



**Nomination for the eAwards 2002 in category 1: Work and Skills**

**A New and Proven Organisation Model for Knowledge Organisations in the Information Age**

*The history and results of Solvision, a company of The Vision Web network*

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the **dotnet in business**  
**VISIONWEB** 

The logo for "the dotnet in business VISIONWEB net". It features the text "the dotnet in business" in a smaller, orange font above "VISIONWEB" in a large, bold, black font. To the right of "VISIONWEB" is a yellow circle containing the word "net" in black.

## **Summary**

Solvision was founded in 1996 by three men with a common objective: to create a company where people enjoy working. Time has proven them successful, because six years later more than 500 people are working in the networked organisation The Vision Web that emerged from Solvision.

Four key elements contributed to a pleasant working environment: an explicit corporate philosophy, working in autonomous teams, possibilities for telework (flexible office concept) and a sound corporate ICT infrastructure. Together these elements resulted in high job satisfaction among the employees, a high level of innovation, very low sickness rates and less housing costs.

This way of working is actually a big experiment, as well for the founders as for the employees and we learned a lot of lessons on ICT, organisational and human levels. We selected three of them to describe in this nomination. As these lessons learned reveal, not everything is perfect in our organisation. But still, for most employees it is a perfect place to develop their talents and grow in their professional skills.

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## Introduction

Some things work out, other things don't. That's in short the experience of Solvision – an ICT consultancy and project management company which persists in structuring itself in an unconventional way. People working at Solvision have no job description, no manager, and no fixed desk to work at. And that for more than six years.

Solvision (Solutions through Vision) was founded in 1996 by three men with a common vision: to create a company where people feel free to use their talents and thus innovate. By consequence, the founders provided no blueprint for growth. Actually, they provided for nothing except for a laptop and a virtual corporate ICT infrastructure, a mobile phone, a car and some good entrepreneurial spirit in addition to a monthly paycheque for the employees.

Over the years more than five hundred people joined the company. Due to the entrepreneurial spirit of these people, Solvision was soon too small to accommodate all their ideas. New companies were founded and The Vision Web (TVW) was born: a network of companies all providing services in information technology.

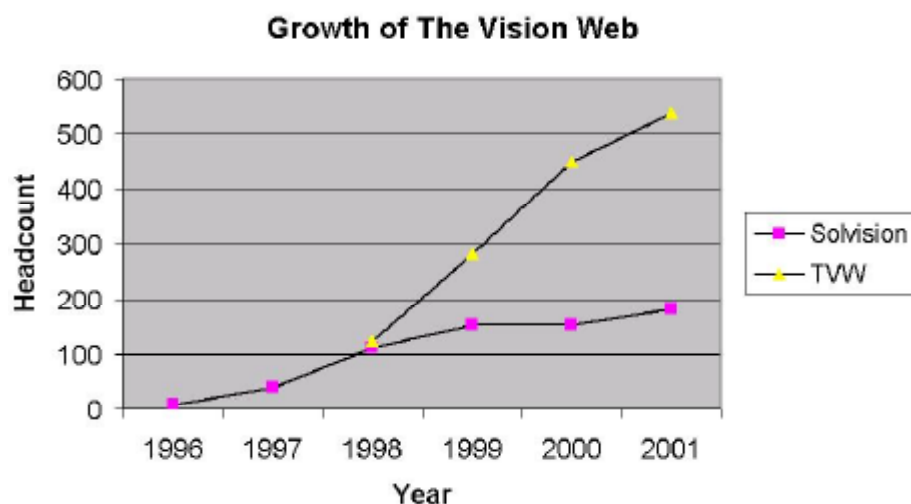


Figure 1: development of number of employees during the first six years

Two years after its foundation Solvision started to receive a lot of attention from the Dutch press. The reason for that appeared sometimes a bit superficial. Our 'new way of working' had been given a 'face' by the untraditional office space. Over the years we moved into monumental old buildings with a grand café on the floor level and a few flexible workplaces and meeting rooms on the higher levels. Journalists love these buildings. Of course, all this press attention is very flattering and we still like to invite customers and press in one of our grand café's. But the grand café and the flexible workplaces are only one aspect of our experiment. Now that we're beyond the critical border for new companies – surviving the first five years – we feel it is time to share our experiences with other companies.

