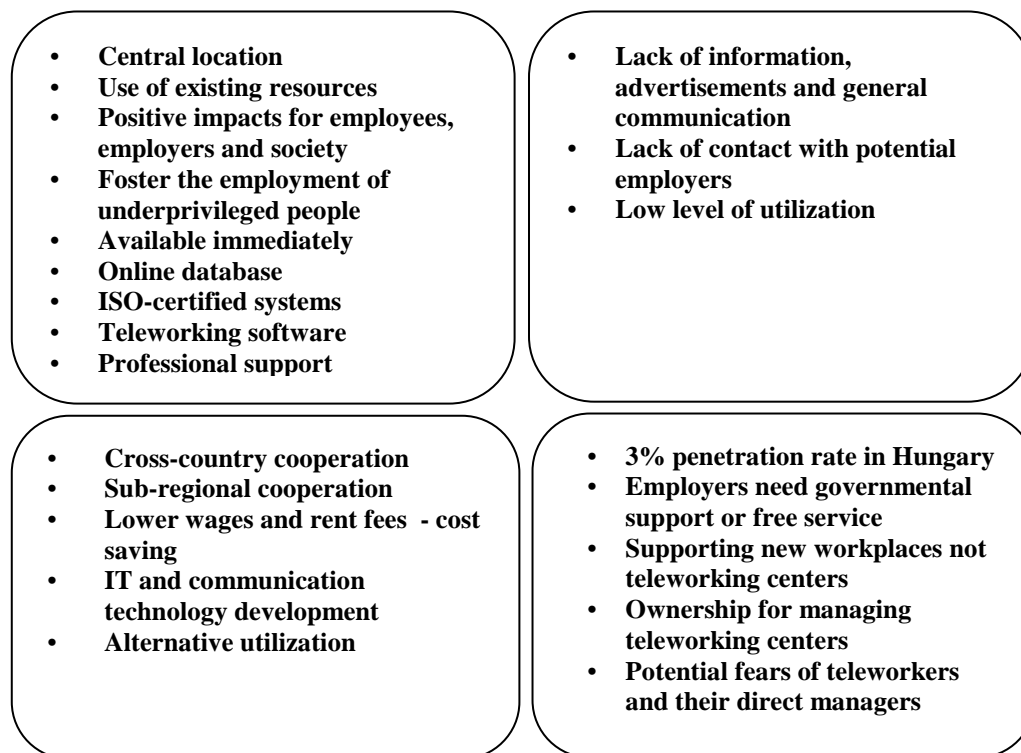
- Central location that is easy to be reached by the employer and the teleworkers as well; close to the capital or bigger cities and higher educational institutions.
- Teleworking centers use existing resources, i.e. infrastructure (buildings, roads and internet) and network of supporting organizations and NGOs.
- They have also social impacts since they are eco-friendly (reduced travelling causes less use of energy) and reduce healthcare costs. Centers provide perspective to employees, develop them and strengthen community (teleworkers can spend more time with their families and community instead of commuting).
- Teleworking has a positive impact on being more effective and efficient (by focusing on performance and empowering employees), it reduces work related stress and attrition, increases work-life balance, job satisfaction and loyalty.
- Teleworking centers foster the employment of disabled people⁵, unemployed or underprivileged people (i.e. employees over the age of 45) – it improves the equality of employees, results in cost saving⁶ and regional differences can be reduced.
- Immediate availability: teleworking centers provide employers with fully equipped office (PCs, hardwares and softwares, video conference room, IP-based phone center).

⁵ For example the teleworking center in Nagykőrös is accessible by employees with disability as well and there are available disabled employees in the region.

⁶ i.e. on the rehabilitation contribution

- Employers can select potential employees from an online database of selected and trained candidates or use their own recruitment and selection processes to hire teleworkers. This initiative is also cost efficient for the companies.
- ISO-certified information security management system has been implemented in teleworking centers. Special attention is paid on data privacy and data management.
- Teleworking software supports employers in organizing and supervising tasks of the teleworkers and evaluating their performance.
- Professional support is provided by the experts of the Hungarian Telework Association (HTA) and other NGOs.

