

Chapter 5.26

Mobile E-Work to Support Regional and Rural Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Telework, or e-work as it is now more frequently called in Europe, means working outside one's regular workplace, utilising sophisticated ICT. E-work is an alternative form of organising work, a "love child" of the information society. E-work manifests itself in numerous forms and modes. These various solutions emerge as an evolutionary process along with the technological developments, economic pressures, and changes in socio-cultural patterns such as new information-age lifestyles (e.g., Castells, 1996; Heinonen, 2000). E-work can be carried out at home, in a telework centre or at any other facility. It can also be done as a mobile mode on a train, bus or some other vehicle, as well as at airports, railways and bus stations-in other words on the move from one place to another. Such mobile e-work is primarily increasing, owing to technological and social developments. ICT has become smaller in size, more portable and more efficient.

MOBILE E-WORK AS A SOCIAL INNOVATION

Mobile e-work is, however, not only a result of technological breakthroughs and penetration of ICT equipment in society. It is essentially a social innovation where various goals coincide. First, it may ease the stress of working life when the long commuting hours can be used for reducing the work load. Second, it is an instrument for employers to recruit people from a wider geographical area. Last, but not least, the implications of mobile e-work on regional development and rural communities must be taken into careful consideration (Heinonen, 2001). Along with various obvious benefits that are to be expected from e-work, prejudices persist and obstacles are still abundant (e.g., Anderson et al., 1996). Mobile e-work as a social innovation primarily awaits a breakthrough of the trust culture in working milieus.

The data available on the numbers of e-workers is somewhat unreliable and incomparable.

This is largely because various surveys measure e-workers' numbers using different criteria or definitions. Mobile e-work is a recently new phenomenon in the field of e-work in general. Therefore, it is particularly difficult to get statistical data on relevant numbers of mobile e-workers. Some figures can be given, though. The number of teleworkers varies from country to country within Europe. Scandinavia and Finland have the highest proportion of teleworkers out of the total number of white-collar workers, as a result of low-cost technologies, legislative frameworks, and corporate culture. IDC Research has forecast that the number of teleworkers in Europe will increase to over 28.8 million by 2005, up from 10 million in 2000. According to IDC, the mobile workers are defined as those who spend at least 20% of their working hours away from home, their main place of work, or both. There will be over 20.1 million mobile workers in Europe by 2005, up from 6.2 million in 2000 (Jüptner, 2001).

Various models and practices on e-work were developed, tested and recommended for communities and regional authorities in a recently completed three-year research project on Eco-Managed Introduction of Telework, carried out at VTT Building and Transport (Heinonen et al., 2004; Heinonen, 2001). The perspectives chosen were an analysis of environmental impacts, as well as a scrutiny of socio-cultural implications from various e-work contexts (for environmental impacts see also Arnfalk, 2002). A case study was included to experiment with mobile e-work in the Regional Council of Häme, Finland, which will be presented further in this article in more detail.

Mobile e-work can be seen as a means to bridge up the gap between regions. The general processes of centralisation and urbanisation are shifting emphasis on metropolitan areas and a few other urban growth areas. Other regions continue to lose their educated young brainpower to cities, and struggle with economic hardships. By promoting e-work and especially mobile e-work, the regions could have more balance in a

socio-economic sense. The skilled labour could remain living in rural regions or semi-urban communities if their employers permitted e-work as a way to organise their work and commuting. In a traditional e-work case, an employee e-works one or two days per week at home or at a nearby telework centre, while on other days he or she commutes to the main office. Mobile e-work adds relevant benefits to the traditional e-working. In mobile e-work, trips to and from work can be used for working and thus the working hours at office will be cut down correspondingly.

In regional development, legislative efforts to diminish the digital divide between cities and rural areas could include, for example, tax deductions to the companies that permit mobile e-working, as well as to the employees who regularly practice mobile e-work.

E-WORK AS A TOKEN OF MOBILE LIFESTYLE?

In a survey by the Helsinki Metropolitan Area Council (YTV), the results showed that a typical e-worker in the Helsinki Metropolitan area is a highly educated and well-off male employee, younger than an average (YTV, 2001; Heinonen et al., 2004). He lives in a detached house, drives a personal car to the office and has a longer distance from home to the job than on average. Does this imply that an e-worker is prone to more mobility when trips to work are reduced? Or is the diminished commuting a quality-of-life target for a person who is already accustomed or obliged to undertake much travelling? In this survey, 3.6% of all the respondents claimed to have teleworked on the day the questionnaire was administered. Of the respondents active in working life, more than 5% teleworked at least one day per week and 13% replied to have teleworked occasionally during the last six months.

Mobile e-work is understandably more natural to persons with a mobile or nomadic lifestyle.

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