

# Using Telework and E-Work as Flexible Working Alternatives

**Flávio Nunes**

*University of Minho, Portugal*

## WORKFORCE FLEXIBILITY

The argument of a paradigm shift in the organization of work is not new, it goes back to the post-Fordism debate, in which the dissolution of traditional production structures was predicted, especially as a consequence of the good results achieved by the flattening of hierarchies, as well as the practice of a more flexible and decentralized organization of work. Since then, the issue of flexibility in working arrangements has been central in order to make enterprises more competitive in a global economy, where fragmented and rapidly changing markets impose a more efficient use of human resources in order to respond to the changing external demands and opportunities. Sisson et al. (1999) distinguish two main approaches to workforce flexibility: numerical and functional. Numeric flexibility is the ability of the organization to adjust the quantity of labor to meet fluctuations in demand (for instance the part-time jobs or the temporary work). Function flexibility is about the ability to increase the level of responsibility of the workforce, which involves continuing training to enable employees to acquire new skills and competences (for instance the job rotation and the polyvalent workers), as well as collaborative approaches ensuring that employees become more responsible for organizing their own work (for instance the workplace flexibility that characterizes telework or the subcontracts dissemination).

Recognizing that this debate about the flexible organization of work is not new, Schienstock (2002) states that what is relevant today is that organizational change of work is more and more linked with the introduction of modern information and communication technologies (ICTs), which have an important role to play with respect to several dimensions of restructuring practices of work (the proliferation of unstable forms of employment, the geographical decentralization of work, the increasing importance of information work, the de-skilling versus re-skilling debate, the externalization and downsizing practices, ...). For instance, as these technologies seem

to make work increasingly independent of time and space, we assist to the spatial relocation of activities under the heading of teleworking or e-working, which are largely interchangeable concepts used to describe work which takes place outside the conventional office involving the use of ICTs.

## TELEWORK: A WORKING PRACTICE EVOLVING FROM TELECOMMUTING TO E-WORKING

It is widely known that the debate on the telework subject began in the early 70s, in the University of Southern California, when Jack Nilles presented the term telecommuting during a research project for the National Science Foundation, which meant simply the opportunity to work from home using telecommunication links. At the time of the oil crisis, a special demand of new ways to conserving energy was identified, and it was under this background that the author discussed the potential in the substitution of commuting by the technically possible telecommuting. This concept would be materialized as an electronic mediated distance working, with advantages not only in energy-savings, but also in providing less traffic and environmental pollution, less stressful working conditions, more time for family and leisure, or the possibility of substantial savings in office costs. In the following studies, he distinguishes telework from telecommuting, stating that telework is simply the use of telecommunications technology to conduct work, like for instance teleconferencing, facsimile transmission, e-mails, or cellular phone calls, which does not necessarily involve remote work while telecommuting implies a decentralized location (Nilles, 1985). Thus, telecommuting is both telework and remote work, which implies the use of telecommunication as a tool to allow for the worker to be physically distant from the primary worksite (the location of the supervisor).

However, in some further approaches based solely on the etymology of the word, a form of work is considered as telecommuting if it involves remote supervision and if the commute trip is reduced or eliminated. Under these criteria (distance and commuting), it was argued that telecommuting does not require computers or telecommunications on every occasion. This perspective is the one shared by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, which presented in 1986 a definition accordingly to the following three prerequisites. Firstly, the place where the work is carried out is spatially independent of the location of the employer or client; secondly the work is done predominantly with electronic terminals; and finally a telecommunication link is used between the employee and the employer, but not in every occasions since in some cases the work results are stored on data carriers and later transmitted to the employer or client (EFILWC, 1988). A few years later, the definition of the U.S. South Quality Management District, presented in 1990, did not yet exclude the possibility of store work results being transmitted later by post, courier service, or other means, and in this sense “telecommuting is working at home or at an alternate location and communicating with the usual place of work using electronic or other means, instead of physically travelling to a more distant work site” (Mokhtarian, 1991, p. 11).

