

Promoting eWork in Remote Regions: Lessons from FlexWork

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Abstract: The FlexWork project provided a set of knowledge objects (handbook, templates, cases, decision support tools) to business advisors in ten European regions and assisted them in learning about flexible working. These advisors were also provided with standardised presentation materials and supported in deploying knowledge about flexible working to their constituencies of SME clients at regional level (multiplier). The demand for knowledge about flexible working among business advisors and their clients was seen to be significant, and uptake was supported by evidence of usage of online materials. The experience supported refinement of the package of materials, and provided several lessons of benefit to future initiatives supporting regional information society uptake.
<http://www.flexwork.eu.com>

1. Introduction, Background and Objectives

The FlexWork project has been sponsored by the EC and ten European regions to provide a support package to remote regions to help business advisors leverage SME adoption of flexible working methods for economic advancement. It is widely recognised that the accelerating Information Society (IS) can leave behind those not prepared for uptake of IS opportunities, and the more remote a region, or a specific business, the higher the risk. The focus on remote regions and SMEs supports the eEurope general aim of inclusion, and targets the special case of the least developed areas, including New Accession States.

The main objective was to exploit opportunities to add value to local actions by providing new knowledge and tools addressing flexible working aimed at business advisors. Business advisors are the front line of regional business development, and are a professional group whose organisation varies throughout Europe. They may be members of a professional body with 'continuing professional development' (e.g. Institute of Business Advisors), or they may be private advisors trading on their own experience and skill (informal). Each region has its own business support network and uses different kinds of advisors, but the shared objective is to impart knowledge and experience to business managers facing problems or investment decisions. The main objective was supported by identifying and engaging existing business support networks to capitalise on established support relationships. An initial specific objective underpinning this general aim was to develop a set of 'flexible working blueprints' and a 'handbook' of flexible working, and to channel these knowledge objects via the existing business support networks. This strategy

was aimed to empower local business advisors as multipliers for uptake of flexible working. All products can be seen at <http://www.flexwork.eu.com>

2. The FlexWork Approach

A general approach to knowledge sharing, especially between remote actors, is to codify such knowledge in appropriate forms. Preparatory work with a sample of regional business advisors had identified a keen interest in two specific routes to knowledge acquisition concerning flexible working. The first was a general reference text covering the domain of flexible working at a level, and in a style, that would be accessible by business advisors and SME managers who were not experts in either technology or flexible working. The second was a set of scenarios showing how to implement different styles of flexible working in a practical way. These were conceived as ‘blueprints’ (templates) and each addressed a specific type of flexible working derived from a wide set of actual case materials.

The set of basic materials was supported by a standard presentation on flexible working translated for local audiences. The project promotion team identified and made contact with the local business support infrastructure in each target region, and organised a series of workshops. These workshops were used to present flexible working methods and benefits, and to encourage detailed discussions amongst participants. At this stage, business advisors already evidenced significant concerns, including the need to have local language translations of materials, and the need to have a wider set of materials, including case studies with a specific SME perspective (actual examples), case studies with a regional perspective (regional development actions), presentation materials to be used by business advisors, and tools to assist with planning and implementing flexible working pilots or schemes. This initial feedback cycle [1] allowed the project to achieve a first complete ‘package’ of information which was made available to registered business advisors via the project web portal. These registered members formed focus groups in participating regions, and provided a basis for evaluation studies in each region.

Table 1 – FlexWork Package for Business Advisors

Handbook of Flexible Working	1
Blueprints (templates)	10
SME Manager Briefings (business operational)	6
Technology Briefings (business technical)	25
Technology Case Studies (technical)	27
SME Case Studies (experience)	30
Regional Case Studies (development)	17
IST Success Stories (project examples)	12
External Link Inventory	1
Decision Support Tools and Checklists	6
Flexible Working Contracts (examples)	3

A second round of workshops in participating regions allowed in-depth discussion of the materials, and sharing of experience between advisors who had been using such materials to assist companies in their regions [2]. This approach helped regional advisors understand how their own locality compared with other regions, and allowed them to learn from the experience of others in deploying knowledge about flexible working. This mixture of benchmarking and learning (mainly informal) seems to have been a significant aspect of the overall experience from the business advisor point of view, and allowed them to provide feedback on what they required to support improved uptake of flexible working in their regions.

Based on this feedback, the FlexWork package was finalised, as illustrated in Table 1, and subjected to a formal evaluation involving expert Business Advisors from each participating region. After the initial evaluation work, conducted to ensure the materials were truly fit for their purpose, the web portal was made public. Business advisors are still encouraged to register, and do so at a steady but low level, while many others make use of FlexWork materials on a daily basis. The materials have been translated in line with demand, with ten languages covered to different levels of completion at present, and translation work is ongoing.

