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Telecommuting: Issues in Public and Private Sector Employment

Telecommuting is among a number of initiatives that public and private organisations are adopting in response to the worldwide trend for more flexible working arrangements for employees.

Research Brief 2003/30 will attempt to examine the issues that may have impacted on the uptake of telecommuting. It will discuss, as matters for consideration by workplaces, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of telecommuting in achieving improved business outcomes and client services that are important to the future of Queensland.

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1   INTRODUCTION

While there is no generally agreed definition of 'telecommuting', it can be described as the agreed performance of work outside the workplace using telecommunications technology (eg telephones, computers, fax machines, and Internet facilities) to replace all or part of the physical journey to work.[1] Sometimes, the term is used interchangeably with 'teleworking'. Telecommuting can be home-based or conducted on a mobile basis (eg working on a laptop while travelling). It can also occur in a satellite centre, where a person attends a satellite office near to home, or in a 'telecottage' which is a community-based centre, mainly in rural areas, providing computing and telecommunications services for local community use.[2]

Interest in telecommuting has had impetus from a combination of elements, including the increasing emphasis on workers being able to balance work and family responsibilities; improvements in technology; greater focus on pollution and conservation issues; and increasing pressure on transportation infrastructure in cities. Telecommuting is among a number of initiatives that public and private organisations are adopting in response to the worldwide trend for more flexible working arrangements for employees.

Despite the fact that, some decades ago, telecommuting was heralded as revolutionising the workplace, the uptake has not being as swift or widespread as anticipated. The USA appears to have the largest number of telecommuters followed by European countries such as Finland and Denmark, whereas Australia

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[1]   Definition adopted by the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations Division of Public Sector Industrial & Employee Relations, 'Flexible Work Practices - Telecommuting Framework and Management Kit', *Attraction & Retention Series*, Issue 4, June 2002, at http://www.psier.qld.gov.au/toolkit/attractretent4.pdf (*Telecommuting Kit*). It is similar to the definition adopted by C Diamond & G Lafferty, 'Telework: Issues for Research, Policy and Regulation', *Labour & Industry*, 11(1), August 2000, p 125 and is consistent with overseas academic writings and with the 1994 Australian Public Service award provisions on home-based work (replaced in 1998).

[2]   Commonwealth Department of Employment Education and Training, Women's Bureau, 'Working from home', *Women & Work*, 17(1) (1996) (online magazine no longer available).

lags some way behind.[3] It appears that only around 6-7% of Australian employees have formal arrangements for working from home.[4]

Many researchers point out that obtaining comparative national and international data and undertaking any meaningful comprehensive analysis is constrained by definitional variations.[5] Indeed, while the concept has been around for well over a decade, there have been few substantive surveys or research about telecommuting.

Despite the limitations on data and analyses, it can confidently be said that few Australian workplaces, public or private, have telecommuting arrangements for staff although a number have trialled or piloted them, or are currently doing so. Real or perceived concerns associated with telecommuting may make workplaces cautious about adopting the practice over other flexible workplace arrangements that also enable employees to balance work and family (eg flexible hours, job sharing, time-off in lieu). For the organisation, those issues can include lack of managerial control; IT security implications; set-up costs; and regulatory arrangements including occupational health and safety issues. For employees, there are worries about isolation; lack of 'visibility' to managers; lack of support from supervisors and colleagues; and outside distractions. Organisations may ultimately consider that the problems created, actual or potential, outweigh or eliminate possible benefits such as increased worker productivity; more motivated staff; and the ability for workers to better manage family responsibilities.

This Brief will attempt to examine the issues that may explain why the uptake of telecommuting has fallen short of expectations held many years ago. It will discuss, as matters for consideration by workplaces, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of telecommuting in achieving improved business outcomes and client services that are important to the future of Queensland.

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[3] G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, 'Telework in Australia: findings from a national survey in selected industries', *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 26(3) 2000, pp 236-252, pp 237-238. The authors note, however, that lack of consistent definitions in obtaining data make comparisons difficulty.

[4] Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 'Australian Social Trends 2002 – Work – Paid work: Working from Home', ABS@:Work, http://www.abs.gov.au/

[5] C Diamond & G Lafferty, pp 116ff.

2   TRENDS IN TELECOMMUTING

There were almost 1 million persons working mainly from home in Australia in June 2000.[6]   The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) uses the term 'home workers' to apply to employed persons who work all or most hours at home and employees who have an arrangement with their employer to work some hours at home, in their main or second job.   However, it also includes self-employed persons and does not necessarily include employees who use telecommunications technology to work at home, whereas it is employees using telecommunications technology that are the main focus of this Brief.

The ABS survey results as at June 2000 revealed some points of relevance to the discussion. Those are that only 430,000 (6%) employed persons had an agreement with their employer to work from home on an ongoing basis but most home workers tend to be employees (58%) rather than self-employed (42%). Women made up 49% of all home workers in 2000 and dominated in occupations involving clerical, sales and service.[7]

Reflecting the concentration of workers in service industries, 61% of home workers are in service industries. Of those, 25% were from property and business services, 15% from education, and 10% from health and community services. Most home workers in services industries were professionals (such as teachers, accountants, and IT professionals).

In terms of telecommuting, 64% of home workers used information technology (computers and the Internet) with highest usage among professionals (83%) and advanced clerical and service workers (76%). While women were heavier uses of computers than men (66% opposed to 63%), men were more likely to use the Internet (43% compared with 35% of women). The ABS noted that the different usages may reflect dissimilarities in occupational profiles of male and females. For example, over half of the professionals working from home were men.

Most of the 58% of employee home workers had workers' compensation cover and superannuation but were less likely to have access to those benefits than other employees.   80% of home workers were covered by workers' compensation compared with 93% of employees generally. 74% of home workers had employer provided superannuation, compared with 84% of all employees. 59% of employee home workers had access to either paid sick leave or holiday leave while 71% of all employees had access to those entitlements.

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[6]   ABS, 'Australian Social Trends 2002 – Work – Paid work: Working from Home'.

[7]   ABS, 'Australian Social Trends 2002 – Work – Paid work: Working from Home'. See also ABS 'Household Use of information Technology', 2000, Cat No 8146.0.

In a study of teleworkers in New South Wales during 2001 (the only ABS study specifically on telecommuting), the ABS found that around 8% of employees teleworked with more males (58%) than females (42%) doing so. Most teleworkers were engaged in the public service – around 10% - compared with only 7% in the private sector. 62% used a technological facility supplied by the employer such as laptop computers (including dial-up services and Internet); and mobile phones. Around half reported that they would like to telework more often but the main reasons given for not being able to do so was that the work was not suitable (63%) or the employer not allowing it (14%).[8]

3   GLOBAL SUMMARY OF TELECOMMUTING

Telecommuting has been operating overseas for over two decades, particularly in the USA, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and is growing among Canadian companies.

