Teleworking: An Examination of the Irish Dichotomy

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ABSTRACT

Changing demographics and labour market structures are placing increased pressure on identifying work/life balance solutions, while global competition is forcing companies to look beyond traditional solutions to search for competitive advantage. Recent rapid technology developments facilitate a strategic application of teleworking, which, in suitable organisations, would appear to alleviate both of these issues. Despite this, the limited evidence that exists in the telework literature indicates a dearth of telework in Irish companies, and recent research on the reasons for this, form a gap in the literature.

This study, empirically examines the key factors that influence the extent of telework in Ireland. Qualitative data has been gathered from thirteen semi-structured (eleven face-to-face) interviews with a combination of current and part-time teleworkers and managers. The exploratory approach employed, provides the opportunity to gain an invaluable perspective from participants with personal experience of working from home. The data gathered during this current study, offers some unique insights into teleworking in Ireland and highlights challenges which appear to be particular to the Irish context. While telework is seen in a positive light, by the respondents in this study, socio-cultural barriers to telework are identified. A recurring theme, emerging from this research, highlights the pervasiveness of a traditional management style, and an Irish culture of mistrust, which poses a particular challenge to those wishing to engage in telework. This current research also reveals a particular Irish need for social affiliation, through workplace interactions, which may account for the prevalence of 'part-time' teleworking in Ireland.

Given the attitudinal challenges to telework within Irish organisations, the research findings suggest that there would be clear merit in piloting telework initiatives with carefully selected candidates. Multinationals and young dynamic businesses which remain open to innovative work practices, particularly in the services and technology sectors, are ideally positioned for such an initiative. Coupled with the extension of broadband, a successful outcome, with government sponsored PR, could pave the way for expanding the practice of teleworking in Ireland. This research would be of particular benefit to organisations and individuals considering the option of telework in the future.

Key Words: Telework, Working from Home, Workplace Flexibility, Work-Life Balance, Telecommuting.

Introduction

Globalisation is now a fact of life for Irish businesses and with strong competition driving a need for rapid responsiveness; virtual teams are a growing trend. Information and communications technologies (ICT) now play a vital part in influencing and reshaping how we work and live. These factors are converging to forge a paradigm shift in how we work. International competition is forcing companies to look beyond traditional solutions to search for competitive advantage through innovative workplace structures. Boosting productivity can significantly impact the bottom line, both organisationally and nationally. Embracing the concept of teleworking can improve organisational flexibility and re-activeness, as well as demonstrating Ireland's openness to alternative work practices.

Teleworking is defined as "a way of working using information and communication technologies in which work is carried out independent of location", (National Advisory Council on Teleworking, 1999: 11). Telework is an

essential part of introducing and supporting new ways of working, organisation and trade. The potential of teleworking for improving the quality of life of workers is substantial. The changing labour market and demographics, featuring dramatic shifts from the traditional nuclear family to dual-earner, and single parent families, has brought work/life balance into focus. Telework can offer a better balance between our role as members of the labour force and our role as parents and members of society outside work.

The core of the opportunity in teleworking is in services and, particularly, internationally traded services, a growing sector in the Irish economy (CSO, 2010). As teleworkers can live in the locations of their choice, teleworking has the potential to contribute to employment creation in rural and disadvantaged areas and aid in regional development. In addition, teleworking, if generally implemented, can assist Ireland in meeting its targets for CO_2 emissions and improve the environmental quality of our urban areas. These benefits add to the quality of life of commuters as well as to the physical environment. The workplace flexibility of teleworking offers many advantages for Irish workers and employers alike. Yet the teleworking phenomenon appears to remain a relatively untapped offering in the Irish workplace. This research study empirically examines telework in Ireland, using primary and secondary research data, to investigate why telework has not yet permeated the Irish workplace to the extent that it appears to have in the U.S. and many of our European neighbours.

Methodology

'Teleworking: An Examination of the Irish Dichotomy' presents a research study of the nature of telework in Ireland, with a specific focus on the barriers to the increase of telework in the nation. Extensive primary and secondary research was conducted as part of this exploratory study into telework in Ireland. A phenomenologist approach was adopted, in order to understand the perspective of the teleworker and their manager, within the complex environment in which they operate. Semi-structured interviews with thirteen current and part-time teleworkers and managers was used in this current study, to compile information rich data, which is the most suited to understanding the complex influences on teleworking. While eleven of the contributors were based in Ireland, two teleworked in the U.S, and U.K, providing some interesting comparative data.

This current study utilised a qualitative approach, to get information rich data on the practice of teleworking from the perspectives of various categories of workers affected by it. The research was exploratory in nature in order to most effectively identify the barriers that impinge on telework practices in the country and explore any idiosyncrasies that exist in Irish culture. Each interview was conducted with the aid of an interview guide which allowed the researcher leeway to probe further when required.

The findings and conclusions outlined in this current research study are derived from the extensive primary data gathered by the researcher, and considered in the context of the extant secondary literature on the topic of telework. These findings generate recommendations by the researcher to guide future developments in the area of telework in Ireland.

