

05 Telework as business: guide lines

Brief description of the module

This module deals with the modalities in which a business activity can be set up through telework, in its diverse forms

Topic treated in the module

This module basically deals with two main topics:

- How to set up an autonomous telework activity
- How to realise an enterprise based on telework

A specific space, in terms of an ad – hoc chapter for each, is also dedicated to two specific topics

- The business of telecentres
- The business of services for teleworkers

Skills that the module allows to acquire

The module allows acquiring two types of operational skills

- Specific operational skills on the peculiarities of setting up a business based on telework
- Skills on the type of integrative training that is required to assure, on more general topics of telework to effectively bring about a business idea based on telework

05.1 Introduction

The development that telework has had in Europe allows us today to look at this phenomenon not only from a design viewpoint, that is look at it as a thing to do in order to respond to needs of work organisations or to more general needs connected with the organisation of work, but to see it as a possible actual business, or better as a particularly interesting modality to start off or bring about business ideas, both in terms of initiatives which, for their limited dimension, lead to an individual activity, or for more consistent initiatives, that allow the rise of new enterprises.

05.1.1 The various forms of businesses linked to telework

In general terms we must distinguish among the various forms of telework as business at least according to two aspects: the size, that is if we are dealing with initiatives at the level of autonomous work level rather than at the enterprise level, and orientation in respects to telework, that is if telework is a tool to realise the idea of business or if instead we are aiming at realising services that respond to a demand that exists just because telework exists. In this situation a specific space must be left to the business of telecentres.

Let's briefly summarise what we have just said, in the actual setting, talking about:

- Autonomous telework activities
- Enterprises that arise in telework
- The business of telecentres
- The business of assistance to teleworkers

05.2 Autonomous telework activities

Brief description of the chapter

In this chapter the topics relative to the peculiarities of setting up an autonomous telework activity are treated: from the general characteristics to the ideas of services, from the financial and insurance needs to the needs of flexibility and refresher courses.

It does not deal with, instead except for certain exceptions specified below linked to telework, for which we refer to the TES course for teleworkers, which in some measure is propedeutic to this module.

The exceptions are relative to the topics linked to the safety of the workplace, that are treated in this module, seeing that these topics are mainly charged to the firm in the event of telework projects, but charged exclusively to the teleworker in the case of autonomous telework.

05.2.1 Introduction

Today it is difficult to be an autonomous worker in the field of services without also being in part a teleworker. It is difficult in fact to respond to the needs of flexibility, availability, completeness and speed of the service if we do not organise exploiting ICT technologies:

- To be, at least virtually, time in time there where one's own presence is required;
- To reduce times and costs of moving trying to as much as possible make work move rather than travelling personally.

05.2.2 General features

Don't ever neglect direct contacts with your customers: remember that, for the elementary laws of economics, the fact that telework makes interpersonal contacts less frequent, and thus rarer, entails also the fact that they become at the same time more precious.

05.2.3 Why focalise

The most important thing to remember, during the start off phase, and even during the developing phase, of an autonomous teleworker activity is that of absolutely needing to **focalise** in a very precise way one's own activities.

The performance of a professional activity requires in fact a relation of trust between the professional and the client: a rapport which in an activity carried out in presence may also be based on personal trust, but in a telework activity must be centred on the image of a specific competence, all so much harder to achieve as the work area for which the teleworker offers himself is broad and not well defined.

Therefore, one must offer precise and well-defined services, and only later, as the relationship with the client develops, propose integrative services.

05.2.4 Service ideas

In general, and in theory, all the activities that deal with back office information, that is, not face to face with the customer, can be offered for developing autonomous telework activities. In practice, we must focalise on that which responds to five requirements:

- It is an easy activity to describe
- It's something we know how to do well
- There is demand, as results from an analysis, however brief but necessary, of the job offers on newspapers and on the Net at the time in which the activity is started
- It is an activity easy to dimension, and therefore suitable for result based contracts and not time contracts
- Requires limited investments, sustainable by a person

Examples: translations, text editing, image production, programming – especially in web environments, administration of web sites, realisation of multimedia publishing projects, conversion of paper documents into electronic format, accounting, subject searches on the net and in general “information broking”, data entry, telemarketing, engineering of didactic content for e-Learning solutions, Good Luck!

05.2.5 Necessary skills

In order to carry out an autonomous telework activity three classes of skills are required: those specific to one's profession, general ones on how to operate in telework and those on how the profession presents opportunities and new risks in the telework context.

For the first, training does not change compared to that which would occur to carry out one's own activity in a traditional manner

For the second, look for support in TES: we advise you strongly to follow the entire course for teleworkers, in the event you haven't followed it in the past.

