

A Study on the Imbalance between Information Technology and Teleworking in Japan

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1. Introduction

It is clearly seen, nowadays, that the geographical boundaries between nations are diminishing rapidly as a result of advent and advancement in the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The application of Internet is one such powerful tool to accomplish this drastic change in the contemporary world. It has made employees to accomplish related tasks not only relatively easier and quicker but also at an alternative work site other than regular work sites. Teleworking, an alternate work arrangement which brings work to the workers rather than workers to the work, has been gaining significance in many industrialized countries mainly as a result of advancement in information technology. In Japan, nevertheless, it has not gained momentum as otherwise expected because of many visible factors as expressed by the management of the organizations. Nonetheless, few other organizations have been practicing teleworking successfully. Hence, it has created an intuition in ascertaining whether or not technology has really played a role in considering teleworking as an alternate work arrangement.

2. Status of Information Technology in Modern Japan

It is well known that advancement in information technology has significantly stimulates Japanese appetite for information. The penetration rate of PC has started to increase as early as 1990s if not outgrown to few industrialized nations. Figure 1 illustrates this trend. In spite of significant growth in the number of Internet users in Japan, the average penetration level was found to be lower as compared to few Western and Asian countries. Figure 2 illustrates this trend. One of the prime reasons is reported to be very high Internet access fee in Japan as compared to these countries. It is about US\$61 per month including communication fee for 20 hours as compared to USA (US\$30), Germany (US\$40), United Kingdom (US\$29) and South Korea (US\$17) (TCA, 2000). The proliferation of portable mobile telephone in Japan has been seen very explosive. Its growth has spurred

tremendously especially over the past few years. The number of cellular mobile phone subscribers was reported to be 47.3 million in March 1999 and increased further to 56.85 million in March 2000 (TCA, 2000) and 62.19 million in October 2000 (MPT, 2000). Thus, it has been growing with an increase of almost 10 million subscribers annually. It is depicted in Figure 3.

3. Growth of Teleworking in Japan

In Japan, teleworking has started in the form of satellite and resort office experiments in the late 1980s as a result of factors such as: abnormal land prices in urban areas, change in the Japanese industrial structure, female employment, graying of society and change in social values (Wendy Spinks, 1991). The Ministry of Post and Telecommunications (MPT), a Federal entity, had started a fully owned in-house telework pilot in 1997 followed by a small work-at-home pilot by Gifu Prefecture in September 1997 (IFF, 1998). In the later years, private sectors have had begun a change in employment patterns with a growing emphasis on in-house efforts. The sales forces of NEC were being converted into mobile workers and its innovative drop-in centre in the downtown Osaka has proved extremely popular with its peripatetic workforce (IFF, 1998). Fuji Xerox, another large organization in the pipeline of flexible telework initiatives, had started a New Work Way campaign in which head office decentralization, telework centers and mobility were greatly seen as valuable tools in their ongoing search for greater efficiency (IFF, 1998). Nonetheless, the growth of telework population in Japan was found to be very slow unlike other major developed nations. The number of white-collar regular employees who practice teleworking once a week and over was estimated to be 680,000, about 4% of white-collar employees, in 1996. The total telework population, however, including those who telework less than once a week was estimated to be 809,000 in 1996 (SOAJ, 1997). A report by the European Telework commission had estimated the number of teleworkers in Japan in 1999 to

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be 2.09 million, about 7.9% of the workforce. Figure 4 illustrates this trend with other few industrialized nations.

4. Imbalance between teleworking and technology

Despite the development and innovation in the technology sector, teleworking has found to be grown very moderately as otherwise expected. Reluctance by the management, not technology, has played a major role for the very slow growth of teleworking in Japan. It is noted that life time employment, traditional work style, direct supervision, frequent face-to-face communication and more importantly team work were found to be essential in many Japanese organizations. Additionally,

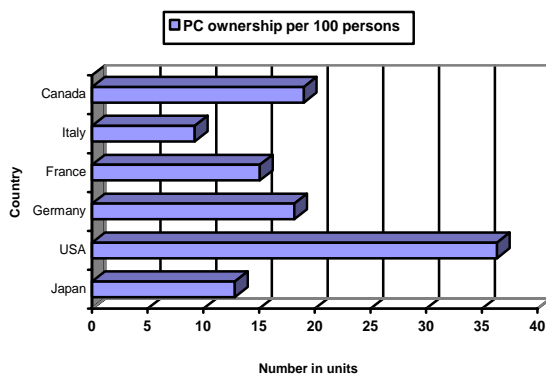


Figure 1 PC ownership/100 persons, 1996
Source: Japan Almanac, 2000

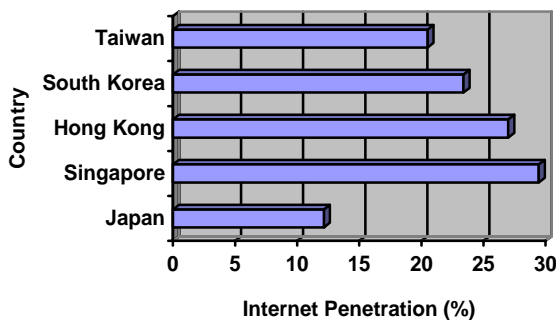


Figure 2 Penetration of Internet, 1999
Source: Telecommunication Carrier Association, 2000

middle management was reported to face “additional work loads by supervising employees remotely” as a result of practicing teleworking. The growing number of mobile workers in Japan is another important potential job category for greater acceptance of teleworking. Despite the involvement of greater mobility equipped with portable computer, mobile phone and other

electronic gadgets by these mobile workers, the employing organizations, unfortunately, have failed to recognize teleworking as a potential full-time work

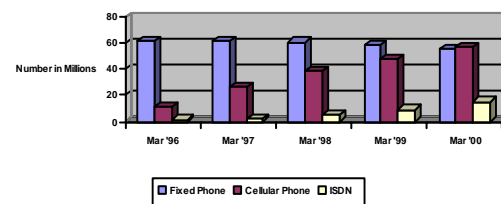


Figure 3 Number of Telephone subscribers in Japan
Source: Ministry of Post and Telecommunication, 2000

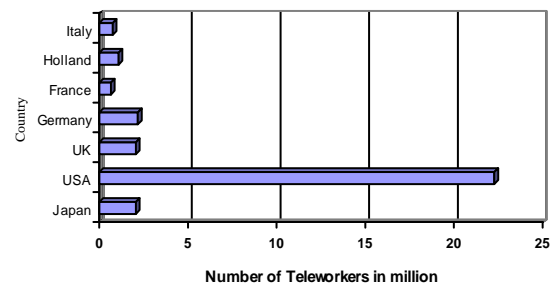


Figure 4 Population of Teleworkers, 1999
Source: European Telework Report, 2000

arrangement. Thus, in Japan, the advancement of technology has failed to make an impact on the growth of teleworking. It is noted that though the number of email transactions between organizations has increased drastically, the number of people using this media to report work to their employers remotely has not increased proportionally.

5. Conclusion

Teleworking, an alternate work option, has yet to gain widespread recognition in the business environment in Japan. The increased role of information technology in promoting the growth of teleworking in Japan is still remain to be seen at large. It is argued that further innovation in the technology might help to change the attitude of the business management toward teleworking for a wider adoption. Nevertheless, the change of attitude especially from the traditional work environment to that of contemporary work option would play a very crucial role for greater penetration of teleworking in Japan.

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