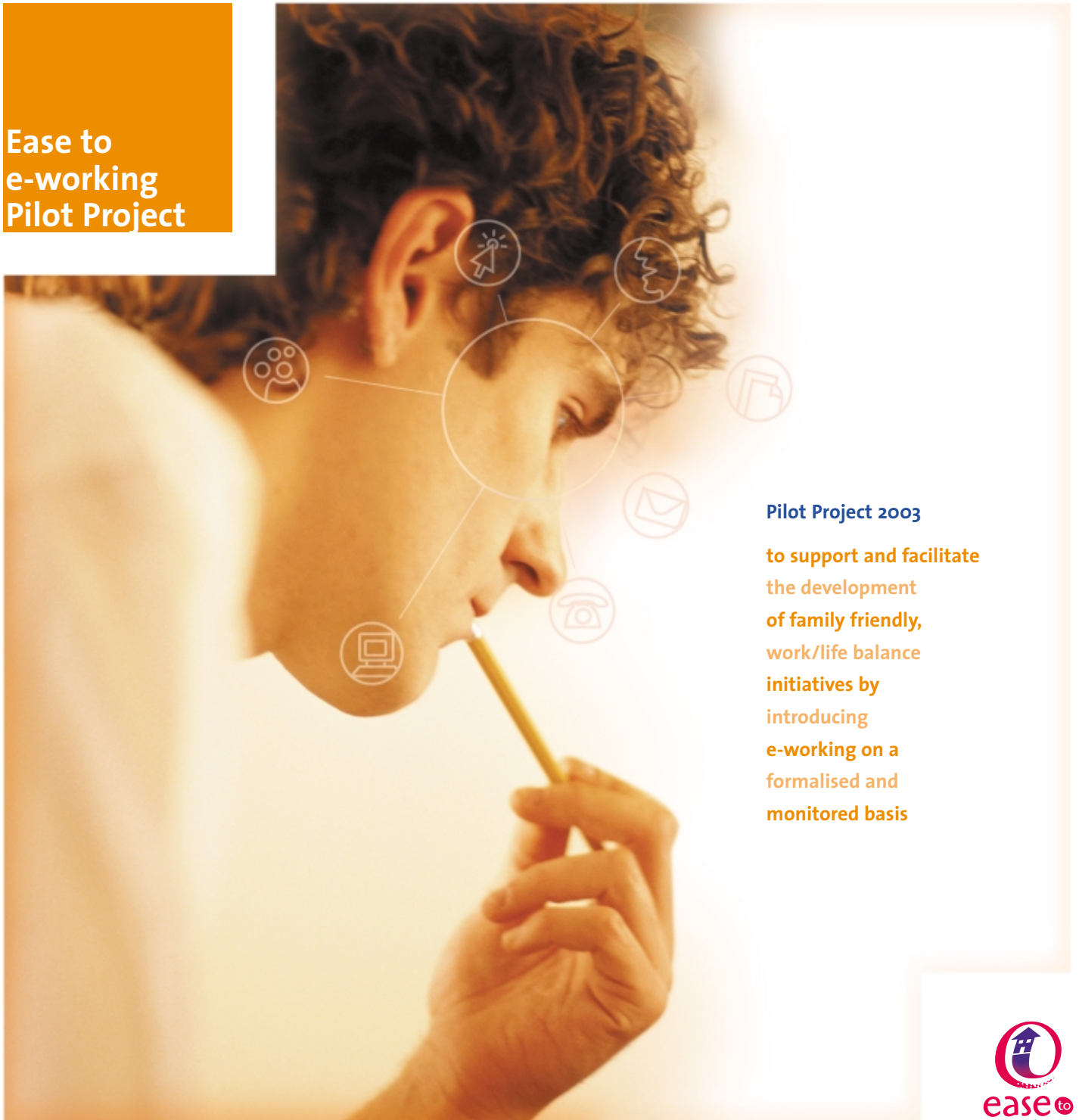


Ease to e-working Pilot Project



Pilot Project 2003

**to support and facilitate
the development
of family friendly,
work/life balance
initiatives by
introducing
e-working on a
formalised and
monitored basis**

Background

The 'Ease to eWorking' pilot project has sought to support and facilitate the development of family friendly/work life balance initiatives by introducing e-working on a formalised basis through the joint efforts of three major employers, eircom, Eastern Health Shared Services (EHSS) and some Government Departments through the Department of Finance. Other partners involved in the project included the trade unions IMPACT, the Public Service Executive Union (PSEU) and the Communications Workers' Union (CWU).

The project was comprised of management, unions and employees who jointly, and on a co-operative basis, examined the issues that exist in identifying and overcoming any barriers to this form of family friendly/work life balance arrangement. The project timeframe was a 9-month period, followed by feedback, evaluation and review.