The third aspect is linked to individual creativity, but even to the constant development of a network of contacts with colleagues that work in an analogous manner, development in which the aspects of collaboration prevail time in time on those of competition.

In the field of Net Economy, the terms "co-opetition" is used often to indicate the fusion of the aspects of competition and those of co-operation.

A useful way, if practicable, is that of relying on a telecentre.

Another is that of participating in times of associative life in professional associations

05.2.6 The telework post and safety aspects

A Telework job usually does not present particular risks to one's health: with only one bind, for that matter to be considered as a good practice for any environment, and that is the electrical system is in accordance with safety standards.

The use of computers, the desk, may cause even significant problems if the work environment does not respect good practice, usually consolidated as laws for work posts in the countries of the European Union.

This good practices regard work stations (especially the chair), arranging of the computer, lighting.

Position of the table

- The distance between the margin of the table and the wall behind your back must not be less than 600 mm, while that between feet and the same wall not less than 800 mm;
- The position and the size of the table must allow the correct positioning of the screen in respects to lighting, windows and other lighting surfaces, to allow a correct lighting

Chair (hot word 1 - pic)

- The distance between the surface of the chair and the table surface must be included between 270 and 300 mm;
- The surface of the chair should measure crosswise 400-450 mm and longitudinally 380-420mm;
- The chair must be conceived for sitting down in an erect position rather than slightly reclined, allow to rest the feet, be swivel and have:
 - Adjustable height (380-540 mm)
 - The front corner of the chair rounded
 - A 5 spike base with swivel wheels
 - Easy to use adjusting mechanisms
- The back rest should have
 - An adjustable inclination
 - A correctly shaped lumbar rest, that offers a good support to the vertebral column
 - Height between 480 and 500 mm in vertical starting from the surface of the chair;

Video (hot word 2 - pic)

The Video Display Units (VDU) should have adjusting features that allow placing it in the most suitable position within the following range:

- Height of the keyboard (from the floor to the housing) 700-850 mm

- centre of the screen from the floor 900-1150 mm
- inclination of the screen 88°-105° on the horizontal plane
- keyboard (housing) from the end of the table 100-260 mm
- distance of the screen from the end of the table 500-750 mm

Lighting (hot word 3 - pic)

- the light contrast between the turned off screen and the document we are working on should not exceed the ratio 1:10. It may be aesthetically or psychologically pleasing to work with the screen light on in a dark room but it hurts your eyes.
- All the other surfaces of the visual field should have a luminance included between that of the screen and that of the document one is working on.

05.2.7 Financial and insurance aspects

The topic of insurance is presented differently for the diverse professions in the various countries: it is in any case a point to which we must dedicate special attention because many activities suited to telework cannot often be insured in an economically convenient manner: for instance it is difficult to conveniently insure the development activities of informatics solutions. In Italy, for example, the insurance companies have a very limited offer of insurance services against professional risks for the categories for which a professional order is not contemplated. Having established contracts where a monetary limit to the compensation rights of the client is set in the face of possible damages: not only this limits the problem, but a similar contract can be more easily covered by an insurance policy.

05.2.8 The needs for flexibility and refresher

The greatest risk of the autonomous telework activities is hidden in the success of the same. If the activity starts off strong, the temptation to dedicate oneself entirely to billable activities, postponing any type of refresher course for when there is more time is very strong.

Unfortunately in this way we risk to conduct refresher courses only when our customers start feeling that we are not very up to date, and therefore when it is too late to keep up the cycle of professional trust.

Remember that skills become old fast, and the market will not forgive you.

You must at least invest 5% of your resources and keep up: and you must invest a greater percentage the higher the level of services offered, and therefore of the fees applied.

You must always be flexible, and therefore prepare to reconfigure your activity when demand changes.

05.3 Enterprises that arise in telework

Brief description of the chapter

In this chapter topics dealing with setting up an enterprise on telework are discussed: general characteristics, positioning, service ideas, organisational criteria.

This chapter presupposes a range of knowledge, that imply propedeuticity.

The following are propedeutic to this chapter:

- The chapter, "Autonomous Telework Activities" of the module "Telework as Business"
- The TES course, "Introduction to Telework"

This chapter does not deal with Telecentres: we have believed in fact that, for their importance as business, Telecentres merit a chapter on their own, called exactly "The business of Telecentres".

05.3.1 Introduction

From a conceptual standpoint there is no substantial difference, in terms of service profiles to offer, between the development of an autonomous activity in telework and the development of an enterprise that arises in telework.

