Virtual Exclusion and Telework:
The Double-edged Sword of Technocentric Workplace Accommodation Policy

Paul M.A. Baker, Ph.D., AICP
Andrew C. Ward, Ph.D., MPH
Nathan Moon

Center for Advanced Communications Policy (CACP) and the Center for Assistive Technology and Environmental Access (CATEA)
Georgia Institute of Technology

National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR), U.S. Department of Education

www.workrerc.org
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.