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INSIDE TRACK: A long day at home
By Alison Maitland
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Teleworking offers rich material for myth-making - not least the one that has most of us abandoning offices virtually overnight to work cosily at home in our slippers.

But there is no doubt that e-mail and advances in wireless technology are enabling more employees to work remotely. This has led to forecasts of a surge in the number of teleworkers this decade, particularly those who work while on the move or alternate between home, offices and clients' premises. IDC, the industry analyst, predicts that the US could have 105m mobile workers by 2006, or about two-thirds of the workforce. In the European Union, the number of teleworkers could treble to 27m by 2010, according to a recent study by the European Commission-funded Emergence project.

If these predictions are accurate, new work-styles will have big social, economic and environmental implications. So what is life like for teleworkers? Does the absence of the daily commute make up for the lack of contact with colleagues? Do they concentrate on the job or skive off to watch television? Do they feel their careers are affected by being out of sight?

British Telecom is one of the largest employers of "flexible workers" in the UK, a country where the number of teleworkers has risen 65 per cent in four years to 2.2m. Nearly 2,000 BT teleworkers have been surveyed about their experiences for a report* that is part of a European Union project on sustainable teleworking.

The most striking finding in this independent survey, carried out by Bradford university and the non-profit Centre for Economic and Environmental Development, is that a large majority of respondents say they work longer hours than they did in their office-bound existence. Yet they also say their quality of life has improved.

How can long hours - in some cases more than 15 extra hours a week - equate with greater well-being, especially when more than one in five of those surveyed say they work at home even when too ill to travel to work?

Part of the answer may lie in the profile of the respondents, who are predominantly middle-aged men, in line with UK teleworkers as a whole. Most are in managerial or sales jobs. They have been teleworking for one to three years. They work largely from home or split their time between home, different BT offices and clients' premises. Only 8 per cent still have a main office and 1 per cent a dedicated office desk.

The crucial feature is choice. Seventy seven per cent say they have flexibility about where they work. BT has particularly encouraged middle managers and above to work remotely. It helps that they are motivated and able to organise their work, and they are not paid overtime, says Alison Garner, marketing manager for social responsibility. "Nobody was ever forced."

For many of them, life has improved because they no longer commute and because they can combine work with doing the ironing - some men do iron - shopping, taking children to school and so on. This leaves them with more "quality time" in the evening or at weekends, and less stress in their relationships. Some say their female partners have been able to return to work as a result.

"I have been promoted to washing/ weather watcher by my wife," says one. "I

prepare the evening meal when I finish work, hopefully in time for the arrival home of the family." Another says: "I used to be away from home 12 hours every day. Now I work in a more relaxed frame of mind. No contest!"

Their biggest reason for teleworking is to get more work done. One respondent, revelling in the quiet of home, says: "I can sit down at midnight for three hours and concentrate, and lie in bed the next morning if I wish." Another enjoys "the creative period that occurs for me naturally in the evening after a glass of wine".

Most consider themselves more productive, something confirmed by BT's own research. Freed from the distractions of an open-plan office, one respondent explains: "I'd forgotten what it was like to read documents without my fingers being in my ears."

But the report's authors suggest there is a hidden danger here. "In the longer term, some of the perceived advantages, such as less interruption by interaction with colleagues in offices, may have a downside of less effective distribution of knowledge, and/or sense of commitment to the organisation and colleagues."

Some respondents who recently started teleworking have found the adjustment harder than expected. "Loss of social interaction is demotivating and can be depressing," says one. Others say they have had to take steps to overcome isolation, such as ensuring that team members telephone each other at least once a day.

Some are concerned that teleworking reduces their chances of advancement because they are less visible to senior management. Another worry, especially for those working mainly at home, is lack of exercise. "Going down stairs for breakfast is as strenuous as it gets," one comments.

The report warns BT to be on its guard. A small minority of respondents says teleworking has a negative impact on their quality of life, mainly because of longer working hours. While most respondents accept these as a reasonable trade-off for flexibility, a few say they feel guilty or under pressure to prove they can work as well as they did in the office.

Under the EU's Sustel project, these findings will be compared with research in Denmark, Germany, Italy and the Netherlands to assess the environmental and social benefits of teleworking. The BT survey shows, for example, that teleworking can cut car travel and enable some groups, such as lone parents or people with a disabled dependant, to remain in employment.

But the authors point out that some north Europeans may be critical of the finding on longer hours, seeing it as evidence that teleworking intensifies the UK's culture of excessive working hours, while making it marginally more tolerable. "More time spent working is one thing when work is reasonably satisfying, well paid and the rest of life harmonious. But it can create stress and dissatisfaction if other things begin to go wrong."

**Teleworking at BT, available at www.sustel.org*



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