The International Labour Organisation Convention (ILO) No 177 and Recommendation No 184 (1996) deal with 'home work' (which is defined quite broadly so that it may cover telecommuting but whether it in fact does do so remains debatable).[9] The instruments provide a basis for member parties to adopt, implement, and review national policies on 'home work' to improve the situation of home workers in terms of equality with other employees.

The European Union has endorsed the concept of telecommuting as part of its move towards becoming an information society. The Commission has been investigating telecommuting in the context of improving and modernising employment and has examined issues such as company security, conditions of employment, monitoring, and training needs. There are a number of EU-funded projects attempting to work out how telecommuting is best organised and to develop codes of practice, one of these being a European Charter for Telework endorsed by a number of government and trade union bodies across Europe.[10]

The issue was dealt with in an EU-wide agreement between members of the Sectorial Social Dialogue Committee (SDC) for Telecommunications, finalised in 2001, setting out a number of principles for telecommuting arrangements. The SDC brings together representatives of employers and employees in the telecommunications sector of Union Network International's UNI Europa. The UK

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[8]   ABS, 'Teleworking, New South Wales', October 2001, Cat No 1373.1.

[9]   V Di Martino, *The high road to teleworking*, International Labour Organisation, Geneva, 2001, p 107.

[10]   V Di Martino, pp 108-109.

has implemented the agreement at a national level with the UK organisations represented in the SDC drawing up telecommuting guidelines for implementing telecommuting in the UK context. In April 2003, laws were passed in the UK, to ensure that parents with child care responsibilities have the right to ask for flexible work arrangements (including telecommuting) that the employer must consider, and accommodate if possible.

Few nations, however, have specific legislation governing telecommuting although many European countries have various plans and initiatives to encourage such arrangements. Belgium is one of the few exceptions, having passed a law concerning home working (including telecommuting) setting out a framework of rights and obligations.[11]

Many organisations in the USA have informal arrangements with staff. It is claimed that Nortel, Ernst & Young and IBM are a few of the more visible organisations with successful telecommuting programs.[12] A USA Department of Labor study has found that there are around 13m to 19m US workers who telecommute but that they tend to do so only one to two days a week. It tends to be more prevalent in the private sector (10%) than in the public sector (2%). The uptake of telecommuting appears to have been influenced by matters such as the government transportation management programs that require organisations to reduce employees' commuting; and because clients are tending to choose those organisations that can demonstrate environmental awareness by managing pollution and traffic congestion.[13]

The concept of telecommuting is in its infancy in Australia but some larger organisations, private and public, have some form of telecommuting arrangements with staff or have been involved in trials or pilot projects. While, as noted earlier, only some employees have formal telecommuting arrangements with their employer, there could well be many organisations where informal arrangements exist as part of flexible work programs. Organisations which have recently formalised arrangements for telecommuting include the Brisbane City Council, Energex, Lend Lease Australia, the New South Wales Road Transport Authority (RTA), Telecom (now Telstra), and BP Oil Australia.[14]

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[11]   V Di Martino, pp 109-110.

[12]   M Tan-Solano & B H Kleiner, 'Effects of telecommuting organisational behaviour', *Management*, March 2001, pp 108-111, p 109.

[13]   M Tan-Solano & B H Kleiner, p 109.

[14]   N Meyers & G Hearn, 'Communication and control: Case studies in Australian telecommuting', *Australian Journal of Communication*, 27(2), 2000, pp 39-63, p 41. The researchers are based at the Queensland University of Technology.

A July 2003 Business Council of Australia Work/Family Survey of its company members revealed that, of the 68 companies responding, 84% offer a range of flexible work policies for employees with 88% offering telecommuting.[15]

The Commonwealth Government introduced the Australian Public Service Interim Home-Based Work Award in 1994 for senior staff. It has since been superseded by a provision in the Australian Public Service Award 1998 allowing agencies and employees to agree on the performance of part of the ordinary weekly hours of duty at home.[16]

Australian state and territory governments have, or are, developing policies and programs for implementing family-friendly workplaces, with working from home being one of a number of alternative arrangements to the normal work environment.[17] The framework for implementing telecommuting arrangements in the Queensland public sector is discussed later in this Brief.

In early 2003, a new pilot project looking at home-based work began in the Local Government sector as a joint effort between Local Government Managers Australia and the Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services. It seeks to identify suitable work; the key organisational, professional, environmental and technological factors of successful home work arrangements; and practical strategies to promote adoption of home-based work.[18]

Research suggests that there are few councils (possibly around 24 across Australia) that currently have formal or informal arrangements for staff to work for significant periods at home. Even though it would appear that Local Government would have an interest in promoting community welfare in terms of reducing traffic congestion and generating employment outside capital cities,[19] it appears that few employees actually take up the option. However, because most councils generally allow *some* work at home, especially to get a project finished by a deadline, reluctance to embrace working from home on a more extensive basis is caused by any one or more of the issues/problems considered in this Brief. The councils that do allow

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[15] Business Council of Australia, *Balancing Work and Family Survey*, October 2003, p 7.

[16] Australian Industrial Relations Commission, *Australian Public Service Award 1998*, 24.10.

[17] See, for example, NSW Government, Premiers Department, *Flexible Work Practices: Policy and Guidelines*

[18] Commonwealth Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 'Work & Family', Issue No 30, February 2003, http://wwwworkplace.gove.au/workFamily

[19] M Paddon, Professor at the Centre for Local Government of the University of Technology Sydney, 'Can a Home Base Work?', Presentation to the LGMA National Congress, Adelaide, May 2003, pp 4-5.

employees to work mainly from home have reported that they have been able to manage potential problems through having only a few employees telecommuting at one time, ensuring that working at home was suited to the employee's position, and trialling/piloting arrangements prior to formalising them. They also had explicit procedures for dealing with difficult matters.[20]

4 ISSUES IN TELECOMMUTING

There are a number of issues that are raised by flexible workplaces in general and telecommuting in particular. A number have been seen in terms of advantages and disadvantages to the worker or to the organisation but they should first be considered objectively before such assessment is made. This Brief makes a number of references to recent university research findings from case studies in *Assessing the Benefits of Telework: Australian Case Study Evidence* (*Australian Case Study Evidence*) and a previous stage of the project involving a national survey of telecommuting (*Telework in Australia*) to provide an overview of telecommuting and observations about the issues involved.[21] However, the foregoing studies acknowledge that more in-depth research, particularly of an empirical nature, needs to be undertaken to enable a proper assessment of the effects of telecommuting on workers and organisations and on the community in general. Such studies also need to be conducted over a sustained period of time to measure changes in perceptions by workers and organisations and in their situations.[22]

It is important that before an organisation embraces telecommuting on a broad scale it should engage in an assessment of all of the issues affecting the employee, the organisation and the community along with potential advantages, disadvantages and resource implications.[23] It has been suggested that this could perhaps be done through a pilot project in a single organisational unit and the *Australian Case Study Evidence* noted that this had proved a successful strategy for several of the case

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[20]   M Paddon, pp 5-6.

