

## YOUR HOME - YOUR ENTERPRISE IN E-UROPE

When you say telework in Slovakia, many people still think "*Hmm. That has got something to do with television*". Telework, but also other flexible working forms remain poorly known and scarcely used. Better information and an increase in the use of telework are the objectives of the project *Your home – your enterprise in e-urop*e. The project is promoting telework as a form of work which could enable employees to combine family life and working life, in a way which is beneficial for both employers and employees. It is also hoped that this could help reduce discrimination on the labour market.

With the exception of Bratislava and a few other larger towns, Slovakia's inhabitants live mostly in small towns and villages. It is very common to spend an hour or more commuting to and from work. This imposes a number of constraints and inconvenience not only on individual workers but also society in general. The obvious one is time. Time spent in traffic is time which cannot be spent on more enjoyable pursuits. Also, it is often difficult to travel to work when there are children in the family who have to be dropped up at school at eight and picked up again at four. Commuting is also expensive. Whatever option used, car or public transport, the monthly cost for household budgets can be considerable. Besides, the traffic contributes to pollution and saturation of transport infrastructures. Last but not least, commuting is even more difficult for people with physical difficulties such as disability or illness. Therefore it appears that long travel times are not only an inconvenience and a personal and social cost but they may also be a source of discrimination. Women with young children as well as older people are less likely to be able to accept a job which requires long travel to work.

The concern of project organisers of *Your home – your enterprise in e-urop*e was to support sustainable job creation which would also respect employees' personal life. It is one of the very few projects in Slovakia to focus on work-life balance. This is partly due to the fact that for the moment, little attention is paid to the issue, but also to the employment situation in Trenčín region.

Slovakia is progressively recovering from the structural changes of the nineties, when the average national unemployment rate was close to 20%. At that time - and this trend still continues today - the primary policy focus was put on employment creation, often to the exclusion of considering employees' other needs. As the unemployment rate declines, issues of work-life balance are becoming more prominent in the policy debate. The employment situation in the Trenčín region is quite good compared to other parts of the country. Indeed, it is the second best after Bratislava. The unemployment rate (8.1% in 2005) is lower than the Slovak average (16.2% in 2005) and a little lower than the EU average (8.8% in 2005). Therefore Trenčín and its surroundings are meeting different challenges than the regions where unemployment still ranges above 20%. Labour and skill shortages are emerging in some sectors. As a result there is a need to make the labour market accessible to a larger part of the employable population in the labour market and to offer them conditions which can combine both their professional ambitions and their personal life. These are the considerations which motivated the project organisers of *Your home – your enterprise in e-urop*e to introduce telework as a possible solution to the employment situation in the region.

### **BUILDING EMPLOYEES' INTEREST AND EMPLOYERS' CONFIDENCE**

The task facing the organisations involved in this project is considerable. According to a survey carried out by the Trenčín Chamber of Commerce and Industry, only around one percent of Slovak companies currently use telework. A more optimistic scenario actually indicates a figure of three percent, but following a more detailed questionnaire it appears that this is mostly due to poor understanding of what telework means. "We actually know only one company who effectively uses telework" says Jan Vaclav from the Trenčín Chamber of Commerce and Industry "others often misinterpret this term". People have the tendency to think that because they prepare some documents at home or because they employ freelancers they are using telework. But this is a misconception. Telework is a form of organising and performing work, using

information technology, in the context of an employment contract or relationship, where work, which could also be performed on the employer's premises is carried out away from these premises on a regular basis.

Alongside the generally poor knowledge of telework on the part of employers as well as employees, the project is also trying to overcome employer mistrust of this flexible form of working. There is a widespread belief that telework is open to abuse, because employers have less control over what their employees are doing. This can, however, be addressed by using well adapted management tools. The development of such tools and methodologies is one aspect of *Your home - your enterprise in e-urope*. The project organisers have already created a multifunctional portal on telework ([www.teleworkportal.sk](http://www.teleworkportal.sk)). This of course serves as an information source, but more importantly, it will soon be used as a source of e-learning activities linked to telework. It can also function as a telework platform. It contains a part on which employers can create their own secured space, which they can use for storing materials necessary for telework, teleconferences and other exchanges. The idea behind this platform is twofold. First, it gives companies who can not or do not want to immediately invest in such a secured website a space to launch their telework experience. The second goal was to have a pedagogical tool; an example of what such a platform can look like and what functionalities it should have.

The main audience of this activity are SMEs employers. Its content has been designed in order to address the issues identified in two surveys, one of more than 500 employers and a more in-depth one of a sample of 200 employers. As well as the very low use of telework, the survey showed that major obstacles for companies to implement telework are:

- a lack of employees interest
- a lack of employers confidence
- a lack of information

The project is trying to address all these aspects through awareness raising and workshops, the development of adapted management tools for telework as well as other training modules, such as ICT. However, it is important to mention that the surveys also showed that employers are aware of a wide range of possible benefits of telework. This fact is very encouraging for the project since it shows possible employers interest. The benefits mentioned include:

- possibilities to improve work-life balance
- a better approach to customers' needs
- improved employee efficiency
- costs savings (office and transport)

A large campaign and a number of information resources have been launched in order to put forward the benefits of telework. An information website ([www.tele-work.sk](http://www.tele-work.sk)) has been created. It was the first comprehensive resource on telework in Slovakia. It contains information about telework, job offers which are selected in cooperation with a job portal called Profesia, and an electronic bi-monthly newsletter which already has more than one hundred subscribers. Unlike the workshop activities, the newsletter and the website give the project a national dimension.

