

European Telework Status Report 1998: Austria

This is an extract from the country summaries section of the European Commission's 1998 Status Report. The complete report is online at <http://www.eto.org.uk/twork/tw98> in a variety of formats, including Word, HTML pages and Acrobat .pdf files. Links to further information about telework in Austria are in the Austria national page at European Telework Online - <http://www.eto.org.uk> .

Summary

For Austria 1997 was a year of significant progress towards the Information Society, with a considerable growth in activity surrounding and following the Government's *Information Society Report* (April 1997). This set a series of fundamental objectives and terms of reference for Federal Government strategy. The involvement of more than 350 experts in an Information Society Working Group means that the underlying principles are having a widespread effect beyond the Federal Government and can be expected to have a sustained impact in accelerating responses to the Information Society by businesses and citizens, employers and employees and public institutions.

The environment for telework has also advanced considerably in 1997, with a first collective agreement (in the oil industry), a model contract devised by the White Collar union, and a number of individual agreements within companies. There is however always gap between public policy and private implementation, and the innate conservatism of Austria's industrial and labour market environments is leading to a rather slow acceptance of teleworking. This may change with lower costs and increasing use of telecommunications following from liberalisation and driven by Austria's continuing role as a bridge between the European Union and Eastern Europe, where there is much readier acceptance of new methods of work and trade.

Telework background and take-up of ICTs

General background:

- Austria is one of Europe's wealthiest and most stable economies, closely tracking Germany, its largest trading partner, with whom it shares a common language. This relatively large "local language" market also extends to neighbouring Eastern European countries, where German is widely understood. The availability of a large "internal market", together with the relative conservatism of Austria's domestic business markets, perhaps accounts for Austria's relatively low take up of PCs, IT generally and Internet, compared with (for example) Sweden - a country of similar size in terms of population and GDP:

	Population	GDP per capita (\$ US)	IT per capita (ECU)	PCs/100 white collars	Internet users/1000 population
Austria	7.9 millions	26,917	438	50	46
Sweden	8.7 millions	23,864	745	75	152

- Austria has for many years benefited from its geographic position as a bridge between East and West and stands to consolidate this role with the enlargement of the European Union. Many multinational companies choose Austria as a firm base for their Eastern European operations. There may however be competitive pressure on this role when some Eastern countries have joined the European Union and may therefore be considered by enterprises to offer a secure base at a lower cost.
- Austria's labour market has strong formalised mechanisms, with national/regional chambers of labour and trade to which employees and employers respectively are required belong, and which have legally enshrined rights of representation. Paralleling this are Union and Employer federations.

Driving factors:

- The national *Report on the Information Society*, published in April 1997, is providing a powerful blueprint for policy and actions. The report is very broad in scope, addressing the use of technology by Government and industry, telecommunications policy, research and education, and relevant legal and regulatory provisions.
- Telecommunications liberalisation has been implemented with positive objectives to ensure reliable, high-quality and low-cost services through stimulation of competition and restraint of dominant suppliers.
- The social partners (representative of employers and employees), who play a particularly important role in Austria, have started to provide model contracts and guidelines for telework.
- The education ministry is providing free-of-charge Internet access for schools, so that future new entrants to the workforce will be familiar with electronic networking methods.

Constraints:

- Austria's general take-up of Information and Communications Technologies is relatively low for a wealthy and developed economy; this means that Government initiatives and market forces have a substantial backlog to catch up.
- Relatively low unemployment, an economy bolstered by Austria's role in East-West trade, and the conservative effects of Austria's strong labour market institutions are all factors supporting the status quo and providing little motivation for higher investment in ICTs or introduction of new working practices.
- Initial Union recommendations regarding telework have tended to be prescriptive rather than enabling and have focused on avoidance of possible negative effects rather than on promoting positive benefits.
- Telecommunications pricing is high relative to

Telework activities and results

A number of important activities occurred in 1997-98:

- Austria's first collective agreement for telework was signed, covering the oil industry
- A model contract for telework was created by the white collar Union
- The Union also published a set of recommendations for telework
- The Austrian Labour Market Service (AMS) is supporting a range of training provisions with a focus on IT skills, including projects relating to the use of telework for improved inclusion of women re-entering the labour market and people with disabilities
- In a survey by Spectra, 69% of employed respondents expressed a positive attitude to the idea of teleworking; among younger respondents (aged below 30) the proportion was 77%
- The Federal Ministries of Labour and Economic Affairs supported activities in ETW '97

In the context of overall restructuring of the central Austrian Federal administration, it was originally planned to outsource the Federal Office of Metrology and Surveying with 1700 employees. However, a feasibility study showed an internal reform as the cheaper solution, which also meant that a reduction in the labour force could be managed without loss of jobs, but based on reduced replacement of retired employees.

The reform targets a reduction of the number of departments and remote office sites, and those remaining are serving as hubs for tele-cooperation also available for private users as telecentres. In 1998, 25% of the administration's employees are expected to use their homes as offices, and a 15% increase of productivity via telework is expected. The major benefit for employees is seen in new opportunities to choose their workplace, whereby the employer provides a brokerage domain for jobs to enable the coordination of individual choice and mobility. Awareness building and information processes are considered as an important part of 'good practice', especially emphasising the common problem of hierarchical transformations within public administration.

Teleworking, intensified networking and data share via new technological equipment is being used for increasing customer services as well as for the creation of an Austrian digital map.

- Provincial and City administrations are supporting telework activities, including the Provincial
- Governments of Salzburg and Upper Austria and the Municipality of Vienna.

Conclusions

Austria presents unusual characteristics regarding telework. In most countries, demand for and interest in telework has preceded the supply of appropriate infrastructure and social arrangements; Austria appears to reverse this. There has been public support for telecentres; there are model contracts and trade union recommendations for teleworking; the Government is promoting the Information Society. Yet telework take-up to date has remained small. However, there was a much stronger response to European Telework Week in 1997, and recent opinion surveys show a positive attitude.