

**TIME FOR TELEWORKING?  
- How Teleworking Affects the Working Hours  
and Non-Work Time of BT Teleworkers**

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## Highlights

This report summarises an on-line survey of staff registered with Workabout, BT's official teleworking scheme. Answers were received from 1874 people – a very satisfactory response rate of 36.5% of the overall sample of 5128 staff.

The majority of respondents felt that they had a better life through teleworking than if they commuted to an office:

85% felt that their quality of life was good or very good

82% felt that teleworking was important or very important to their quality of life

73% felt that their work-life balance was good or very good

90% were satisfied or very satisfied with teleworking.

A small minority of respondents felt that teleworking was having negative effects on their life, mainly because of increased working hours.

In addition:

33% of respondents stated that their contribution to domestic activity had increased

14% reported that it had made it easier to become involved in community activities

10% believed that they would be unable to do their present job if unable to telework.

However, 69% of respondents stated that their working hours had increased, with 45% of respondents reporting an increase of more than 9 hours per week. How can this paradox of higher quality of life but increased working hours be explained? One reason is reduced time commuting, which can free time for both work and private life, and also greatly reduce stress. Another is the ability to multi-task – for example, hanging out washing during breaks – so that there is more quality time at the evening or weekends.

## Introduction

Teleworking – working remotely from an office – is said to have many benefits for organisations, the environment and society. Some of these benefits – such as reduced travel or increased staff productivity – have been the subject of research. But there is one aspect of teleworking which has remained mysterious. That is the use which is made of time saved from commuting – which can easily amount to 10-15 hours a week for London commuters. Most writers on the topic have claimed that this extra time enables teleworkers to spend more time with their partners and children and/or to spend more time on local activities. But a minority argue that teleworking is the new sweated labour, and that most of the time savings from commuting are eaten up in additional working hours.

This report describes recent research on this topic. This was undertaken as part of a European Union project on sustainable teleworking.<sup>1</sup> It took the form of an on-line survey in March 2002 of all the 5128 BT employees registered with its teleworking scheme, Workabout (previously Options 2000). Completed questionnaires were received from 1874 staff by the cut-off date. Although not all respondents answered every question, it is still one of the largest surveys of its kind ever undertaken. The response rate of 36.5% is also very satisfactory for this kind of research.

Appendix 1 provides full details of the survey, which also contained questions on transport, productivity, quality of life and other issues. These will be analysed in a fuller report to be published during the summer.

The analysis in following pages is illustrated by comments made by respondents. To retain authenticity, these are reproduced as written except for occasional corrections of misspellings.

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.sustel.org](http://www.sustel.org) for further details of the project.

## 1. Most Teleworkers Have a Better Quality of Life

The majority of respondents felt that they had a better life through teleworking than if they commuted to an office. For example:

85% (1520) of the 1779 respondents to the question 'overall how would you judge your quality of life over the past 12 months' stated that it was good or very good

Only 5% (95) of respondents felt that it was low or very low<sup>2</sup>

82% (1455) of the 1779 respondents to the question 'how important is teleworking to your overall quality of life' replied that it was important or very important

Only 12% (221) felt that teleworking was unimportant or very unimportant to their quality of life<sup>3</sup>

73% of 1179 respondents to the question 'overall how would you judge your current balance between your working life and other aspects of your life' felt that it was good or very good<sup>4</sup>

90% (1601) of 1779 respondents to the question 'overall how satisfied are you teleworking over the past 12 months' were satisfied or very satisfied

Only 5% (89) were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.<sup>5</sup>

However, a small minority of respondents did feel that teleworking was having negative effects on their life, mainly because of increased working hours. Section 6 has more discussion of this issue.

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<sup>2</sup> The remaining 164 (9%) felt that it was neither good nor bad

<sup>3</sup> The remaining 103 (6%) felt that it was neither important nor unimportant.

<sup>4</sup> The remaining 242 (14%) felt that it was neither good nor bad.

<sup>5</sup> The remaining 89 (5%) felt that it was neither good nor bad.

## 2. Many Teleworkers Undertake More Domestic Activities

A third (279) of the 851 respondents to the question 'has the amount of domestic activity increased as a result of teleworking' answered yes whilst only 48 (6%) considered it had decreased.

People were asked to expand on this feature of teleworking in an open-ended question. Most comments were made by men, who formed the majority of respondents to the questionnaire.