## **LARGE PARTNERS – LARGE AUDIENCE**

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*Your home – your enterprise in e-urope* is a regional project with national ambition. It unites three major regional actors of whom two are part of a national network. The Association for Regional Development of Upper Nitra – ZRRHN was the originator of the project. ZRRHN has among its core missions to support the development and growth of the region, including the development of its labour market. There are a number of encouraging innovations, including new forms of working and the development of ICT. The other two partner organisations are actually members of ZRRHN.

When ZRRHN were in the process of designing the project, they invited interested member organisations to participate. Among those who responded was the Trenčín branch of the Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry. It brings together more than 200 companies active in the region. They are a crucial partner for the project. The nature and structure of the Chamber of

Commerce enable easy access to one of the target groups, small and medium companies. The Chamber of Commerce also has a good knowledge of employers' needs. Therefore they can formulate project activities which are attractive and beneficial to this target group. "*We entered this project because we consider that telework can be very interesting for at least some SME's*" says Jan Václav, project manager from the Trenčín Chamber of Commerce. "*SME's are under constant pressure to minimise their costs and become more efficient. Telework can help these smaller organisations to significantly reduce their costs and enhance their efficiency*" he adds.

The third partner is another national organisation represented by its regional branch, the Forum for Support of Senior People - FPPS. The objectives of the organisation are to represent the interests of this group and also to fight against their discrimination. "*We think that telework could be an interesting form of working for our ageing society*" comments Ľubica Gáliková, the president of FPPS. As the retirement age increases and the population ages, it is necessary to think about form of working adapted to the needs of older people. Some of them are suffering ill health and hence travelling becomes more and more inconvenient for them. Others may have an older parent to take care of and therefore can not afford the time to commute to work. Telework could be a solution even though there are several obstacles to it. Individuals over 50 years of age are the second target group of the project.

The role of the FPPS in this project is twofold. On one hand they are informing their audience about the opportunities of telework. On the other hand, through this project, they are raising general awareness about the position of older people in society and fight against their discrimination. In order to map the current situation, FPPS organised a survey about the interest in telework, training needs, but also the employment situation and discrimination of this target group. The survey revealed that among the 159 respondents the majority would be interested in remote working but unfortunately many are lacking the ICT skills. They are equally lacking the necessary ICT equipment. On the other hand the survey showed that most of them would be willing to take up ICT training.

It also confirmed that older workers are a particularly at risk of unemployment. More than two thirds of respondents were unemployed for periods longer than one year and one fifth of them for more than five years. The majority also felt that their age was an obstacle to finding new job and that they were being discriminated against in recruitment processes. For FPPS, the project *Your home – your enterprise in e-europe* is a possibility to reach employers and work with them on solutions to the employment situation of older workers.

The partnership developed two forms of engaging the two very different target groups. One is through series of workshops. The first round of workshops was informative and has already taken place. Their first objective was to present telework and its advantages to both target groups. The second objective was to raise employers' interest in recruiting older workers. The upcoming workshops will concentrate on training activities based on the functionalities of the on-line portal mentioned above.

Besides the training workshops, which are one-off events, a longer pilot training programme is being developed. It is based on the needs of the two target groups as identified in the initial surveys. The project is going to train a small mixed group of older persons and SME managers. The programme will of course focus on telework, but not exclusively. It will also cover ICT and language training. These, however, will mostly be delivered through e-learning on the teleworkportal and will be then offered to the wider public.

## **FROM REGIONAL TO NATIONAL IMPACT**

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*Your home – your enterprise in e-europe* is backed by strong and important partners, both at regional and national level. Both the Slovak Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the FPPS are organisations consulted by government in relevant policy areas. They will therefore have the capacity to bring this project, its objectives and results to a wider audience as well as the immediate stakeholders.

As has been underlined before, this project is rather unique in the Slovak Republic. From the interest in its initial activities and the information workshops it appears that the project has the potential to capture its audience. A mainstreaming strategy has been designed to promote telework at the national level and to organise a widespread and informed debate. The objective of the mainstreaming strategy is to regulate telework as a flexible form of working. Currently there is no national legislation specifying the rights and the obligations of teleworkers. The European social partner framework agreement on telework signed in 2002 has not yet been fully implemented in Slovakia. The lack of regulation is an important obstacle to the introduction of this form of working. This enhances the mistrust of employers and employees.

The major mainstreaming tool of *Your home – your enterprise in e-urop*e will be the forum for discussions about new ways of working. This will be launched in 2007 and will be based on the idea of a tripartite dialogue through the activities of a working team, a series of workshops and finally a conference in May 2007. It will bring together employer and trade union representatives and decision makers. These discussions should seek to respond to the legislative requirements and put forward alternatives which would satisfy both employees and employers. The Forum should also focus on identifying sources of employment discrimination in Slovakia and reflect on how more flexible working forms could serve to address these.

The mainstreaming activities already seem very promising now. The National Union of Employers has recently asked the project organisers to participate in the consultation on the review of the labour code which is planned for 2007. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic is also already aware of the activities developed by the project. The messages of the project are echoed in the government resolution of June 2006 on initiatives to reconcile work and family life by 2010. This document states that searching for responses to the challenge of work-life balance should be a governmental priority. *Your home- your enterprise in e-urop*e definitely has the ambition to participate to this task.

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