Choosing Participants

The pilot population for the project was targeted at 60 participants, 20 from each organisation. Employees were selected from a diverse population in terms of geographic location, gender (50% male and 50% female), ethnicity, disability and age (ranged from 26 – 50 years). A Code of Practice for e-working in all three participating organisations was developed based on the Code of Practice on e-working in Ireland. In addition an E-Working Agreement between the employer and the employee was also agreed and implemented in this project.

Project Activity

Expectations of participants and their managers were measured at the outset and again nearing completion of the project. Training seminars were conducted for all participants of the project with a particular emphasis being placed on the challenges facing the managers of e-workers and their teams. A help facility was also initiated in each participating organisation where practical assistance and technical advice was given over the duration of the project. A dedicated website for the project, which was hosted by eircom, was also developed to give information and assistance to both the e-workers and their managers.

Aim of the Project

The overall aim of the project was to successfully implement e-working in the partner organisations and to design this comprehensive information pack for organisations wishing to implement a family friendly initiative in the area of e-working. The pack is based on the real experience of the project partners from the pilot.

The expected outcomes of the project, which have been achieved, were as follows:

- *A full analysis of the project with the benefit of the pilot being tested and reviewed in a working environment*
- *Increased awareness for employers and employees of the advantages and disadvantages involved in implementing an e-working initiative*
- *Enhanced awareness of the strategic importance of implementing family friendly/work life initiatives to gain competitive advantage*
- *Development of a practical assessment of the working model and an honest reflection of the actual experience*
- *Development of a resource pack to act as a guide to employers and employees who wish to explore e-working with a specific analysis in terms of finances, technology and expectations of those involved*

Training

A one-day training course for e-workers and their managers was held prior to commencing e-working. This training day covered:

- *General information on e-working*
- *Time management for e-workers*
- *Framework for e-working*
- *Social/psychological impact of e-working*
- *Managing e-workers*
- *Health and safety*
- *Communication*
- *Performance management*
- *Legal obligations*

There are initial short-term costs associated with providing e-working. However the results suggest that the long-term savings outweigh the initial costs

Following feedback mid project, a further one days training was provided which was designed specifically for the managers of e-workers. This training concentrated on how to manage e-workers by support, etiquettes, customer service, and managing teams comprised of e-workers and non-e-workers. As a result of this training and following feedback from the managers and e-workers on the project, an additional days training/facilitation was required for the e-worker's team members or 'e-teams'. This training was designed to enhance the relationship between the e-worker and their non e-working team members. This training involved the use of international trainers with specific skills in this area. In addition some e-workers undertook specific health and safety training.

Costs

ITEM	UNIT COST	TOTAL COST
Computer Equipment:		
Desktop PC	€1,299	
Modem	€195	
Printer	€225	€1719
Furniture:		
Desk	€203	
Chair	€100	
Pedestal	€152	
Footrest	€48	
Desk Lamp	€40	
Shredder	€190	€733
ISDN:		
Line Connection	€320	
Line Rental (1 year)	€450	
Call Costs (est. for 1 year)	€480	€1,250
Fire Equipment:		
Fire Extinguisher	€75	
Fire Blanket	€30	
Smoke Alarm	€7	
Plug Board	€20	€132
Total Costs for 1 e-worker		€3,834

Part-funding was secured for the project through the Family Friendly Framework Committee for the Development of family friendly initiatives at the level of the Enterprise arising from the PPF. The funding was used for

- *training*
- *administration of questionnaires*
- *printing the Packs*
- *design and delivery of the website*
- *design of the video*

In addition each organisation funded the 'set-up' costs for each e-worker's home office. These costs included furniture, computer equipment, ISDN and DSL line installation, rental and call charges, and fire safety equipment. A detailed breakdown of the suggested furniture/equipment required for one e-worker together with the estimated costs is listed opposite.

As illustrated, there are initial short-term costs associated with providing e-working as a flexible working arrangement. However the results of this project suggest that the long-term savings to both the organisation and the employee outweigh the initial costs.

Project Evaluation

Getting Started

When the pilot commenced it was intended that all e-workers would be trained and would have commenced e-working within 3 months.

This timeframe was successful for most e-workers. However difficulties were experienced in some areas that led to a delay in commencing, including securing approval of 'set-up' costs for some of the partners, which delayed the purchase of essential home office equipment. The experience gained from this issue is to plan in advance of the start of the financial year when introducing a new working initiative that will have cost implications, and ensure all anticipated expenditure is identified.