3. Main Results

More than 480 registered business advisors now use the FlexWork resources for business advisory work, and hundreds more un-registered users of the FlexWork site provide significant numbers of hits and downloads, suggesting a much wider sphere of usage. A sample of these is used to gather feedback on the usage experience (follow up to the main evaluation).

The main evaluation employed 60 business advisors from participating regions who each had been provided with the full package of materials and who each had opportunity to use these materials in their work with business clients (SMEs). A test methodology derived from the STEPS [3] method was employed, and was applied using translations of common instruments and procedures in each region. The data was collected for analysis, and extracts of the overall results [4] are reported here.

3.1 Existing Concerns and Expectations

As part of the pre-test procedures, prior to addressing FlexWork directly, business advisors were asked to declare the concerns that they brought with them, and which they felt FlexWork should be able to address. The most frequent offerings were:

- Needing to know about human resource management (HRM), training, and work-life balance.
- Needing to know about flexible work operations (how to make business flexible).
- Needing to know about how flexible working can support business development issues (innovation, start-up, location, competition, cost)
- Needing to know about savings in travel and time.

And so it seems that employment, business operations, regional development and costs were the main areas of concern. When asked about how they felt FlexWork might be of benefit, the main offerings were:

- Improve flexible-working knowledge and ability to support clients.
- Improve local economy and competitiveness.

This finding is highly supportive of the main objectives and approach of FlexWork, and so encourages confidence and confirms the potential value of such an intervention.

3.2 Initial problems Using FlexWork Materials

The advisors who participated in the focus groups offered only one strong concern in relation to initial use of FlexWork materials. They felt a need to have 'localised' materials. That is to say, materials translated to local language, as well as materials that referred closely to the local situation. For example, flexible working contracts from another country were seen as interesting examples, but it was felt that examples from their own country, and preferably region, would help more, and would inspire more confidence in taking up an approach that had been proven at a more local level (better match). This general concern of matching at local level was quite strong, and suggests that although we had some success in

providing ‘generic’ material, advisors and their SME-Manager clients want as close a match (example case, regulation, contract, etc.) as possible.

3.3 General Perception of FlexWork Materials

The participating advisors were asked a range of questions about each item in the FlexWork package, and were asked to score these to show acceptability, satisfaction, etc. The materials (handbook, blueprints, etc.) were generally well received and no significant problems were found with the materials per se. However, the issue of localisation appeared again as the main concern, and it was seen that advisors declared that they used the materials (in order of importance):

- to improve own knowledge
- to assist local development actions
- to support specific SME clients
- to inform regional/local policy and strategy

3.4 Use of Decision Support Tools

The main use of decision support tools observed in the focus groups concerned the online cost-benefit-analysis tool (CBT), and the ‘flexible work implementation planning’ aid (FWIP). Added to this were several checklists to assist advisor surveys of companies prior to implementation of flexible working, or checking coverage of key issues during pilots or operation. The CBT proved to be very popular, and has been translated from the original English version, to German and Slovenian (others planned). The FWIP also proved popular, especially in training of business advisors (e.g. in Slovenia) where the guidance for developing a detailed plan for implementation was used to also guide advisors through usage of all supporting materials (to inform planning decisions). It was felt that hands on experience by local advisors was necessary to really situate new knowledge and make it operational.

3.5 Selection of Materials Online

Observation of the web site logs shows who is selecting materials and what materials are being selected. In the case of ‘technology briefings’, for example, it was seen that those related to ‘networks’, especially broadband technologies (e.g. ADSL, WiFi, Powerline, etc.), were most popular and accounted for almost half of the 10,000 copies of technical briefings downloaded in the first 18 months of operation.

In the case of technical case studies, selection shows a preference for cases addressing networked organisations rather than individual cases of teleworking, and this pattern is echoed in other materials such as blueprints and regional cases.

3.6 Multiple Views – Common Problem

A key result was the discovery that our customers, the business advisors, required multiple perspectives on the same problem space. While we had started out with the idea that a handbook plus a set of ‘blueprints’ would suffice, they quickly made clear their demands for case studies, technology briefings, business briefings, decision support tools, and other codifications of knowledge about flexible working. This demand was both encouraging and problematic, since we had to quickly determine how to respond to this, plus the demand for multiple languages, very quickly. The multiple forms of information requested suggest that since business advisors are not well standardised (see later), there is a need to provide multiple access routes to knowledge about flexible working. Different forms and different levels of expression of the same fundamental knowledge are required to ensure access to a

heterogeneous constituency, and so knowledge/information access is a key issue in regional deployment of new IS opportunities.