Literature

TELEWORKING: A CONCEPTUAL INTRODUCTION

Widespread interest in teleworking began in the 1970s, when the term 'teleworking' was coined to encapsulate remote working from the office (Baruch, 2001b). Its origins are attributed to the oil crisis of the 1970s when it was observed that "if just one in seven commuters dropped out, the U.S. would have no need to import oil" (Burch, 1991: 19). At that time, Jack Nilles and his team examined teleworking in an insurance company on the west coast of the United States in order to study its feasibility, and the publication of this influential study became the inspiration that spawned a large body of research in this area attributing Jack Nilles with universal recognition as the 'father' of teleworking research (Hoang *et al.*, 2008).

ECaTT (2000) found that 6% of EU employees practice telework, with the highest levels reported in Scandinavian countries, the U.K. is above average, but Southern European countries including Ireland (with a 4.4% penetration rate) trail behind. According to Parent-Thirion *et al.,* (2007), in research conducted by them, involving almost 30,000 European workers across 31 EU countries, the proportion of workers working all, or, almost all of the time from home (with or without a PC) to be less than 3% of the EU working population, with 8% working at least a

quarter of the time at home with a PC. Parent-Thirion *et al.,* (2007), suggest that, although telework or working from home is not yet a real alternative to working on company premises, it is used by a substantial proportion of people as a complement to their normal working arrangements. Gray *et al*., (1993), posit that individual teleworkers benefit from reduced commuting time thus saving time, money and reducing stress; increased flexibility; greater autonomy and increased freedom. Telework offers a solution to problems of balancing work and family life with employees choosing teleworking to decrease work-related stress, to reduce lengthy commutes, to work longer hours but in more comfortable surroundings, and to provide uninterrupted time to focus on their work (Huws *et al*., 1996, & Kurland and Bailey, 1999). Kurland and Bailey (1999) identified that organisational motivations to introduce telework centralise on reducing costs and to improve employee morale and productivity.

PROFILE OF TELEWORK

The Central Statistics Office (2003) identified the profile of the typical Irish teleworker as male, Dublin-based, highly educated professional, in the services sector, aged between 20 and 44 and working only part of their time from home. Both O'Connell, *et al*., (2004) and Haddon and Brynin (2005), concur that teleworking is dominated by managerial, professional and technical workers, suggesting that telework reflects social status. According to Bailey and Kurland (2002), teleworking is more frequent among firms that have larger percentages of knowledge employees (software programmers, designers, researchers, etc.), in the workforce, and note that those industries, where knowledge is a competitive resource, are an ideal environment to teleworking adoption.

According to Baruch (2000), not everyone has the personality characteristics to make them a successful teleworker, and organisations must bear this in mind. The most important personality attribute of teleworkers is self-discipline and inner motivation is crucial, particularly where complex and high level tasks need to be carried out (Haddon and Lewis, 1994). Potter (2003) suggests that individuals, who need social interaction or close supervision, are not likely to succeed in a teleworking environment.

TELEWORK & WORK/LIFE BALANCE

Many of the issues associated with heightened time pressure, work/life imbalance and decreased quality of life have risen in response to recent gender- and age-related demographic changes in the workforce as well as a shift in many workplace cultures towards longer working hours, particularly, among professionals (Hilbrecht *et al.,* 2008). Russell *et al*., (2009), note that the 'Celtic Tiger' era in Ireland, was accompanied by a strong surge in the number of women in employment, leading to a significant increase in the proportion of dual earner families which have brought the issue of reconciliation between work and care commitments to the fore. Within the public-policy and academic discourses, such attempts to 'balance' different and sometimes conflicting aspects of one's life are expressed by the term 'work/life balance'[1], which is understood to entail organisational flexibility initiatives comprising leave arrangements, variations of flexi-time and modes of teleworking, including home-based telework (Apgar, 1999).

Hilbrecht *et al*., (2008), suggest that "of all non-traditional work formats, policy makers and employees have most frequently suggested that telework (or home-based work) is an effective solution to juggling the demands of career and family", (2004: 456). Cross and Linehan (2006) indicate, however, that many Irish organisations do not have a culture which embraces the concept of work/life balance. Although organisations are aware of the need to introduce work/life balance polices, they essentially are just 'paying lip-service' to them (Cross and Linehan, 2006: 34). Research conducted on European workers by Parent-Thiron (2007) indicated that "those working from home are considerably more satisfied with their work–life balance than all other workers", (2007: 42). Hilbrecht *et al*., (2008) found that telework was viewed positively by those involved, because flexible scheduling facilitated optimal time management, thus enhancing the sense of balancing work and life and perceived quality of life. A body of research (e.g., Haddon, 1992, Schepp, 1995), however, notes a weakening effect of telework on boundaries between work and life. Hyman *et al*., (2003), found that working at home in high-stress jobs can lead to greater intrusion into family life because of its constant omnipresence and the difficulty associated with 'leaving work at work'. This notion of a spillover from work into family time was epitomised by Hochschild (1997).