It was in the beginning of the 90s that this concept categorically acquired a meaning that goes a bit beyond simply working at a distance. With the substantial improvements of electronic equipments and telecommunication infrastructures, this term is definitively linked to the use of information and communication technologies to enable people to work away from their employers (Huws, 1991; Osborne, 1992; Weijers, Meijer, & Spoelman, 1992). Since then, this concept excludes the “outworkers” (understood as traditional home workers making no use of telecommunications as part of their work), which means that work supervision must be carried out and work results have to be presented at least partially through telecommunication. Gray, Hodson, and Gordon (1993) decided to add another trait to this concept, arguing that this flexible way of working must be the chosen method in a significant proportion of work time (they suggest two days a week, just for reference), in order to exclude people who work remotely only on very few occasions.

In spite of this clarification, the confusion between telework and telecommute persists. The concept of

telework, despite being very different from the notion proposed in the middle 80s by Nilles, is still a very broad one, although it is possible to say that it is linked to the use of ICTs to practice remote working of some kind (Muhlbacher, 1998; Qvortrup, 1998). In a strict sense, “telecommuting” is a part of the broader concept of “teleworking.” “To begin it implies that certain trips to work, for example a few days a week, are substituted with work from home, from a satellite centre or from a neighbourhood office aided by data and telecom. Moreover, it exclusively applies to employees, not self-employed persons” (Forsback, 1995, p. 7). More recently and to avoid this confusion and misunderstanding between teleworking and telecommuting, the e-work concept was defined as a term referring “generically to any type of work which involves the digital processing of information and which uses telecommunications link for receipt or delivery of the work to a remote employer or business client” (Huws, 2001, p. 2). Nowadays, this is the term favoured by the European Commission. Although it does not refer to distance (as does the prefix “tele”), it still has the advantage of avoiding confusions with telecommuting (which is constantly happening with telework) and not being too specific, as it is not restricted to a particular form of remote work, such as homeworking, working at a telecentre, or mobile working.

## THE TWO MAIN TYPOLOGIES OF TELEWORK/E-WORK CATEGORIES

Nowadays defining telework or e-work remains an uneasy task, as it covers a great variety of working practices that in some cases have little similarity to one another. Thus, the challenge faced by many analysts was to define and present different typologies, one of the most common systematizes three different organizational forms, defined in terms of the types of work relationships available: telehomework, group-based telework, and flexible telework (or mobile work). However, like any other kind of typology, it is understandable that some teleworking practices can be included in more than one of the groups described next.

- **Telehomework** is the classical form of telecommuting, which provides employment possibilities for workers with restricted mobility or for those who prefer to work at home using telematic sys-

3 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: [www.igi-global.com/chapter/using-telework-work-flexible-working/17814](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/using-telework-work-flexible-working/17814)

## Related Content

---

### **An Interactive Space as a Creature: Mechanisms of Agency Attribution and Autotelic Experience**

Ulysses Bernardet, Jaume Subirats Aleixandriand Paul F.M.J. Verschure (2017). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-15).

[www.irma-international.org/article/an-interactive-space-as-a-creature/169931](http://www.irma-international.org/article/an-interactive-space-as-a-creature/169931)

### **Smart Classroom-Based Innovative Solution Toward Uninterrupted Education: Perspective**

Sudhir K. Routrayand Sasmita Mohanty (2022). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 1-14).

[www.irma-international.org/article/smart-classroom-based-innovative-solution-toward-uninterrupted-education/306689](http://www.irma-international.org/article/smart-classroom-based-innovative-solution-toward-uninterrupted-education/306689)

### **Online Poker and the Individuals Who Play It**

Ramesh Venkataraman (2001). *Our Virtual World: The Transformation of Work, Play and Life via Technology* (pp. 104-123).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/online-poker-individuals-play/27932](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/online-poker-individuals-play/27932)

### **A Virtual-Reality Approach for the Assessment and Rehabilitation of Multitasking Deficits**

Otmar Bock, Uwe Drescher, Wim van Winsum, Thomas F. Kesnerusand Claudia Voelcker-Rehage (2018). *International Journal of Virtual and Augmented Reality* (pp. 48-58).

[www.irma-international.org/article/a-virtual-reality-approach-for-the-assessment-and-rehabilitation-of-multitasking-deficits/203067](http://www.irma-international.org/article/a-virtual-reality-approach-for-the-assessment-and-rehabilitation-of-multitasking-deficits/203067)

### **Unmasking Virtual Crimes: Investigating and Proving Evidence in the Metaverse**

Ramy El-Kady (2025). *Unveiling Social Dynamics and Community Interaction in the Metaverse* (pp. 389-444).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/unmasking-virtual-crimes/375598](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/unmasking-virtual-crimes/375598)