

Conditions for the Diffusion of Telework

By Hamano Takayoshi

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications has named May 27 "Telework Day," and on that day this year a panel discussion and exhibition were held in Tokyo with the aim of promoting the spread of teleworking. The practice apparently is quite widespread in the United States, but is Japan really about to enter an age of teleworking?

Definition

Teleworking can be defined as a method of working in which workers are not confined to their workplaces. Being employed usually means commuting to a place of work, such as an office in a private company or a public office, but in the case of teleworking, it is the work which comes to the worker. Needless to say, this new employment pattern has been made possible by the recent revolutionary development of information and communications equipment, such as personal computers and teleconference-style panel discussions, and the spread of information networks.

Under the teleworking system, instead of going into their head offices, workers operate in satellite offices or spot offices set up near their homes and communicate via e-mail and so on. There is also a system of at-home employment, whereby people work at home rather than commuting to the office. Yet another employment pattern that is spreading is mobile work—in other words, workers use personal computers with cellular phones from wherever they might be to keep in contact, make reports, and receive orders from the company. Recently, a device the size of a large pocket notebook has come on the market that combines PC and minicellular phone functions. Mobile work is very convenient for sales people, for example, who cannot do their work from an office.

Current rate of diffusion

Fuji Xerox has a satellite office near Shin-Yurigaoka Station on the Odakyu Line in the suburbs of Tokyo. It has per-

sonal computers, of course, and also teleconferencing and other equipment, so employees can work here without having to go to the headquarters in the city center. The people working here belong to different sections. When I visited, they were each quietly doing their own work in front of their own terminals.

Fuji Xerox began to seriously introduce satellite offices in December 1993. Now the company has five satellite offices in such places as Musashino and Yokohama and also 12 spot offices, where employees can do partial telework. Other major companies that have taken the initiative in introducing teleworking include Asahi Breweries, NEC Corp., Nippon Kokan, Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Corp. and Kokuyo Corp. No accurate statistics are available on diffusion, but according to a final report issued in the fall of 1996 by a council for the promotion of teleworking, made up of representatives from the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, the Ministry of Labor and interested companies, there are an estimated 400,000 or so employees who do regular teleworking at least once a week.

Incidentally, according to one survey, there are 11.23 million teleworkers in the United States. When a powerful earthquake hit Northridge, Los Angeles, in 1994, the federal government set up a teleworking center there in about a month, and 700,000 people are said to have made use of this facility. Before the earthquake, the number of teleworkers in this area was no more than 350,000, so the figure has doubled as a result of the tremor.

Advantages of teleworking

Generally speaking, there seem to be two types of teleworking: the urban type and the rural type. The urban type enables people to work in suburban



Mobile information: Cyber office hits the road

satellite offices or in their homes without commuting to the head office in the city center. In contrast, the rural type involves teleworking in the community, with the aim of revitalizing the local economy.

The advantages of the urban type are that, first of all, commuting time is reduced enormously. In the case of Fuji Xerox, the average one-way commute of 75 minutes has been cut to 43 minutes. Commuting in Tokyo during the rush hour can be hellish. Passengers are packed in the trains so tightly that they cannot even move. Some people say that commuting in the metropolitan area is like a prison sentence. And with the constant rise in land prices in Tokyo, commuting has grown longer year by year as people are forced to look for homes farther away from the center.

Say that an employee has a roundtrip commute of three hours, which is not unusual, and works for 38 years. That means that he has a prison sentence of nearly 30,000 hours, or more than three years in total. So teleworking means that this sentence can be reduced considerably. If the practice of teleworking spreads, people will no longer have to talk about painful commuting. Also, teleworking will probably have enormous merits for physically disabled persons who, for example, are unable to travel into the city center because of weak legs. Hearing

about case studies so far, it seems that there are quite a few salaried workers who would have become lazy pensioners after retirement but who have been able to change course by using the saved commuting time to actively pursue hobbies or get involved in community activities.

The second merit of teleworking is that it gives white-collar workers, who are usually too busy with writing reports, making contacts, consulting, and the like to mull over ideas and concepts, more time to ruminate. The person who is phoning might be doing his work efficiently, but the person who answers the phone has to cease what he is doing in order to do so. It is said that such breaks last for an average of 15 minutes, so this is no trivial matter. In the case of teleworking, callers can switch to e-mail, so workers can continue to concentrate on the task at hand without being interrupted. Looking at the performance of companies that have introduced teleworking so far, the number of planning proposals and reports is said to have increased by about 20%. In the process of personnel evaluation, the amount of proposals and other documentation is taken as one measure for appraisal.

There have also been a few cases reported in which working wives have moved with their husbands when they

have been transferred but continued to work from home at their new place of residence. A magazine recently reported the case of a woman who works for an information equipment and systems development company in Sapporo who, instead of quitting when her husband was transferred to Tokyo, went with him but continued to work for the same firm from her new home. Such cases are expected to increase from now on.

Problems of at-home work

Although it is basically a form of teleworking, however, in practice at-home work has more problems compared with working from satellite offices or doing mobile work. For example, a housewife who works at home might have a hard time doing both the household chores and her work.

Also, at-home work can be very lonely. Accordingly, it is important to have frequent correspondence with other people via e-mail and so on. In addition, at-home workers have to create a work space in the home and make sure, for example, that they are not interrupted in their work by the kids. Even in a country like the U.S., where the housing environment is generally better, this is sometimes a problem. In Japan, where houses and apartments are like rabbit hutches,

working at home can be very difficult indeed.

Furthermore, there is concern that it will be difficult to apply labor accident insurance for at-home work. When an accident occurs at home, the judgment will differ depending on whether it happened in the part of the home being used as an office or during some other household task. Discriminating between the two could be very difficult indeed.

So teleworking from home involves various problems. One solution could be for workers to engage in partial teleworking, meaning that they would sometimes commute to their offices, rather than absolute at-home work.

The Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications is encouraging the spread of teleworking and hopes that about 3.5 million people will be involved by 2000. For this purpose, it has launched a campaign under the slogan "the rising tide of teleworking in the public and private sectors." The government itself is introducing teleworking on a trial basis in the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, and it has compiled a guidebook on the introduction of teleworking. The government is also considering tax benefits and other forms of assistance for the diffusion of teleworking among private companies and local governments.

The problem lies in how companies and the people who work there will take this campaign by the government. The attitude of some employers will probably be, "Yes, teleworking has its merits, but . . ." Therefore, a more carefully planned campaign might be necessary in which, for example, companies that have taken the lead in adopting teleworking would announce their experiences. There are also employees, especially in the middle and older age groups, who find it hard to accept the idea. One company official told me that in the end maybe about 30% of people would not take to teleworking. What is needed here are technological developments to make PCs even easier to handle than at present.

Hamano Takayoshi is a news commentator at NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation).



Working together remotely: Does a satellite office generate creativity or isolation?