

The Information Age

The Information Age is now upon us, an age when computers connected to communications networks are changing very quickly the way we work, play and organise.



The following scenario describes working life in ten years' time:

- ◆ In 2010, everyone has access to cheap high-speed communications networks and can use these networks to connect with people and/or do business.
- ◆ New (virtual) organisations and communities have sprung up on the Web, allowing everyone to trade and to share information and common interests. Most commercial activities are carried out on the Internet (E-commerce).
- ◆ Careers change even more often than now, and people constantly have to up-date their skills through life-long learning.
- ◆ All organisations are changing the way they work and trade. Patterns of work have changed and most people are able to choose when and where to work. Teleworking is an accepted way to work.

We in 1999 must prepare for this era now upon us and put systems in place to ensure that Ireland will progress to the forefront in the E-commerce world. Teleworking is an important part of this organisational change.

What is teleworking?

Teleworking is 'a way of working using information and communication technologies in which work is carried out independent of location'. Teleworking is not a job but a way of working. People who use teleworking include *teleworkers* - at home or in a remote office, full-time or part-time; *telecommuters* - part-time at home and part-time in office; and *mobile teleworkers* - on the move.



Learning how best to use teleworking is good groundwork for the Information Age. New jobs will be created using high-speed networks and new skills will be used to carry these out. By using teleworking, workers, managers, trainers and organisations can learn new ways of working that will support these new jobs and skills, in particular, on-line trade and organisation.

The benefits of teleworking

For businesses, there is a close link between teleworking and E-commerce. On-line trading will reach new international markets and new customers will require products and services. In general, teleworking is the way that this kind of business will be carried out, guaranteeing efficiency and competitiveness. For employers, teleworking can also provide a solution to problems of rising office overheads and can help recruit or retain highly specialised staff.



In addition, teleworking can greatly improve the quality of life of individual teleworkers. It can reduce commuting time to and from work, give workers more control over working hours and achieve a

better balance between their role as earners and their other roles as members of society outside work. In addition, teleworking can help marginalised groups, such as people with disabilities and carers find employment.

Employment opportunities

Using teleworking as a working method, new employment opportunities can be created. Examples include:

- ◆ Telecentres or remote offices, in rural and urban areas, can provide serviced office space for remotely based employees and can become business centres by setting up information technology (IT), marketing and training services for remotely based markets
- ◆ Teleworkers (alone or in groups) and organisations that use teleworking can access the global marketplace to source customers and trade services internationally
- ◆ A telework-friendly country will attract new industries that will use these new methods of working to provide services in an efficient and cost-effective manner.

Regional development

Teleworkers can live in the location of their choice and have greater choice over when and where to work. Teleworking can therefore support employment creation in rural and disadvantaged areas. To make a real difference, a combination of factors is needed;

- ◆ high-speed and competitively-priced telecommunications with universal access,
- ◆ skills training programmes,
- ◆ support services, in particular, marketing supports and awareness campaigns.

A better future for many of the less-developed parts of the country can then emerge. The pattern of the past can be reversed, 'bringing work to the people', rather than 'bringing people to the work'.

What is happening now?

Despite the evidence that teleworking improves the working and living environment for both employees and employers, Ireland does not yet have a culture of telework-centred organisations. Among the barriers that are preventing the adoption of teleworking as a mainstream method of working are:

- ◆ Low awareness of teleworking and its benefits
- ◆ Low awareness of education/training programmes available or required
- ◆ Possibility of social isolation.

Most people, working or unemployed, are unaware of the real implications and benefits of teleworking. Organisations are unaware of the benefits of teleworking, of ways to initiate teleworking, long-term implications and the adaptations that need to be made to successfully implement this new method of working.

Lack of awareness of IT and language training available is also a major barrier to the take-up of teleworking. Government initiatives such as the IT 2000 Project and the International Teleservices Programme have great potential for increasing the use of new technologies and teleworking in both public and private sectors. Linguistic skills are vital for many internationally-based tasks or services.



Teleworking opens up new working opportunities for disadvantaged people and regions by allowing people to earn and live at or near their home. However, for people who are already socially isolated, efforts must be made to ensure that teleworking, especially home teleworking does not provide a solution to one problem (economic), while at the same time worsening another (social).

The main recommendations made by the Council include:

A Government awareness campaign

A national media awareness campaign should be initiated by Government promoting teleworking and especially encouraging companies and individuals to work and relocate in rural Ireland using teleworking.

The formation of a Government Teleworking Policy

It is vital that Government shows itself to be a leader in the implementation of teleworking. All Departments should be required to introduce teleworking options into their mainstream working. Also, all publicly funded organisations should formulate a Teleworking Policy to be implemented by 2002.

The relevant Minister should take the necessary steps to have the Code of Practice for Teleworking endorsed and adopted by the Social Partners.

The implementation of 'telework-friendly' training and education initiatives

People who lack the basic skills to use information technology will easily become the future 'have-nots'. The necessary steps must be taken to raise the awareness of technology and language skills training programmes now available and encourage people to avail of them. Further distance-learning schemes could be developed, including language-teaching programmes. Such steps must be taken to produce a workforce that has the technical and language skills to operate in the global multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment.

Formation of a Teleworking Action Forum

A Teleworking Forum should be established to initiate, monitor, evaluate and support initiatives related to teleworking.

The establishment of new business models

Up to five teleworking initiatives should be selected to demonstrate best practice in the international marketing of tradeable skills and services, together with an international promotional campaign to promote Ireland as a source of such services.

A 'telework friendly' Ireland from a fiscal and environmental point of view

Steps include the creation of a tax environment that supports the growth of E-commerce, encourages teleworking and supports teleworkers. 'Green Taxes' or financial incentives should be provided for enterprises to encourage employees to work from home where an improved environment, employment for disadvantaged groups or increased regional employment can be achieved. Planning regulations should support teleworking at home.

An Irish telecommunications environment that facilitates teleworking

One of the most important aspects of creating an environment that is E-commerce and telework-friendly is the provision of universal low-cost broadband telecommunications access. EU structural funds should be made available to help finance the upgrading of telecommunications links in rural areas.

These recommendations, when implemented, will lay secure foundations for Ireland to benefit from this most exciting of futures in the Information Age.

