

## ***Meeting Information needs of Teleworkers in Australia***

**SAM BERNER**

### **2.1 Teleworking: What is it?**

Advances in technology and the demand for flexible working arrangements have promoted an increase in the utilisation of teleworking in Ireland in recent years. This trend looks set to continue in the current context of a tightening labour market. In this climate, some employers are finding it necessary to introduce policies such as teleworking to recruit and retain labour. For their part, employees often value teleworking because it is a means of achieving a more satisfactory "work-life balance". The evidence suggests that, where teleworking has been introduced, it can potentially generate "mutual gains" for employers and employees. The building of trust is essential for the successful operation of teleworking. However, the continued existence of traditional "command and control" attitudes and practices may prove to be a significant barrier to the further diffusion of teleworking.

Teleworking means working from a distance through the use of telecommunication technologies. A teleworker is a physical person working from a distance where the work involves using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). There are four main ways to organise teleworking:

- a. Home based: working directly from home, often carried out in alternation with traditional work at the employer's site;
- b. Telecenter based: the telecentre is a specially equipped location, provided with all the necessary technological fittings;
- c. Teleservice Providers: organised as a department of a company and working for all other departments or organised as companies and providing services for other companies;
- d. Mobile telework: individuals who have to work in many locations such as Sales people, Service people etc.

Teleworking suits best people who need to travel a lot, women with young children who can work from home, and physically disabled people who may find access to standard employment facilities difficult. In a broad sense, teleworking refers to any telesales staff, freelance businesses, consultants, mobile workers and technical support staff. However, the term telework does not apply when an employee works only partially off the main site of the business.

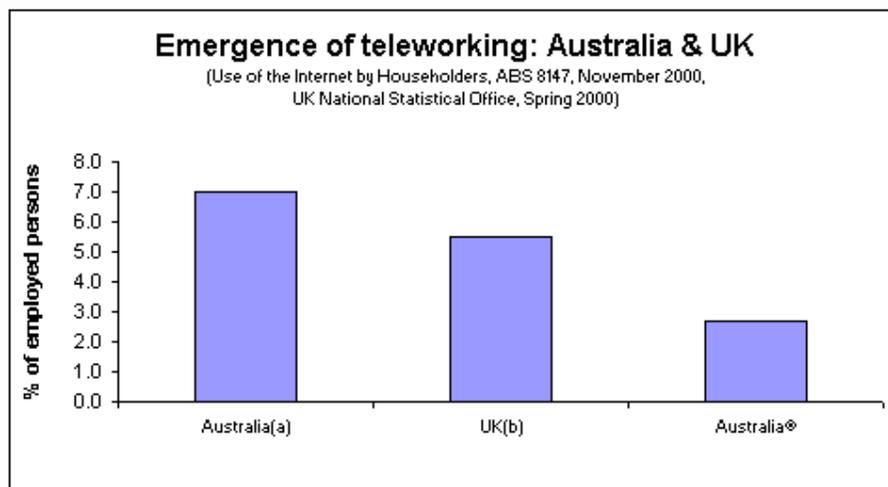
In Australia, many people believe that teleworking is a new phenomenon, however the idea actually originated during the 1970s oil crises, as an alternative work practice which could reduce motor vehicle traffic and the use of petroleum. It's interesting that 25 years later the Sydney Olympic Roads and Transport Authority is promoting the concept in an effort to reduce traffic during the Games on Sydney's already clogged motorways.

Rural teleworking in Australia was pioneered by the Walcha Telecottage in 1992, in the Northern Tablelands of New South Wales. The Telecottage recruited and trained people from within the surrounding rural community and successfully completed many data processing and survey jobs. One of these jobs employed more than 30 people for several months. Rural people have the ideal attributes for teleworking: they are usually independent, motivated and committed. It's interesting that studies of urban telecommuters (employees who work from home some of the time) have found that isolation is often a problem. Whereas for rural teleworkers already living in isolation, teleworking is a solution. Teleworking can also help provide income for city people wanting to move to the bush for

lifestyle reasons, or for those who've married into a life in the country. It's often said that one reason for the shortage of doctors in country communities is that doctors' spouses are reluctant to move to the bush and give up their career. In many cases, teleworking can overcome that barrier. Country people have shown they're keen to take up teleworking opportunities.

However, as with anything that involves innovation in Australia, the major problem is not in technology but in attitude. Middle managers and bureaucrats are rarely prepared to support innovation because there is always a risk. Although key information economy enabling technologies such as computers and the Internet are increasingly providing Australians with a greater range of choice in terms of how they undertake traditional day-to-day activities such as work. However, as the following set of statistics shows, while teleworking is now a viable option for many work environments, very few Australians have taken up the teleworking challenge.