3.7 Variety of Actors in Business Support Networks

As previously stated, it was discovered that business support networks are not well standardised in Europe, nor is the type of professional who provides business advice at the front line. At the professional level the range is from formal qualifications in business advisory practice, plus continuing professional development (e.g. Institute of Business Advisors, IBA), to completely private practitioners trading on their own experience as successful business professionals (craft approach). At the institutional level the range is from well established Regional Development Agency (RDA) employing trained advisors, to informal local collectives of concerned business people providing mutual support via trade bodies, local chambers, and other such networks of local business practitioners. What is significant is that in every region there is some kind of, at least seminal, business support network in operation.

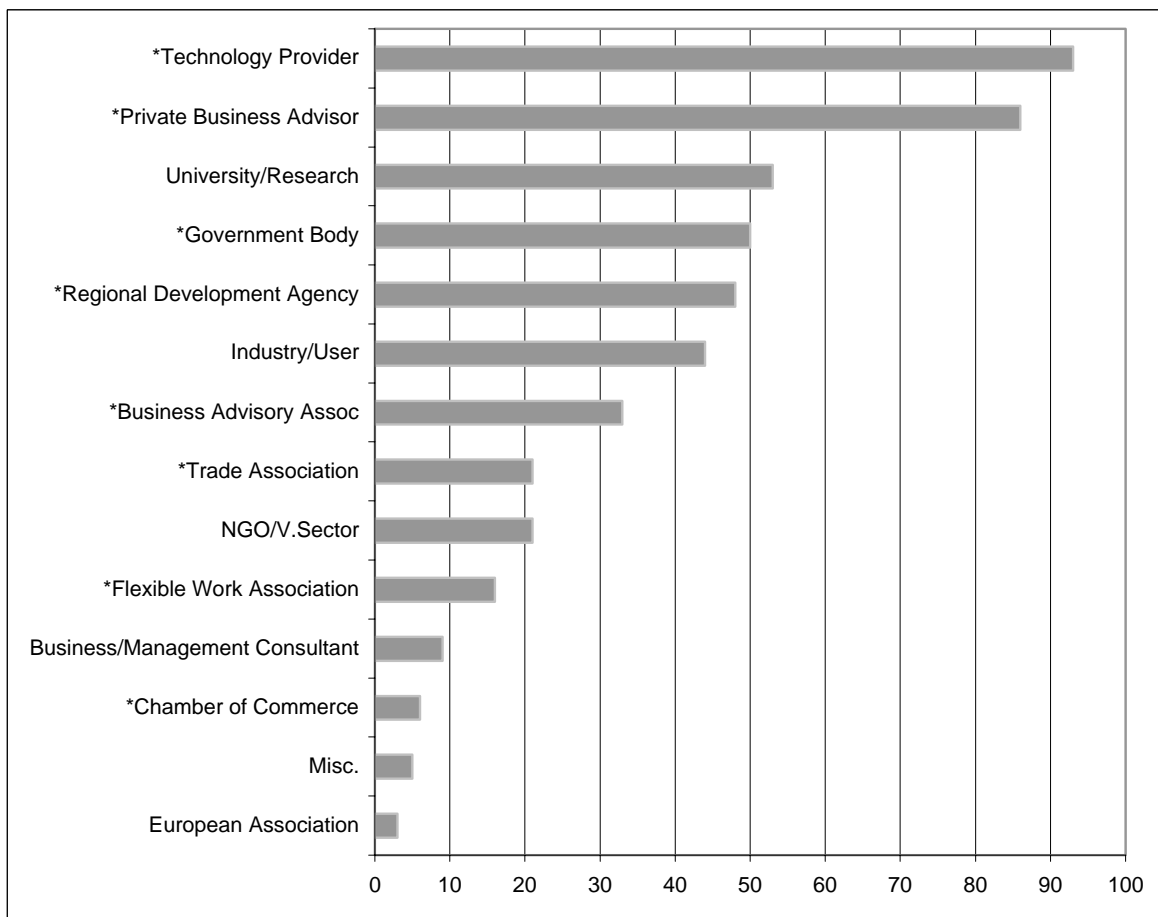


Figure 1 – Types of Business Advisors Registered in FlexWork (484 at 03/03)

It is important to note that the lack of standardisation in business support delivery at regional level means that National and European initiatives may find it easier to reach some business operators than others where leveraging or catalytic actions are dependent on local networks (multipliers). A key lesson to carry forward from this is the need to consider how to harmonise the ways in which European SMEs are provided support for business development. This has implications for Information Society, Employment, Regional Development and European Enterprise, and so it is a problem that is hard to locate with

one authority or champion, and may require collaboration of several agencies at European, National and Regional levels.