[21]   G Whitehouse, et al, 'Assessing the Benefits of Telework: Australian Case Study Evidence', 27(3) 2002, *New Zealand Journal of Industrial Relations*, pp 257-268; G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, 'Telework in Australia: findings from a national survey in selected industries', *Australian Bulletin of Labour*, 26(3), 2000, pp 236-252.

[22]   P L Mokhtarian & R Meenakshisundaram, 'Patterns of Telecommuting Engagement and Frequency: A Cluster Analysis of Telecenter Users', *Prometheus*, 20(1), 2002, pp 21-37.

[23]   Queensland Office of the Public Service (J Monaghan, Principal Project Officer), 'Telecommuting – Why move people when you can move information', *Discussion Paper*, February 1998, (*Telecommuting Discussion Paper*), p 13.

study organisations it studied.[24]   Indeed, some commentators believe that a full commitment up-front is not advisable and the organisation should begin with a pilot project for one or so days per week and then evaluate its success and its feasibility to be introduced across the organisation.[25]

4.1   SUITABILITY OF THE WORK AND THE WORKERS

Not all jobs can be easily done by telecommuting. Some types of work are not amenable to such arrangements including employment that involves face to face customer contact or where the nature of the work requires physical presence (eg a security guard, personal attendant). The questions to be asked by the organisation are, for example, does there need to be ongoing personal contact with other staff? Is the work such that there are identifiable goals and outcomes? Does the work require long periods of concentration?

Earlier research indicated that managers, IT professionals, administrative and clerical workers, and salespeople tended to have the most telecommuters.[26]   In many instances where organisations did not plan to introduce telecommuting, lack of suitability of the work was the most common reason cited.[27]

The *Australian Case Study Evidence* findings from the case studies undertaken suggested that work which involved long work cycles on deep problems seemed to be the most suited to telecommuting, contrary to the perception that more routine data entry work is the most amenable. High level professional administrative jobs were suited but not managerial work where rapid responses to work emergencies were required.[28]

In the case studies undertaken, it appeared that the manner in which workers were selected to telecommute was somewhat ad-hoc, usually based on the opinions of managers about their suitability. There was, however, general consensus that those workers wishing to telecommute needed to be familiar with organisational culture

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[24]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 264.

[25]   Tom Mochal, 'How to manage telecommuters', *TechRepublic, ZDNet Australia: IT Manager*, 18 April 2002, at http://www.zdnet.com.au/itmanager/management/story

[26]   G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, pp 243-244.

[27]   G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, p 245.

[28]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 265.

and it was not really an option for new employees.[29] Survey data from earlier research indicated that telecommuting was not typically used for casual workers or those with irregular employment.[30]

The *Telecommuting Resource Kit* developed for the implementation of telecommuting arrangements in the Queensland Department of Employment and Training (used as an example in this Brief) contains a 'suitability checklist' to be completed independently by the employee and the manager to assist in determining whether telecommuting is suited to the employee. The attributes listed include self-motivation, initiative, a positive attitude to work and telecommuting objectives; an ability for independent work to achieve goals; an ability to plan and communicate effectively; the ability to work in isolation and with minimal face to face supervision and feedback; and sufficient organisational knowledge. On the other side of the coin, the manager's attributes include effective communication skills and ability to manage staff using technology rather than personal contact; an ability to focus on goals and outcomes; and good organisational skills.[31]

4.2   EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS AND RIGHTS

Employees should not be made to give up, in exchange for telecommuting, employee entitlements such as superannuation and workers' compensation. The Queensland Government's Telecommuting Policy (discussed below) recognises that issue as part of the telecommuting implementation framework and is important given that there is no legislation specifically protecting telecommuters.

Indeed, as part of the telecommuting policy of each organisation, rights and obligations of employers and telecommuters must be agreed upon, clearly documented, and implemented. Much of the literature on telecommuting stresses the importance of proactive planning for implementation, particularly through developing a telecommuting policy and a written agreement between the organisation and workers outlining rights and responsibilities of each party.

The findings in *Australian Case Study Evidence* gave rise to some concern by the researchers about the low level of union involvement in telecommuting policy. Among those findings was that there had been little evaluation of whether, for instance, non-telecommuters in a workplace had to shoulder additional tasks on top of their own work, and whether the flexibility of the organisation as a whole was

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[29]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 265.

[30]   G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, p 244.

[31]   DET *Telecommuting Resource Kit*, Appendix A.

compromised such as in being able to respond to crises. In addition, there was also little evaluation to date of the effect telecommuting had on telecommuters and their families, particularly if (as will be discussed below) telecommuters feel the 'obligation' to work longer hours in return for the 'privilege' of telecommuting or are unable to separate work from home.[32]

The *Australian Case Study Evidence* revealed some instances where telecommuters said they were prepared to sacrifice career progression in order to be able to telecommute.[33] It was suggested that, to be a real alternative to working at the office, the telecommuter should have the same conditions as on-site employees and that it should be regarded as a flexible work arrangement rather than as a cost cutting measure.[34]

4.2.1   Occupational Health and Safety

Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) legislation (eg *Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995* (Qld)) obliges employers to provide a safe system of work and workplace for their employees. It is a non-delegable duty and it also applies in relation to employees who work from home. This makes the employer's obligation more difficult to discharge.

Ensuring a safe work environment extends to provision of safe materials and maintenance of a healthy environment which may entail WHS personnel (most organisations use consultants) visiting the telecommuter's proposed home office to ensure its compliance with WHS requirements and to monitor ongoing compliance. It is important that all issues in this area are agreed, documented, and followed. The DET *Telecommuting Resource Kit* includes a checklist to be attached to the telecommuting agreement that deals with matters such as ergonomics of furniture etc; electrical safety; lighting; ventilation; noise; hazardous substances; access and egress; fire safety; first aid; WHS awareness. The checklist assists the WHS officer determining whether or not to endorse the home office for use in performing telecommuting. It may be that the home is unsuited to providing a safe system of work for the employee and cannot be made to do so without significant expenditure. Part of hazard management requires taking into account the exposure

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[32]   G Whitehouse, et al, pp 260, 266.

[33]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 266.

