10 Conceptualising a Telework Environment

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Introduction

When writing about telework there is a natural tendency to promote the successful aspects, and in this way, positive experiences are usually referred to. However, in order to allow a sustained implementation of telework it is important to explore some of the causes of unsuccessful experiences. Resulting from these experiences, there are many disadvantages which have been associated with telework: social isolation, management problems and communication difficulties are some examples. Many of the disadvantages come from the inadaptation of teleworkers to the displaced office, the home office.

Isolating the organisational relations in an inter and intra environment is fundamental for understanding the viable expectations of teleworkers and to ensure operability success in a different interaction and management format which is in accordance with the institution’s original mission and culture.

The telework is seen as ‘a vision of the future’, rather than considering its practical merits as a technology-supported work innovation’ (Jackson 1998: 3). This concept of ‘vision of the future’ can deflect us from the real difficulties and concerns one must have in designing adequate environments for telework activities. Telematic services – as independent services – are developed to answer specific communications needs and to be adapted to different users (though no-one specifically); consequently, they are not for teleworkers in particular.

Teleworkers have specific and strong communication needs as they rely for their contact on the business of telematic services. Therefore, it is important to understand the real necessities of teleworkers, to know their profile, and to conceptualise a communication environment that fits their needs.

Some major technical constraints can arise from the lack of specific telework tools demanded by the teleworkers, or whoever implements telework, to search for the best combination of available telematic services.

“It is presumed, for instance, that technologies will be appropriated and configured in ways that accord with the teleworking, rather than supporting alternative arrangements in general”. (Jackson 1998: 3)
It is important to develop a working environment specific to teleworkers that answers not only the technical difficulties but also the broader telework-related problems.

Consequently, this chapter introduces an answer to the major question: ‘what is the correct methodology to equate the appropriate system infrastructure and optimal human-computer communication scenario so as to support teleworkers and managers?’. The answer put forward is: a system that allows i) efficient participation of the teleworker in the fulfilment of tasks, ii) proximity to the distance office dynamics, iii) adaptability to different organisational scenarios, iv) multiple platforms for accessing the system.

**Telework(ers) Problems**

The most valuable resource of New Economy activities is based on manpower and knowledge. Therefore, it is important to focus our concerns on establishing the most appropriate conditions for workers to perform their tasks. To build an appropriate environment, teleworkers can be the first to give us the feedback to understand their needs. What are the needs of teleworkers?

Though the figures can change from country to country, some indicate that isolation is the major concern of teleworkers and that fast technological evolution inhibits the implementation of a telework plan (Sousa 1999: 96, H R Executive 1999, ECATT 1999: 53).

Teleworker isolation is a result of the lack of face-to-face communication resulting from the displacement of the worker. Consequently, major investment must be made to allow the same level of communication that existed in the enterprise, especially as ‘a minimum primary requirement of telework is that it should have no negative bottom line impact. It is thus necessary for the teleworkers to be able to communicate with their co-workers and customers at least as effectively as they did before’ (Nilles 1997).

Many experiences and examples demonstrate the importance telematic services can have for telework. Nevertheless, as in most software applications, they lack an integrated and uniform interface with other telematic services. The services are not specifically designed for telework and have problems communicating with other telematic services from other software houses.