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Getting Buy-in

During the project the absolute need to ensure that there is 'buy-in' from all sections of the organisation became apparent. The experience from the project suggests that a small project team within the organisation should be established to ensure the successful implementation of the new working arrangements. This small project team should include:

- *An 'owner' or champion from senior management*
- *A representative from the human resource department*
- *A representative from the IT department or a service company representative if there is no IT department within the organisation*
- *A representative from the finance department*
- *A staff representative/trade union representative*

Issues did arise during the project that highlighted the need to have full commitment from these sections of the organisation through full participative ownership of the project.

The negative impact of lack of commitment or low prioritisation of the initiative will result in delays in commencing e-working and/or failure to establish e-working as a viable new way of working.

Participation on the Project

The nature of businesses operated by the project partners gave rise to a diversity in the roles tested. The range of roles demonstrates that e-working is an option in a wide variety of work areas:

- *Regional Librarian*
- *Financial Controller*
- *Health & Safety Advisor*
- *Senior Buyer*
- *Administration staff*
- *Test Analyst*
- *Design Engineer*
- *Investigator*
- *Fire Safety Officer*
- *SAP Configuration staff*
- *IT Project staff*
- *Insurance Manager*
- *Network Development Engineer*
- *Technical Support Manager*
- *HR Manager*
- *Training officer*

Full participation of 60 employees and their managers, was realised at the start of the project. However during the 9 month period a number of e-workers left the project, for a variety of reasons:

- *Promotion to another organisation*
- *Returning to home country*
- *Realisation through the training process that e-working did not suit either the job or the employee*
- *Promotion within the organisation to a position that did not suit e-working*
- *Technology not available in home office due to ISDN installation not being available in some remote areas*

Training

The e-workers were open to the new working arrangement and willing to participate fully to ensure the success of the arrangement. However managers of e-workers had some concerns regarding their ability to manage at a distance. The e-worker's co-workers or team members also expressed concern regarding how effective the team would be through the remote working arrangement.

These issues were all addressed through the three different training sessions provided during the project in an effort to ensure that each worker had the key skills and information to work successfully and continue to meet the objectives of the organisations.

Project Findings

EXPECTATIONS

Questionnaires were administered before and after the e-working initiative was implemented. The data from the questionnaires administered prior to the initiative was used to design the training interventions to ensure that all concerns were addressed and that the required skills and competencies were delivered.

Analysis of the data gained from the questionnaires administered prior to implementing the initiative indicated that there were several areas of shared concern for both managers and e-workers prior to e-working.

Managers of e-workers had some concerns regarding their ability to manage at a distance

According to 83% of the post questionnaire sample, the e-worker has been able to work to the standards required by the manager during the e-working project

Anticipated negative outcomes

- **66.7%** of managers were concerned that e-working would have a negative impact on communications with colleagues. **53.3%** of e-workers shared this view and **62%** of e-workers anticipated that one of the main disadvantages would be a lack of interaction between the e-worker and his or her work colleagues.
- **77.7%** of managers were of the view that e-working would impact negatively on the ability to manage crisis situations.
- **73%** of managers were worried that e-working would result in resentment from co-workers. E-workers were also concerned and **49%** of the sample anticipated that this would be a disadvantage of e-working.
- Managing e-workers was also viewed as a possible disadvantage, with almost **45%** of the managers sample anticipating this as a disadvantage.
- **51.1%** of e-workers expected that e-working would have a negative impact on an employee's career and **38.9%** of managers shared this view.

Anticipated positive outcomes

- **72%** of managers believed that e-working would not impact on customer relationships. E-workers were similarly confident with **53%** of the sample stating that e-working would have a positive impact in this area.
- **55.6%** of managers were of the view that e-working would reduce commuting times. **95.6%** of e-workers agreed with this view.
- Over **64%** of the e-workers sampled felt that e-working would have a positive impact on their ability to perform their job.
- When questioned about the possible impact on home life, **72.2%** of the sample of managers stated that it would have a positive impact on the employees home life. Similar responses were reflected in the employees' responses.

OUTCOMES

Managers views

Following implementation of the e-working initiative the managers stated that managing the e-worker, with regard to the delivery of results, was the same as the office-based worker. According to **83%** of the post questionnaire sample, the e-worker has been able to work to the standards required by the manager during the e-working project.

- The majority of the sample (**66.7%**) indicated that e-working had a negative impact on communications with colleagues or manager. Although a concern was initially expressed with regard to possible co-worker resentment, this did not materialise and **100%** of managers who responded stated that the other team members were happy with their e-worker colleague.
- All respondents stated that they would recommend e-working to other managers.
- The percentage of managers who acknowledged the importance of balancing work and other commitments increased from **56%** of the prior questionnaire sample to **83%** in the post questionnaire. It is possible that the training had an impact in creating an awareness for managers that this was a matter of great importance to employees and to the business.

