

## European Telework Status Report 1998: Belgium and Luxembourg

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 Belgium and Luxembourg are in the Belgium national page at European Telework Online - <http://www.eto.org.uk>.

### Summary

Belgium has a well-established national telework association with strong representation of major employers, particularly in the IT and telecommunications sectors, which has recently restructured to enhance its activities. In Luxembourg a telework association is in the process of being created, with support from the Belgian Telework Association.

### Telework background and take-up of ICTs

#### General background:

- Relative to its GDP and economic structure, Belgium has a relatively low level of investment and use of IT:

	Comparable economies, different levels of IT investment?				
	Population (millions)	GDP per capita (\$)	IT per capita (ECU)	PCs per 100 white collars	Internet users per 1000 population
Belgium	10.1	24,747	548	51	47
Netherlands	15.4	23,966	642	66	90

- In contrast to this, Belgium is a pacesetter in at least one Information Society application, namely online banking services: telephone banking is in use by some 70,000 enterprises and 1.5 million citizens. From 1997 a new common Internet-based network, ISABEL (<http://www.isabel.be>) links banks with some 20,000 corporate customers, and provides email and business information services as well as banking services.
- Belgium is also a leader in the deployment of cable TV networks, with some 95% of TV-equipped households having access by cable to more than 30 TV channels. Cable companies have started offering Internet access at speeds up to 2 Megabits per second, providing an important platform for early trials of broad band services to the home.
- The three Federal Regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels) are installing optical fibre backbone networks with the aim of connecting all public establishments to the Internet by early in the next decade - eg administrations, schools, hospitals, public information points etc.
- Belgium has relatively high unemployment and also a relatively low level of participation in the workforce, with low levels of part time working:

	Employment % of total population	Part time work (% of total employment)	Unemployment %
Belgium	57	22	10
Netherlands	66	37	6

This may to some extent account for the lower rates of IT investment and Internet use. Another influencing factor may be the fact that Belgium has three official languages - French, Dutch and German, reducing the opportunity and demand for centralised or "national language" online and other information based activities - for example "national" newspapers and TV channels are either French or Dutch language.

- Many public and private sector organisations at all levels have representative offices in or near Brussels, providing a source of employment and local trade, but with a strong perceived need to be "on the spot" rather than working "at a distance". Some 40% of the Brussels population are "non-Belgian".

Implementation of the 'Shared Office Concept' in IBM Belgium/Luxembourg stated in 1994 and covers the entire working environment. Sixty per cent of the staff (1,050 employees) participate in the project, each one using portable equipment and choosing the most convenient workspace when arriving at the office. All participants also have the option to work from other locations, such as from their own home or the customer's premises.

In order to ensure the effectiveness of this new way of working, changes were made to the organisation of both secretarial staff and management staff, for example the latter adapted to the new way of working by taking on a larger coaching role. All participants in the project, although having complete freedom to chose their own place of work, were asked to check into the office on a regular basis.

#### Driving factors:

- The active Telework Association (Belgian Teleworking Association, <http://www.bta.be>) was restructured towards the end of 1997, stimulating a higher level of activity.
- Belgium is the host country for many European Union activities, including events in the European Telework Agenda.
- Traffic congestion (and regularly visible resultant pollution) in and around Brussels provides motivation to reduce the use of cars and unnecessary travel.
- There is quite high public interest in telework, with a substantial range of activities and events.
- Belgium is becoming a centre for new telework-based enterprises and operations such as call centres, capitalising on its language skills, its location and its large non-Belgian population.

#### Constraints:

- The strongly individualistic regions, with different languages and cultures, inhibit people from one region from teleworking for companies in the other, except for the general "pull" of the capital (and third region), Brussels.
- A high proportion of city centre employment is in relatively small representative offices and in small headquarter operations of European federations and associations; the nature of the work and the small scale are not conducive to either intensive ICT use or teleworking. This may change as the use of online methods becomes more pervasive across directorates of the European Commission and especially if the Commission itself becomes an exemplar of teleworking.
- Extra costs and perceived difficulties in managing at a distance are still strong inhibitors (see IWERF study below).

#### Telework activities and results

- The Belgian Teleworking Association (BTA), founded in 1994, restructured towards the end of 1997, has professionalised its administrative and management activities and is extending its membership. The approximately 85 members include many major corporates, including household name non-ICT companies (for example ABB, Dow Corning) as well as local and multinational ICT players (Belgacom, Mobistar, IBM, Philips etc) and De Finacieel-Economische Tijd (the leading Flemish business and finance newspaper).
- A new law on Home Working came into force in March 1997. Although the text doesn't explicitly use the term telework, and the law affects "old style" as well as new forms of home-based working, its provisions do apply to employed teleworkers. An English language summary will be placed online at the BTA website. The law's provisions were strongly influenced by experiences in an early pioneer telework experiment undertaken by ABB Insurances from 1992.

- Another long-standing Belgian telework programme (see panel) gained a European Telework Award in 1997, by when a small initial (and largely informal) activity had become firmly embedded in the overall company working environment.
- Innotek, a Belgian member of the European network of Business Innovation Centres, having opened a single telecentre during 1996, has now committed to one of Europe's largest telecentre deployment programmes, with plans for 20 centres across Belgium (<http://www.innotek.be>).
- At least 20 significant telework promotional, education, training or research activities and projects were recorded during the year.
- A study by the Institut Wallon d'Études de Recherches en Formation (IWERF) found that most people know about and have some clear perspective on telework, and 70% of those interviewed regarded the idea of telework as attractive, but that very few companies have any plans to introduce it.
- A University of Liège study, *Télétravail et handicap: étude exploratoire - rapport de recherche*, made strong recommendations for the establishment of a pilot project supporting telework as a means to integrate people with disabilities into the jobs market.
- A not-for-profit membership organisation for individual teleworkers and home based workers, Home Based Business (HBB, <http://www.kmonet.be/homebasedbusiness>), was formed in 1997.

Televillages is a network of tele-offices (telecottages) which has been operational since October 1 1997 and has resulted in four telecottages in each Flemish province in Belgium.

INNOTEK negotiated with over 30 Business Centres to reserve office space for teleworkers and which offer tele-services, shared hardware use, meeting rooms, etc. All the offices available in the Televillage concept are being equipped by INNOTEK with the same office design all over Belgium. INNOTEK also requires certain standards for each centre, such as minimum floor space, meeting rooms, etc.

A prospective teleworker's employer can contact the Televillage to find out the location of the closest tele-office. INNOTEK then negotiates with the Business Centres and the employer only needs to sign one contract with INNOTEK.

## Conclusions

Further research and analysis seems appropriate to better understand Belgium's comparative position in Information Society development. Some aspects such as online banking are apparently highly advanced, but the overall investment in and use of IT, PCs and Internet is lower than might be expected for a highly industrialised economy with a high proportion of information-based work.

Belgium has been one of Europe's first countries to introduce new laws specific to home based working in the beginning of the information age. Belgium's experience, particularly employer and worker views on the usefulness and effectiveness of this law, will be of great interest in other countries and in the European policy debate.

The presence of two language/culture communities within one geographically small state makes the Belgian experience and outcomes also of great interest to assist in understanding telework in a multi-country, multi-culture environment – i.e. for the European Union as a whole.