English version

Telework: an insider's perspective

Academia Internacional del Teletrabajo

CP 217 NL-7500 AE Enschede, PAÍSES BAJOS

ita@telework-academy.org

Author: Carlos Alberto Castro García;

Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE)

San José, Costa Rica, Centroamérica

Apartado 1032-1000.

ccastrog@ice.go.cr

ABSTRACT.

This paper presents information about telework at the Costarican Institute of Electricity (ICE); this company is a regional icon in terms of electricity and telecommunications as well as in terms of telework in the public sector. Telework is being implemented throughout the world; knowing that telework functions and brings benefits to its participants; one should feel invited to participate in it. This paper argues that, telework develops successfully and brings positive outcomes if it relies on three cornerstones: technology, the company and the person. It is also important to acknowledge the idiosyncrasy of the country, the region and the company to forsee the impact that it would have on the people and the program. The culture and dynamics of the group work are also important; they have to be taken into account as key elements of the kind job that will be transformed in the group that participates in telework.

Keywords

Teleworkable activities
Job contract addendum
Technical assistance
Costarican Electrical Institute (ICE)
Telework shift
Telework

1. INTRODUCTION.

The following analysis presents the experience of the author as an active participant in the telework practice developed at the Costarican Institute of Electricity (ICE) in Costa Rica. This plan began with 9 participants who decided to get involved in the first telework- pilot plan which began on November 9th 2007The author of this paper started working on the project from the beginning and he is still an active member of the plan today.

From the author's perspective, a telework prospect is important if it is seen from the benefits that technology, the company and the person bring in to the experience. One should consider at all times that these three elements are seen as the cornerstones that should maintain a healthy and adequate equilibrium in order for the company to be successful. All of this is done keeping in mind some of ICE's objectives such as improving costumer's service quality, increasing productivity, maintaining the company's profitability, and also providing its workers the best work development that is possible.

In Costa Rica, ICE has -throughout history- been an agent of change. It has traditionally impacted the country's society with its practices and vision and it is doing it again through the implementation of telework, up to the point of becoming an important referent and an institutional support, in this area, for the local government. From the evaluations that have been applied, it has been clear that this modality of work has been very beneficial both for the company and the employees. ICE has already reached a stage of maturity in issues related to telework but it still faces important challenges; among these challenges there is an evaluation of what can be understood as life-quality of the teleworker.

2. TECHNOLOGY, THE COMPANY AND THE PERSON

From the author's perspective, just like you cannot find an unstable, three-legged stool, he sees that if telework is based on healthy and well balanced feedback that flows from these three elements or resources, it then has to direct it to the process while this is put into practice. It is possible that some adjustments might be necessary so that both stability and job performance are reached. If the right equilibrium is maintained among the feedback of all three resources, if they all managed correctly, then the result will be success, achievement and reaching of the initial goals and a promising future for the actors that are involved in telework.

Along these lines the following ideas present some considerations in relation to these three elements and their context at ICE.

2.1. Technology

This represents the highway through which the work is developed and one which must contain all computer-related and peripheral services that warranty a safe arrival to the final destination.

The most important service is Internet, which given the communication services that it offers (video-conferences, MSN, Facebook and other connectivity's) -most of which are open to all public- allows technology to be a

complement for those company related requirements that are needed to fulfill –despite the distance- all the shores and responsibilities assigned to each worker.

Throughout the highway one should have access to administrative, financial and control services that permit to carry out the assigned job. There are many other resources that can certainly not be absent: fax services, telephones, scanners and copy machines; these can turn into useful accessories that are absolutely necessary almost indispensable depending on the task that one has to accomplish and also depending on the demands of the oficie and the shores one must get done.

If there is no adequate backup in this resource, even if the personnel and the company support are the right ones, it is hard to be successful given that the interaction among the three resources can be hindered. On the contrary it must be balanced for a better development of the activity; this with the purpose of a right complementation and synergy that will conduct to the achievement of the original objectives and why not, to exceed the goals both on the side of the company and the teleworker.

