

Telework and Management in Public Organizations

Ángel Belzunegui Eraso

Rovira i Virgili University, Spain

Inmaculada Pastor Gosálbez

Rovira i Virgili University, Spain

INTRODUCTION

In this article we discuss the implementation of telework in public administration (henceforth PA) as a new work arrangement that can increase the effectiveness and efficiency of services provided by public organizations. As a PA resource, telework has developed in parallel with electronic administration and electronic management. One important question, however, concerns the possible reasons why telework should be introduced in PA administrative processes.

From a managerial perspective, analyses of the introduction of electronic administration and telework in PA are motivated by the need to increase effectiveness and efficiency by: (1) making the PA structure more flexible, thus reducing costs, (2) streamlining the provision of public services, (3) extending the coverage of services to individuals that have problems accessing them, and (4) increasing the quality of the service and raising the public's level of satisfaction with it.

The widespread introduction of communication technologies in PA means that many routine tasks of public organizations can now be done remotely and online. In this article we describe the importance of telework in public organizations, make recommendations for its introduction, and discuss some lessons learned from its incorporation in a number of public agencies.

Analyses of PA procedures and structures have demonstrated the disadvantages of an overly-rigid bureaucratic model and led to calls for alternatives from the so-called New Public Management (Christensen & Lægreid, 2001; Barzelay, 2001; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000; Olsen, 2006). In response to these calls for review and improvement, experiments to implement telework and electronic administration have required process

innovations that have generally led to improvements in both the quality of the PA's internal procedures and the quality of the service provided. Some of these innovations coincide with the approach outlined in New Public Management, namely: (a) less paperwork, (b) fewer lines of hierarchy, (c) more flexible administrative procedures, and (d) better use of available talent.

In the first section of this article we describe the background, the context in which telework has developed in PA (the new economy and the bureaucratic model of administration). In the second section we discuss the New Public Management approach in relation to telework and demonstrate how telework can help transform an organization. In the third section we analyze telework as an organizational innovation. In the fourth section we make several recommendations on how telework should be implemented in public administration and highlight some of the lessons that have been learned in organizations where it has been implemented. In the final section we draw several conclusions.

BACKGROUND

The Interest in the Telework in the PA

The penetration of telework in the public administration and in public organizations generally has taken place after its penetration in organizations in the private economy. The study Telework in the European Union (the most comprehensive assessment of the extent of telework to date) found that telework is a growing phenomenon, accounting for 7% of employees in the EU in 2005. As of today, this figure might have doubled in the European case.

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The interest in this form of labour organization in the public administration dates back to the mid-1990s. Pilot programmes were developed during the first half of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and more or less consolidated telework projects in various areas of the public administration are currently on-going. The extension and implementation of telework by country is very uneven and depends on the level of rigidity of the apparatus of the public administration. We also found significant differences in penetration levels within a country depending on the different areas of each public administration.

In chronological terms, the interest in implementing telework programmes in the PA is recent. However, in terms of undertaking economic activities, approximately 18 years is a sufficiently long period given the characteristics of the new economy, including the enormous mobility of resources, the speed of information transmission, the acceleration of innovation in products and processes as well as technology, and the need to save time while ensuring the quality of products and services. This new economy or technical-scientific competition economy is based on what is known as the information society (Castells, 2000), to the extent that the production and management of knowledge and information have become the axis around which the generation of distinctive wealth is based.

This first consideration leads us to ask why telework has not been implemented faster in the PA. The answer to this question in turn leads us to consider some of the limits to the expansion of telework which we summarize briefly (Garson & David, 2003; Taskin & Edwards, 2007; Suomi & Pekkola, 1998):

1. In general, the bureaucratic culture that prevails in the PA with a high formalization of procedures.
2. The internal hierarchical organization in public organizations.
3. The rigidity of the organization of labour typical of pyramidal organizations, based on a pattern of management/supervision/execution (a pattern highlighted in classics of organization management and sociology such as those by Crozier [1964]; Etzioni [1964]; Mintzberg [1963]; Mintzberg [1979]).
4. The formalization of administrative procedures, resulting in what is known as bureaucratic ritualism (Merton, 1949).
5. The lack of flexibility in labour relations within the PA, which limits workers' opportunities for establishing individual negotiations.
6. The volume of the service provided by the PA.
7. The level of penetration of information and communications technologies (ICT) in the PA.
8. The style of management and propensity to change at the upper levels of the PA.

Broadly speaking, empirical evidence shows that flexible administrations with few lines of hierarchy, an achievable volume of service, a high level of technology and an innovative leadership have implemented more telework and electronic administration and done so more efficiently than others.

New Public Management and Telework

Briefly, the term NPM (New Public Management) emerged in the early 1990s to refer to a range of proposals and practices of for the modernization of the public administration. The objectives of this modernization included citizens' proximity to services, service evaluation, the effectiveness and efficiency of the administrative system and the containment of public spending. The implementation of New Public Management has been possible to varying degrees since then, due to technological development, among other factors. Telework has been regarded as an ally of interest for carrying out NPM programmes. Other organizational developments such as e-government and e-management have also been important in the spread of NPM and acted in parallel with telework in the pilot programmes.

E-administration, e-government and telework are part of the modernization of the PA, and have enabled the streamlining of administrative processes and the improvement of the quality of service, as well as facilitating procedures for disabled people and those living in more isolated areas. The spread of communication technologies in the PA has allowed many tasks, routine and otherwise, that undertaken by public organizations, to be carried out online and remotely.

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