E-workers views

Employees were asked about the impact of their working away from the office and how it affected a series of work situations. **41.7%** of participants viewed that e-working would negatively impact their career development. Interestingly, they were satisfied to continue e-working regardless of this concern.

Changed Employee Perspectives

MAIN REASON FOR E-WORKING	BEFORE	AFTER
Managing Childcare	8.9%	20%
Work/Life Balance	37.8%	42%
Commuting	44%	38%

Initially, the main reason cited for taking up this form of flexible working related to commuting. However, while this remained a major factor, work life balance gained a higher priority in the data obtained after the project had been implemented. Whilst childcare was not at first a high priority as a reason for choosing e-working, it gained significant importance and jumped almost ten points in the results obtained after the project was implemented.

There was much more emphasis on the possible resentment of work colleagues in the e-workers prior questionnaires, with **49%** of the sample agreeing this would be a disadvantage. Yet in the post questionnaires only **21%** saw this as a disadvantage.

The percentage of managers who acknowledged the importance of balancing work and other commitments increased from 56% of the prior questionnaire sample to 83%

Some e-workers found acquiring the hardware, configuring the PC and software was time consuming and suggested a handbook would have been useful

Only two e-workers actually experienced conflict with co-workers during e-working. This is further supported by the responses of the managers – **100%** of the managers who responded to the survey stated that the other team members were happy with the initiative. With specific emphasis on training to prevent co-worker resentment, this issue was addressed early in the project.

Technology and support

The majority of respondents (**91.7%**) agreed that the technology suited their needs. If something did go wrong over **58%** of the sample stated that it was easy to find someone to help to repair it. The majority of respondents (**71%**) accessed their IT support centre for technical support. Two respondents received technical support from a co-worker and one respondent from a manager. However two respondents received technical support from more than one of the above mentioned people. Over half of the sample (**54.2%**) consulted both the manager and co-worker concerning e-work related problems. Some e-workers found acquiring the hardware, configuring the PC and software was time consuming and suggested a handbook would have been useful.

Time saved as a result of not commuting

- **29.2%** stated that they saved more than 9 hours per week commuting
- **16.7%** saved between 6-9 hours per week
- **33.3%** stated that they saved 3-6 hours per week commuting

Use of extra time

Over **87%** of the sample agree that e-working provided them with more time.

- **50%** of respondents used this time for family activities or responsibilities
- **25%** became involved in leisure activities
- **12.5%** took part in community or voluntary activities

Conclusions

Managing e workers

Although managers had concerns regarding managing e-workers the initiative proved that this concern was not realised. Work objectives were met, delivery of results remained constant and work standards were maintained. Customer relationships were not impeded and overall both managers and e-workers were satisfied in this regard.

Communications

All participants stated that communications were a significant issue. Managers and e-workers were of the view that e-working did impact on communications with co-workers. There was considerable concern in relation to the possibility of co-worker resentment yet this did not materialise. This is an important factor to be considered in the implementation of any form of flexible working.

Work life balance

E-working, as a form of flexible working, can accommodate the needs of both the business and the employee and provide for better living and working conditions for workers, their families and the business. It has been accepted as a viable option in the work-life balance initiatives available in the organisations.

Career Development

The project was of a short duration and so many of the issues that are likely to evolve over time could not be explored. Some participants expressed concerns in relation to possible negative impact on career development. In this context it may be necessary to ensure that appropriate training and development options are availed of by e-workers, their managers and the e-team. One solution could be for e-workers to prepare a personal development plan to ensure their specific training and development needs are met.

Savings to the Employee

Participants reported savings in the area of:

- petrol consumption
- time spent commuting
- lunch and other daily expenses
- cost of commuting
- childcare expenses

Commuting

Participants reported significant savings in the cost of commuting with participants stating that they saved between €400 to €1,500 in expenses over the lifetime of the project in this area.

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Savings to the Employer

As part of the project, forecast savings on the implementation of the project were undertaken. Estimates of savings ranged from a conservative €1,109 to an optimistic €2,875 per employee with an expected verifiable savings of €1,760 per employee during the duration of the project. The figures arrived at were based on the following criteria:

- *productivity increase*
- *reduction in accommodation costs*
- *proportionate change in absenteeism*
- *increased retention*
- *savings on recruitment and training costs*

Summation

In general the e-working project has been a success with all participants reporting positively on the areas measured. The project facilitated e-workers with a greater work life balance and an unexpected outcome was that many e-workers used the extra time gained to become more involved in their community.

It is necessary to ensure that suitable training is availed of by e workers, their managers and the e-team. Technology played a key part in this project and it is important to point out that relevant support structures of people and technology are key to making such initiatives a success.

As one e-worker stated:

“E-working is good for me and for the company because I am healthier, fresher, more alert and better able to cope financially.”

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