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TELEWORKING AT BT

ˉ The Economic, Environmental and Social Impacts of its *workabout* Scheme
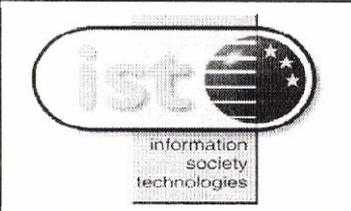
Report on Survey Results
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Results of the First SUSTEL survey

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Highlights

BT is participating in a European project on sustainable teleworking, financed by the Commission's IST initiative.' This report summarises one of the first outputs from the project, an on-line survey of staff registered with workabout, BT's official teleworking scheme. Answers were received from 1874 people – a very satisfactory response rate of 36.5% of the overall sample of 5128 staff surveyed.

Teleworking is Generally Positive for BT Staff and Society as a Whole

Most of the questions related to the personal and social impacts of teleworking.   The majority of respondents felt that this was giving them a better life:

> 85% felt that their quality of life was good or very good

> 82% felt that teleworking was important or very important to their quality of life

> 73% felt that their work-life balance was good or very good

> 90% were satisfied or very satisfied with teleworking

A small minority of respondents felt that teleworking was having negative effects on their quality of life, mainly because of increased working hours.

The majority (81%) of recent Workabout registrants felt their expectations of the benefits of teleworking had been met. However, 19% of respondents were finding the drawbacks more significant than expected. The main reason given was difficulty in adjusting to the lack of social interaction.

The survey also examined motivations to telework and found that:

> The highest ranked was getting more work done, with 83% of respondents stating that this was very important

> Only 46% of respondents stating that more time for themselves was very important

> Only 25% of respondents stated that making it easier to help with caring responsibilities was very important (even though 58% of respondents had dependent children).

In addition:

> 33% of respondents stated that their contribution to domestic activity had increased

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[1] See www.sustel.org for more information on the project.

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14% reported that it had made it easier to become involved in community activities

10% believed that they would be unable to do their present job if unable to telework.

Hence BT teleworking is positively contributing to work-life balance, community development and social inclusion.

Teleworking Increases Productivity and Reduces Absenteeism – But Also Increases Working Hours

78% of teleworkers considered themselves to be more productive. The main reasons were reduced disruption, reduced commuting time and stress and greater flexibility about when and where to work.

22% of teleworkers said that they had worked at home during their last typical working month when they felt too ill to travel to work.

However, 69% of respondents stated that their working hours had increased, with 45% of respondents reporting an increase of more than 9 hours per week. How can this paradox of higher quality of life but increased working hours be explained? One reason is reduced time commuting, which can free time for both work and private life, and also greatly reduce stress. Another is the ability to multi-task – for example, hanging out washing during breaks – so that there is more quality time at the evening or weekends.

Teleworking Reduces Travel – But Not Always

Teleworking certainly reduces commuting travel:

74% of new registrants say that travel reduction was an important factor in their decision to telework

47% of those still commuting say that their commute travel has decreased and only *6%* say that it has increased

The average reduction in car commuting is 178 miles per week, and for rail 220 miles

27% of respondents felt that teleworking had decreased in-work travel compared to 13% who felt that that it had increased.

However, the survey found that that there are at least seven different kinds of teleworker within BT, with considerable differences in travel and other areas between them.

46% of BT teleworkers working at home when they would otherwise have worked elsewhere use their cars for additional journeys, demonstrating that this can offset some commuting savings.

Some Questions Remain Unanswered

The survey suggests that BT needs to conduct further research to:

1. Compare a sample of teleworkers with non-teleworkers so that effects created by teleworking can be distinguished from those created by more general organisational changes

2. Better understand the environmental and social impacts of teleworkers who are not registered with workabouf (which is probably a much larger proportion of BT teleworkers)

3. Gain a more detailed understanding of the impacts of different kinds of teleworker

4. Confirm whether teleworkers are working longer hours in total, and whether, if this is the case, anything can or should be done to help them to avoid this.

Introduction

BT is one of Europe's leading providers of telecommunications services and has around 108,000 employees. The company began implementing telework schemes in 1990 and now probably has the largest number of teleworkers of any UK organisation.[2] Over 5000 of these are registered with the focus of this study, the workabout scheme. This voluntary scheme provides equipment and other support to teleworkers who are giving up a permanent BT office space to move to a home-based, mobile working pattern.