Figure 2 SWOT analysis of teleworking centers in Hungary



Source: author's own construction based on HTA (n.d.a), HTA (n.d.b) HTA (2011), Ipsos (2012a), Forgács (2011), Forgács (2013), Duxbury and his co-authors (1998), Paprika (2013), Taylor – Kavanaugh (2005), Tóth (2013)

Weaknesses:

- Information about the teleworking centers is not widely communicated: on the central webpage (www.working-centers.eu) the latest news are from 2011; teleworking centers are not promoted on the website of all municipality governments.
- Continuous and intense communication and contact with the potential employers was planned but is not in place or can be further strengthened.

- The current level of utilization of the teleworking centers is low. In 2007-2008, the center in Örkény was utilized almost fully (for call center and telemarketing jobs), but later on this opportunity was ceased and since then there is lack of interest. In Nagykőrös, the teleworking center was opened in December, 2011, but the project was fully completed (i.e. preparing marketing materials) only in the end of 2012. Therefore this teleworking house has not yet been utilized at all.

Opportunities:

- Cross-country cooperation between Slovakia and Hungary, sharing best practices, developing new and innovative methods together, involving regional stakeholders.
- The cities of teleworking centers are members of sub-regions therefore more potential employers and teleworkers can be reached.
- Wages and rent fees are 20-40% lower in other cities than in the capital, therefore employers can save costs immediately by using teleworking centers.
- IT and communication technology developments and coverage create new opportunities for the centers as teleworking jobs are based on this technology.
- Alternative utilization of teleworking centers can take place (trainings, meetings, project offices, substituting offices for business continuity plans).

Threats:

- Teleworking is not widely spread (3%) across Hungary and Hungarians prefer well-known, good practices compared to new situations with high risk.
- Without reducing the service fees of the teleworking center or without governmental support employers are unable to employ teleworkers.
- Governmental initiatives and tenders (i.e. GOP-2012-3.5.1/B) aim to support creating new workplaces, not leveraging existing teleworking centers. Teleworking as a way of organizing work assumes trust between the employer and the employer. If a company is encouraged to establish new workplaces as a teleworking job, the employer has to hire new employees where the trust has to be established first and it is even more difficult in a teleworking environment.
- Questions regarding ownership appeared: in the model the local organization is responsible for managing (i.e. attracting employers, educating potential teleworkers about teleworking) the center, however, Hungarian Telework Association has the necessary expertise not the locals, but the Association has no capacity for it.

- Some of the teleworkers might be afraid of the new situation, i.e. because they might get isolated; there is less feedback on their performance, less chance for getting promoted. They have fewer opportunities to participate in trainings; and their colleagues also might be ungrateful. These fears are mainly caused by lack of information and no experience with teleworking.
- Some of the employers (direct people managers) might face new challenges as well: they might lose their power, influence and importance or they might feel that their managerial skills (i.e. communication, leadership style, etc.) are outdated. These fears are also mainly caused by lack of information and few experiences with teleworking.

A study was conducted in March, 2011 with 37 individuals and 45 companies within the framework of the HUSK/0901/1.1.1/0140 tender⁷ that was supported by the European Union. This study was designed to measure the success of the teleworking center in Örkény and collect recommendations for further improvement and for the new centers to be opened (Carurbis Kft. 2011). Key conclusions of the study are shown in Table 3.

Most of the teleworkers were employed for 3-6 months only (temporary solution), neither them, nor the employers consider it as a long term option. Some of the companies' expectations have been met in the meantime, i.e. creating a database of trained and selected employees, preparing a cost calculator, offering additional services. Companies also emphasized the importance of corporate social responsibility (CSR); it can be one of the unique selling points of teleworking centers in the marketing and communication plan that is still to be created.

The teleworking center in Nagykőrös had been opened in the end of 2011; however, the project was just fully implemented in the end of 2012. Therefore, as explained by István Tóth (president of Bács-Kiskun County's Association of Job Seekers) and by Tamás Forgács (president of the Hungarian Telework Association), the teleworking center in Nagykőrös is not utilized at all at the moment, as the promotion has to be strengthened.