It is a well known fact that no one is born with all the knowledge and skills required to perform his/her functions. It is possible that one may run into teleworkable activities that are backed up by the company and which the worker, despite being willing to do telework, does not count with all the skills and knowledge; at least at that moment. In a case like this, some kind of training can be implemented to somehow level the skill and the technological knowledge that are required to productively perform as a teleworker and at the same time this teleworker could productively develop the telework task. This has not been the case of the project that has been developed at ICE, but still it is important to bring in to our minds as a possible scenario that should not at all represent a barrier that limits the successful practice in telework.

The country's and the company's dynamics must bring into existence telework-centers which are buildings that should count with all the conditions that are necessary in terms of technological infrastructure and the necessary support that is required for the implementation of services from the teleworker.

2.1.1 Reference to ICE's regulations

In the particular case of ICE, the following are some considerations that are present in the '*Manual of regulations to implement telework modality at ICE* (Reglamento para implementar la modalidad de teletrabajo en el ICE) [1]; which constitutes the institutional policy that regulates telework in this company and which makes sure it maintains a relation with the line of development.

In regards to informational technology, whenever ICE considers it necessary it can provide the employees who decide to join telework with: internet access, phone line, equipment, materials and tools, assuming the costs that are required to achieve these means. In case the teleworker provides these resources he must be responsible for their use, updating, maintance and all associated costs.

ICE is responsible for providing technical support for the informational systems so that teleworker can do his job, ICE is not under obligation of providing support for problems that are cause due to misuse of computer resources.

2.2. The Company

A second key element is the company, the importance of the company goes beyond the expectations of success of telework because it must intervene in the organization if they want to achieve success in the attempt to develop a program as complex as this. When talking about ICE it is important to keep in mind the kind of company that this represents. Table 1 presents a brief description of the company in reference to electricity and telecommunications services.

Costa Rican Institute of Electricity (ICE)
Energy Sector:
The ICE was founded in 1949 with the purpose of promoting the development of the country while offering electricity service to the country.
From a vertical perspective it develops the activities of production transmition and distribution of electricity in the area.
It carries out activities related of planning of energy.
It functions as a market operator and as an electric system operator at the level of electric interconnectivity in the Regional Electric Market (MER, for the Spanish acronym) for the central American region.
It currently offers an approximate electrical coverage of 99,2% in Costa Rica.
Telecommunications Sector:
The company started to strengthen and develop the sector of telecommunications in the country in 1963. .
It is currently in charge of providing telecommunication services in Costa Rica.
It is now starting to offer new services such as cable TV, wireless internet and others, using the telecommunications platform, activities that depend on the possibilities of the platform and on the demand.
From a coverage perspective 66.05 % of the Costa Rican households have telephone service and 45.5% of the area with population has cellular phones.
Currently there is a movement towards opening the electricity and telecommunications market to private company participation.

Table 1: General Information about ICE

When analyzing the role of the company, the area of personal and human resources must develop, test and approve methods of diagnosis, evaluation, follow-up and control that allow them to take the pulse of the development of the management. The criteria of acceptance has not only to investigate but define most of the instruments of diagnosis and evaluation used as well as several services that will contribute successfully in this modality of work; they must possess elements of control in constant evolution counting with the support of specialized personnel.

Also, the company must provide the technological platform mentioned above, as well as the support and proper maintenance. Besides this the company must provide an adequate space that is suitable and could be adapted in the main office in order to provide the teleworker and the company a connection to assess the development of his or her work without constraints or any other kind of difficulties.

It is important also to formulate and to establish a plan of incentives or stimuli that is well structured and reasoned which will reward the outstanding performance of the teleworker once the aims and goals that were proposed are reached.

The levels of the management constitute key elements of the process, and for these the author proposes two different categories: the top management and the immediate management.

The top management must not only say that they believe in what is done but they must also commit themselves to what is done. In this same manner, just like not all the people can participate in teleworking, not all the management have the aptitude to send his or her people to telework. These must then endorse the managerial project in a general way and with actions and concrete limits; they must be thinking about endorsing the effort and the work of the group of persons who devote themselves to this. It is important to motivate as well as to instruct the "hard" levels of the organization in order that they do not stop the civil servants' participation and the success of the program.

This superior level is in charge of having an integral evaluation of the benefits that telework provides; not only for the company and its earnings but for the society the teleworker and his or her family.