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[1] "Satisfaction and good functioning at home and at work with a minimum of role conflict", (Clark, 2000: 751).

TELEWORK & THE INFLUENCE OF CORPORATE CULTURE

Schein (2004) defines culture in the context of organisations, as "a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems", (2003: 18). According to Gainey *et al.*, (1999), the informal culture of the workplace may be as important as the presence of formal policies and as new employees enter an organisation and begin the socialisation process, they depend heavily on informal discussions with mentors and colleagues in learning the history of the organisation as well as the norms, values and behaviours. Gainey *et al.*, (1999) thus suggest that employees should spend a minimum period of time in a central location before being selected to telework. Hoang *et al.*, (2008) examine whether corporate culture is an obstacle to the progress of teleworking and reveal that it is still a deterrent to teleworking in many organizations. Many aspects of teleworking are considered to be somewhat incompatible with current corporate cultures in which management style is still ingrained with traditional practices. The importance that corporate culture places on visibility could indeed impede teleworking. The assumption that the performance evaluation system used by today's managers is primarily based on 'results', may be just an illusion. Part-time teleworking is thus seen by Hoang *et al.*, as more suitable for current corporate culture and indicates that part-time teleworking is accepted in most current corporate cultures.

TRUST & CONTROL IN TELEWORK

The benefits of the virtual organisation are dependent on organisations being run on the basis of trust rather than control (Harris, 1998). According to Gordon (1988), the philosophy of management that is prevalent in many organizations goes back to a legacy of factory supervision, in which close observation of direct labour was common. Gordon (1988) posits that, even though society believes it has progressed from the factory to the office, many of the supervisory methods have not changed much. Kurland and Cooper (2002) agree that reduced face-to-face contact impeded trust, revealing that teleworkers complained that their non-teleworking colleagues do not believe they are working while at home. Clear and Dickson (2005), with their survey of SMEs, indicated that the disadvantage cited by the greatest percentage of firms was 'absence of employee supervision'. This, they believe, has obvious implications for the adoption of telework—skepticism about how employees would perform when 'out-of-sight', inhibited telework adoption. Interestingly, research by Hoang *et al.*, (2008) disagrees with previous research, indicating that trust does not appear to be an issue. Korte and Wynne (1996) found that all teleworking schemes have adopted a more task or goal oriented style of management where targets were agreed between the Teleworkers and their managers. According to Baruch (2000 and 2001b), management of teleworkers should have a 'results' based orientation and should be based on a culture of trust: "when people are judged according to their actual output, it should not matter where or when they accomplished their targets", (2001: 121).

SOCIAL ISOLATION OF TELEWORK

Maslow (1954) identified the need for belongingness — the need to feel part of a group, with "one's familiar working colleagues", (1954: 20). Kurland and Egan (1999) identify isolation (social and professional) as the main drawback of teleworking. Baruch (2001a) goes so far as defining an 'autistic society', an extreme outcome of teleworking and similar modes of working in which one becomes unaccustomed to dealing with others, except in purely transactional ways; a "global village of poor communicators", (2001: 130). Kurland and Cooper (2002) identify that "telecommuters are most likely to perceive they are professionally isolated when they telecommute frequently, expect to do so for a long time, have been in the organization for a short time, and/or want and expect to be promoted", (2002: 122). Research by Baruch and Nicholson (1997), however, indicates that part-time teleworking can prevent or significantly reduce the social isolation of teleworkers and can provide a good balance for people who need the quite atmosphere at home as well as the personal relationship with their colleagues at the office.

TELEWORK IMPACTS ON PRODUCTIVITY, CAREER & ORGANISATIONAL COMMITMENT

Baruch (2000) and Potter (2003) found that teleworking enabled managers and professionals to get better (perceived) performance and improvements in productivity as well as reduced absenteeism in teleworkers. Hill *et al.,* (2003), however, identified that although the perception of home based workers was that telework had enhanced productivity for them, direct comparisons showed no significant difference between the reported performance appraisals between home and office workers.

Haddon and Lewis (1994), suggest that career marginalisation has long been recognised as a problem for teleworkers given that "visibility and office information networks are key influences on career prospects", (1994: 200), and employees feel 'out of sight' is 'out of mind' for promotions and other organisational rewards (Kurland and Egan, 1999). Hill *et al.,* (2003) disagree, however, finding that telework was neither a positive nor a negative influence on career opportunity and that practicing teleworkers believed telework did not influence employees' promotion possibilities. Golden (2006) investigated the link between telework and organizational commitment and turnover intentions and found the degree of telework positively related to organisational commitment and negatively related to turnover intentions. Teleworkers, Golden found, "who perceive the organization as caring for them are apt to demonstrate increased loyalty due to norms of reciprocity and social contacts", (2006: 179).