The difference can be found in the size of the investments needed and in the organisational needs that the entrepreneurial choice entails.

05.3.2 General characteristics

The starting point of any entrepreneurial initiative is the business idea.

The idea of business cannot be telework, which is not a performance, but rather a way of providing it. We must identify the services we intend to supply and then see telework as a way to provide them in a more economic, flexible and modern way.

Obviously the business idea must be an idea on which telework represents a real competitive edge, and therefore it must deal with a service:

- Of high informative or knowledge content,
- Easily describable,
- For which a market space exists, real or potential
- On which we can present skills of distinctive economies compared to the competition that we imagine to face,
- That requires sustainable investments

05.3.3 Key need: positioning

The key factor of all the initiatives of businesses based on telework is positioning: we must be capable of answering convincingly to two questions:

- Why should the potential clients pay attention to our offers ?
- Why should they choose us?

The most important question is the first: the most precious resource, in the Information Society, is **attention**: goods in European countries are basically abundant, technologies ever more abundant, services are not lacking, information is overloading, the attention that each one can dedicate to the request for attention of the others becomes day by day more scarce.

Ask yourself how you can obtain attention, and then how you can transform this attention into a business.

05.3.4 Service ideas

In the paragraph relative to the autonomous telework activities a series of service ideas are indicated.

Those which are better suited for an enterprise activity, for the needs they present of adequate sizing from the supplier side are:

translations, programming, realisation of publishing projects, information brokering, telemarketing.

There are also others that are suitable for enterprise activities and are instead not suitable for individual activities: in general all those linked to the concept of Call Centre but more broadly of support to Customer Care, as all the multiservice activities, realised integrating, in a **clear** overall offer, a set of initially proposable integrated various services. A unit aside is dedicated to Telecentres

05.3.5 Organisational Criteria

A firm operating in telework must be organised **by processes**: hierarchies are useless, in modern organisations, if not in the measure in which they are required to guarantee the correct execution of processes. Commercial processes, design processes, productive processes, auxiliary processes.

A firm operating in telework normally takes on various contractual forms:

- Employed work relations for the “core workers”, that is for those that carry out functions that require structured relations with hierarchic components
- Semi-employed relations, typically the most frequent
- Professional collaboration relations.

The terms for which one or the other is used, and the specific contractual modalities, depend on the legislative context in force in every country. In Italy plenty of information can be found on the INPS site, point your browser to <http://www.inps.it/doc/Professionista/Telework/0301.htm>

05.4 The business of telecentres

Brief description of the chapter

In this chapter topics dealing with the peculiarity of the telecentres business, facing the topics that allow planning and development setting.

Special attention is given to the two key topics:

- Services
- Planning of the business

These topics are dealt with after a general part where we talk about style, localisation, telecentre size

This chapter can be followed after the two chapters:

- Autonomous telework activity
- Enterprises arising in telework

All the more reason for, the TES course “Introduction to telework” is propedeutic to this chapter.

05.4.1 Introduction

In certain European countries that of telecentres is a truly consolidated business: in the United Kingdom, by March 2000, there were 130 telecentres associated to the relative association (TCA: www.tca.org.uk). (With this opportunity we would like to point out that the TCA distinguishes between Telecentres and Telecottages: in the TEST field when we talk about Telecentres we refer to both the solutions).

In other European countries, like Italy, the business of telecentres is at the starting point. In 2002 the first non experimental initiatives started off to do business through the realisation of telecentres. For this reason we believe that the realisation of a telecentre represents an investment opportunity to evaluate by whomever is interested in investing in the Net Economy or in general in the Information Society.

05.4.2 General characteristics

Investing in a telecentres is like, for certain aspects, investing in a service and technological goods supply, for other aspects to invest in a social place, like a bar.

The first analogy must drive us to dedicate more attention to the most suitable technological level, and to the presence of a demand to be met on the land.

The second analogy must drive us to focalise our attention on how to intercept the micro flows of meeting demand and socialisation on the territory.

Together we remember the pivotal importance of defining well the “style” of the telecentre, and to take care of all the aesthetic aspects according to a coherent image. This in regards to the design of the business idea.

Obviously, the localisation of the Telecentre is fundamental: in general it must be along a line of commuter traffic, for example next to a parking lot or in a more remote locality equipped with ample parking space, in respects to the needs of the users.

Must be large enough to allow a minimum of social life in the work areas among the various users: for example at least fifteen – twenty jobs.

It should also have a sponsor, or a main client, that utilises it in a significant percentage (usually around 30%) for their own employees, and which therefore acts as economic driving force.