The immediate management have as much or more importance inside the organization scheme in order to promote telework, given that if the immediate headquarter believe in there people, this supports the work team integrally, it supports with the teleworker requirements, it follows up the achievement of goals and the given objectives. It assesses and follows up the integral dynamics of the group work; it will also have the capacity of searching for an adequate balance in the distribution of the work in the team under their supervision. It is convenient that they also assess and follow up, not only the teleworker and his or her task, but also the whole team integrally; this can be done with a specific assessment in this modality of work. The immediate management will also be capable and responsible of proposing improvements and feedback to the superior management. This chiefdom once it has achieved its role as part of the program, it cannot expect anything more than successful results coming from the effort made by the organization and the cooperators. This is possible if the process of selection and the integral dynamics have been conducted appropriately.

Certainly the role of the company is the most complex since it involves any element both internal and external to the organization to the extent that this may be required to reach the success of the telework and of its different teams of multidisciplinary work that support any relapses to reach the constant success of the organizational program. One of its functions for example is to evaluate the different areas of the organization in order to establish which one of them has functions that could be 'teleworkable'.

It corresponds to the company to define and evaluate the necessary human and technical equipment in order to promote the workers disposition towards telework. Emotional and physical health as well as a the family relation that allows the company to have a win-win effect once the teleworker join this modality of work.

2.2.1 Reference to ICE's regulations.

Still based on the '*Manual of regulations to implement telework modality at ICE* (Reglamento para implementar la modalidad de teletrabajo en el ICE) [1] the next section presents important elements associated to this topic.

Teleworkable activities must abide by the following characteristics:

- ☐ They can be developed outside the office without affecting the normal performance of the process through the use of the informational and communication technologies.
- ☐ They are associated with clear objectives and specific goals that allow for a good planning, follow up and control.
- ☐ Supervision is indirect and based on task completion.
- ☐ Communication comes through telematic means mainly.

The *role of the management* will guide to planification of activities and establishments of goals through which the performance of the teleworker will be measured. It must supervise these activities through reports that have specific deadlines and which also have indicators, that must have been previously agreed on between both the management and the teleworker.

The management must have *access to a space* that offers the conditions that are requiered in case the workers need to come to the office. This must have internet access and the adequate conditions that allow the teleworker to continue with his functions at least transitorily.

The management must maintain the *adequate conditions of the work environment*, any retribution, development opportunities and social integration of the teleworker participating in this modality of work.

Some divisions that are involved in telework at ICE are:

The Attention Call Center for the Division of Computer Science and Comunications (*Centro de Atención de Llamadas de la Dirección de Informática y Comunicaciones* (CALLDIC)). It is responsible for providing the teleworker with technical support to solve technological infrastructure problems through remote media. In case remote assistance is not possible regional technical support will asist them.

The Client Division for the Telecomunications Area (*División Clientes del Sector Telecomunicaciones).* It is responsable for the installation and optimal up keeping of telematic networks that are required to do telework tasks.

The Areas Human Resources, Managements and Strategic Business Units (Gestión de Recursos Humanos de las Divisiones, Direcciones y UEN). They must support the process of inclusion and follow up of the teleworkers in this program.

2.3 The person

The third key to secure the success of telework is the person. In this sense, those who wish to get involved in telework must satisfactorily fulfill a set of individual attitudes, actitudes, qualities and capacities to succeed in the program.

In the same way that the company can achieve savings it would also be expected that the staff members also earn some savings. Though the teleworker electricity bill or water service and other expenses may increased; it would be expected that he/she to receive some benefits on the reduction of expenses such as transportation or fuel. He or she may improve her/his eating habits, family relationships and he/she could grow closer to his/her family. At this point, it does not mean that the person is going to neglect his duties and concentrate on his family, since it is through establishing controls and monitoring by the leadership that the company could also warranty success. But the advantages given to the worker and his/her family cannot be denied: it provides more time sharing with children or close/sick relatives. Thus, it could also be expected that it will eventually benefit the teleworker, his/her quality of life and his extended family.

2.3.1 Reference to ICE's Regulations [1]

In the following section some of the ICE's regulations concerning the teleworker will be commented.