Some of the most frequent comments were by fathers about opportunities for greater involvement with children, for example:

*It has meant that I have been able to take my children to school one or more times a week, which I see as a good quality time for me rather than a chore.*

*Opportunity to take children to school, once a week, allowing my wife to go to college.*

*Taking kids to school more often and spending more time with partner and kids.*

*Time formerly spent commuting is now spent helping out with my two young sons. Before teleworking I would not have seen them awake during the week as their bedtimes would have been before getting back from work.*

*Able to cook tea in time for children coming home from work or school. Able to wash dishes at dinnertime!*

Many men also commented that they were taking on more domestic tasks:

*When I finish work I have time to do housekeeping cooking etc before my wife & kids get home. This gives us all more time to interact and do the things we enjoy.*

*My wife works so working at home I can run dishwasher/washing machine /tumble dryer etc. Also shop & prepare evening meal.*

*I have been promoted to Washing/Weather watcher by my wife. I prepare the evening meal when I finish work, hopefully in time for the arrival home of the family.*

*I actually do a few things like putting the washing in, hanging it out. More washing up, cooking sometimes. Things that I would not have done before.*

*Now have a baby and have to help the wife more. The extra time has allowed me to share more of the responsibilities of being a parent.*

In a number of cases this was greatly helping female partners:

*I fit in more domestic duties around work and my wife expects me to do more. This has enabled her to return to her career but of course means I spend more time working in the evenings.*

*My wife is now able to work fulltime now the children have someone at home to supervise etc.*

*Due to not having to commute I now have time at the beginning and end of the day for Domestic duties. This is very helpful to my working wife and thus reduces her stress and workload, which in turn helps us both. We therefore spend more quality time together.*

*With the flexibility I am able to take the kids to school and their other activities. Which has been an absolute godsend as my wife has been recently diagnosed & is suffering from MS.*

But not all men were quite so positive:

*Forced Labour.*

*My wife makes me do it!!*

*No, Im a lazy male chauvinist so I still don't make the beds. I help with the parental taxi service though.*

Most women respondents were also positive about the time benefits of their own teleworking, although in their case this was more about the ability to fit in domestic tasks during the day:

*I can cook more often. It is easier to fit in some domestic things like putting on the dishwasher at lunch time.*

*Less time commuting means I have more time to do housework, cook meals etc.*

*On a typical day, I will wash and dry one load of washing, wash up, clean work surface, and sweep the floor - about 30 minutes in total. I do this before work (when I would previously have commuted) and at lunch times.*

*As I just returned from maternity leave when I became a homemaker, it was very convenient being able to put the washing on and hang it out and bring it in again, especially if it started to rain, which you couldn't do if you were at work.*

Another perceived benefit of teleworking is the ability to undertake shopping:

*Able to pop out to do shopping during lunchtime and the same with school activities.*

*Being flexible about working times has meant that activities such as food shopping can be done via home delivery or at less busy times which also frees up time to spend.*

*Easier to go shopping at none busy times.*

*Go for quick shop/banking/dog walking etc.*

This greater use of local services can have important social benefits, especially in rural areas:

*Now that I no longer work in a town, I have switched to Internet banking and use the local village post office for paying in and withdrawing cash. This helps to keep the village post office viable.*

A smaller number of people also noted the value of being able to do other domestic tasks:

*Used the previous commuting time to do DIY, put the kids to bed. Able to use the lunchbreak to mow the lawn, general gardening, etc.*

*I have more time to cook decent meals now, which I enjoy.*

Others noted advantages such as:

*I can use some of the time I used to travel to do things like a fitness routine.*

*Participate in new activities!!*

*I never had to opportunity to work in the nude in the office!*

*Arrange to be in for repairmen, deliveries etc.*

*Also able to have a cleaner once a week as I'm at home.*

*I am now able to take part in activities such as sport during daylight hours during the winter, where I could not before.*

*I get time to walk the dog in the daylight!*

Teleworking also produced greater social interaction for some:

*By being at home I can take a lunch break to sort out domestic issues locally - school, neighbour, friend etc. Which could not be done if I commuted.*

*Easier to plan evenings out with family and friends as I know I will not be travelling to 7 pm plus every evening.*

Three respondents may have been more emphatic in their summary of teleworking than most, but they do appear to speak for the majority when they commented that:

*Has made a dramatic improvement to my work and personal life. Has allowed me to become involved in village life (e.g. Chair of School Governors). Allows me to see more of my children growing up, especial at those important times e.g. before they go to school and most important when they return and tell you about their day. Brings a family much closer together.*