[34]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 265.

of other persons apart from the telecommuter, particularly children, the protection of whom may require more rigorous safety standards.[35]

The very isolation that is integral to telecommuting arrangements poses a greater level of danger to the home worker. If they suffer injury or illness, there may be no support or assistance at hand. This issue is one that organisations may need to consider and possibly address through information and training of their telecommuters about coping when working alone and about reporting of incidents. In particular, ergonomic issues should be dealt with.[36]

Under the Australian Public Service Award 1998, the agency has to meet the cost of supplying and maintaining equipment and materials necessary for an employee to work at home. Also, under the Queensland Telecommuting Policy, the organisation is responsible for the provision and maintenance of equipment, furniture and supplies, subject to other arrangements, and the normal WHS obligations and requirements continue to apply to the telecommuting arrangements.

To avoid conflict over ongoing monitoring/audits of the home office to ensure safety is maintained, the telecommuting agreement should set out minimum notice and 'reasonable time' provisions for access.

4.2.2   Workers' Compensation

Workers' compensation issues can prove challenging for telecommuting arrangements. WorkCover legislation applies only in work situations during specified working times. In particular, it may be difficult for a telecommuter to show that the injury occurred in the course of employment when the hours of work are fuzzy. There will also usually be no impartial witnesses. USA insurance companies believe that there will be greater potential for fraudulent claims. On the upside, less need for commuting in peak hour traffic may reduce claims for injuries received on the journey to and from the workplace.[37]

It may be important for the telecommuting agreement to require that the telecommuter record their work times and that the parties agree on the extent to which cover extends to work breaks. Reporting systems should also be established and employees should keep a diary of their work.

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[35]   K Haseloff, Principal, Safety Valve Consulting, 'Teleworking – OH&S Issues for Employers', *Safety Science Monitor*, Vol 3, 1999, p 4.

[36]   K Haseloff, p 5.

[37]   K Haseloff, pp 3-4.

4.3 TAXATION

While the telecommuter is subject to the general income tax arrangements that apply to employees in general, there are other tax implications that need to be considered. For example, the use of part of the home as a workplace may enable the telecommuter to claim work related expenses such as use of the phone line. Advice needs to be sought from a taxation adviser or professional body or from the Australian Taxation Office about individual situations to ensure that inappropriate claims are not made or legitimate claims are neglected to be made.[38]

4.4 INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

Telecommuters obviously require access to all of the computer networks that would be available to them if they were at the physical work site. That has resource cost and security implications and challenges posed by bandwidth deficiencies, frequently changing software, and lack of proximity to IT support.

The *Australian Case Study Evidence* found that technological issues emerged as the main area for initial and continuing problems in telecommuting. For example, continuing slow or unreliable dial-up access to the organisation's network can undermine the effectiveness of telecommuting. All of the organisations studied agreed that such issues needed to be addressed well in advance of telecommuting being implemented.[39] That may include ongoing availability of IT support to ensure that telecommuters can get the work done on equipment which is safe.

The DET *Telecommuting Resource Kit* guidelines indicate that the Department has developed a service to extend IT support to the home location on a fee for service basis. A procedure is provided for direct dial-up access to the departmental computer system if that access is required.

In one international company that has a large group (around 75%) of public relations professionals telecommuting from throughout the world, the IT manager has a server that enables telecommuters to launch applications without the need for IT professionals to physically install every program on their computer. The manager has found that personal contact is essential to the success of the program.[40]

As the Queensland *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* notes, the costs of Integrated Services Digital Networks may decrease over time and fall in line with normal

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[38] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 6.

[39] G Whitehouse, et al, p 264.

[40] Brian Hook, TechRepublic, 'Tips for effectively managing telecommuters'.

telephone service costs which will make off-site computer access to the work networks more reliable than through using modem technology and provide better security than through use of an ISP.[41]

In the *Telework in Australia* national survey, data security issues were the most frequently cited concern by organisations.[42] DET's *Telecommuting Resource Kit* guidelines state that the telecommuter is responsible for maintaining security of documents, including electronic files. Home computers must have secure access and comply with the workplace Internet security policies regarding passwords, anti-virus software, encryption etc. and configure the computer to meet the departmental standard operating environment.[43]

4.5 MANAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

For telecommuting to be successful in any workplace, a change in the manner in which work and staff are managed may be required. This may also necessitate a cultural shift in attitude by management. It has been acknowledged that mutual trust is an essential ingredient for smooth operation of the practice.[44]

The *Telework in Australia* survey data indicated that the literature on telecommuting has often cited middle managers as the greatest opponents of the concept, fearing lack of control over workers and management difficulties.[45] The Queensland *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* canvassed the idea that management by observation might need to be replaced by management by agreed gaols and results and providing clear-cut conclusive feedback.[46] It is important that managers do not feel threatened by a perceived 'loss of control' of their workers or that there will be less 'teamwork spirit'.

On the other hand, some employees are concerned about the possibility that separation from the physical workplace may jeopardise career progression through

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[41] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 11.

[42] G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, p 249.

[43] DET *Telecommuting Resource Kit*, p 10.

[44] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 6.

[45] G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, p 245.

[46] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 6, citing other works such as, United States General Accounting Office, General Government Division, *Federal Workforce Agencies – Policies and Views on Flexiplace in the Federal Government*, 1997, Washington DC; 'Managing Telecommuters Effectively', *PTI Journal*, 7(4), 1993, p 12.

less visibility. In one small analysis undertaken by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) researchers, one telecommuting solicitor said that each year she telecommuted, her standing in the firm diminished such that the more important briefs were given to more visible on-site colleagues. Another telecommuter said that he would not do so for long because he saw it as not being a good career path.[47]

Some of the literature in this area notes that organisations able to handle management and organisation issues best are those whose managers tend to evaluate work output and results. If managers give the telecommuter clear instructions about objectives, actions, and deadlines, and also track, evaluate, and reward output, then their knowledge of work activities, consistency in establishing expectations, and ability to objectively determine if expectations are being met should improve.[48]

A small qualitative study of 39 telecommuters (classed as information workers eg academics, administrators, computer systems designers, managerial consultants, sales marketing personnel, solicitors) was undertaken by QUT researchers to examine the communication aspects of telecommuting in terms of management support, working relationships, isolation, network maintenance and other relevant matters.[49] In terms of management support, 53% telecommuters appeared reasonably satisfied with their relationship with managers/supervisors. 23% strongly indicated lack of support from management with issues such as lack of trust emerging as the greatest concern. Those workers with explicit support reported feeling valued. The researchers noted that while the clearest form of support was established policies setting out rights and obligations of each side, such formal policies were rare in the organisations studied.[50]

Education and training of managers and employees and development of a workplace telecommuting policy tailored to the organisation's needs and culture would assist in the facilitation of successful telecommuting.[51] In the QUT study, it

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[47]   N Meyers and G Hearn, p 53.