TELEWORKING IN IRELAND

> *Ireland, with a few notable exceptions, appears to have a very traditional and conservative management ethos within industry . . . and a questionable uptake in the usage and perceived strategic importance of information and communication technologies. Ireland is currently estimated to have approximately 15,000 teleworkers representing 1.4 per cent of the workforce, one of the lowest percentages in Europe* (McGrath and Houlihan, 1998: 73).

ECaTT (2000) surveyed 7,700 members of the general population across ten European countries including 547 from Ireland, and estimated that 61,000 teleworkers (4.4%) in Ireland are split between 27,000 regular and 35,000 supplementary/occasional teleworkers. Ireland was the only country to have more supplementary than regular teleworkers in Europe, echoing the findings of McGrath and Houlihan (1998) that more Irish telework is a result of informal, occasional practice than of official, full-time policies. Bates *et al.*, (2002) examined telework in Ireland and again found supply and demand for telework in Ireland to be modest, the only exception to this being in the knowledge sector. The main factors highlighted for the low levels of telework were: (a) low penetration of ICTs; (b) structure of the labour force and specifically low participation of women with children in the labour force; (d) structure of the Irish Economy; (e) Irish companies more likely to be subsidiaries than to have subsidiaries; (f) Ireland geographical separation from the European mainland.

Fine-Davis *et al.*, (2002) performed a comparative study of 400 parental couples across four European countries (France, Italy, Denmark and Ireland), finding that Irish men consider it less acceptable to participate in family-friendly initiatives and feel more pressured to put work ahead of family. This is particularly the case for those fitting the profile of teleworkers, with high social and economic status and high educational status. Bates, *et al.*, (2002) suggest that these attitudes towards family-friendly programmes in Ireland may also act as a barrier to telework. The Central Statistics Office (2003), identified 38,700 Irish home-based teleworkers, i.e., persons for whom a computer with a telecommunications link is essential to be able to work from home. Two thirds of these teleworkers were male with the vast majority aged between 25 and 54, with over 70% having a third level qualification and nearly four-fifths (30,600) of teleworkers falling into the managerial, professional and technical occupational categories. According to Russell *et al.*, (2009), about 14% of Irish employees report that working from home is used in their workplace, but only about 8% of all employees are personally involved in working from home.

Main Findings & Discussion
PERCEPTION AND THE NATURE OF TELEWORKING IN IRELAND

The conclusions of this research identify telework as a positive and promising alternative to the traditional office. 91% of the Irish teleworkers, both past and present, interviewed as part of this current research, share a positive experience of teleworking: "I think it's great. If everybody who could telework, teleworked, we'd lower our dependency on fossil fuels, we'd have better work/life balance and there would be more disposable income due to savings on transportation costs". This current study reveals positive experiences by teleworkers in relation to work/life balance, reduced commute, lower stress and increased flexibility. For 54% of respondents, work/life balance is the primary motivation for teleworking. Prior experience with a company is vital to the success of teleworking (O'Connell *et al.,* 2004 and Gainey *et al.*, 1999). 38% of candidates interviewed for this current study, indicate that experience working in the office is important to establish a track record; build a strong set of working relationships; establish a track record of trust with their manager; and familiarise oneself with the organisational culture: "I think they need to understand the organisational culture, group norms, ground rules, expected behaviours, when you escalate, when you flag an issue, that kind of stuff. I think it would be crazy to just hire somebody and let them telework". Interestingly, 100% of the contributors to this current study, who

teleworked on their own request, had already built up a reputation within the company and had an established performance history.

A clear finding from this study was the vital role that trust plays in relation to telework — the relationship between teleworker and their manager needs to be built on a foundation of trust to ensure a successful teleworking relationship: "I think it's important for a manager to trust his team, treat them with respect and not to be a micro-manager". According to Potter (2003), in order to supervise teleworkers, managers must be able to trust people outside of their field of vision, must be able to manage by results, and must be able to build relationships across a dispersed organisation. The teleworkers in this current study stressed that a strong trust-based relationship existed with their respective managers. Supporting the findings of Korte and Wynne (1996), the importance of setting clear goals was highlighted by a number of respondents: "As a manager, that person would need to ensure that whatever the teleworker needs is available and that their role and tasks are clearly identified and that weekly or monthly goals are being met. An interesting theme arising from this current study was the pervasiveness of a results-driven culture within the organisations represented. A 'management by results' approach was in place for 91% of those interviewed, many of whom worked within a formal performance management structure.

ORGANISATIONAL INFLUENCES

The organisations represented in this current research study, tended to be either large multinationals, or young dynamic, open-minded, and flexible companies. An interesting finding revealed by this research, is that both share a common feature — telework very much forms part of the fabric of the culture for many of the companies — but for two different reasons. For most of the larger multinationals, the corporate culture now is very much characterised by geographically dispersed 'virtual' teams, so conference calls, remote team members and collaborative technology are very much a way of life and telework simply a very natural extension of this. For some of the younger more flexible organisations, there is strong evidence of an openness to implement structures that make sense and an understanding of the potential modern technology brings to facilitate such structures.