*Weekends more time - more relaxed at end of day.*

*As previously noted, teleworking has made an enormous improvement to my quality of life. I used to be away from home 12 hours every day - now I work in a more relaxed frame of mind. No contest!*

### 3. Many Teleworkers Are Unable to Work in Other Ways

Around 10% (190) of the 1874 respondents to the question 'would you be able to undertake your current job if you were unable to telework?' replied that they would not. For many people this is simply a question of commuting times (especially when offices have relocated since teleworking began), which could potentially be overcome by moving. But others face more insuperable barriers of an inability to spend 8-10 hours away from the home. A number of respondents commented that teleworking allowed them to care for dependent young children:

*As a single parent I would not be able to commute to London every day as it is impossible to get a childminder to do the hours I would need and the cost is prohibitive.*

*I would only be able to work part-time as a divorced parent my children are with me part of each week and my teams office base is not easily commutable.*

*It would be difficult. When I first started teleworking, it would have made no difference. However, subsequently my wife has fallen ill and I have a 3-year-old son. Life would be much more difficult if I was not here to help out.*

In a number of cases, however, teleworking was allowing people to provide extra time for disabled children or those with special needs:

*I have been ill on at least 3 occasions since teleworking and still managed to do my job. This is a hidden bonus for employers of teleworkers.*

*I started home working because I had real difficulties looking after my Son who had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. If I had not started working from home I might have been forced to leave the company.*

*I have a special needs child who is registered disabled and have been able to reduce the stress levels from other family members, by contributing more to school trips and hospital visits.*

*I have an Autistic son and am a single parent with very little support so I need to work from home.*

One respondent perhaps summarised the importance of teleworking for such people:

*I have had a very difficult year personally. Had it not been for my flexible working arrangements, I would very likely have been forced to give up work. This way I continue to be a productive citizen, I balance*

*my family commitments with my working life, and I continue to provide quality output for my employer and our customers.*

However, the comment of one respondent that:

*Now do house work to relax. If I take a break I usually end up Hovering (!) or washing etc rather than going out or chatting with others in the office*

reveals one potential downside from an organisational perspective. The chats in the office can be valuable in terms of communicating information, maintaining relationships and providing stimulation. As one of the lengthier answers observed:

*There are only 2 problems that have concerned me about homeworking so far. Firstly, when I was in the office I'd spend my lunchbreak wandering around the city centre. Now, I'm more likely to do the ironing or some gardening. This means that I'm not getting the exercise I used to so I've had to buy a fitness bike to counter my new found sloth. Secondly, my day passes without incident. I no longer have any amusing tales of daily travel, office gossip or city centre observations to talk about with my wife. When she asks about my day, I have to say that nothing unusual happened in the spare room today - but, oh yes, I did receive an amusing e-mail. It's easy to become de-socialised!*

Effective teleworkers – and good employers – recognise the value of this informal networking and try to provide it in other ways.

## 4. Many Teleworkers Are More Involved in Community Activities and Volunteering

More time at home can create many personal benefits, but does not necessarily create social benefit. To examine this topic, the survey asked if teleworking has allowed BT teleworkers to spend more time on these activities. To place this into context, we obtained baseline data on how many people actually engaged in community activities and volunteering, what those activities are and how much time they spent on them.

Approximately a third (692) of 1874 respondents reported that they are involved in community activities. Table 1 indicates the diverse range of activities undertaken by the 486 people who provided information on this.

**Table 1 Involvement in Voluntary Activities**

<b>Groups</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>School Related</b>	105
<b>Community/Local/Neighbourhood activities</b>	61
<b>Sport – Participating</b>	42
<b>Religion – Participating</b>	40
<b>Charitable (Not specified)</b>	40
<b>Scouts/Guides/Cubs etc.</b>	35
<b>Sport - children/youth</b>	32
<b>Sport - Managing/ Coaching</b>	36
<b>Children’s/Youth (Other than sports)</b>	28
<b>Religion – Management</b>	22
<b>Music &amp; Drama</b>	17
<b>BT community activities</b>	11
<b>Activities for Environmental Issues</b>	12
<b>Miscellaneous Leisure</b>	11
<b>Other Public Activities</b>	9
<b>Magistrates</b>	7
<b>Politics</b>	8
<b>Adult Education (Teaching)</b>	8
<b>Business-related</b>	7
<b>Counselling</b>	4
<b>Not Specified - Other</b>	20
<b>Total</b>	555

Of course, these absolute figures say nothing about the influence of teleworking upon the amount of time spent. To find out, we asked the question 'does your opportunity to telework make it easier or more difficult to be involved in organised community activities?' The answers are generally positive:

14% (267) of 1874 respondents stated that it made involvement easier

Only 9 respondents stated that it made involvement more difficult.