[48]   Brian Hook, 'Tips for effectively managing telecommuters', *TechRepublic, ZDNet Australia: IT Manager*, 31 July 2002, at http://www.zdnet.com.au/itmanager/management/story

[49]   N Meyers and G Hearn, pp 39-63. Those studied fitted the definition of 'telecommuters' adopted in this brief and most did so 1-2 days p/w. 20 of the 30 telecommuted because of organisational policy while the remainder did so voluntarily.

[50]   N Meyers and G Hearn, pp 46-47.

[51]   *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 6.

was found that if management was not supportive, then telecommuters found that they had difficulty obtaining the technology they needed to work effectively.[52]

4.6 PRODUCTIVITY

Evaluating increases in worker productivity through telecommuting appears to be difficult.[53] There is little evidence available to assess productivity increases across an organisation and better collection and analysis of data is required if the effects of telecommuting on productivity are to be properly measured.

In a 2000-2001 case study of eight Australian organisations (*Australian Case Study Evidence*) to assess whether the productivity and work/family balance benefits of telecommuting have been realised, it was found that in the absence of data, assessment of productivity gains by the researchers was based on the impressions of managers, supervisors and telecommuters and upon evidence of factors that impacted on other areas of the organisation.[54] Improvements in productivity were perceived by 62% of organisations with telecommuting employees.[55] This perception did not appear to be based on any data. It was considered by managers and telecommuters that productivity increases were achieved because workers had fewer interruptions away from the office and could organise their time better. Some respondents believed that fewer interruptions at home; better time organisation; and the attraction and retention of quality employees contributed to improving productivity.[56]

In essence, the findings from the case studies did not indicate clear long-term productivity benefits for the organisation. A telecommuter's productivity gain might be offset by on-site colleagues needing to do urgent jobs or attend to matters that arise that need to be dealt with on the spot, thus transferring the load to those workers and reducing their productivity. Ultimately, it was suggested that there needed to be a longer term assessment of productivity change across entire organisations in order to make more confident evaluations about productivity gains from telecommuting.[57]

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[52] N Meyers and G Hearn, p 47.

[53] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 9. See also G Whitehouse, et al, p 261.

[54] G Whitehouse, et al, p 259.

[55] G Lafferty & G Whitehouse, pp 247-248.

[56] G Whitehouse, et al, pp 259-260.

[57] G Whitehouse, et al, p 260.

The *Australian Case Study Evidence* also found that telecommuters tended to work longer hours because they felt that telecommuting was a 'privilege' and they should be making more effort. There was also evidence that telecommuters also worked many extra unpaid hours and believed that doing so was reasonable, particularly as they no longer had to allow commuting time. Some managers also expected (although usually unspoken) additional hours from telecommuters. Often, having the work computer close by encouraged workers to 'check in' to work more often, even outside normal hours. Also, there were some instances of claims for overtime being refused.[58]

However, there is also other evidence suggesting that telecommuters achieve more work at home, have more job satisfaction and take less sick leave. It is possible that increases in productivity of 50% may be achieved, and indeed, Telstra's six month trial in 1993 involving 30 employees found a 15% to 20% average rise in productivity with additional spin-offs such as better motivated employees and improved customer service.[59] Westpac also found improvements in work quality, productivity and processing as well as decreased absenteeism.[60] Trials by the NSW RTA in 1994 also produced evidence of increases in productivity and greater worker satisfaction. IBM in Germany found productivity increases of up to 30% by 4000 persons performing more than half their work through telecommuting.[61]

4.7   SOCIAL ISSUES/ISOLATION

There are concerns that telecommuters might become isolated if they are unable to interact with colleagues, attend formal meetings, and engage in the normal workplace social functions and routines. Of course, this may not be a concern for telecommuters who do not feel the need for ongoing interaction with colleagues. On the upside, telecommuting avoids those matters becoming distractions and interruptions to the flow of work. Another positive for some employees is that they do not have to cope with office politics when they may not wish to.

There is also the prospect that the telecommuter may not be seen as part of the 'team' anymore. There is also the very real possibility that the telecommuter may

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[58]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 260.

[59]   *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 9, citing Telecom, *Telecommuting: the Telcom Australia Pilot*, Canberra, 1993.

[60]   *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 9, citing Ward A, 'Westpac Cracks the Myths of Home-based Work', *HR Monthly*, November 1996, pp 4-5.

[61]   Merkes M, 'What Happened to Telework?', *PC Update Online*, April 2001 at http://www.melbpc.org.au/pcupdate

not play an active role in workplace decisions due to not being 'on the spot' at the relevant time.[62] It has also been suggested that organisations are sites of 'power relations' and that participation in office politics, which is difficult for an 'invisible' telecommuter, is crucial for survival.[63]

In the QUT study, noted above, some telecommuters surveyed said that co-workers seemed reluctant to contact them at home despite being told about their availability to be contacted when needed. This meant that important messages were not received in a timely manner and, in some cases, decisions were made without them. On those other hand, those telecommuters who had daily phone or e-mail contact with the office felt that it was the next best thing to being there. Suddenly, meetings and memoranda by e-mail, once seen as the plague of office existence, are now seen by many telecommuters as essential to formal communications with the office network. However, as the research noted, the communication needs of telecommuters varied and organisations should determine these in advance.[64]

The *Australian Case Study Evidence* revealed that there was widespread agreement among the organisations studied that telecommuting on a full-time basis was not desirable as it could lead to feelings of isolation from colleagues and supervisors and there were some matters that needed to be dealt with by workers all being together. One to two days per week seemed to provide the best option. Telecentres might also provide another means of overcoming isolation issues.[65]

It is important that telecommuters continue to feel that they are part of the organisation through keeping communication channels open. It is easy for such workers to begin to feel less important to the workplace if they lose touch.[66] Indeed, isolation may be a potential cause of occupational stress.[67] There is substantial literature on this organisational communication issue.[68] DET's *Telecommuting Resource Kit* suggests that communication strategies be developed and maintained to ensure that the worker is aware of opportunities for training,

[62] Karen Gair, 'How to work from home', *SEEK Jobs Database and Employment Advice*, 1 June 2000, at http://careers.aol-seek.com.au

[63] C Diamond and G Lafferty, p 120.

[64] N Meyers and G Hearn, pp 48-49.

[65] G Whitehouse, et al, p 266.

[66] K Haseloff, p 2.

[67] G Odgers, *Occupational Health & Safety and Industrial Relations*, Union Research Centre on Organisation and Technology, Victoria, 1996, p 11.