An *addendum or new work-contract* specifying the teleworker system condition must be signed by the worker according to his/her working situation.

The teleworker *must be available throughout the established working shift* to serve the directors, partners and clients and other matters through email, telephone video-conference or any other means. Should the director require it, the teleworker must present himself/herself and carry out his or her duties personally. Failure to do so will be sanctioned according to the dispositions stated in the Rules and Regulations for the Staff concerning job desertion.

Spence's coming from *electricity, water and food consumption and related to teleworking activities must be covered by the worker*. Working-tours and meetings related to the worker's functions are covered by the current working rules and regulations.

The worker must cover the official work-shift from the company. However, the working schedule could be flexible, as long as the director approves of it and it affects neither the normal development of other partner's activities nor the working processes necessary to carry out those activities.

3. ¿WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED AT ICE?

A series of experiences describing the mature stage in the process reached today at ICE will be described below.

3.1 The Teleworking Pilot Plan. [2]

Some of ICE's workers had been studying and analyzing the viability and convenience of implementing a teleworking pilot plan within the institution. The purpose was to study this plan's productivity to carry out this working practice in the organization.

The idea was promoted without having any clear reference of this kind of working practice in the country, thus the low attendance to the call for participation in the project. This fact together with the legal gaps in the country forced

ICE to encourage an important change for the country concerning the rules and regulations on this working practice. Other key elements were connectivity and support infrastructure for telework that was studied and improve as the pilot plan developed.

One important element, which is also part of the foundation premises at ICE, indicated that this Institution must be a referent for the Costa Rican government, including also the aspect of empresarial management. From this perspective, telework is conceived as a way of improving productivity, efficiency and efficacy at an institutional level, it also tries to improve the employees working conditions at a social level and at the same time tries to improve customer's service. Based on this, there were clear expectations and interests as to why it was important to support this project in order to achieve success.

Through involvement and participation of an interdisciplinary team a final compilation of job characterizations, teleworkable activities, the definition and evaluations of the physical and ergonomical conditions of the working place were defined. This group also defined the technological support for the teleworker to accomplish the job he/she was assigned.

The put into practice of the project permitted to validate and make adjustments regarding organizational planning and coordination. This lead to the implementation of activities in terms of quantitative objectives, and to providing a chance for a change in culture towards a better use of informational technologies. Table 2 shows a summary of qualities of first pilot plan.

Description	Reference
Beginning date of pilot plan	November 15th, 2007
Participants who started pilot plan	9
Participants who finished pilot plan	16 (63% men, 37% women)
Ending date of pilot plan	
Participants currently involved in teleworking.	184

Table 2: Summary of features of pilot plan and current plan.

When the pilot plan started there were a total of 9 teleworker; the plan grew progressive to achieve a total of 16 teleworker at the end of this same plan. The first time the plan was implemented was between November 15th 2007 and May 15th 2008; this time, 63% of the participants were men, 37% were women. A total of 63 % belong to the category of 'professionals', 31% were 'administrative', and 6% were 'technicians'. 56% of these workers had less than 11 years working for the company. This time there was participation of workers from the Metropolitan Area (GAM in Spanish), that is where there is a higher concentration of population in the country. There were representatives of four from the seven provinces in the country. Currently there are 184 people involved in this job practice.

The following chart presents how this plan was implemented at ICE from an organizational perspective. The coordinator team was formed by an interdisciplinary group of workers from several areas of the company. The