05.4.3 The services: need for clarity and completeness

Even for telecentres the key requirement is positioning. Experience teaches us that telecentres do not take off economically if they limit to provide workstations: we must enrich the services, even for distinguishing the telecentre from a simple Internet Point. For which for any reason it obviously offers the services.

Examples of additional services are:

- Services for children, with secure and/or game Internet stations, in a dedicated space
- Service Bank, for exchange of services among the various users, not regulated on a monetary basis but in analogy with the Time Banks. Services widespread among the Telecentres of the United Kingdom, with the name of LETS (Local Enterprise Trading Systems)
- CD Rom libraries and other tools for information and training
- Services for work
- Information points and local services access (both public information and bookings and purchases on the net of services/ products on a local basis)
- Social activities: the Telecentre can become the Club of teleworkers that utilise it, organising meeting times beyond the purely working needs

05.4.4 Planning of the business: dimensioning of the Telecentre and financing needs

The profitability of a telecentre must be planned on a three-year business plan. This means that, foreseeing a normal curve of growth of revenues, an availability of financial means is required in the order of one / one and a half the turnover we want to obtain.

The ideal condition is that of starting off with an important client, that is with an enterprise that aims at utilising the Telecentre for their own employees, saturating ideally 50% of the resources in the first year and 30% the third.

A condition very much exploited in the past, but now a lot less accomplishable, is that of availing oneself of a public financing (European, national, local).

Today in general, it is quite hard to obtain European financing for a telecentre, for the exact reason that telecentres have become a business activity.

We cannot however leave out the possibility of local financing, linked to objectives for example:

- Reduction of traffic
- Valorising of areas of decline
- Reduction of pollution
- Realization of socialisation points

The business plan must be drafted taking into account, according to the principle of caution, all the expense items and all expected proceeds.

Remember this is not trivial: it is in fact quite easy to fall into that trap of "Wishful Thinking", which we may translate as "thought imbued with hope", that leads to underestimating cost forecasts and overestimate proceeds forecasts.

The main items to take into consideration are:

- Costs: personnel (management, sales, operations, support), offices (leasing, consumption, insurance, ...), consumables, publicity, technologies, assistance
- Proceeds: office services (photocopies, fax, ...), Internet services (consumption use, additional services), job posts leasing and for meetings, secretarial services, specialised services (see "needs for clarity and completeness of services").

05.4.5 The needs for constant improvement

If we work in the market of telecentres we work in that of the Net Economy. And the Net Economy has a characteristic that is well expressed through the metaphor: that of the “Web Year”.

The metaphor says that: “a Web year lasts three months” . That’s to say “In the Web world certain things become old faster than in the rest of the world”.

To operate in this market means dedicating a two digit percentage of turnover to constant investments on technologies and structures, on services, on the way to present them, on gathering feedback from the users.

05.5 The service business for teleworkers

Brief description of the chapter

In this brief chapter a few hints are offered to face the more sophisticated topic, and therefore in prospect more promising, among those linked to telework: doing business realising services thought specifically for the market made up by teleworkers.

A series of business ideas are identified and summarised, on which it is more appropriate to invest, not on which it certainly opportune to reflect, because they represent a future of services anchored to one the more solid trends in the work market: that towards the growing flexibility in the times, places and forms of cooperation through which the working performances are achieved.

05.5.1 Introduction

This part completes training on telework as business, since it faces the service business for teleworkers themselves.

05.5.2 Possible hints

The development of assistance business for teleworkers is all the while arising in European countries.

Not only, but all the services suitable for an autonomous telework activity can be addressed to the teleworkers, in addition to non teleworkers, developing a network of collaboration that can foster reaching the “critical mass” for launching the business. And this is obvious, if we reflect on the fact that telework is not a performance, but rather a modality for accomplishing the performance

In addition to this we can identify and suggest a series of specific hints on the areas on which it is convenient to deeply assess the possibilities of operating in a profitable manner, addressing as market target in specific teleworkers.

- Technological assistance (PC repair, software installation, Internet subject searching).
- Logistic help (transmission and reception of physical objects, in the time it is necessary, is usually source of bother for the Teleworkers, used to the immediacy and compete availability of e-mail).
- Insurance coverage (the classical offer of Insurances is adequate to covering professional risks only for certain categories of teleworkers: usually those belonging to professional categories).
- Contractual/legal assistance (given the normal presence, in the Telework activities, of an articulated set of contractual forms).
- Distance learning and community services (to favour updating and job socialisation), perhaps in relation to the initiatives under way, such as the TES Leonardo project!