[68] See works cited in N Meyers and G Hearn, p 42.

career development, promotion etc.; is informed of issues at work and is consulted and/or advised of professional and work issues; has monitoring and feedback on their work performance; and is contributing to workflows and goals of the workplace. Those strategies could be telephone contact, e-mail or periodic meetings.[69]

Another problem is that friends and family may see the telecommuter as being 'at home' and available to visitors. It is not productive for an organisation if the telecommuter is disrupted by friends, kids, barking dogs, television etc. This may create a need to establish boundaries and to make it clear that the telecommuter is working. For example, the worker could set up a separate phone line and an answering machine to screen calls.[70]

4.8   BUSINESS COSTS AND SAVINGS

The Queensland *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* observed that real estate and related support services costs offer opportunities for a long term source of savings. Having fewer workers physically on-site may mean less office space requirements, and a reduction in facility requirements such as carparks. Some companies have experienced such cost reductions. For example, American Telephone and Telegraph is reported to have saved around $80m annually in overhead costs while American Express and Hewlett Packard also experienced reductions.[71]

There are, of course, initial outlays for organisations in setting up a telecommuter with the facilities and equipment necessary for them to work effectively off-site. Initial costs range from around $3000 to $5000 per employee, depending on the type of work undertaken. Some workers may require only a telephone line but others might need video and satellite conferencing facilities. There are also associated costs such as heating/cooling, insurance etc. Under DET's *Telecommuting Resource Kit* guidelines, related communication expenses (eg telephone, Internet) are met by the work unit.[72]

Insurance costs can also be an issue. Although most homes will already have public liability insurance cover and building and home contents insurance cover,

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[69]   DET *Telecommuting Resource Kit*, p 8.

[70]   'Telecommuting: Prevents home invasion', *ZDNet Australia*, 13 June 2001, at http://www.zdnet.com.au/newstech;communications

[71]   *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 9, citing A Hamilton, 'Free At Last – New Technology Makes Telecommuting Easy, Cheap and Addictive', *Time Digital*, July 1996, pp 49-51.

[72]   DET *Telecommuting Resource Kit*, p 11.

inquiries should be made regarding whether those covers will be affected by telecommuting and whether the employee is required to pay a higher premium.

Current evidence indicates that cost savings on physical facilities are offset by considerable start-up costs.[73] The *Australian Case Study Evidence* noted that adopting consistent approaches to setting up of the home office was needed in terms of what facilities are provided by the organisation or by the worker.

In the end, the uptake of telecommuting will be determined by whether organisational benefits, in terms of cost savings and increased worker productivity, exceed these start-up costs, a concept that is difficult to measure.[74]

4.9 STAFF RETENTION

The *Australian Case Study Evidence* found that, in interviews with managers, a reason provided for allowing telecommuting was to enable the organisation to be regarded as an employer of choice for younger, skilled workers, hence improving its capacity to attract and retain high quality employees.[75] It appeared however, that this perception was not based on data analysis.

Indeed, it is quite common for an employee to move interstate or overseas with their partner if the latter has opportunities elsewhere. Telecommuting can help retain skilled employees who would otherwise have had to resign by enabling them to work from another location. A further advantage to an organisation is that ongoing training costs are reduced if workers stay at one place for longer.

4.10 WORK/FAMILY BALANCE

During the *Australian Case Study Evidence* focus group sessions, a group of 29 telecommuters were asked if they were better able to manage work and family responsibilities. Of the six women and eight men who identified themselves as having those responsibilities (eg sole parents, shared child care), most could point to a number of ways in which telecommuting had assisted them to achieve a better work and family balance, although some negative aspects were noted.[76]

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[73]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 258.

[74]   C Diamond & G Lafferty, p 120.

[75]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 260.

[76]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 261 ff.

The main advantages in coping with family responsibilities reported included –

- greater flexibility (eg being able to collect and take children to school);

- greater ability to deal with family emergencies promptly through being 'on the spot' and able to get back to work quickly instead of missing a whole day's work;

- ability to care for sick children while working;

- ability to keep working when suffering an extended illness that did not completely bed-rid them but made getting to, and working in, an office more difficult;

- more availability for family needs through the day while being able to catch up on work at night;

- less need to commute to work, enabling children to spend less time in child care;

- in a few cases, telecommuting enabled employees to live at home rather than having to live closer to work through the week to reduce travelling time;

- greater ability to effect the transition from home to a work environment for workers returning from maternity leave;

- ability to undertake domestic chores simultaneously during work breaks or before or after work instead of commuting;

On the other hand, the downsides reported included –

- telecommuters believing that their colleagues were 'suspicious' of the fact they were 'working' at home;

- some supervisors were concerned that child care responsibilities might compromise the quality and quantity of work by the telecommuter, particularly if the telecommuter was unable to visit clients on those days;

- those workers who were required to be readily contactable under the telecommuting policy of their organisation felt more constrained in attending to family responsibilities. One private professional IT telecommuter stated that he could not finish early although he began work early because his employer expected him to be contactable during business hours;[77]

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[77]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 262.

- they worked longer hours – often, because, as noted earlier, telecommuters believed that they had a privilege and should give a bit more time to their work out of gratitude, or when catching up on work missed through attending to family responsibilities during work hours, actually worked longer hours. As the Study noted, this exacerbates the problems that were seen to be imposed on families from long working hours;[78]

- some felt that housework became a distraction instead of a break while one telecommuter reported that his at-home partner would ask for help around the house while he was telecommuting;

- some senior staff who were telecommuters were required to attend unscheduled meetings at short notice which made it difficult for them to plan for managing family commitments (eg collecting children from child care);

- they found it more difficult to separate work from home once the working day was over.

It has been suggested that the autonomy over performance of work allowed by telecommuting appears to be evident only where a reasonable degree of autonomy exists generally – usually persons in senior or management roles or professionals.[79] Some research has noted that the extent to which telecommuting is 'family friendly' may depend upon the level of control and autonomy an employee has in organising their time. It appears that non-professional jobs, such as low status clerical work, allow telecommuters little control over their work and can result in more stress, especially for women (who tend to be over-represented in such occupations) with primary carer responsibilities. Many may feel increasingly isolated by their child care roles during the day and catching up on paid work at night.[80]

It may be that the use of 'telecentres' or telecottages rather than the home as the telecommuting base might overcome some of the negative aspects, such as difficulty in mentally separating work from home and distractions of the home environment, while providing the sought after aspects of proximity to home to cope with emergencies and child care responsibilities.

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[78] See for example B, Pocock, et al, *Fifty Families: what unreasonable hours are doing to Australias, their families and their communities*, Report commissioned by the Australian Council of Trade Unions, Melbourne, 2001.

[79] G Whitehouse, et al, p 258.