following chart represents the process that the pilot plan underwent, the different stages and the activities that were implemented in each stage.
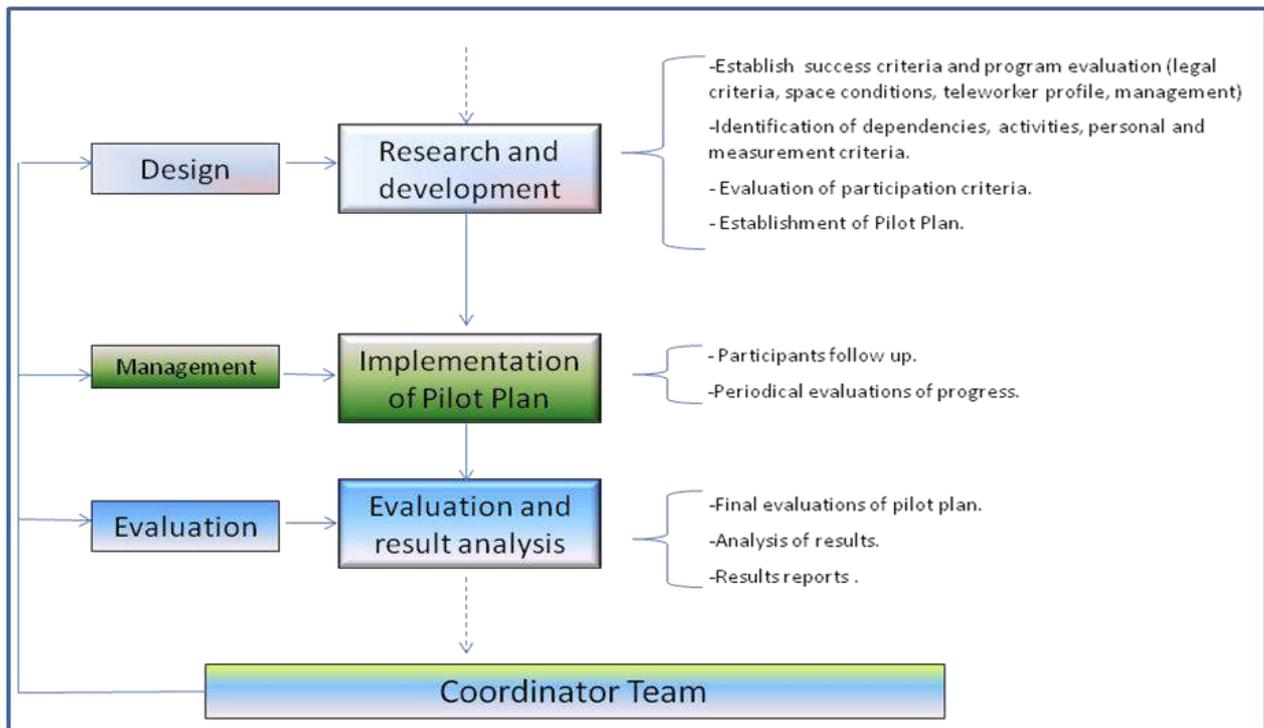

Chart 1: Organization for the implementation of the Pilot Plan [2]

Table 3 below presents the general criteria that served as a base for the selection of participants to be part of the first pilot plan at ICE [2]. This was part of the first stage referred to in the chart above and it represents the basis for the subsequent success of the plan.

Element	Characteristics
Personal Characteristics	Flexibility, adaptability, self-discipline, independence, dynamicity and trust-winner.
Job-related characteristics	Ability to work without supervision or pressure from a superior/ boss, good communication skills, social skills, organization skills, time management, problem solving ability, job experience, knowledge and experience in the company.
Personal Circumstances	Appropriate physical space, social lide outside home, positive social environment, willingness to telework, need to look after kids or elders.

Table 3: Criteria for Pilot Plan

4. TELEWORKING: POSITIVE RESULTS AND CHALLENGES AT ICE

4.1 Positive results

The results from the telework pilot plan represent an important platform in the promotion of teleworking inside and outside the company. The following are some of these results:

4.1.1   There is an evident professional growth for the organization and for the teleworkers.

4.1.2 All workers involved in the pilot plan have succeeded in their role and none of the have been required to return to work in the office.

4.1.3 ICE has perceived monthly revenues of approximately US$400 per teleworker.

4.1.4 ICE has become a model in the promotion and support of teleworking for the government and the whole country. This resulted in the publication of a governmental decree and the modification of the modification of the Labor Code of Costa Rica in favor of teleworking at a national level.

4.1.5 Currently there are 23 Costa Rican public institutions developing pilot plan on teleworking.

4.1.6 A gradual growth in the number of people involved in teleworking in the ICE's pilot plan is being evident: 9 teleworker at the beginning, 16 at the end of this same plan, and 184 in different areas of the company today. This shows the positive outcome of an effective program dynamic.

