

Telework in the Context of E-Collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Today, everyone recognizes that we live in the so-called knowledge society. In this society, new possibilities based on and around IT and the Internet arise for human beings. IT technology has also made the organizations where they work change rapidly as well as the wider general business environment. The development of the Internet in the early 1990s was both the catalyst and an example of this phenomenon. This computer network allowed the development of *social networks*, or virtual communities of people who use these networks to communicate and to collaborate. We shall concentrate on the specific changes that have taken place in the workplace because of the introduction and increased usage of IT.

Since the 1970s, a decade in which we can place the beginning of the study of telework or telecommuting (Nilles, 1975), the professional literature has given some insights about the explosion in the number of teleworkers that was going to take place in the next decade. As an example, we can mention the predictions of AT&T in the 1970s. As later with the Internet bubble, nothing happens, the forecasts were not good enough, and the statistics show now the reality is different to the initial predictions: It is difficult to speak about the “real telework.” On the other hand, there are some instances, (i.e., in Europe the European Commission), and from some industry e-work and e-collaboration practices, more and more people are starting to speak about a broader concept, especially in the last two years. On this issue, they refer to the situation in which some people have to cooperate, using IT to realize a specific task. However, is e-work (or telework) and e-collaboration the same? To answer this, we have to review historical developments, definitions, clarifications, and analysis of the main reasons of why telework is not yet wide spread or why it can be confused with e-collaboration.

Historical Perspective of Telework

We will discuss shortly the main factors that have affected the development of telework in the last decades. Before the 1990s, only aisle initiatives existed, without using the term *telework*. In the 1970s, the term *telecommuting* is coined, as a result of a research project related to the energy crisis and the big traffic congestion problems in big cities, such as Los Angeles. In the state of California, new laws were developed to force companies to implement telecommuting programs to reduce traffic and pollution. Telecommuting was initiated in big companies that started to measure the results. Conclusions from these first experiences were considered as models for future applications.

In the 1980s, several pilot projects were developed in the United States, where it experienced a greater development than in Europe. In Europe, the implications of telework for rural development, its social implications (and the protection required for teleworkers), and the technological aspects were studied. In the *first part of the 1990s*, companies were looking for new ways of cost reducing, to afford a smaller demand. Telework was designed as a tool for cost reducing. In the *second part of the 1990s*, businesses used teleworking as a way to be closer to clients, having more technological tools to serve client needs in their premises; that is, with mobile teleworkers. Public administrations decidedly promoted telework, more in the European Union, communicating the best practices among the society.

In the first years of the *new century*, we can observe an important change related to the term *telework*; for example the European Commission change it for *e-work* in its well-known annual reports about the area (European Commission, 2005), and more labour and business practices were related to telework and all of them mixed up in new concepts such as e-collaboration.

Summarizing this, we can say that since the 1970s, several lines of research about teleworking have been

developed: transportation, management, outsourcing, socio-economic development, and technology. *Teleworking and transportation* was the first line of research, and it studied the way of using telecommuting/teleworking for reducing traffic congestion and noise pollution (Bagley, Mannerling, & Mokhtarian, 1994; Handy & Mokhtarian, 1996; Nilles, 1975, 1994).

About *teleworking and management*, teleworking is another aspect of the tendency of business process reengineering driven by IT possibilities in the 1990s and also related to Human Resources Management (Daniels, Lamond, & Standen, 2000).

In the *teleworking and outsourcing* line, they have been studied by big companies that outsource, mainly IT activities, and small businesses that have been created to respond to that demand.

With regard *teleworking and socio-economic development*, and from a political point of view, telework has been proposed and used to help not well-develop areas, either in urban or rural zones. The main objective is to provide to the community with telework facilities, so people living there could work as freelance teleworkers. Finally, about telework and technology, several investigations have been conducted to improve the available technology to telework.

CONCEPT OF TELEWORK

From an etymological point of view, the term *telework* supposes the union between “telou” (*distance*, Greek) and “tripalliare” (*work*, Latin). In summary, this means work at a distance. Nevertheless we use the term *telework*; the first term more accepted internationally and used to talk about this activity was the one of *telecommuting*. This was coined by the North American Jack Nilles (a former physician and NASA researcher, denominated since then as the father of telework) in 1973, who defined it as taking the work to the worker instead of the worker to the work, using telecommunications. Since then, the terms used more frequently have been *telecommuting*, mainly in the United States, and *telework*, mainly in Europe.

After this, other terms have been introduced, such as *flexiplace* (Schiff, 1983). The reason for *telework* being the term most used in Europe is due to the use of it by the European Commission that has promoted several research projects in this field since the 1980s. The confusion about the terms starts when the term is

translated into other languages; for example, in Spanish, *teleworking* and *telecommuting* have the same translation: *teletrabajo*, and there exists several similar expressions. In other languages, the situation is quite the same. Even in English there are several terms similar to teleworking, such as telecommuting.

This is only an example of the lack of consensus on what is the exact meaning of teleworking or telecommuting (Gray, Hodson, & Gordon, 1993) because different forms or organizing the work are included in the concept. Overall, it appears quite easy to understand what telework is about in a colloquial context, but it is more difficult when an empirical study is being conducted and the number of teleworkers has to be considered. Depending on the concept the researches adopt, the results could be different. Korte (1988) considers that it is not appropriate to define telework with only one dimension. He considers telework in the middle of some general changes that are taking place in the organizations, and imply three basic elements: (1) location (the location of the employees change depending on desires of these employees or necessities of the company, so the location in which the work is carried out is independent of the location of the employer); (2) use of IT (telework extensively depends on the use of IT); and (3) the communication link with the employer (it could be completely electronic communication or using other more traditional communication means).

We could propose, as coincident aspects of the different definitions of telework in the literature, the following: (1) Telework is working at a distance—it implies a different location of the worker from the company/client for which her or she is working; (2) telework implies an intensive use of IT; (3) the added value that brings the worker to the company is related with the use of IT.

TYPES OF TELEWORK

From the 1970s, some types of teleworking were defined and related to the place of work: home teleworking, mobile telework, and telecentres or telework centres. The home teleworking was defined as a way of working full time from home instead of working in the office. Mobile telework was referred to as work wherever the employees were needed; for example, in the clients' office or at home. Related with these there are other terms, as *mobile office*, more concentrated in the technological aspect, and *hotelling*, related

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