We went on to ask 'would you say that the amount of time spent on such activities has altered as a result of teleworking?' The answers were that:

118 (6%) reported an increase, and only 13 a decrease<sup>6</sup>

The increase in time commitments varied between 1 hr per week and 23 hrs per week.

It appears therefore that BT teleworking does support community development, at least in the areas where respondents live.

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<sup>6</sup> The percentage of those actually engaged in community activities who have increased their time commitment is, of course, much higher.

## 5. Most Teleworkers Work for Longer

As table 2 shows, only 34 respondents (2% of those answering) stated that teleworking had reduced their working hours. In contrast 1219 people (68.5%) stated that they had increased, and 525 (29.5%) that they had remained the same.<sup>7</sup> As table 3 indicates, 80% of those noting increased hours reported an increase of more than 5 hours a week and almost 45% reported more than 9 hours per week.

**Table 2 Effects of Teleworking on Working Hours**

<b>Increased</b>	1219
<b>Decreased</b>	34
<b>Same</b>	525
<b>Not Answered</b>	96
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1874</b>

**Table 3 Reported Increases in Working Hours**

<b>Increased Hours</b>	<b>Number of responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
0	120	9.8%
0.1-2.9	50	4.1%
3.0-4.9	79	6.5%
5.0-6.9	300	24.6%
7.0-8.9	124	10.2%
9.0-11.9	337	27.6%
12.0-14.9	40	3.3%
15+	169	13.9%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1219</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

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<sup>7</sup> Note, however that 120 of those noting increased, and 9 of those noting decreased, working hours gave 0 as the actual figure so these figures may slightly overstate the situation.

A small number of respondents noted that increased working hours have had a deleterious effect on their quality of life, for example:

*I have spent more time working and less time with family related issues.*

*I now work more hours in open ended roles, there is never an end point and with no set hours and laptops, its too easy to work too long.*

*I used to work in the garden on Sat. mornings, now I tend to work on the computer.*

However, the vast majority – whilst perhaps not welcoming the increase in hours – nonetheless felt that it did not impede a better quality of life.

Before discussing this further, we need to understand why working hours increase. One important point is that many of the respondents have been teleworking for some time. It is therefore possible that their non-teleworking peers have also experienced longer hours because of increased commercial pressures on BT. To really understand what is happening for this, and other subjects covered in the survey, it would be desirable to compare a reasonably matched group of teleworkers and non-teleworkers.

Another, more teleworking-specific reason, is the way in which people use greater control of time to complete tasks in one go:

*Easier access to computer, systems and information etc tends to result in carrying on working until a job is completed to my satisfaction, rather than leaving it until the next day to complete.*

*I spend more time working; I find excuses to finish off pieces of work to allow for a clean start to the following day.*

Whilst this does not necessarily lead to longer working hours (some time off could be taken the following day to compensate), in practice this does not seem to be the case for many. Presumably the reasons are that work is either being undertaken to higher standards, sometimes for greater job satisfaction, and/or more work is being undertaken than previously.

The lure of reading the latest e-mail, or undertaking some other work-related activity, is also too tempting to resist for some teleworkers:

*Spend too long on intranet and email at home after normal working hours.*

Finally, there may be a need (actual or perceived) to impress managers:

*Increase in workload/hours worked/need to produce results to satisfy higher management that I am not skiving.*

The finding that most BT teleworkers report both longer working hours and better quality of life is paradoxical. More time working is usually associated with increased stress, domestic tension and other factors which reduce quality of life.

One possible explanation is that, for many individuals, their increased working hours will be less than the time they have saved in commuting.<sup>8</sup> Hence, they still have more time available for family and other activities. For some, the stress associated with commuting (especially for long distances) may be less than that arising from additional working time. Perhaps most significantly, teleworking can in effect create time through opportunities for multi-tasking or greater control of activities. As respondents noted:

*Things like washing, shopping can be fitted into a working day leaving the weekends free for leisure rather than catching up on the weeks household duties.*

*Although the amount of time not changed it has made the Weekends freer, as domestic activities can be fitted in during lunchtimes or early morning.*

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<sup>8</sup> Most of the respondents, and the whole sample, are highly mobile managerial and professional staff, who tend to have longer commuting distances and time than the average.