4.1.7 There is a positive modification in the way work is organized as a result of the benefits perceived form telework.

4.1.8 There is quantitative evidence that shows that productivity has surpassed expectations in 110% average.

4.1.9 Research on working environment has shown that working relations between teleworker and the management has improved.

4.1.10 It is possible that the number of leaves of absence has decreased -as has been the experience of the author-; this will be given further investigation to see if it is a general condition.

4.2 Challenges

Departing from the telework experience ICE is also facing new challenges which are at the same time stimuli to succeed in the activity of teleworking. The following are some of these challenges.

4.2.1 ICE as a virtual Company

Several organizations that provide services through the use of virtual platforms are well known in the business sector; both, to the inside and outside of the company. This idea turns into one of the most defying challenges for ICE given that it will allow the company to offer an emphasis on customer service that also will bring back higher achievement and profit for the company and the client.

4.2.2 Culture and Leadership of the Management

There is no doubt about the important role that leaderships perform in the success of telework, from this it becomes fundamental to create and boost necessary actions so that whenever it is required leaders can be exposed to the importance and the benefits that derive from telework.

4.2.3 Examine the Quality of Life of the Teleworker

It is frequent to talk about improving the teleworker quality of life. This is the reason why ICE is promoting a series of actions to evaluate the worker's motivation, projection, emotional stability and any other element necessary for properly evaluating the teleworker quality of life and their interaction. In this way ICE can keep track of the different elements and situations that guaranty the success of teleworking; as well as the way in which it benefits the institution's workers.

It is a fact that ICE is implementing the necessary actions to set up at least ten telework-centers in strategic points around the country. These telework-centers will provide the necessary infrastructure to implement this working practice beyond the limits of ICE, even including other institutions of public sector.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The following are the author's conclusions derived from interviews and informal discussions with different agents who are part of teleworking at ICE (ICE's teleworking general manager, intermediate management, co-teleworker and workers in general). These conclusions summarize the experience and expectations of ICE as an institution in regards to teleworking.

1. ICE is one of the most important companies of Latin America. It has been decisive at different moments in the country's history because of its innovative ways. Teleworking has been one of them: ICE became the first public company in Costa Rica that developed and implemented a pilot plan and later put into practice the modality of telework in the organization.

2. Due to teleworking ICE experienced a raise in its productivity, improved the quality of its products, and made a better use of its facilities while saving institutional resources thanks to the work in location.

3. Teleworker experienced an improvement in their productivity resulting in more time to share with their families. This is a stimulating result especially when teleworker have kids who required the guidance of their parents or when there are elders who may require special care and attention, even if partially.

4. Reduction in the numbers of leaves of absence, the feeling of having more control over stressful situations – traffic jam, lack of parking spaces, commuting-, are other benefits that cannot be lefts aside. Flexibility in schedule is also important, especially if considering that coworkers at the office may require support at any time.

5. ICE has the challenge to perform or carry out a deeper analysis of the company and the country's idiosyncrasies: what are we like? How do we behave? What can we expect from our co-workers or bosses? What can we expect from our families and neighbors while working at home? And what impact is this going to have in our job-performance? If the company does not examine these issues, it is important for people interested in teleworking to think a bit about them. These matters are going to be part of the teleworker daily life until they reach a mature stage in the process.

6. Currently ICE has reached that mature stage: having started with 16 workers there are now 184, a number that is growing gradually. This is a healthy behavior which offers an optimistic view of the development and implementation of the teleworking at home or in a teleworking-center.

7. ICE supports and helps the action of the government in regards to teleworking. This means that the project has been successful and that better things are yet to come; not only for ICE but for the whole country.

It has been a pleasure to me to share this personal experience regarding the success of teleworking at ICE in Costa Rica.

6. BIBLIOGRAPHY

[1] **Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad, Subgerencia Administrativa Institucional, Unidad Gestora de Teletrabajo y Videoconexiones:** *Reglamento para implementar la modalidad de teletrabajo en el ICE*. **Versión: 2, (2010), pp. 2-12.**

[2] **Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad, Subgerencia Administrativa Institucional, Unidad Gestora de Teletrabajo y Videoconexiones:** *Resumen del Plan Piloto de Teletrabajo en el ICE*, **(Junio 2008), pp. 4-54.**