

Workplace Accommodations  
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## **Virtual Exclusion and Telework:**

The Double-edged Sword of  
Technocentric Workplace Accommodation Policy

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# 1.0 Introduction

- Workplaces are complex social communities, oriented toward the achievement of tasks ("doing work") frequently requiring the flow of information and interactive engagement with coworkers
- Much telework policy-related research addresses technological/physical issues of implementing remote/offsite work functions. Telecommuting vs. Telework.
- Teleworking can expand job possibilities for people with disabilities, mitigate boundaries associated with transportation and the physical characteristics of the workplace environment, and permit active worker communication and inter-worker interactions.
- Could Telework create workers physically isolated and socially stigmatized by reliance on ICTs for participating in the work(space)? Where do we locate the virtual watercooler?
- How can we design policy to facilitate the integration of people with disabilities into the workplace in such a way as to optimize their interactions with other workers?

## 2.0 Context of Telework

- First teleworker is believed to have been a bank president in Boston who had a phone line installed between his bank and his home in 1877
- Actual implementation of telework for people with disabilities appears to lag behind the theoretical, with one estimate (Tahmincioglu) that 7% of the employed persons with disabilities work from home 20 hours or more
- US surveys indicate 2.8 million employees telework regularly, and 17% of Americans teleworked full-time while 30% teleworked at least one day a week. (DOL 2003); and that teleworkers can save employers on the order of 63% of absenteeism costs per teleworker per year and 25% of an employee's annual salary -- around \$10,000 in reduced absenteeism and job retention costs
- Some 45% of teleworkers with a separate office in the home perceive an improved quality of life—work, home and social
- Downside: Remote aspect of telework — the lack of work support, job structure, technology, social interaction and communication, and potential liabilities of telework, OSHA regulations, and fair labor laws

## 3.0 Federal Policy Environment

- Policy matters: affects context of employment of everyday living and employment as well as the development and availability of technology
- U.S. EEOC recognizes telework as a “reasonable accommodation” under 1990 Americans w/Disabilities Act
- New Freedom Initiative (NFI 2001) focuses on Telework to help people with disabilities enter the workforce
- Telework promoted by the U.S. Government to increase employment opportunities for people with disabilities
- Much legislative/policy efforts, even within disability context, seem focused on cost reduction, rather than increased civil rights of people with disabilities
- Market based approaches (Sec. 508 Rehabilitation Act)

## 4.0 Key Conceptual Issues

- Does telework “shape” work to be done or does work (tasks, etc.) constrain the implementation of telework?
- Workplaces vs. Workspaces, Telework/Virtual Workspace, Collaborative nature of work, Information flows
- Inclusion within the constraints of the physical workplace
- Social inclusion/participation within the workplace “community”
- Economic issues related telework
- Regulatory/Legislative issues
- Technological issues related to telework
- Employer resistance to telework arrangements

## 5.0 Implementation Barriers/Considerations

- Telework may translate to “pink collar” data entry jobs and marginalization in terms of promotion and career
- Substitution of home-centric telework for physical and social changes in the workplace
- Cost/Technological considerations supporting robust teleworking environments (pay rent or broadband bill?)
- Are economic implementation costs higher for teleworkers with disabilities, considering basic equipment and additional necessary AT
- Research gaps in documentation of actual implementation outcomes

## 5.0 Implementation Barriers/Considerations

- Lack of “readiness” on part of both individuals and supervisors
- Interoperability issues
- Lack organizational experience/processes in managing and evaluating teleworking experience specific to teleworkers with disabilities
- Research in collaborative and virtual workspaces not necessarily conducted with special considerations for people with disabilities
- Lack of social capital due to decreased workplace presence –out of sight, out of mind?

## 6.0 Policy Approaches/Considerations

- Telework may translate to “pink collar” data entry jobs and marginalization in terms of promotion and career
- Substitution of home-centric telework for physical and social changes in the workplace
- Outreach – work with stakeholders (advocacy/employer groups) to explore economic and social benefits of teleworking
- Tax incentives – e.g. Develop increased array of tax incentives for employers to adopt teleworking, especially for persons with disabilities; employees to purchase equipment

## 6.0 Policy Approaches/Considerations

- Develop examples, best practice approaches, training modules to help employers foster proximate/virtual social networks
- Increase/improve interagency coordination to head off potential problems in rules/interpretations covering physical teleworking location
- Develop/support public sector broadband/telecom initiatives
- Training – develop materials to support employer based training programs in traditional and online formats

## 7.0 Outcomes

- Increased access/availability of government resources
- Increased public/private sector knowledge transfer
- Increased productivity of persons with disabilities
- Development of a competitive market place for assistive/wireless technologies
- Facilitation of convenient and independent lifestyles

## 8.0 Conclusions

- As the perception of a person with one or more disabilities becomes a broader, more inclusive idea that applies to a larger portion of the population, the role of Telework becomes more critical
- New wireless/IT technologies/collaborative virtual environments can improve the teleworking experience of people with disabilities
- Issue awareness, and information flow to/from policymakers: outreach and education
- Policy interventions include training initiatives employee **and employer**, economic incentives, public sector examples
- Additional multi-disciplinary research initiatives beyond technical issues addressing social inclusion issues, and implementation of social networking processes including ancillary disciplines such as planners and sociologists



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