A common theme for many respondents in this current research study, is the increasing prevalence of virtual teams with ever-broadening geographical dispersion, leading to the formation of a 'virtual society' (Handy, 1995; Hoang *et al*., 2008). This perspective was reflected in many of the workplaces described as part of this current study. One contributor describes how they could now telework as a result of a change to a more global project-based organisation structure. Organisational boundaries are becoming more permeable and for those organisations in which working with remote teams is the norm, teleworking is a natural extension of this. Some of the managers interviewed had remote team members and to them, it didn't matter if they worked from an office or from their home, once they were doing the work they were assigned. In such virtual organisations, telework has become very much part of the culture: "With such a distributed labour pool and the frequency with which employees work from home (overtime, on call), it's very much part of the fabric of the organisation". There is a considerable difference between the management cultures in multinational companies operating in Ireland, which will tend to have a U.S.-derived culture, compared to Irish indigenous companies (Bates *et al*., 2002). Indeed, Bates *et al*., (2002), posit that multinational companies, by virtue of being or having branch offices, already have experience of working at a distance from colleagues and customers, which is likely to reduce the fear of uncertainty that teleworking may initially inspire.

Tools and technology emerge from this current research as key enablers for teleworkers, facilitating collaboration, integration and communication with the organisation. Although one long-time teleworker, describes technology in Ireland, when they commenced teleworking as 'dreadful', this respondent perceives technology now as a significant influencer: "Our infrastructure has changed, our communication, broadband has made a difference, it has opened up video-conferencing".

IMPACTS OF TELEWORK

Globalisation, competitiveness and economic conditions are steadily placing increasing pressure on modern workers, and as they struggle to cope with the competing demands of work and family, parents are feeling increased pressure on their time, decreased sense of work/life balance, and an overall decline in satisfaction with life compared to previous years (Zuzanek, 2004). The experiences of those teleworkers interviewed in this current study were 91% positive in relation to the impacts on work/life balance. Telework is seen as particularly

beneficial to parents due to the enhanced flexibility it allows. For most, telework presents an invaluable opportunity to balance work and family life: "I feel that it helped me manage and improve my work and home life". From a practical perspective, teleworking allows respondents to more easily pick up and drop off children, complete small chores during breaks and lunch hours, and for many, avoid a long and stressful commute. It also reduces the stress associated with the daily routine, and ensures that they are in close proximity in case of emergency: "One day working at home, meant at least one day where I could avoid the stress, time and cost that comes with the commute to and from work and having a small baby".

Some of the respondents in this current research very carefully protect the boundaries between work and personal life, using mechanisms such as ignoring all interruptions (for example, ignoring the doorbell ringing during working hours), and having children refer to the teleworker by his or her given name while upstairs working, and as Daddy or Mommy when downstairs, so accessibility is symbolically restricted during work hours. Working at home in high-stress jobs can, however, lead to greater intrusion into family life, due to the constant omnipresence and the inability to 'leave work at work' (Hyman *et al.*, 2003). This is reflected in the case of one full-time teleworker in this current study who struggled to maintain boundaries between work and family life: "I found it very difficult to separate. . . It may have helped the balance between work and personal life if I was in an office more regularly". This teleworker's family, too, experienced similar difficulties: "it was kind of difficult for my wife to get the fact that because I was in this other room I wasn't in the house". Interestingly, a clear finding from this current research supporting Baruch (2000), is that having a dedicated office space away from the heart of daily activity in the home, is a key success factor for teleworking. The 70% of the teleworkers interviewed who had a dedicated space, when working from home recognised the important role it played in delineating the boundary between work and personal life within the house.

Interestingly, this current research has found that for the majority of those interviewed, performance and career progression are results driven and presence in the office does not appear to be a consideration in promotion circumstances. Indeed, this study supports the findings of Hill *et al.,* (2003) that telework was neither a positive nor a negative influence on career opportunity due to the fact that when flexible work arrangements have been in place for so long in a company, the practice becomes normalised, and work venue is no longer seen as an impediment to career development. It is indeed the case, that for many of the respondents in this current research, teleworking has become very much a normal part of the culture within the companies involved. Interestingly, many of the teleworkers who perceive no negative impact on their career, do not telework full-time, and recognise the importance of 'face-time' in the office. Most interviewees acknowledge the danger of being 'out of sight, out of mind', ensuring that the arrangements they have in place for teleworking mitigate against this risk: "I try to be in the office twice a week just to keep in touch or be seen, and not to be out of people's minds". Of the teleworkers who report no negative impact on career, 100% of them telework on a part-time basis and with one exception, would not work from home on a full-time basis: "I'd have to go in at least one day a week just to show my face".

