

**THINK** - Towards Handicap Integration Negotiating Knowledge - is a project that takes into account the many difficulties faced by the physically handicapped in accomplishing full professional integration. This posture is according to the International Labour Organization, which recommended to the governments the adoption of "a national policy concerning the professional re-adaptation and disabled persons employment."<sup>9</sup> Using the methods made available by the new Information and Communication Technologies, mainly through telework, it aims to develop their capabilities, market their services and achieve full professional integration.

Key terms are to become productive, profitable and self-sufficient. The main objective is to benefit the social and economic insertion of 240 disabled persons in 22 months in areas such as accounting, translations, word processing, web design, programming and technical assistance for computer systems. The reasoning behind THINK implementation is the broader geographical application of PORCIDE, providing a new perspective of life to the Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Greek and Scottish disabled participants, following a recommendation of the European Council, which envisages a guiding program of the rehabilitation and integration in favour of the disabled persons.<sup>10</sup>

Through partnerships with companies based in those countries and multinationals, TELEMAnutenção envisages to export this innovative concept of work environment,

conjugating technology and socio-economic concerns, resulting in a transnational revolutionary project. The idea implies a new perspective towards handicapped persons, allowing them a choice of life proactive that should be seen as a first step to state their will to be integrated and independent, refusing a passive posture in society. The large corporate companies have a fundamental role in the process, since they will be a significant part of the future clients.

THINK features an integrated and flexible approach to the countries participating, enhancing the opportunities for co-operation, showing that telework has no geographical boundaries and that any company or individual, no matter the physical location, has potential to compete and to co-operate nationally as well as internationally. As referred, THINK will be disseminated based on the pilot experience we had in Portugal, which resulted in the next guidelines of action suitable for implementing THINK in other European countries.<sup>11</sup> This is a pioneer model because of the chosen approach and its characteristics.

This distance work concept lead to the necessity of creating a monitoring and support structure – basically the following management model - for the teleworkers, which is sufficiently solid to provide them with the tools to develop highly professional services to the final client. For this, local research was undertaken to check the reality of the markets. In the end, teleworkers and customers are integrated in a logical framework of action.

The selection of the potential teleworkers is a key step, and we propose in the following sections of this document a process divided in several stages, according to the training

<sup>9</sup> Convention 159 of the International Labour Organization, adopted by the International Labour Conference in 20 June 1983.

<sup>10</sup> Recommendation R (92) adopted by the Ministers Committee of the European Council in 9 April 1992.

<sup>11</sup> See the Managing and Operational Plan.

capacities of the persons, the limit of teleworkers envisaged and the target services in each participating countries. TELEMANutenção is developing a distance-training model adequate to THINK, aggregating physical presence and distance learning methods. We built our pedagogical model according to the spirit of inclusiveness stated in the Salamanca Declaration.<sup>12</sup>

The main characteristics the distance-training model are:

- a) Internet based, to give the trainees access to courses from any geographic location.
- b) Interactive: it favours a permanent contact between pupils and these and the trainers.
- c) Flexibility: training can be – and must be – constantly improved, the contents updated, aiming at a functional efficacy. On the other hand, the proposal for the division of contents in “pieces” (small modules) provides obvious advantages, as we will see next.
- d) Continuity: in learning. The courses are always available as well as the updates.
- e) Adequacy: of training and the specific needs of the professional work developed by the consortium. Providing a practical training method will contribute to better performance of human resources, personalizing courses by Department.

The contents contemplated concern the main areas of telework activity and will take into account the need for standardization regarding the participating countries. The language will follow this reasoning, with the aim of favouring interaction and be as realistic as possible, namely in what

relates to the actual work which will be developed. In other words, the means of communication will have to consider the products and instruments of work, as well as a possible solution to promote communication between individuals and partners of various cultures.

In a broader perspective, we also propose a logic integration of systems, as well as a co-ordination network adequate to the project, aiming to achieve a high degree of satisfaction, for the customers and teleworkers. Once again, in this area THINK will build on the Portuguese experience, taking advantage of the know-how obtained by TELEMANutenção. As ultimate result, we expect that this project will contribute to shape a different future for the disabled persons, providing true hope based on a new work method that can be performed anywhere, any time, taking into account the difficulties of this group of persons.

Besides exploratory visits to potential partners, this project commissioned market studies in the selected countries in order to make a profile of the particularities and economic possibilities of each.<sup>13</sup> It is worthwhile to state the broad benefits of this project, in areas such as employment, information society, social inclusion, technology advancement and economic competitiveness.

In a European perspective, the project intends to demonstrate and develop a model of social, organisational and technological dimensions that enables people with disabilities to work as a team across different countries. In this way we will improve the quality of life of a population who has been discriminated from the labour market. And since the future of Europe “in terms of innovation, growth, competitiveness and employment

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<sup>12</sup> Adopted in 10 June 1994 in the General Session of Conference, in Spain.

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<sup>13</sup> See Part II.