## 6. Conclusions

Our survey has a paradoxical result. Most of the BT teleworkers who responded say that they now work longer hours as a result of teleworking. But most also feel that they have a better quality of life. In addition, there has been a net increase in the amount of time spent on voluntary activities outside the home.

This paradox of teleworking hours means that organisations must be on their guard. More time spent working is one thing when work is reasonably satisfying and the rest of life harmonious. But it can create stress and create dissatisfaction if other things begin to go wrong. A small minority of BT respondents are in this position. But the majority seem to be positive about their personal outcomes. The main reasons appear to be avoidance of commuting, which reduces stress and creates more time for both work and non-work activities, and the combination of teleworking and greater control of working time. This in effect creates time by allowing people to undertake domestic tasks during breaks, thereby increasing the amount of 'quality time' outside normal working hours. Some will see this as a skiver's dream, and believe that domestic tasks are being done at the expense of work. But the evidence from BT itself is that teleworkers are just as productive, if not more, than their office-based counterparts or former selves. A more interesting question is whether this replacement of the informal activities which have been carried out in breaks at work – such as discussion with colleagues – might have any long-term effects on distribution of knowledge within the organisation and/or sense of commitment to colleagues.

It also appears that BT teleworking not only creates private benefits, but also public ones in the form of greater involvement in community and volunteering activities, and perhaps also greater use of local services.

The key to maximising the benefits of teleworking, and minimising any harmful effects, is careful design, management and monitoring of telework initiatives. The present study provides a practical example of this being done at BT. However, there remains scope for further action which is to compare a sample of teleworkers with non-teleworkers so that effects created by teleworking can be distinguished from those created by more general organisational changes.

## Appendix – Details of the Survey

BT has an official scheme for teleworkers, known as Workabout (previously Options 2000). Registrants receive free equipment and furniture for home offices, a helpline and other benefits. This survey was sent to all 5128 people registered with Workabout in early March 2002.

The current survey builds on, and replicates some of the questions from, previous surveys of new registrants to Workabout. Based on this experience, a survey of the telework literature and discussions with BT, a questionnaire was developed to assess a variety of aspects of teleworking. In addition to the topics reported in this paper, questions were also asked on environmental impacts (primarily transport), effects on motivation and performance, and social impacts such as social inclusion. The full results will be published in the early autumn of 2002.

The questionnaire was confidential, and hosted on a secure third party server/ it went through 3 piloting phases during January and February with around 15-25 BT Workabout staff on each occasion. The final version can be viewed on [www.sustel.org](http://www.sustel.org).

A request to complete the questionnaire was emailed by BT Workabout staff to the 5128 recipients in two batches in mid March 2002. As an incentive 100 £10 book vouchers were offered in a prize draw for those who completed the questionnaire. By the closing date a total valid response of 1874 had been received, providing a very good response rate of 36%, compared to 37% and 21% in the first two surveys. To the author's knowledge, this is the highest number of responses to any teleworking survey.

The respondents were predominantly male (74%) and middle aged:

14% are between 16-34

43% between 34-44

38% between 45-54.

In terms of household structure, 80% of the respondents live in a household with a partner. 42% have no child dependents. 17% have one, 31% two whilst 8% have 3 or more.

Almost all (97%) of respondents worked full-time for a range of business units within BT:

BT Retail 28%

Wholesale 18%

Ignite 15%

Affinitis 9%

Exact 3%.

Asked to describe their job area against a pre-set list 50% classed themselves as managerial, 15% as sales. Marketing, admin, central support finance and field engineers each comprised around 3-5% of the sample. In addition respondents supplied a further 197 job descriptions/categories where they felt the pre-set categories did not capture their titles which may reflect the rapid re-structuring and changes in job titles of people.

BT divides teleworkers into those who are fixed (spending most of their time working at home) and those who are mobile (using home as a working base but travelling extensively to BT or customer premises). 65% of the survey respondents were mobile, a slightly lower percentage than the 75% figure for the overall sample. Only 8% of the sample reported that they still have a main BT office.

One interesting feature of respondents is their long-standing employment within BT. Less than 1% in total had started work with BT in the past 3 years. Over half the sample had worked for BT for more than 20 years and 20% more than 30 years.

Approximately half of respondents had been teleworking within BT for 2 years or less (20% less than 1 year), 20% more than 3 years.