Kazmierczak and James (2008) indicate that implementing telework can risk losing the 'water-cooler effect', that spontaneous collaboration and exchange of ideas that occur when co-workers are face-to-face. A number of respondents referred to the importance of this informal networking and information sharing that occurs — lunchtime conversations, chats over a cup of coffee, or water-cooler catch-ups: "You miss out on learning by osmosis … you don't overhear conversations and get involved in discussions that you would if you were surrounded by people". This tacit knowledge shared informally, is absent from a full-time teleworker's arsenal. There is also an acknowledgment of the importance of relationship building, for which time in the office is seen as an invaluable foundation. A strong link exists between working from home and long hours of work (Mann and Holdsworth, 2003 and Russell *et al.*, 2009). This indeed, is almost exclusively the case, for those teleworkers interviewed for this current study. Where commute time is eliminated, this was fully or partially re-allocated as additional work-time. Even in the absence of reduced commute times, there is a tendency to work longer hours to ensure there was no misconception that the teleworkers were not working: "I think if you are working from home you will always work more just because you want to prove that you're not slacking off".

BARRIERS TO TELEWORK IN IRELAND
This current research seeks to understand the nature of teleworking in Ireland and uncover the barriers to telework in Ireland in particular. Research by Adam and Crossan (2000) on telework in Ireland indicates that barriers present in the form of technology costs and bandwidth, as well as psychological barriers perceived by

Irish managers in adapting their methods of supervision and coordination to new organisation forms. This research uncovered some very interesting new findings in this area.

Broadband

The availability and speed of broadband rollout, acts as a barrier to telework implementation (Bates *et al.*, 2002). In January 2010, Forfás published a study benchmarking Ireland's latest broadband performance (Forfás, 2010), which has suggested that Ireland has made significant progress over the last two years in improving levels of broadband coverage and take-up, however "Ireland's key weakness is the lack of deployment of fibre infrastructure closer to the consumer for both wired and wireless networks", (Forfás, 2010) and "Ireland is currently not well placed to take advantage of future trends in broadband. Ireland's relative position has not improved as other countries are moving ahead at an even faster rate", (Forfás, 2009). These findings are very much reflected in the feedback from the participants in this current study, with 62% of respondents feeling that broadband limitations act as a limitation to the expansion of telework in Ireland. The primary issues tended to be in relation to the speed, availability, reliability and cost of broadband in Ireland.

Need for Social Affiliation

A significant new finding in this current research is that the Irish need for social affiliation militates against telework in this country, and helps account for the high volume of occasional telework in Ireland. The need to be part of a group is a fundamental human motivation (Maslow, 1954). Potter (2003) posits that the workplace today is the locus of social interaction and friendship for most workers. For many Irish workers, the complete separation from this epicentre of their social network, that full-time teleworking enforces, is too excessive. 54% of the respondents in this study contend that the Irish need for social interaction is a significant barrier to teleworking in Ireland. The Irish psyche is perceived to possess a greater need than other nations, to retain the social linkage to the work environment: "There is an Irish mentality of meeting people face-to-face". Some of those interviewed were very well positioned to comment on this, working across geographical boundaries. One teleworker, who worked in both Ireland and the U.K., observes more of a social life in the Cork office which they perceived as partially attributing to lower teleworking in their Irish office. Indeed, one of the managers who had team members across a number of countries noted that: "I actually think that part of it is the social thing, because talking to the people that work for me, they don't want to work from home permanently, they miss the social aspect, whereas my guys in the U.K., love that peace and tranquillity".

Culture of Mistrust

A theme threaded through each interview conducted as part of this current research focuses on the criticality of trust in teleworking relationships. One of the most fascinating findings from this current research is that a strong presence of the traditional culture of 'face-time', coupled with a general culture of mistrust, still strongly militates against telework in Ireland. 69% of respondents suggest that a perception that those working from home are 'dossing', coupled with a management culture which requires people in the office, still pervades Irish business and culture. This management ethos places significant emphasis on 'face-time', requiring the team to be co-located and monitored. As far back as the turn of the century, a report on telework in the Irish public sector highlighted that:

> *The wider adoption of teleworking in the public service would require a substantial change in managerial and organisational culture. In particular, the strong cultural emphasis at present on visibility and hours of attendance incorrectly focused managerial attention on time spent at work rather than its productivity and value added. . . while the wider introduction of teleworking is both feasible from a technological point of view, and potentially desirable in terms of cost reduction and better reconciliation of work and family life, managerial barriers to its development tend to be based around issues of trust and control,* (Humphries *et al.*, 2000)

This emphasis on visibility of workers still acts as a barrier to the expansion of teleworking in Ireland. The traditional style of management and interaction in Ireland, as reported by some respondents, centralises around the boardroom and the office. Managers tend to prefer to have all of their employees centralised and lined up in front of them. 'Face-time' is a pre-requisite for successful progression — "you need to be in the office, you need to be seen". As one respondent observes: "I think people are a lot more pessimistic about the availability of the person they can't see". Such observations support earlier suggestions from Bates *et al.*, (2002), that management culture in Irish companies has been characterised as relatively 'polychronic' (characterised by informality and multitasking) and tolerant of uncertainty, in contrast with more 'monochronic' cultures (which are more likely to

involve a strict compartmentalisation of activities, and agreed timetables) which may lead to a preference for face-to-face contact and the avoidance of overly rigid rules that could be construed as a barrier to some forms of telework.