⁷ "Joint development of telework infrastructure for the establishment of cross-border opportunities of corporate telework"

Table 3 Key conclusions of the study about the teleworking center in Örkény, 2011

	Feedback from teleworkers and potential employees	Feedback from companies
Advantages of teleworking and the center	Improved work-life effectiveness, shorter commuting time and saving money, working more effectively.	Delivering tasks in a fast and cost efficient way; CSR approach; suitable for call center support, digitizing, market research, etc.
Disadvantages of teleworking and the center	Teleworkers are mainly from Örkény – the center cannot involve employees from the subregions.	Teleworking center does not have enough references.
Recommendations, ideas, needs	Further developing the IT infrastructure (to avoid frequent technical problems with the computers).	Need for additional support (i.e. wage subsidy) from the government to leverage teleworking.
		Database of trained and selected employees to be created.
		New services, i.e. temporary or permanent offices, online library, trainings, presentations, organizing events.
		SMEs ⁸ could also be target of the centers.
	Awareness building, additional marketing and PR activities, communicating advantages by presenting real life examples and calculations of potential cost savings.	

Source: author's own construction based on Carurbis Kft. (2011)

To sum it up, currently the two teleworking centers of Hungary are not sufficiently utilized, well-known and most of the companies beware of implementing this new way of organizing work.

7. Establishing new teleworking centers

The outcome of the above presented SWOT analysis, the conclusions and recommendations of the study conducted in Örkény and the feedback from Nagykovács all have to be taken into account when opening a new teleworking center. Furthermore other important components influence this decision too. According to Forgács (2011), hard and soft location factors can be identified.

Hard location factors are for example transportation, taxes, subsidization, labor market; soft factors include economic environment and partnerships, higher education, social infrastructure and human factors. Some of these criteria of establishing new teleworking centers are summarized in Table 4.

⁸ Small and Medium Enterprises

Table 4 Hard and soft criteria of establishing teleworking centers

Hard criteria	Soft criteria
Costs of establishment and maintenance (i.e. teleworking center coordinator, overhead expenses)	Educational background of candidates, availability of higher educational institutes
Available property that can be used for this purpose	Openness, willingness and ability to gain new skills
Costs of the employers (service fee, lower wages, local taxes and contributions)	At least user level IT knowledge (or even higher for IT-relates jobs, i.e. software developer)
Employment and unemployment	Languages spoken
Governmental strategy and support, tenders	
Availability of IT and communication technologies	
Location (closer to bigger cities) and transportation	
Logistics	

Source: author's own construction based on Forgács (2011)

According to Bagley and his co-authors (1994), those teleworking centers have the biggest potential to develop that are in the rural areas and that are used by only one employer; however, centers with more employers are more likely to survive, because they are not dependent on the success of only one company.

Although the National Teleworking Center Program aimed to open 3-4 teleworking centers per regions (Forgács 2010), considering the reality of the existing centers, opening further ones is not recommended at the moment. Instead, focusing on awareness building for both potential teleworkers and employers, promotion, partnering with companies, studying potential barriers and eliminating them would be advised.

8. Conclusion

Teleworking can be a useful tool for increasing level of employment in Hungary. Several actions have been in place for fostering teleworking, for examples wage subsidy provided for companies, tenders of the Labor Market Intervention Center of Budapest, but all of them subsidized Central Hungary the most, while Northern Hungary and the Northern Great Plain have the biggest problems with unemployment. Also, the existing teleworking centers are located in Central Hungary, the most developed region with the lowest unemployment rate, while there are no centers in other regions. Therefore it seems to be logical to establish teleworking centers in Northern Hungary and the Northern Great Plain as well, and later on in other regions of Hungary too. However, the very low current utilization,

misconstrued tenders (where the focus is on Central Hungary and tenders aim to support creating new workplaces, not transforming jobs into teleworking), employers' and employees' lack of knowledge and resistance against new methods makes it questionable. This also led to the rejection of the hypothesis, which means that establishing new teleworking centers is not recommended, instead, it is advised to subsidize the utilization of the existing teleworking centers, supporting education on advantages of teleworking, sharing best practices and building partnerships among teleworking centers and employers. Exploring these factors raises new research questions that can be answered by further studies. In our opinion, new centers could be opened when the position of the existing ones has been stabilized and the hard and soft factors have been justified in the underdeveloped regions.

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