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## *We foresee the creation of a virtual community, where teleworkers and all project participants can exchange opinions and thoughts*

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depends (...) of the human resources development and the information and communication technology”,<sup>14</sup> THINK is a truly helping hand in a very competitive world, giving primacy to people with disabilities in a new area: telework, which becomes the instrument of socio-economic cohesion. On the other hand, taking advantage of the new technologies we will contribute to the European Commission’s programme eEurope, since one of its objectives is to “give to all Europeans the benefits of the Information Society.”<sup>15</sup>

The management approach to be used in the project – as explained further on – will secure tight communication and collaboration between the co-ordinator and the participants, and later also the teleworkers. Information technology support will be used to facilitate work group management and development. This provides an easy way to keep up to date, share information, and collaborate on documents and projects. Another tool to be used is Intranet, so as to be interconnected and flexible. Intranet reduces the cost of paper document distribution, increases communication, and improves access to current information.

As a collateral effect, we foresee the creation of a virtual community, where teleworkers and all project participants can exchange opinions and thoughts in a virtual space emerging from common experience. This infrastructure enables us to learn much more about individual and group experiences, and to make it

possible to support both intra-company as well as inter-organisational working.

Based on PORCIDE, we created a new model and develop new methods for managing teleworkers over distance, detailed on Part II. We developed a software application that monitors the teleworkers activity and automates all the daily routines. This application will contain specific routines and templates applied to operational areas like marketing and sales, project control, administrative management, personal management, system management, maintenance of the system, communication and remote access to information.

Our model will also link the teleworkers with enterprises, to increase their competitiveness in the global marketplace. In fact, “due to a variety of technological advancements, today’s society is changing rapidly and companies have difficulties in keeping up.”<sup>16</sup> The companies participating in this project will increase their competitiveness since they can develop different kind of services – constantly updated – using this new way of working, making them real actors in the global market. And they will be contributing to innovation because they are providing equal opportunities for people with disabilities to access a labour market without boundaries.

One of Europe’s key objective is to generate employment opportunities for all, and the problem of unemployment hits particularly those people who are often already in disadvantage when competing in the labour market. The possibility of creating new job opportunities across Europe and at same time also the professional and social integration of disable people is considered in a very serious way by this project. The European unemployment

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<sup>14</sup> [www.eun.org](http://www.eun.org), Report of 26 June 1999.

<sup>15</sup> in [www.ispo.cec.be](http://www.ispo.cec.be), Office of the Project Information Society.

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<sup>16</sup> See *Economist*, 15 July 2000.

problem is related to technical skills and education / training is a crucial variable.

Many job positions demand more and more training and formal qualifications, due to technological innovations. This is like a closed circle, in which “communication technologies are not only changing our education and training needs, but also expanding our response ability to those needs.”<sup>17</sup> From the European Employment Summit of November 1997 emerged guidelines for an integrated strategy based on the “creation of new and better job positions (...) modernization of the educational and training systems [to deal with the problem of] unemployment [and] prepare companies and workers for the adaptation to new market technologies.”<sup>18</sup>

In this respect, THINK is an answer to both problems concerning the handicapped persons, providing new opportunities for this group in particular. And this is directly related with Guideline 19: “The States Members will give special attention to the problems disabled persons may encounter when entering working life.” We contemplate another variable: the creation of employment for these persons, not just their adaptation to work.

The European Commission has the desire to create a digitally skilled Europe, “assuring that the whole process is socially inclusive (...) and reinforces social cohesion.”<sup>19</sup> But in reality, initiatives benefiting disabled persons are not common, and the few existing do not create new horizons for these persons.<sup>20</sup> THINK appears has clearly different. As others focused on training unemployed or disabled in

performing teleservices, not guaranteeing employment opportunities, THINK has employment potential, linking the usage of the features of the Information Society with the social-professional integration of citizens suffering from a handicap. This aim of inclusiveness is common to another European project: Helios – Social Integration and Independent Living. The ultimate expected result is to give disabled people real control over their lives and consequently the autonomy and independence to participate actively in society.

In THINK participants from different organisations are involved, each contributing with their specific skills, complementing each other, and making the project possible. Only this way, are we able to foster the creation of new working methods (telework) and to

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[http://www.acenet.edu/calec/dist\\_learning/home.html](http://www.acenet.edu/calec/dist_learning/home.html)

<sup>18</sup> <http://europa.eu.int>

<sup>19</sup> [www.ispo.cec.be](http://www.ispo.cec.be)

<sup>20</sup> See Part II-Competition.

develop systems and services for social integration of the disabled. THINK is a unique concept, which will help the disabled to be autonomous and self-sufficient, while contributing to better employment conditions and social inclusiveness, according to the Amsterdam Treaty.<sup>21</sup> It is also an example of the power behind civil partnerships, how private companies can collaborate to help solve a public problem profiting from it. But in the end society as a whole benefits.

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<sup>21</sup> See Article 13 of the Amsterdam Treaty, approved in 2 October 1997.