The organisations in this current study which operate across geographical boundaries present an interesting comparative opportunity for this current research. Schein (2004) posits that while organisations often strive to create their own unique cultures, systematic national, occupational and industry influences all affect organisational values, because they are imported through their members and because organisations adapt to their surrounding environment. This current study supports this finding, with telework facilitated within some multinationals, in other locations, but not allowed in Ireland or by Irish managers. One contributor indicates that teleworking is positively forbidden in the Irish branch of their current company, although it is allowed in the U.S. In research contrasting entrepreneurial culture within Chinese and Irish software firms, Tsang (2006) found that "the approach to Irish entrepreneurial firm culture has been, and still is, subordinated by a moderate level of trust", (2006: 148). A culture of mistrust in Ireland is similarly clearly observed in this current research: "If you are a manager in Ireland and you have a team in Ireland, the Irish manager will be far more reluctant to leave them telework, than the U.S. manager. It's a cultural thing here. It's assumed that if you are working from home, you are on the 'doss' ". As another respondent observed, "it's so easily abused", and all that's required is one person within a company to create the perception that it's not being taken seriously. One of the managers interviewed as part of this current study described how they rang one of their teleworkers during work hours and on more than one occasion got through to the teleworker's mother who had to get them out of bed. This mistrust not only resides within the management ranks: "If you talk to colleagues who can't telework, there's a sort of mistrust there or a grudge or something because you are doing something they can't". Trauth (2000), Kenny (2001) and Chhokar *et al.*, (2007) in respective research on the Irish 'information economy', Irish leaders, and global culture, noted an Irish 'begrudgery of success', identifying a level of mistrust within teams, where respondents refer to the begrudging of success and criticised the Irish culture for its failure to recognise achievement and its tendency to 'knock' people.

THE FUTURE OF TELEWORKING IN IRELAND

> *[Workplace flexibility] is an issue that affects the well-being of our families and the success of our businesses. It affects the strength of our economy — whether we'll create the workplaces and jobs of the future we need to compete in today's global economy,*
> President of the United States, Barack Obama,

According to Hoang *et al.*, (2008), "what has evolved seems to be the prevalence of occasional telecommuting in which the balance between reaping the benefits of telecommuting and conforming to corporate culture's tradition can be achieved", (2008: 92). This current research reveals that the Irish in particular, need to have some level of interaction with co-workers to satisfy a need for social affiliation. Weisberg and Porell (2011) suggest that "many employees who choose to telework do so occasionally, rather than full-time so they can stay connected", (2011: 2). This current study research supports this view, contending that in terms of career development, a presence in the office for relationship building and informal networking is important. The respondents in this current study express a strong preference for part-time teleworking which is seen as an ideal balance of increased flexibility, better work/life balance and reduced commute while allowing for the social affiliation, learning by osmosis and networking that office-based work facilitates.

According to a report by the Knowledge Society Division in the Irish government, combining smart travel, smart work options and communication and collaboration tools will result in significant cost, time and emissions savings. Embracing these options enthusiastically will open up strategic advantages for Ireland against its competitors (McSweeney, 2009). Various respondents described the potential telework has on Irish society in terms of competitiveness, enhanced flexibility, and environmental impact. Teleworking offers opportunities to reduce work-related travel (thus lowering carbon emissions), traffic and time-wastage. A number of the participants in this current study believed that there could be benefits to the 'Green' economy from teleworking: "If everybody who could telework, teleworked, we'd lower our dependency on fossil fuels". Similarly, teleworking can aid Ireland's cost competitiveness: "I think it's something that will make us even more cost-competitive if we can do this correctly because you would have people taking up less spaces in offices, using less resources, electricity, etc., heating, even the office space if you have three people teleworking and they can share an office it takes you rental space for your offices down dramatically". Operation continuity for many organizations is critical, and teleworking can play a vital role as a strategy for crisis management (Potter, 2003; Hoang *et al.*,

2008). Interestingly, one respondent described the role which telework played for them as an emergency-response strategy following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. A number of respondents mentioned the critical part the government have to play if telework is to grow in Ireland: "I think it will grow but unless its incentivised and encouraged by employers and by the government it's not going to catch up with our neighbours in the U.K. and in the U.S.".

The contributors in this current study also highlight that many of the growing sectors in the economy today are well-disposed towards teleworking. As highlighted by Bates *et al*., (2002), the high-tech sector and financial services were identified in this current study as being particularly suitable for telework and the size of this sector presents opportunities for increasing the volume of teleworking. This research also highlighted the suitability of teleworking for multinationals:"Multinational culture always leads the way with indigenous companies following, and the same applies here. The world has changed - with internet broadband technology speeds, and with the huge variety of mobile communication, presence in the office is no longer necessary for many working professions".

