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Disability Information
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Submission to ATAC

By David N Wallace
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I am employed by the Disability Information and Resource Centre (DIRC) in South Australia as Information Technology Coordinator where I have been teleworking for the past 12 years. I am employed on a full-time basis and telework from my home in the North East suburbs 2 days per week and commute into the City of Adelaide, approx 20kms, where I work in the traditional on-site mode for 3 days per week.

I have a PC provided by my employer at home and in my office in the city. Both are equipped with a trackball as the only real piece of adaptive equipment I need. At home my employer provides a broadband connection and a telephone line. I use a combination of Terminal server, VPN and other technologies run over the Internet to operate either my computer at work, the servers, or administer the network at work.

Teleworking has been a part of my employment from the start. I have C4 Quadriplegia resulting from a motor vehicle accident 24 years ago and had retrained myself from being a motor mechanic to computer and network engineer. Due to my disability and distance from work (at that time I lived in a near rural setting) it was an agreed part of my employment when starting that I work from home 2 days per week and has remained that way.

Working has had a very positive impact on my life. I do not think that I could sustain full time employment without teleworking. The drain physically on having to commute every day would be too much over any significant period. So I consider teleworking extremely beneficial and to sustain my employment over time almost essential.

Based on my experience, I consider the potential personal, social and economic benefits of telework for those people who have a disability to be immense. I therefore think the potential social and economic benefits to the community are also immense.

Employment for a person with a disability needs to be viewed holistically. Life is a complicated business, add in a disability and it becomes more complicated. Issues of how

a person with a disability gets up, gets dressed, gets something to eat, gets to where they work, gets what they need wherever they work, gets home if indeed they left home, gets fed again and gets to bed all have an impact on their ability to sustain employment. All these areas need consideration.

As a person with a disability my life relies so much on other people. If my carers are late in the morning I'm late to work. It's not just a matter of waking up with the alarm. If the person driving me to work isn't on time, I'm late. If my support workers at work aren't on the ball I can't get done what I need to when I need to. And this is all before I add other co-employees into the mix. The ability to perform my job to the level that not just my employer expects but what I demand of myself relies on more people / factors than just me. And it also relies on more than just what work I do and where that work is done.

A great benefit to me has been flexibility that my employer and teleworking gives. I can rearrange my work according to unforeseen happenings that disability brings to my life. This could mean working from home at night to make up for hours lost while attending a specialist or rehabilitation centre during business hours or many other such situations that would require sick leave or time off if I was required to be at the office every day. (Working after hours on-site at the office is usually out of the question due to transport and support worker considerations.)

The enabling factors in my situation have been predominantly the managerial style and support and the culture of the organisation I work in. And yes, I very much work IN the organisation not FOR the organisation, even though I'm not physically there 2 days per week. Belonging is not a geographical phenomenon. It could be argued that the existing culture in situations where telework is not given value is the same culture in which people with disability are not valued.

I believe that in the area of ICT people with a disability have the most to gain from the technology but are often those most likely to be denied access to it. I see people with a disability not having the appropriate supports outside employment to enable them to access established, traditional forms of employment. Therefore I see a great opportunity for people with a disability as the group that have the most to gain from teleworking, provided they have the appropriate support to enable them to access employment in that way. The work-life balance teleworking offers, and a person with a disability requires, means this style of working is an ideal fit and offers improved opportunities for the person with a disability with potential benefit for employers and society in general.

So, drawing from my own experiences as related above and from my understanding of disability and teleworking I make the following summary observation:

- The potential social and economic benefits and disadvantages of telework for people with a disability;
 - Potentially huge **economical** benefits as many people with a disability could undertake meaningful and productive employment rather than being dependent on the DSP.

- Reduce the frustration of not being able to get to place of employment (people with a disability relying on Access Cabs / Accessible buses usually have great difficulty on getting to work on time). They could save on transport costs.
 - Initially teleworking may seem to have some social disadvantage as it may be seen by some as being isolating. Structures can be developed to overcome this – such as video-streaming chat rooms where people who are teleworking can, if they wish, interact during breaks. The development of such networks should be encouraged and supported so workers can share their experiences and learn and support each other.
 - People with a disability being facilitated by teleworking into employment would bring great personal benefit and consequently the potential benefits for society are great as the formation of employment networks enable the extension of social and personal networks.
- Cultural, regulatory, technical and/or legal factors that are enabling or preventing telework adoption;
 - Teleworking works when there is a culture within the organisations that values people with a disability and diversity in general and is prepared to be innovative.
 - Policies and actions that Government could use to encourage the adoption and effective use telework in Australia.
 - The Government must instigate training programs for people with a disability to develop ICT skills that would prepare them for telework. This should include both off-site and in-home training options.
 - The Government must provide house modifications / adaptations to set up a suitable home-office working environment. (Yes, moving people from the DSP is going to initially require an outlay of capital / money but in the medium to long term it will create wealth both for the individual and society).
 - The Government must subsidise business to provide the necessary ICT equipment and infrastructure (including assistive devices) so that people with a disability can telework from home.
 - The Government must become an exemplar for employing people with a disability and model of excellence in facilitating and accommodating people with a disability in teleworking. This will require the Government to make a dramatic change in its culture to be inclusive of people with a disability.

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