According to the Australian National Office for the (non-existent) Information Economy, at November 2000, an estimated 7% of employed adults (persons aged 18 years or over) had an agreement with an employer to work from home on an on-going basis spending a quarter of their total work hours on average working from home. While comparable international comparisons are difficult to find, data collected by the UK National Statistical Office (NSO) in its Spring 2000 Labour Force Survey, shows that an estimated 1.5 million people in Britain (approximately 6 per cent of those in employment), had undertaken work from home at least one day per week using a computer and telephone link to their employer. However, only 37 per cent of Australian teleworkers had access to their employers computer at home via a modem (equating to roughly 3 per cent of employed persons).



Monash University are currently carrying out a study on telework among its academic staff. The summary report [<http://www.infotech.monash.edu.au/itnr/reports/Teleworking%20Sumary.htm>] found that some core academic staff who teleworked did so only in the evenings and/or on weekends, whilst others spent some hours of the ordinary working week working at home. Members of the first group commonly cited workload pressures as a primary reason for their teleworking; many members of the second group also suggested that they worked evenings and/or on weekends at home. The report also found that casual academic staff were often 'teleworkers by default', in that the nature of their working conditions on campus typically obliged them to perform much of their work at home, whatever their personal preference. Academic work tasks deemed most suitable for teleworking included writing, research, and course and teaching preparation. The common thread through all these tasks was that they required sustained concentration for their successful completion. By contrast, many aspects of teaching – above all, those with a face-to-face aspect – were deemed unsuitable for teleworking, along with many administrative and managerial responsibilities, and the greater part of laboratory work. Chief amongst the personal disadvantages of teleworking according to participants were

- a. Isolation - (coffee breaks aren't the same without Tom, Dick and Harry all quarrelling over the correctness of their reports or complaining about the lack of funding)
- b. lack of contact with peers – (Peers don't have an email address and a phone number??)
- c. lack of access to campus resources – (this could be addressed by the Courier delivery system, and an online catalogue)
- d. family responsibilities – (as if these disappear magically if Mr. Academic goes to the office instead of going to his study)
- e. the boundaries between work and leisure – (in my opinion their inability to discipline themselves)
- f. technical support – (the one really viable excuse, since half of Australian academic staff has problems using PCs and let their secretaries respond to their emails which they have carefully handwritten on paper)
- g. the costs of maintaining a home office (makes me question if they know what is really involved)

As an information professional engaged in consulting, I have many real-life anecdotes regarding (a) bureaucratic lack of support and (b) anti-technological attitudes within the academic environment.

## **2.2 Information Needs? Nothing Special!**

Although telecommuting seems like an easy thing to do – just work from wherever you feel like – it actually takes a lot of thinking and planning before it can be implemented. The amount of planning and the care that should be taken is proportional to the size of the firm and the number of teleworkers therein.

Issues such as the quality of hardware and software, a unified platform for teleworkers and en situ staff, availability of legal research material in electronic format, the feasibility of purchasing multiple hard copies of resources, communication interfaces between teleworkers and their clients, and between teleworkers and the legal system (courts, tribunals, police, etc.),

To say that teleworkers have some form of “special” information needs is to miss the point. A teleworker will need EXACTLY the same information that his/her colleague who is occupying a cubicle at work needs. Both are doing the same job. Teleworking is not a profession, it is a modus operandi. What is different in the information-related needs of a teleworker are such factors as IT support, connectivity, communication speed and quality, social interaction problems, etc. As such, there is no need for some special portal just aimed at teleworkers and in any way different to that aimed at the other staff. What is different, probably, is the way the teleworker connects to this portal.

My business partner was employed by an international company based in the USA. She is a teleworker per excellence: not only working from home, but from a totally different country to that where her HQ are situated. Apart from the time zone differences which meant that she had to teleconference at 2 AM Melbourne time, there was no difference between her access to the company's portal and that of her co-workers in USA, Singapore, China, Hong Kong or India. Those en situ were all attached to a major network, while my business partner had to dial-in into the exchange using their dedicated ISP.

All said, then, what we need to address are features of an information portal that would address the needs of all workers, both en situ and telecommuting. Portals consist of software that manages role-based, end-user access to multiple applications and information sources. Processes that may be served include:

- a. Structured data management, including enterprise reporting and metadata handling
- b. Unstructured data management, including document review and workflow, proactive information delivery, and document directory creation and management
- c. Search, including directory, document, Internet, and report searches
- d. Collaboration, including online meeting rooms, Internet chat and messaging, and community management
- e. End-user administration, including role management and default end-user views
- f. Security, including authorization, authentication, and administration
- g. Personalization
- h. highly automated business processes