Recommendations

In order to reap the benefits of telework, the cultural idiosyncrasies of the Irish psyche must be recognised and acknowledged. While the Irish workforce may never reach the comfort level with fulltime teleworking that other countries have developed, identifying opportunities to increase the part-time teleworking population could garner many of the advantages of teleworking at an individual, organisational, and national level. This current research concurs with Baruch and Nicholson (1997) that the best output comes from teleworking if it is done on a part-time basis.

At an organisational level, it is thus important for Irish companies to recognise the potential benefits of telework and seize any available opportunities to introduce the practice on a trial basis for suitable job functions. Flexibility is a key aspect of today's working environment. Flexibility on behalf of the employer in relation to work/life balance can be rewarded by flexibility on the part of the employee in relation to extended work hours, adjusted work patterns, on-call support, etc. As the current economic environment is one in which staff retention issues are becoming less acute, the pressure to facilitate staff wishing to avail of teleworking has abated. As this current study shows, however, those with telework arrangements show a distinct reluctance to give up this ability, ensuring that organisations with telework arrangements have a competitive advantage in the future, centred on increased staff loyalty.

Irish organisations should also consider telework as part of a disaster recovery program. The U.S. Centre for Disease Control, for example, suggests the establishment of teleworking policies to deal with influenza pandemics[2]. Telework can also be an excellent contingency for extreme weather conditions, as U.S. President Barack Obama recently observed: "it's about providing better, more efficient service for the American people — even in the face of snowstorms and other crises that keep folks from getting to the office. I do not want to see the government close because of snow again", (Office of the Press Secretary, 2010: 1).

Telework, however, will best be implemented in the future in a culture that is 'performance' rather than 'face-time' based, and one in which individual responsibility, within clearly defined goals and targets, is the norm. This challenges the very core of some organisations to transform its culture to one in which responsibility and autonomy is distributed within the team and trust is central to relationships within the organisation. Caution should be employed, in the selection process for teleworking, to ensure its success. A clear finding from this current study was a consistent view on what makes telework arrangements work. It works best where there is trust and an 'open mind' on the part of employee and employer, where there is clear allocation of responsibilities, where staff are committed and experienced, where there is flexibility shown on both sides to make it work, and where tasks and responsibilities are clearly outlined and targets set.

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[2] See http://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic/pdf/businessChecklist.pdf

At a national level, while the Irish government commissioned a Code of Practice (which was later updated in light of a European Framework agreement) in 2000, the initial momentum shown appears to have has been lost in the years that followed. Fiscally, the Irish government can play an active part in promoting telework by facilitating the development of a telework-friendly society including the creation of an imaginative tax environment to foster the growth of telework by adapting taxation tools already in existence. Initiatives in place in the U.S. to encourage telework could provide a possible direction for the Irish government (for example, U.S. Telework Enhancement Act (U.S. Government, 2020) was signed into law in 2010, and provides a framework for Federal agencies to better leverage technology, and maximize the use of telework, requiring each agency to establish a policy under which eligible employees can telework).

The findings in this current research highlight the importance of broadband in Ireland to the growth of telework. Building Ireland's Smart Economy, which outlines the governments programme for medium-term economic recovery based around the concept of the Smart Economy, recognises that broadband is a key enabling infrastructure for the knowledge-intensive services and activities on which future prosperity will increasingly depend. According to the CEO of Forfás, greater investment in telecommunications infrastructure is required if Ireland is to converge towards leading countries in terms of high quality broadband availability. It is now imperative that the Irish government prioritise investment in developing Ireland's broadband capabilities thus increasing Ireland national competitiveness and removing one of the key remaining barriers to telework growth.

Conclusions

The findings of this current study highlight that telework offers strategic advantages in terms of competitiveness, and enhanced flexibility, as well as aiding Ireland as a nation to meet its environmental responsibilities. Flexibility and work/life balance are critical in today's dual-earning families, and with economic conditions currently not as conducive to teleworking as in the past, telework can provide an important tool for the future. Telework has significant potential as an emergency response tool, to cope with the types of extreme weather conditions experienced in recent years. This study has found that government has a vital role to play, however, in incentivising and encouraging telework and needs to revitalise the efforts demonstrated at the turn of the century to encourage telework in Ireland. Teleworking, as a concept, thus offers benefits individually, organisationally as well as nationally. In order for Ireland, as a nation, to reap these benefits, an acknowledgement of some of the socio-cultural challenges unique to Ireland is vital. In the researchers opinion, part-time teleworking, at least for the foreseeable future, will remain the prevalent form, due to the balance this provides between achieving greater efficiencies and improving work/life balance, while still staying in touch socially, strengthening working relationships, and avoiding the 'out of sight, out of mind' trap.

While the great majority of those consulted in the course of this current study are in favour of telework and feel that it provides significant potential, very real barriers are seen to exist. Such roadblocks must be overcome if telework is to become widely available, acceptable and workable. Given the attitudinal challenges associated with implementing a telework program, there would be clear merits in piloting such an initiative, the results of which could inform future developments in this area. Some of the organisations in this current research study provide good examples of where the successful execution of telework can beget further examples until telework becomes the norm.

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