Chapter II

Teleworking in Ireland: Issues and Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Teleworking has been used since the early 1970s in some countries, but it is still relatively underdeveloped in Ireland. This study sought to establish why this is and concentrated on the implementation of teleworking arrangements from both management and teleworker perspectives in Irish organizations. This study indicates that, in the majority of cases where teleworking exists, it has been implemented in an ad hoc manner and is largely employee-driven. Teleworking is not actively encouraged and top management commitment does not exist. It seems Irish managers are not yet persuaded of the benefits inherent in the concept of telework or that they are uncertain whether the benefits are worth the risks resulting from the introduction of this new method of organizing work. This is unfortunate given the very positive experiences with teleworking reported in this study.

INTRODUCTION

Although teleworking has been in operation in the United States since the oil crisis in the early 1970s, it is still a relatively new and underdeveloped method of working in Ireland (Bertin & O’Neill, 1996). This is surprising
given the advanced state of the telecommunication infrastructure in this country and the high uptake rate of the Internet/World Wide Web by both the Irish public and organizations (Yahoo!, 1998). This study of the issue of teleworking found little Irish specific empirical research into the practical implementation of teleworking in organizations and into the barriers to adoption that managers in organizations may be facing. Another question that seemed under-researched is whether teleworking offers opportunities for greater integration of the disabled in the workforce and whether these opportunities are being seized.

In the absence of clear, recent empirical evidence, the purpose of this research was to conduct an exploratory study into the implementation of teleworking arrangements from both management and teleworker perspectives. The research objectives were focused on the type of teleworking implemented, the policies and procedures implemented to manage teleworking, the type of work and individual best suited to telework, the technologies used, the driving forces and obstacles and, finally, whether teleworking can be used to integrate people with disabilities into the workforce. A combination of data collection methods (secondary data from literature, survey of managers and workers involved in teleworking and follow-up telephone interviews with both managers and teleworkers) was used in the research strategy in order to strengthen the findings of the research by triangulation.

The results of the study indicate that, in the majority of cases where teleworking exists, it has been implemented in an ad hoc manner and is largely employee-driven. Generally, teleworking is not actively encouraged and top management commitment does not exist. As a result, adequate IT and communications support is not forthcoming as teleworking is not seen as a priority by IT management. Finally, it seems that teleworking is not a panacea to the employment ills of all disabled people, but where it is suitable it could be encouraged with great benefits. In this regard, it seems that more could be done to try to integrate disabled people into the workforce in a meaningful way given the high potential of teleworking for this purpose.

Overall, our research indicates that Irish managers are not yet persuaded of the great benefits inherent in the concept of telework or, at least, that they feel uncertain whether the benefits are worth the risks resulting from the introduction of this new method of organizing work. This is unfortunate given the very positive experiences with teleworking reported by both workers and managers who took part in this study.
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