



Beyond Telework – Using our resources more effectively The advantages of a more deployed workforce

Albert Einstein is attributed to have said, “We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them”. Today, we struggle with issues of transportation, sprawl, air pollution, reliance on oil, economic viability, emergency preparedness and continuity of operations planning. Our methods remain relatively unchanged over the past 50 years relying on an industrialized approach to these issues.

While tremendous advances in information and communications technologies (ICT) have altered, or in Thomas Friedman’s words, “Flattened”, the globe, little has changed in our planning methods to more rigorously exploit ICT for the benefit of the US economy. Furthermore, much has been written regarding the changing nature of work in the US economy as more workers are engaged in knowledge based jobs but our methods of ‘getting people to work’ are fundamentally based upon an industrialized or ‘single location’ model.

The legislative directives of the Congress for federal agencies and departments to support workers on a remote basis have fallen dramatically below the legislative requirements. For example, the 2001 Transportation Appropriations Act (prior to 9/11) included the Federal Telework Provision requiring 17 agencies and departments to support 100% of their ‘eligible’ workforce to work remotely some percentage of their time by the end of 2004. In testimony before congress and according to GAO reports, the rate of compliance was less than 14%.

In a recent paper issued by the CSIA (Cyber Security Industry Alliance) after hosting a Roundtable on Continuity of Operations Planning and Telework, the numbers are even more revealing of our limited progress to more effectively use our information and communications technology infrastructure. Of the 1.7 million federal employees nationwide, approximately 800,000 qualify to work remotely some portion of the time. On any given day it is estimated that only 3,000 to 5,000 of these individuals are working away from their primary (single) work location. That is LESS THAN ONE HALF OF ONE PERCENT OF THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE. At these deployment levels, it is not possible to test or to implement a credible continuity of operation plan for emergency preparedness.

As a young man of 20, I recall the words of the Army drill instructors before being sent to Vietnam, “spread out. Don’t bunch up!” Today, we should consider that in the area of deployment, 9/11 was a wake up call we have largely ignored. As one Congressman stated “We are putting bull’s-eyes on our federal buildings.” Without a proactive plan to support these requirements, Congress’ response has been to penalize some agencies \$5,000,000 each for non-compliance. The picture worsens when we consider the US workforce at large. While much has been written about the success of some working from

home, they appear the exception. Commuting has grown worse over the past several decades as we struggle to improve access and air quality in major metropolitan areas. We toil to ‘parse’ our limited highway capacities by methods of HOV lanes, truck lanes, and toll roads but we fail to consider a large portion of these daily commuters cross our metropolitan areas primarily to use phones and computers. Additionally, the growing cost of gasoline costs an additional one billion dollars to the American public for every penny increase. If we want to reduce the burden on the daily commuter, we have to find ways of redirecting traffic by redirecting work.

While the advances in broadband technologies give us converged and collaboration capabilities, issues of management oversight, inequality of ICT access, cost of last mile support, issues of security and need for separation of home and work all seem to work against the belief that enough of the US workforce will work from home on a predictable basis to alleviate growing congestion or improve emergency preparedness. It is not the lack of progress it is, given the gravity of the issues we face, that progress is not fast enough in developing a comprehensive use of ICT infrastructure to support a broader, more predictable, more permanent deployment of the knowledge workers in the US economy.

We have yet to develop local or regional ICT planning approaches beyond limited efforts to deploy wireless systems in our metropolitan communities. The technologies exist but our focus on transportation and land use does not integrate ICT into the problem solving processes.

Current use of ICT in the form of work from home or the limited sizes and under-utilization of the telework centers in the DC, VA and MD areas do not do justice to the potential of these resources. These efforts have not yielded credible types of traffic demand management tools or significantly diminished our reliance on oil nor improved our emergency preparedness to the extent possible with a pragmatic distributed workplace model.

If time is money and change is inevitable, we must more aggressively leverage the ICT resources we have created. If we are to be more competitive in the global workplace then we must think in new ways and teach ourselves what a truly deployed information workforce can do to improve our economy, security and way of life. We are limited not by the resources we have, but more by our imagination and our willingness to learn how better to employ them.

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From 1993 through 1998, Mr. Shear was a key leader in the product definition and market creation of national directory assistance in the U.S, dramatically changing the nationwide directory information services market.

In 1999, Mr. Shear turned his attentions to identifying how information technologies may better reduce congestion and stimulate economic growth while improving employee productivity and work – life balance. The result is a distributed workplace initiative unique in both scope and depth.

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