[80] C Diamond, 'Telework: A 'Family-Friendly' Work Arrangement', *Labour & Industry*, Vol 13, No 1, August 2002, pp 39-54, citing M H Olson & S B Primps, 'Working at Home with Computers: Work and Nonwork Issues', *Journal of Social Issues*, 40(3), 1984, pp 97-112.

4.11 ENVIRONMENTAL ASPECTS AND TRAFFIC CONGESTION

A reduction in traffic congestion facilitated by more workers telecommuting has other advantages apart from environmental ones. Social benefits may also result. Workers no longer required to sit in traffic jams at peak hour means fewer road-rage incidents, accidents, and stress. It has been found that the total social cost savings including delay, vehicle operation, accident and pollution costs for Sydney alone are approximately up to $1 billion in 1992 prices at a 10% telecommuting adoption rate.[81]

However, as the *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* notes, it is difficult to estimate the future impact of telecommuting on travel demand management as there are a number of other factors that will also affect the travel behaviour of people.[82] For example, there might be an increase in the amount of non-work journeys and if that is combined with a trend to living further away from the CBD, air pollution levels may not significantly alter.

A Californian telecommuting pilot compiled travel data indicating that telecommuting reduced the amount of travelling in peak periods but it did not cause an increase in non-work journeys. Comparable findings were made in the Netherlands.[83]

4.12 EQUITY ISSUES

As the Queensland *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* notes, telecommuting may enable persons to participate in the workforce who would, through physical disability, age, or having carers' responsibilities, otherwise be unable to do so.[84] Such employees may have talents and skills that would otherwise be untapped or lost. Discrimination legislation in many jurisdictions may well require employers to give consideration to the prospect of an impaired employee working from home if their essential functions can be undertaken just as well there and it will not create

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[81] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 7, citing J Luk, 'Teleworking and Travel Demand Management', *Road and Transport Research*, 3(1), 1994, pp 26-33.

[82] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 7.

[83] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* p 10, citing US research including R Kitamura et al, *Telecommuting and Travel Demand: An Impact Assessment for State of California Telecommute Pilot Project*, University of California, Transportation Research Group, 1990. See also R Hamer et al 'Teleworking in the Netherlands: An Evaluation of Change in Travel Behaviour', *Transportation*, 18(4), 1991, pp 365-382.

[84] *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 10.

unjustifiable hardship to the organisation. Obviously, OHS issues may prevent telecommuting being a viable option.

However, as the *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* observes, such equity benefits might be negatived if the actual effect was to cause more segregation and isolation of such employees.

It has been suggested that the concept of the telecottage may provide a solution for workers whose family responsibilities are such that working from home is impractical or whose geographic location prevents suitable access to telecommunications technology to perform the work required. Telecottages can provide telecommunications services on a community basis that help to overcome the disadvantages of isolated and rural communities.[85] There are a range of Government strategies in place to assist telecommuters, particularly those who are geographically or economically disadvantaged in their use of technology.

An interesting qualitative, but small, study on the impact of telecommuting on traditional gender roles in the home concludes that telecommuting actually reinforces the traditional gender division of domestic labour (which is still a fact of life according to ABS surveys indicating that even where both partners work, the woman spends more time on domestic chores than men) by making things a little easier for both partners.[86] While there are some positive outcomes for work/family balance, there was no clear evidence of a shift in the gendered division of domestic chores. The study of six telecommuters (with equal gender representation) indicated that two of the male workers rarely used the extra time available by not having to travel to perform any extra domestic work, with one believing that his wife was the primary caretaker. Another male telecommuter expressed similar views. A female telecommuter reported that telecommuting helped her fulfil her primary carer and domestic role but that she had to ensure that her work did not unduly impact on that role. Thus, the males saw telecommuting as enabling them to occasionally assist with domestic work while the females saw it as a means of providing more time for family and domestic chores while enabling them to undertake paid work.

4.13 RURAL EMPLOYMENT

The *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* suggests that telecommuting may assist rural communities if they were able to offer telecommuting services utilising

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[85]   Commonwealth Department of Employment Education and Training, Women's Bureau, 'Working from home', *Women & Work*, 17(1), 1996 (online magazine no longer available).

[86]   C Diamond, p 51.

infrastructure and equipment.   In Queensland, strategies and projects being promoted by the Government may have a part to play in facilitating such measures.[87]   There is a Federal Government funded initiative, Networking the Nation, which funds projects designed to provide telecommuting opportunities for rural Australians.

5   QUEENSLAND FRAMEWORK

The need for family-friendly workplaces was recognised in the Queensland Government's *Putting People and Workplaces First* policy. It is considered that if flexible and accessible work place environments are fostered, those organisations are better placed, through a capable, diverse and motivated workforce, to achieve business outcomes that meet changing client expectations.[88] To facilitate the better management of work and family responsibilities by Queensland employees, the Government has established the Work and Family Unit and the Ministerial Taskforce on Work and Family within the Department of Industrial Relations.[89]

The Work and Family Unit is involved in research, liaison and promotion activities to develop family-friendly workplace policies. One activity is the Work and Family Project Pilot Program in conjunction with the University of Queensland. The Ministerial Taskforce, comprising representatives of government, unions, employer organisations, community groups, academics and independent experts, is developing a family-friendly action plan for Queensland.

The development of a framework for flexible work practices in the Queensland public service particularly gathered momentum from a public sector survey in 1997 that revealed significant interest in arrangements such as telecommuting, job sharing, flexible shifts etc. The concept of telecommuting received much attention (around 70% response rate). Cabinet endorsed the implementation of flexible work practices in December 1997 and, due to the survey response to telecommuting, a **Telecommuting Discussion Paper** and **draft Telecommuting Policy** was issued for response throughout the public sector in February 1998.   Following overwhelming support, a 'Telecommuting Application and Management Package' was distributed and implemented (with necessary adaptation) for trials in various agencies during 1999 to 2001.

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[87]   *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 10.

[88]   *Telecommuting Kit*, p 2.

[89]   At http://www.ir.qld.gov.au/work&family/

Some workplace agreements include arrangements for telecommuting or home working on an ongoing or temporary basis due to specific circumstances. As at 2002, only a small number of Queensland (0.9%) and Federal (2.6%) enterprise agreements included such provisions. The majority were found in public administration (4.5% and 15.7% respectively) with none in industries such as mining, metal manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, and recreational and personal services.[90]

5.1   TELECOMMUTING DISCUSSION PAPER

The February 1998 'Telecommuting – Why move people when you can move information' *Discussion Paper* (*Telecommuting Discussion Paper*) considered telecommuting and the issues surrounding it, including its advantages, disadvantages, and resource implications.