3.8 Ongoing Use of FlexWork Materials

FlexWork materials are now used in more than 30 countries, including all EU Member States and New Accession States. In 22 months of operation, the FlexWork site has seen downloads of 130,000 items (in 10 languages) including handbooks, blueprints, technology briefings, case studies and decision support tools. As an act of electronic publishing this in itself is quite significant. However, as an action towards regional development based on uptake of Information Society opportunities it is extremely interesting. The interest in flexible working stems from real needs in the participating regions. However, the level of activity relies on the catalytic effect of the 'outreach' programme whereby nominated champions from FlexWork worked with focus groups from regional business support networks to engage them, involve them in defining their knowledge needs, and assist them in benchmarking (informally) their region and learning from that how to better support local exploitation of flexible working. Use of FlexWork materials will continue in these regions, and a follow-up action is planned to ensure broader address to other regions not yet engaged.

A key feature of the observed success of FlexWork has been the task-sensitive nature of its product set and support actions. Getting close to regional business support networks, and really understanding the advisors and their local concerns, has helped the project fit itself to the real task needs of regional business advisors. We feel this approach is worthy of closer scrutiny in follow-up work.

4. Summary of Key Lessons and Future Perspectives

The FlexWork project has involved a large team of developers and outreach workers, engaged with an even larger team of regional business advisors who represent different regional business support networks. A number of significant lessons are suggested by the results.

A key lesson lies in the recognition that business advisors at regional level strongly share concerns to better understand how flexible working can impact employment, local business operations, regional development initiatives, and work-life balance. The advisors who offer these concerns are also personally concerned to acquire knowledge about flexible working so as to improve their own knowledge, and hence their ability to support SME clients as part of the general aim to improve local economy and competitiveness. Work needs to be done to enhance advisor competence as part of local capacity building.

It is also clear that advisors, while emphasising professional development and support for specific clients, also have concerns to support regional/local policy and strategy.

A significant lesson is that transmission of knowledge requires it to be codified in as many diverse forms as possible (so hundreds more cases in exactly the same format may not add much). In a regional context there is a strongly heterogeneous client base, and having different kinds of cases, reports, success stories, tools, etc., increases the likelihood that a specific SME manager or advisor can find information that is a good match with their needs for examples, technical answers, or whatever. It is also accepted that these diverse materials must contain enough 'locally relevant' items as possible, and relevance is gained through local language, local cases, and exposure of local technical and regulatory information.

A key finding was that decision support tools, such as cost-benefit-analysis and planning aids, help advisors select and operationalise relevant knowledge objects in a specific task setting. This situates knowledge relative to known problem spaces and supports advisor progress in acquiring new knowledge.

Advisors and their clients appear to have a stronger interest in ‘networked organisations’ than in individual telework methods and examples. There is also evidence that advisors feel that the technical solutions could enhance links between local business and regional government / business support.

Regional business support networks take many forms and involve many different actors. In each region a different pattern may be found, and no common scheme seems to exist, except perhaps within countries where a National initiative strongly influences the shaping of regional initiatives. Accessing such networks requires an outreach programme whereby personal contact is used to develop links to key actors.

These lessons can be summarised as:

- Business advisors want flexible working to improve employment, effective business operation, work-life balance, and regional development initiatives.
- Business advisors want to acquire knowledge about flexible working to improve their own knowledge and hence their ability to help SME clients.
- Business advisors want to continue learning in new IS areas for both professional development and to help them improve local economy and competitiveness.
- Business advisors want to be able to access new knowledge via a set of knowledge objects that support multiple views on the same problems space (variety in learning materials).
- Business advisors seek ‘locally relevant’ learning materials to support clients in their own language or via examples from the same trade, region, culture, etc.
- Business advisors want to use decision support tools to help select relevant examples, cases, etc. Such tools must be convincing to their clients (deliver value).
- Business advisors and their clients have a stronger interest in ‘networked organisations’ than in traditional telework, and identify networking between regional government/business support and local SMEs to be of high potential value.
- Regional business support networks and the advisors/actors involved take many forms. Some are more developed and more effective than others. There is concern to see harmonisation of business support in all EU regions to guarantee equality of access and opportunity in Information Society benefits.

Future work by agencies in IST, Employment, European Enterprise, and Regional Development could contribute significant benefit by addressing the need to offer a harmonised level and quality of support to business development at regional level. Inequalities determined by historical factors mitigate against the objectives of equality of access embodied in the eEurope action plan and subsequent specific initiatives. These can be overcome by ensuring the business support networks at regional level have opportunity to learn from each other and to develop best practice Europe-wide. This will also add value to specific programmes such as IST by ensuring the necessary pre-conditions exist for effective uptake of the IS opportunities and benefits which such programmes generate.

References

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