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TELECENTERS AND DIGITAL MOBILITY





programme, with a national plan that will develop 500 telecentres over the country, all of them equipped with TelePresence.

TelePresence, which will be at the disposal of businesses in the Smart Work Centers, is at the heart of a new social system, for Dialogue Café offers associations the possibility to build their network from a distance. It has also allowed remote families to see each other for Christmas, when distance and travel costs seemed to have cut ties for ever.

Such is the progress that the experiment of Smart Work Centers has brought to the development of towns.

The effects of the new information technologies are therefore similar to that of electricity in the past.

Sustainable and connected towns already exist and provide better life quality, better working life and better leisure time for the citizens.

* Urban, peri-urban or rural Eco centres, of 200 to 15,000 m², offer optimized professional connection and services adapted and labelled depending on the basin in question.

IN THE UNITED STATES, THE GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (GSA) IS AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE TELEWORK INITIATIVE

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Although the Telework initiative has made the headlines lately with the passing of the Telework Improvement Act of 2010, the U.S. government Telework program is nothing new.

Jeffrey Woodworth, GSA Office of Communication and Marketing, gives a detailed analysis of the motivations and evolution of the program. The first government-wide Telework Initiative, formerly called Flexiplace, was established in 1990. Flexiplace was created in response to workforce concerns about a turn-of-the century drop in the quality of the labor pool and the consequent fear that federal recruitment/retention would not be able to compete with private sector salaries.

Al Gore's National Performance Review aimed at creating "a government that works better and costs less", and Congress

passed a series of legislation that require "each executive agency to establish a policy under which eligible employees may be authorized to telework to the maximum extent possible without diminishing employee performance." In July 2000, President Clinton issued an executive memorandum to encourage the use of telework for federal employees with physical disabilities. Today, the Obama administration has given its strong support to the new legislation.

Two federal agencies sustain these initiatives: the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the General Services Administration (GSA). OPM is responsible for developing guidelines and insuring continuity of operations during emergencies and the GSA for developing and implementing Telework programs.



Congress has jumpstarted the initiative regularly, by setting priorities and funding GSA programs. These programs were set initially for the public sector, but since then have served as a model to include the private sector.

Goals were set high, and have been met: 85% of GSA employees are eligible to telework, and of those who are eligible, 48% telework at least one day per week. Today's objective is to reach 60% by 2012. Yet, challenges remain in terms of communication, misconceptions, and adoption of a result oriented managerial style.

As Martha Johnson, Administrator for GSA said during an address to the Telework Exchange Town Hall Meeting on October 7th, "The 21st century workplace is many things. Where it used to be based around hierarchical and controlled assembly lines, it is now characterized as flat, agile, non-linear, collaborative, flexible, and mobile. Managers used to be foremen with consolidated power, but they are now facilitators, resources, guides, and coaches. Technology now lets us be more mobile, but the work is also different and relies less on being watched and more on being connected. Telework fits that model."

OPM and GSA have put in place guidelines, websites, training and support tools to help both managers and employees in reassessing their work practices.

The GSA 2010-2015 Sustainability Plan calls for the creation of "a government that produces more while consuming less." The objective is to reduce the greenhouse gas emissions 30% by 2020 and real estate costs \$32 billion by 2012. These goals cannot be reached without the implementation of the Telework Initiative, especially in view of the results of a study presented by Ms. Johnson that show "a 200-1,500% return on

the initial technological investment after adopting a telework system thanks to increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, lower real estate costs, and reduced recruitment and retention needs."

Public/private partnerships have been put in place to communicate the value of telework and to implement the program. Telework Exchange for instance is a private organization that serves the "emerging educational and communications requirements of the Federal teleworker community." Through series of events, such as the Townhall Meetings, it is able to bring together federal agency executives, program managers, telework specialists and industry partners to focus on such issues as telework management and technology. The Fall 2010 meeting was attended by more than 700 participants.

The Federal government maintains a network of 14 telecenters in the greater Washington DC area, opened to both federal and private sector employees, following a public/private partnership approach with local universities, private entities or local economic development agencies.

Convergence between the public and private sectors is sustained by technologies such as video conferencing, Skype, web conferencing tools and new social networking environments such as LinkedIn or Diigo. Interestingly, a GSA project in Kansas City shows an increase in peer-to-peer communication among teleworkers of almost 55%.

One such convergence is presented by Cisco on its website and concerns the town of Meridian, Idaho. The city has increased its population by 85% since 2000 thanks to its economic dynamism and quality of life. This is due to a public/private partnership that connect the greater business community throughout Idaho and beyond by creating a SmartWork Center facility in downtown Meridian. As stated by Mayor De Weerd, "The Smart Work Center bridges the gap between the home office and a central office, giving Meridian residents and business owners the tools and services they need to work more productively and collaboratively in a downtown location that's convenient to where they live."

The GSA 2010-2015 Sustainability Plan calls for the alignment between private sector incentives and public policy. Its purpose is to "modernize the way that Government sources, develops and implements new ideas; accelerate innovation in green technology, business practices, and collaboration; attract and retain the best talent and change the culture."

Objectives that explain President Obama's view of GSA as a strategic asset both to his government as well as to the Nation. ●