The main reasons for BT's encouragement of teleworking have been:

> Cost control, particularly through reducing expenditure on office accommodation and increasing productivity (the workabout scheme is administered by BT's Property function)

> Working conditions, aimed at improving general employee attendance, morale, recruitment and retention by giving them more control over the location and timing of work

> Productivity, concerned with encouraging more efficient and effective working by employees

> A desire to demonstrate that teleworking can work so that other organisations will be encouraged to adopt it

> A belief that teleworking can create considerable environmental and social benefits such as reduced travel and a better work-life balance for employees.

To substantiate this belief BT's Environment Unit has commissioned two surveys of new registrants to workabout.[3] These surveys focused on travel impacts so that there remained some uncertainty about social impacts. An opportunity to address these arose through BT's participation in SUSTEL, a European Union project on sustainable teleworking.[4] Part of its research is a comparative survey of teleworkers in the five partner countries. As part of the questionnaire development process for this, BT agreed to survey all the 5128 BT employees then registered with workabout.

The workabout registrants were e-mailed in March 2002 and asked to fill in an on-line questionnaire on an independent third party web site established by the report authors. Completed questionnaires were received from 1874 staff by the cut-off date. Although not all respondents answered every question, it is still one of the largest surveys of its kind ever undertaken. The response

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[2] BT itself rarely uses the term teleworking, but sees it as one aspect of a broader commitment to flexible working.
[3] See www.sustainit.org for further details of these surveys.
[4] See www.sustel.org for further details of the project.

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rate of **36.5%** is also very satisfactory for this kind of research. The appendix provides full details of the survey.

The following sections describe the results of the survey. The analysis is illustrated by comments made by respondents. To retain authenticity, these are reproduced as written except for occasional corrections of misspellings.

▌ Typology of Teleworkers

The previous **BT** surveys suggested that people telework in different ways so for this survey a simple classification scheme was developed, with seven categories. **AS** table'l indicates, most respondents were able to identify with one of the seven categories indicating that the typology is reasonably robust. The fact that all the categories are present is an extremely important point as working styles are important determinants of a number of environmental and social outcomes such as travel and community involvement. The fact that over half the respondents work at multiple locations and have high levels of in-work travel also demonstrates the importance of gaining a more detailed understanding of each of the sub-groups.

Table ▌ A Typology of BT Teleworkers

Category of teleworker	Number	Percentage
a Primarily work in a main BT office but regularly spend days/ half days working at home. Relatively small amount of in-work travel.	16	0.9%
b Mixed working locations split between home and main BT office (on average more than one day a week in each of the two different locations). Relatively **small** amount of in-work travel.	63	3.4%
c Mixed working locations split between home and main BT office (on average more than one day a week in each of the two different locations). Relatively **large** amount of in-work travel.	79	4.3%
d Mixed working locations split between home and multiple BT offices (i.e. no main BT office).	460	25.1%
e Mixed working locations split between home, BT offices and customers premises	350	19.1%
F Home working at start and finish of most working days, on the road during the day routinely visiting customers and clients. One day or less on average in BT offices	226	12.3%
g Primarily work at home with occasional days/half days in BT offices for team meetings, training etc	576	31.4%
h None of the above - I do not consider myself to be a teleworker.	4	0.2%
i None of the above for other reasons -	59	3.2%
TOTAL	1833	100.0%

There is also considerable turnover between the individual teleworking styles. 24% of respondents had changed their style in the past 12 months, and 10% expected to do so in future. The main reason for this is the move from 'occasional' teleworking styles that maintain a fixed office to ones which are some combination of home and mobile working.

The questionnaire requested information as to where teleworkers worked. As table 2 shows, 56% of respondents spent more than half their time working at home.

Table 2 Proportion of Week Spent Working At Home

Proportion of Working Week Spent at Home	Number	Percentage
0%	69	3.7%
0-10%	54	2.9%
10.1-20%	237	12.7%
20.1-30%	171	9.2%
30.1-40%	297	15.9%
40.1-50%	209	11.2%
50.1-60%	240	12.9%
60.1-70%	115	6.2%
70.1-80%	223	12.0%
80.1-90%	65	3.5%
90.1-100%	186	10.0%
TOTAL	1866	100.0%

77% of respondents stated that they had flexibility in where to work so this balance gives a good indication of their personal choices. This is borne out by table 3. This summarises people's answers to a question about the single most important factor which influenced their decision to work at home.

Table 3 Reasons for Working at Home

Reasons for Working at Home	Number	Percentage
Need to concentrate (1)	319	22.9%
Prefer to work at home (2)	641	46.1%
Access to people (4)	165	11.9%
Transport issues (6)	97	7.0%
Other (9)	74	5.3%
Access to information (3)	44	3.2%
Family Issues (7)	43	3.1%
Illness (8)	6	0.4%
Weather conditions (5)	2	0.1%
TOTAL	1391	100.0%