THE TELEWORK PHENOMENON AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

FENOMENUL TELEWORK ŞI DEZVOLTAREA RURALĂ

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Abstract: *The location of firms and of their employees in today's world is influenced by, amongst other factors, information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as the Internet, Voice-over-IP telephony and others. We have highlighted the case of telework and its impact on rural communities in a few countries, with an emphasis on projects underway in Romania. Among the conclusions, we have mentioned the need for more efforts from national and local level authorities in bridging the divide between firms which might be located outside Romania, but who could employ home-working personnel based outside the main cities. This can be achieved through highlighting the lower cost-structure and the high quality (education, soft skills and multilingualism) of people, with great potential benefits to all parties involved.*

Key words: *telework, rural development, ICTs, national and local authority strategy plan*

INTRODUCTION

There is a general understanding today that the modern society requires any young person who's born outside the main cities of Romania should move on for a university degree to one of the centers (Bucharest, Timişoara, Iaşi, Cluj-Napoca and others) and then remain there in order to stand any chance at a job and a *future*. We have tried to look at what other countries have done to address this situation, the depopulation of rural areas, a trend which started with the Industrial Revolution. The question of whether or not teleworking is really the answer to this troublesome issue has to be provided only after through examining some primary evidence, as highlighted through the implementation of a European project in several counties of Romania.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The methodology includes primarily secondary data, as well as the showcasing of a few examples of good practice.
The data has been extracted from the literature review of major published articles, data and projects – presenting some examples of good practice in Europe.

The new technologies encourage new types of firm organization and new ways of organizing work within these.
As defined by the European Social Partners, ETUC and UNICE, Telework is "a form of organizing and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis" (ETUC 2002: art. 2).

The Sectorial Social Dialogue Committee for telecommunications (SDC, 2001) highlights the potential benefits of this form of work. Table 1 presents some of these social and business objectives.

Table 1.

Social and business objectives of Telework

Objective	**Business**	**Social**
Better labor flexibility	*	
Employment opportunities in structurally disadvantaged regions and for people with disabilities		*
Employees given greater responsibility in planning and carrying out work tasks	*	
Humanization of work		*
A better balance between work and family life		*
Improving quality and productivity	*	
Greater job satisfaction	*	*

Source: SDC, 2001 (amended by author)

Telework presents an increasing trend in all Member States of the European Union, as presented in the Fourth EWCS from 2005 (Data from the Fifth study, from 2010, are scarce when looking at the phenomenon).

The proportion of teleworking employees in the 27 EU countries increased from 5% in 2000 to 7% in 2005. Considerably higher figures are noticeable in countries such as the Czech Republic and Denmark, where about one in seven employees work out regularly from afar from the offices. The same report highlights above average rates in Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg, the Scandinavian countries and some new EU member states (The Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary). Romania was all but absent in witnessing significant increases in telework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

N. Negroponte predicted, back in 1995, a "a complete renaissance of rural living", or perhaps the end of "the need for cities". The Knowledge Economy permits for businesses to develop anywhere, so working for them can be done from anywhere, the logic would assume. Even from small towns, given the right ICT infrastructure.

European level initiatives in developing rural communities, or, rather, preventing their continued decline abound when it comes to utilizing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) for the aforementioned goal.

In the United Kingdom, we have the example of the development of the website *Work-global.com* which has created around 200 new jobs and established a database of hundreds of potential workers, based in remote areas of Scotland and other parts of the UK. Some other effects of this campaign, include - a database of over 550 profiles of potential teleworkers has been established, over 1 million Euro income generated through individual teleworkers. The customers come primarily from outside the UK, 60% of them being based in the USA (Anderson, 2001).

In France, we could mention a telework project in the Southern area of the Alps (http://teleactivites.leader-plus.com) which looks at alleviating a potential crisis in employment and salaries for local residents, almost all engaged in tourism, which could occur as a result of a lack of snow (the regional economy is based on a few ski resorts).

In Romania, we have to start from Eurostat data, which illustrates Romania having 60% of the rural population being covered to fixed broadband, compared to 82,5% at EU level.

Also, the data according to the Ministry of Communications and Information Society (2011) shows that in 3.648 localities "there is no broadband infrastructure (backhaul and local loop) and no documented intentions to invest in the next 3 years". This is a serious pull-back on any efforts to promote teleworking from villages and other rural areas.

The result of the analysis showed that the population situated in these white zones represent 5% of Romania's population (without the Capital City). This is yet another indicator of the urbanization of Romania after the Revolution of 1989 (Table 2).

Table 2.

Areas covered with broadband Internet in Romania

No. of counties	Population				Households				Localities			
	"white zones"		Total	%	"white zones"		Total	%	"white zones"		Total	%
41	Rural	Urban	19,494,925	5%	Rural	Urban	6,531,580	5%	Rural	Urban	13,746	27%
	902,384	0			337,298	0			3,648	0		
	902,384				337,298				3,648			

Source: Ministry of Communications and Information Society (2011)

With all this data in mind, there are still some interesting projects to be emphasized, one of them being a European funded program, developed over a few counties, with the suggestive name "New opportunities for employment in rural areas through Telework".

The scope of this project? Facilitating the integration in the workforce and improving quality of life and working conditions for 792 young people from rural areas, in the counties of Harghita, Covasna, Mures, Brasov, Alba and Hunedoara"(ADDJB, 2008).

In order to achieve this broader goal, the more detailed objectives include foreign language training courses for youth, lobbying urban based companies in providing telework opportunities in the framework of this project.

This leads to another issues, the lack of interest in many countries, and surely so in Romania in creating job opportunities in rural areas, when the monetary benefit is not evident in the short-run. Companies want to make money..now! Such a project takes a few years, from training the cadre all the way to reaping the benefits, through having a highly skilled technical consultant or sales person or translator working for them from the comfort

of their home or from a telecenter, both being potentially located in a village.

CONCLUSIONS

Examples from countries such as the US, UK, France and many others show that rural development is also possible through offering the youth from these areas viable employment opportunities.

The distance to market makes it difficult to locate enterprises in these areas. However, with good Internet broadband coverage, the Romanian Government or local authorities do not need to lobby companies to locate in these remote areas, but rather to offer jobs which can be undertaken through the Internet (examples: sales and marketing, data processing, graphic or web – design, technical consulting). Moreover, these companies could even be located outside Romania's borders and still employ people located in rural areas of our country. What would be the benefits? Very poor areas of Romania could finally get some hope for a future, instead of seeing the youth moving to the cities (or to another country, see the latest national census from 2011), contributing to overpopulation, pollution and, potentially, criminality. Another benefit would be that, even if these companies are not registered in Romania, taxes would still come from the salary made by those employed, based in Romania. Another positive byproduct ((as also mentioned by Ghilic-Micu et all in 2000)) is that it creates the possibility of migration from areas which are very expensive to areas with lower costs of living, thus improving the quality of life of the population, with benefits in the overall happiness and well-being (reducing also National health related costs).

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