# Chapter 9
# Teleworking and the "Disability Divide"

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## ABSTRACT

*Much of the discourse on the digital divide focuses on issues of information disparity and accessibility, frequently in socioeconomic terms. This perspective overlooks an important aspect of the digital divide, the lack of access and missed opportunities faced by persons with disabilities, referred to here as the "disability divide." Barriers to access and knowledgeable use of information and communication technology (ICT) represent more than simple exclusion from information to encompass social segregation and devaluation. At its most insidious, barriers to ICTs limit full community engagement in employment activities. This chapter examines the ramification of the impact of digital divide on the nature of employment and participation in the workplace, using ICT to conduct telework, and explores challenges to social policy with respect to 'reasonable' accommodations. In the absence of practices, structures, and policies targeting the distributive work environment, telework is much less likely to close the digital divide for persons with a disability. This suggests the need to explore and develop potential policy options to close the disability divide.*

## INTRODUCTION

The digital divide is a broad concept whose basic assumptions are contested (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006;

Hall, 2003; James, 2005; James, 2008; Vehovar, Sicherl, Husing, & Dolnicar, 2006). The concept finds its origins in media and government reports dating back to the mid-1990s, entering scholarly discourse a few years later, and quickly building

momentum since then, with 440 papers in the ISI Web of Science at the beginning of 2006 (Vehovar et al., 2006), and 975 publications identified (by topic) in the ISI Web of Knowledge in the latter part of 2008 (ISI, 2008). At its most basic level, the digital divide has been defined in terms of the gap in information and communication technology (ICT) use. Although ICTs are inclusive of a broad range of technologies, including computers, videoconferencing, intranets, and mobile telephones, ICTs are most commonly used synonymously with the Internet, which provides the infrastructure for most ICT devices and applications (Bayo-Moriones & Lera-Lopez, 2007; Hull, 2003; Triggs & John, 2004). One contested assumption is the strength and direction of the relationship between the digital divide, as a divide between ICT 'haves' and 'have-nots,' in addition to broader, off-line social disparities (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004; Vehovar et al., 2006). The confounding of social inequality and access to ICTs is not disputed; however, there are unresolved questions about the context of the digital divide in poverty, rural areas, and developing countries. Also problematic is framing the digital divide simply as an aggregated distribution problem requiring scaled up infrastructure (Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Hull, 2003; James, 2005; James, 2008; Vehovar et al., 2006). Social exclusion is a common denominator for marginalized individuals and populations, for which barriers to both access and informed use of ICT characterize their experience of the digital divide (Mehra et al., 2004; Vehovar et al., 2006). Indeed, access and use of ICT is a central concern for makers of public policy (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). For example, there is well documented research demonstrating the existence of a "digital divide" in our society in terms of access to, availability of, and use of ICTs (Hoffman, Novak, & Schlosser, 2000; Light, 2001; Hargittai, 2002, 2003; Warschauer, 2003). Furthermore, the divide tends to exist along racial and socioeconomic lines, the same demographic characteristics that have stratified society in general (U.S. NTIA,

2000; U.S. NTIA 2002; Callison, 2004; DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001; Robinson, DiMaggio, & Hargittai, 2003).

Persons with disabilities are a marginalized group for whom the digital divide presents some unique challenges (Guo, Bricout, & Hung, 2005). For example, the obstacles that must be navigated and surmounted by persons with disabilities in accessing ICT and its content have led to an additional dimension of the digital divide encompassing design, interface, and usage factors, collectively known as usability factors (Gyi, Sims, Porter, Marshall, & Case, 2004; Roberts & Fels, 2006; Ward & Townsley, 2005; Wattenberg, 2004). Usability is the key to unlocking the full potential of ICT, particularly for persons with a disability. Web accessibility standards, although considerably more disability-friendly than in the past, still leave room for improvement (Sevilla, Herrera, Martinez, & Alcantud, 2007). Defined as a product's ability to facilitate the efficient, effective, and satisfactory attainment of defined goals in a specified context (Sevilla et al., 2007), usability is ultimately predicated upon the user's digital literacy. Indeed, to address the 'informed ICT use' gap in the digital divide, users must develop digital literacy skills, namely online skill in terms of efficiency and effectiveness of browser use, Internet-related knowledge, Web experience, and computer use skill (Hargittai, 2005; Hohlfeld, Ritzhaupt, Barron, & Kemker, 2008).

Telework, or work (related) activities conducted at a distance through the medium of ICTs, as it is performed in the early 21st century, is predicated largely on the notion of Internet accessibility, either as a medium for worker communications (e.g., e-mail, voice over Internet protocol, instant messaging services, etc.), a tool for carrying out essential work functions (i.e., online research via the World Wide Web), or as a means for connecting to the physical workplace through secure websites or a virtual private network (VPN). These various uses of the Internet as part of telework suggest that accessibility of the Internet

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