

## Thinking about working from home?

Sick of spending ten hours at work every day? Fed up with the traffic jams that add another couple? Tired of day-care centres, irritable children and late night meals?

As working hours grow and new technologies continue to transform the nature of work around the developed world, the latest rage is so-called teleworking. It isn't new. Home-based work has been around for some years now. But the pace and extent of technological innovation now means that telework can, and increasingly does, involve much more than the simple notion of a hook-up to the office. From the straight-forward computer terminal at home for occasional days away from the normal workplace, right through to the so-called virtual office where there is no normal workplace, the range of telework options is growing rapidly.

In its current news magazine, the International Labor Organisation [ILO] draws attention to a huge project by the European Union aimed at getting to grips with just what is happening with teleworking. A consortium was established and soon identified companies in various countries which were making significant use of teleworking. Interviews were conducted, employment contracts were closely studied and a number of case studies were written. To make its findings of practical use, the consortium presented its material in a number of streams aimed at particular target audiences: employees, small to medium enterprises, large corporations, local authorities, for example. Details covered such topics as type of work, check lists for introduction, contractual arrangements, working hours, data protection, software standards and management controls. Material in the different streams was cross-referenced using hypertext for ease of access. A teleworking handbook has now been published in five languages.

The handbook makes clear that, from an employee perspective, teleworking can represent both convenience and a huge change to working lives. It can offer real benefits to both employers and their staff. Time and money saved on reduced travel and a greater capacity to integrate work with their broader lives can be strong attractions for employees. But potential disadvantages also exist.

While teleworking may seem attractive, it does not suit every personality. Some people find it quite difficult to cope without interaction and support from co-workers.

Sometimes, family members can be uncooperative. The hope that work and direct childminding can be integrated is usually dashed quite quickly. They do not often mix well. Space and equipment can be a problem: the 'PC-on-the-kitchen-table' approach is not sustainable or safe. Ergonomic standards in the workplace are there to protect against overuse injury; their absence in the home can increase health risks enormously. Without proper compensation for heating, lighting, telephones and other facilities, the employee will be out of pocket. When it comes to training and development or even promotion opportunities, 'out of sight/out of mind' can mean disadvantage for the employee.

Before starting telework employees need to ensure that their employment status is unaffected legally by the change in workplace. Almost all specialists in this area emphasise the importance of maintaining the employer-employee relationship. If the organization's objective in using teleworking is, in fact, to transfer work to independent contractors then workers should understand that this is a fundamental change to their relationship. A key principle of sound arrangements is a right of return to the workplace in the future. Employees should not commit themselves to long-term teleworking without very careful thought. Personal circumstances can change rapidly and home-based work can quickly become impracticable. A long-term commitment can then trap the employee, even to the extent of loss of employment. Teleworking proposals which genuinely seek mutual benefit will be more effective if they begin with a fixed-length pilot scheme. The absence of pilot tests should raise suspicions.

Because teleworking will clearly be of increasing interest to ALIA members, I have made contact with the Euro-Telework group and sought their agreement to the Association's use of their extensive research in constructing guidelines for members. Shortly, I hope to develop a telework booklet in our employment-related information series. The Euro group's project director has welcomed our collaboration and has given copyright approval to adaptation of research findings by ALIA.

Any Association member with particular concerns about teleworking may contact me at ALIA National Office. I would be interested to hear too about the experiences of library and information workers who are already engaged in telework before compiling guidelines. ■



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