

Telework and the Canadian Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology (ICT) is constantly changing the world around us. This not only affects the way that we conduct our personal lives but also our business lives. It is changing the very make up of society (Neff, 2000). For organizations, it seems that there is a requirement for success that they ride along with the new technological wave or risk getting left behind. As a result, some organizations are implementing telework programs to take advantage of new technologies (Kaye et al., 2000).

Telework has been found to be not suitable for all companies, even if it is technologically possible (Perez et al., 2002). There are many factors which can determine whether a telework program is going to be a success or failure and these factors should be carefully considered before telework programs are instituted. As will be shown in this paper, telework is being adopted by an increasing number of organizations around the world, and this trend seems to be increasing.

A study released by Statistics Canada (2003) found that in 1991, there were over 600,000 teleworkers in Canada. This number grew by over 67% to 1,000,000 teleworkers in 1997. The General Social Survey (GSS) published in 2000 shows that this number had increased to 1,400,000, which equals 10% of all those employed. As this trend continues, it becomes important to understand exactly what telework is and how its use can benefit both employers and employees.

This article will consider different aspects of telework, including its definition, using examples from Canada and around the world, its costs, challenges, benefits and opportunities. It will conclude with a discussion on whether teleworking in Canada can be a viable option for an organization.

DEFINING TELEWORK

Telework is an alternative work arrangement that is conducted in a location away from the traditional office, that

is, in an employee's home or satellite office. The location of the teleworker can vary from a rural tele-center or tele-cottage to a company satellite office that relies upon communications with head office while retaining many of the work patterns of the conventional central office (Fulton, 2002).

A teleworker communicates with the central office utilizing ICT such as telephones, cellular phones, fax machines, and modems. Telework *does not* include occasionally being out of the office for meetings, nor does it include overtime hours completed at home after a day in the office even when communication with the office occurs.

Three main categories of teleworkers exist: part-time, full-time, and mobile or location-independent workers (Hobbs & Armstrong, 1998). The part-time teleworker is an employee based in an office but who spends two or three days per week working from home. The full-time teleworker is an employee who works at home for the majority of the working day, visiting the central workplace only occasionally. Full-time teleworkers can include such occupations as computer programmers and systems analysts who work entirely away from an office. There are also mobile and location-independent teleworkers who spend most of the work day outside of their home and office, meeting with clients and potential customers. Sales professionals, service engineers, tradesmen, and consultants typically fit into this category of teleworkers.

TELEWORK ACROSS COUNTRIES

In Canada, according to the General Social Survey, in the year 2000 nearly 2.8 million people, (1.4 M employees and 1.4 M self-employed) worked at home (Akyeampong & Nadwodny, 2001). According to Williams (1991) as cited in Fulton (1999), Canada has the potential to successfully integrate telework because of a small, highly urbanized population and an advanced well-regulated telecommunications infrastructure. Several large Canadian corporations have experimented with telework including DuPont Canada, Esso Petroleum, Nortel, and Bell Canada (Fulton, 1999).

The reasons for using telework in these companies included cost-savings and downsizing efforts. The Canadian government has also undertaken several trial telework arrangements with employees to examine its costs and benefits, and has supported the use of telework as a work arrangement alternative (Fulton, 1999). Solomon and Templer (1989), cited in Fulton (1999), found that 21% of top earning companies in Canada had implemented telework, or were planning to in the future.

In the United States, environmental concerns are a primary reason firms make telework arrangements. Legislation to reduce smog, such as the Clean Air Act, has been introduced in different parts of the country. In Britain, studies have found that teleworking is frequently used due to child care requirements. Telework allows a parent to care for a child while also being employed.

Telework has been growing in Germany and other European countries, with over 40% of all working Europeans expressing interest in such a working arrangement (Fulton, 1999). Korte and Wynne (1996), as cited by Fulton (1999), found that the use of satellite offices had increased from the 1980s focused on working at home, through the 1990s using neighborhood centres.

In Australia, a teleworking study found telework to be a viable working alternative for women, but the lack of resources including training, facilities, child care and domestic responsibilities, has caused significant problems (Fulton, 1999). Suggestions for resolving such issues included investments in satellite or neighborhood centres to counter these negative aspects (Ilozor & Ilozor, 2002).

Sweden, has long been recognized for its forward thinking approach in terms of equity in working and family conditions for men and women, focused on using satellite and neighborhood centres for telework (Fulton, 1999) to "...combine the breakup of organizations with the maintenance of social relations outside of the organization" (Fulton, 1999, p. 49).

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TELEWORK

When considering whether or not to adopt telework practices, employers must evaluate all options based on financial information as well as the social and psychological factors (Ward et al., 2001). There are shortcomings and challenges that exist for managers and employers alike (Tremblay, 2002; Harpaz, 2002).

Managers strive to achieve an environment that is supportive for their employees but may find it difficult to manage when employees are away from the office. (Armstrong, 1998; Watad & Peter, 2003). Job design,

attitude and expectations present challenges for managers in successfully conveying them to the employees so that they can meet company objectives. The employer is faced with the task of demonstrating that the employee knows and understands exactly what is involved in telework (Wicks, 2002).

The supply and maintenance of ICT equipment and its operation for telework can require a significant financial contribution from the company. However, depending on the agreed upon telework arrangement, employees may be required to finance their own office equipment. In addition to these financial considerations, there is a security threat presented by the use of the Internet outside of company firewalls for communication purposes (Pliskin, 1997; Akyeampong & Nadwodny, 2001).

When employers are evaluating whether or not to implement a telework program, they often complete a cost-benefit analysis to weigh the advantages and disadvantages associated with setting up the arrangement. (Clean Air Campaign, 2002). These costs include candidate selection, preparation and training, network configuration, computers, printers, company software and technical support for employees. Some of the psychological considerations for employers when considering implementing telework include:

- Adjustment of employees' supervision (Treasury Board of Ontario, 1999),
- Evaluation of employees on end results and final projects,
- Establishment of regular communication with employees,
- Providing a supportive environment for workers (Armstrong, 1998),
- Planning and implementing the telework program, and
- Determining which jobs are appropriate for telework arrangements.

The issues raised above are important for the mental well-being of the employees to ensure there is a way to achieve a sense of belonging and commitment to the company and its culture.

According to European Telework Online (2000), it is important to distinguish between professional and clerical positions. This distinction is critical because those workers in clerical positions generally require more direct supervision, which suggests they would not be suitable candidates for a teleworking position. Ideal teleworkers are self-motivated, demand minimal amounts of direct supervision and exhibit good time management. Employers are faced with the task of seeking workers who fit this description. Their main goal in this challenge is to define exactly what the company is looking for so that those

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