

**Chapter III**

The Potential Attraction of Online Distance Education: Lessons from the Telecommuting Literature

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Distance education involves both the student and the instructor in various tasks associated with learning and testing the absorption of that learning. In this chapter, parallels are drawn between educational and workplace tasks—the understanding of prescribed material, assignments, experiences and acquisition of knowledge on one hand and the components of a job on the other. It draws on the telecommuting literature as it relates to telecommuting's attraction to the worker, the organization and the community, the importance of the task, the technology required, the role of the supervisor and the individual attributes one needs to be a successful teleworker. These are brought together in a model aimed at providing a guide to the possible adoption of distance education and enabling administrators to assess its potential and some of the pitfalls that may be encountered.

INTRODUCTION

Distance education, particularly online distance education is attracting considerable attention from both providers of education and potential stu-

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dents. There are many similarities between this form of education and telecommuting. From the employer (or provider) perspective, there is the attraction of a wider pool of potential recruits (read potential students), savings on facilities and organizational infrastructure, meeting demand and changing work practices. From a student perspective, the telecommuting advantages of reduced travel, flexibility and the time to devote to other commitments (work, family, etc.) are at least initially attractive.

The objective of this chapter is to review the telecommuting literature and put forward a model that outlines the potential influences affecting the adoption of distance education for use by academic institutions in their decisions related to this area. Such a model may be helpful for research into distance education too.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter begins with a review of the benefits, costs and risks associated with telecommuting (Gray et al., 1993; Turban & Wang, 1995; Ford & McLaughlin, 1995; Ellis & Webster, 1997) for each of the three components of the telecommuting arrangement—the individual, the organization and the community, and suggests that several of the matters relevant here have direct relevance to the distance education decision. In essence, these issues form part of the drives and constraints which need to be present or absent to some degree for telecommuting to take place. Other drives and constraints include the suitability of the task, the attitude of the supervisor, etc. This theme is continued by an examination of the enablers (Mokhtarian & Salomon, 1994; Tung & Turban, 1996) which provides some insight into the technological factors that are likely to influence the acceptance and potential use of this form of education.

Using a theoretical task model to encompass the component, coordinative and dynamic themes of complexity (Wood, 1986), the task characteristics of uncertainty and equivocality (Daft and Macintosh, 1981) and the organizational issues of resources and scheduling of work (Thompson, 1967), a set of attributes for educational tasks is developed. It is suggested that this model forms a central component of an overall model for the evaluation of the suitability of educational tasks to distance education. In addition the task model provides a firm basis for consideration of the appropriateness of the attributes associated with various distance education tasks and the suitability of those tasks.

Studying and learning from home will require particular student attributes: some familiarity with computing and communications technologies,

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