The *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* ultimately considered that –

> *The likely advantages of improved individual and organisational flexibility, productivity, employee attraction and retention (with potential equity gains), and reductions in peak hour traffic, energy consumption and air pollution appear to outweigh the possible disadvantages such as initial set up costs and communication adaptation.*
>
> *In addition, the potential longer term real estate and related support savings for the employer seem to outweigh the anticipated costs. However, time, effort, and commitment from senior management are required to deliver changes in work practice and management style, two factors critical to telecommuting success.*[91]

It was proposed that further research and consultation occur, together with formal pilot projects, to establish whether telecommuting was suitable for the Queensland public sector.

5.2   TELECOMMUTING FRAMEWORK AND MANAGEMENT KIT

In May 2002 Cabinet gave formal approval to the operation of telecommuting in the public sector. The '*Telecommuting Framework and Management Kit*' (*Telecommuting Kit*), outlining minimum requirements for participation in

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[90]   Adam Special Report, *Examination of work and family measures in Queensland & Federal enterprise agreements: the current state of play*, produced for the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations by ACIRRT, University of Sydney, May 2002. The Agreements Data Base and Monitor (ADAM) is a comprehensive database collection of Australian enterprise agreements.

[91]   *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, Executive Summary, p 3.

telecommuting, was distributed to chief executives and human resource managers in July 2002. It was based on the earlier 1998 Package that was used for earlier trials of the practice. Thus, agencies will be responsible for deciding whether and how to implement telecommuting as part of flexible work arrangements where appropriate and beneficial to operations of the work unit. Implementation is in accordance with the Telecommuting Policy contained in the *Telecommuting Kit*.

The measures are driven by the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations (DIR), in conjunction with other public sector bodies. Advice and assistance is being provided to agencies regarding implementation of the Telecommuting Policy.[92] Some government agencies have adopted elements of the *Telecommuting Kit* in developing their own implementation policies.

The framework acknowledges that not all agencies will be able to accommodate telecommuting or will only be able to do so to some small extent or at certain times. The nature of some workplaces makes them inherently unsuitable for the practice. The practice will not appeal to all workers nor be suited to all workers or organisations.

In addition, it notes the importance of information about the workforce (eg age and sex composition) and data about organisational health (eg morale of staff, professional growth) in assessing the viability of flexible arrangements, including telecommuting, and their impact on the workplace.[93]

5.3   QUEENSLAND GOVERNMENT TELECOMMUTING POLICY

The principles set out in the Telecommuting Policy seek to allow effective implementation of telecommuting. They are contained in full in the *Telecommuting Kit* and only some are set out briefly here –

- Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are solely responsible for determining whether telecommuting will apply in their organisation. It is not to be seen as a right or obligation unless a specified condition of employment;

- The decision to implement the practice will be based on work suitability to telecommuting; the suitability of the employee and their home office;

- Telecommuting is to be voluntary. A telecommuting agreement, signed by the telecommuter and their manager/supervisor, must detail all working

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[92]   Particularly the Division of Public Sector Industrial and Employee Relations of the Department of Industrial Relations, at http://www.psier.qld.gov.au/index.shtml

[93]   *Telecommuting Kit*, pp 3-4.

arrangements and conditions. Changes need to be agreed, and either party should be able to terminate the arrangement after an agreed period of notice;

- Selection criteria addressing work, telecommuter and manager/supervisor requirements is to be developed to enable effective and equitable implementation;

- Employee benefits and conditions (eg pay, leave, employment security, training and career development) must be maintained for telecommuters in a non-discriminatory manner;

- Workplace health and safety responsibilities apply to telecommuting arrangements. A WHS checklist must be detailed and implemented and an initial safety audit on the designated workplace must be made, with ongoing audits as agreed;

- Performance goals, indicators, and evaluation are to be agreed and documented;

- Relevant training and awareness programs must be developed for the telecommuter, manager and other non-telecommuting staff;

- Communication strategies and arrangements must be addressed. There must be regular contact between all parties, including team and client interaction;

- Security of equipment, assets, information, confidentiality and copyright is to be in accordance with organisational policy and contained in the agreement;

- The organisation is responsible for the provision and maintenance of equipment, furniture and supplies, subject to other arrangements as agreed;

- A "no-disadvantage" test is to be applied to expenses incurred by telecommuter;

- Access to telecommuter work sites is to be negotiated;

- Taxation and insurance issues are to be addressed in the agreement;

- Telecommuting is not a substitute for dependant care but may provide flexibility;

- Implementation of telecommuting must take account of relevant legislation, industrial instruments such as awards, industrial and certified agreements, and codes of conduct. The telecommuter must generally be subject to the same requirements as other employees.

The *Telecommuting Discussion Paper* observed the research suggesting that the process set up for developing and implementing telecommuting policy will have a profound impact on the type of program and its ultimate success.[94]

6   IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS

While it is impossible to know whether the issues and problems identified above can be adequately overcome by organisations to make telecommuting a viable flexible work option, it is clear that considerable planning and preparation for dealing with potential difficulties is essential to the success of any telecommuting arrangements. A number of studies on telecommuting indicate the necessity for trials or pilots of telecommuting arrangements in a single unit of a workplace to be undertaken before widespread implementation so that concerns can be identified and dealt with on a smaller scale.[95] A written agreement and/or policy containing conditions, responsibilities, rights and expectations is also seen to be a vital aspect of any successful arrangement.

The main areas of concern appear to be technological issues (security as well as reliability and speed); costs of setting up home offices; OHS issues; and the concept of lack of visibility that concerns both employees (impacts on career advancement and involvement in decision making) and managers (lack of control).

Indeed, as an alternative work arrangement, telecommuting will not suit all organisations or all jobs within an organisation. There is also a degree of consensus that it should not be a full-time arrangement for workers as some interaction with colleagues and physical presence was needed. Ultimately, telecommuting may be just one of a sizable array of flexible workplace arrangements that can be implemented within an organisation if it meets the needs of all parties concerned. There is no 'one size fits all' approach to the concept nor is it one that will suit every area within an organisation nor every type of work performed within it. Indeed, the recent Business Council of Australia survey of its company members in July 2003 revealed that no single policy or response could address problems of balancing work and family responsibilities nor would suit all companies or employees.

A key learning from the BCA survey was that while Australia's largest companies are being proactive in tackling the balancing work and family issue, attitudes and organisational culture can be barriers for companies attempting to implement relevant arrangements for staff. Debate and discussion may be needed to overcome

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[94]   *Telecommuting Discussion Paper*, p 13.

[95]   G Whitehouse, et al, p 264.

problems of resentment from managers and other staff in having to adapt and, more importantly, leadership and commitment from the top.[96]

[96]   BCA, *Balancing Work and Family Survey*.

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