

I have something of a background in telework and continue to this day to manage a small national company all of whose employees are teleworkers.

I read your discussion paper 'Telework in Australia' with interest and feel the need to contribute to the discussion.

You appear to have overlooked one of the most critical issues, the individual.

It has been my experience that part-time teleworkers or to be more specific teleworker who work part of their time at home and part in the company office can be very successful – note I have personally always used the term telecommuter for this role.

However full time teleworking i.e. all work is performed in isolation from a home office, is very much another outcome.

As a long time advocate of telework it came as something of an epiphany that the fundamental problem lies with the individual rather than the manager, the employer or even the government.

In my final letter and report on the TeleTask project to DCITA in February 2002, I said "that based on our experience less than 10% of all Australians are probably suited to telework, (meaning full-time telework). At the time of writing I had to admit that my position could have been construed as a pass the buck for my management of a less than successful project.

However in September 2002 I had a substantial article on our TeleTask experience published in the British Teleworkers & Telecentres Association magazine. The article stated "While it as always envisaged that finding work would be the greatest obstacle, and as early as 1999 three main issues had surfaced:

- Most people could not or did not complete work to the required standard,
- Most people did not complete allocated work either on time or at all,
- When work was available we regularly had difficulty finding available workers."

Despite all efforts including Myers Briggs MBTI profiling this problem persisted. The article states, "There have been occasions where project teams of up to 50 people have been required and despite our skills register having grown to 750 people, we often struggle to find 10 candidates." - Note: this was despite pay rates of \$35 plus per hour in 2000.

My article concludes, "Finally, for many years a number of people, including myself have advocated that telework, as a universally ideal work practise, is self-evident. In fact TeleTask was conceived with that belief as the foundation of the project.

I no longer hold that opinion. I do continue to believe that telework is a viable work practice for many individuals and is in many ways suited to people living in regional areas. However the experience we have gained through our efforts with TeleTask has convinced me that remote (self managed) telework is probably only suited to as few as 10% of people.

While almost all people like the idea of telework, relatively few individuals are actually capable of doing it successfully in a sustained manner."

Within days of this publication I was contacted by long experienced telework advocates from Britain and Europe ( I am sorry their names escape me) whose experience gave 100% support to my findings. This was further reinforced in Australia when I was contact by Kate Gorce-Macham, MD of WA based Virtual Business Australia rang to ask my thoughts as after three years she was considering the viability of her business. She operated on a subscription basis where teleworkers subscribe to be on her database. And claimed that out of 260 subscribers only 35 were “fair dinkum”. She was fed up with tyre kickers. I understand the business was placed on the market soon after.

TeleTask from time to time employed or outsourced over 120 teleworkers, many of these through regional telecentres. The telecentre experience was mixed but the issues there were more related to local telecentre management rather than being telework specific. Although having said that, I know that through my experience in 6 years as coordinator of the Walcha Telecottage from 1992 to 1998, I encountered exactly the same problem. Where people working in the telecentre were fine, those working from home were hopelessly unreliable.

As I mentioned earlier I am still a teleworker from my home in Megan (near Dorrigo) NSW. I work as a management consultant and contract general manager for a small national brokerage company. I perform a variety of duties including recruitment, all of which are conducted virtually. All employees and contractors are teleworkers, in fact 3 of the existing staff originated as outsource workers through TeleTask. After 3 years of relationship I have met face to face with the CEO on only one occasion and I have met only one staff member.

But today we still experience the same issues ie: 9 out of 10 starters do not finish.

The issues are varied but the results are consistent. Some of the issues are:

- lack of personal motivation or commitment,
- lack of actual expertise,
- lack of guidance or training,
- lack of feedback on performance,
- those that succeed are very motivated and capable. As a result most of them find full time highly paid ‘normal’ jobs.

It doesn't matter if they are mature women returning to the work force, professional men or students. Today we now have much better IT and connectivity. We make wide use of live messenger and chats, even video conferencing. I note that some US based telecommuting sites offer ‘staff monitoring systems’, these appear to be little more than web-cams that allow managers to at least check if the worker is present. Obviously there is still an issue and the issue cannot simply be rectified with improved technology.

The one exception to this story of gloom is people with disability. I have in the past and continue to experience success with disabled workers. I can only put it down to one thing; they really value the opportunity and the hold on to it with both hands.

Andrew Hunter

1996-1998 President of The Australian Rural Telecentre Association  
1998-2000 DoTRS Rural Communities Program Advisory Committee  
1999-2000 DoTRS Rural Transaction Centres Advisory  
1999-2000 Sydney Olympics Roads & Transport Authority - Expert Panel

1992-98 Founding coordinator The Walcha Telecottage  
1998-02 Managing Director – TeleTask Pty Ltd