So we decided to invest time and effort in several actions. In 2000 we welcomed a writer of management books to perform research within The Vision Web and to publish a 200 paged book about our successes and failures. Eventually it proved to be one of the best sold management books within that year in the Netherlands. In 2001 Solvision nominated for the Dutch Telework Award. As a result of winning this award, Solvision had the honour to be visited by a lot of university researchers as well as programme researchers, including a researcher of RAND Europe for a description of our case in the Best e-Europe Practices (Beep) database. By nominating for the eAwards 2002 we hope that also companies outside The Netherlands and Belgium in some way can benefit from the lessons we have learned.

*Note:*

In this nomination the company names 'The Vision Web' and 'Solvision' are being used. To clarify the relation: Solvision is a part of networking organisation The Vision Web. But, The Vision Web is not a holding organisation in the traditional sense. It is a *cultural* brand, indicating that the five companies belonging to The Vision Web share the same ideas of working. Because Solvision is the oldest *commercial* brand within The Vision Web, we decided to put Solvision forward for the e-Awards 2002 nomination. The foundation for the way of working and the supporting ICT infrastructure was laid down by this company. In Appendix A you can find an overview of the other companies within The Vision Web.

**A new way of working: four key elements**

In this paragraph the four key elements of Solvision's way of working are addressed: the corporate philosophy, networking as organising principle, autonomous teams, telework for all people and a sound ICT infrastructure.

*Corporate philosophy*

Some basic values in modern social business behaviour are made explicit by Solvision in order to create a corporate awareness of their importance. These values are:

- Respect and trust: co-operation starts with trust in and respect for each other's skills.
- Personal responsibility: persons doing the things they really want will be naturally inclined to take responsibility for their actions
- Entrepreneurship: doing the things you're good at is the best way to contribute to the company goals
- Talents above structures: talents must be used and not blocked by corporate structures or job descriptions
- Synergy: the  $1 + 1 = 3$  formula can't be forced. It works only when people feel free enough to adopt an open attitude towards each other.

For more about our philosophy, go to [www.thevisionweb.net](http://www.thevisionweb.net) and choose menu item culture

### *Autonomous teams*

Solvision isn't divided along service lines or departments. People organise themselves in 'Business Projects'; autonomous teams which function as micro-enterprises. Business Projects determine what products or services to develop and set up strategies on how to make money. Every Business Project has its own profit and loss account, hires people from outside the company and divides profits among its members. Also, the members determine their own salaries. Business Projects vary in size. Most of them contain six to twenty people.

The ICT services market is a very fast moving environment. Business Projects incorporate these dynamics in the company. When people detect a new market demand they are free to form a new Business Project and explore this opportunity. The reverse process happens as well: Business Projects dissolve when the market for their services declines. The members regroup themselves in new or other Business Projects.

### *Telework*

Only 18 out of the more than 500 people work on a fixed spot. These are the office managers and the people working at the Shared Services Centre of The Vision Web. All other people, including the founders, have a laptop and a mobile phone – they can work any place they like. At the client's office, at home or at a flex desk at one of the five 'meeting places' in use by The Vision Web. To facilitate working at home, people get the expenses for using ISDN, xDSL or cable refunded.

### *ICT infrastructure*

From day one, all people at Solvision teleworked. The ICT infrastructure and the virtual office developed itself naturally to facilitate place and time independent working. All work related activities can be done remote. Except of course picking up physical mail. To accommodate this, people get an e-mail warning when a package has arrived. The scheme below shows the ICT infrastructure of the company.

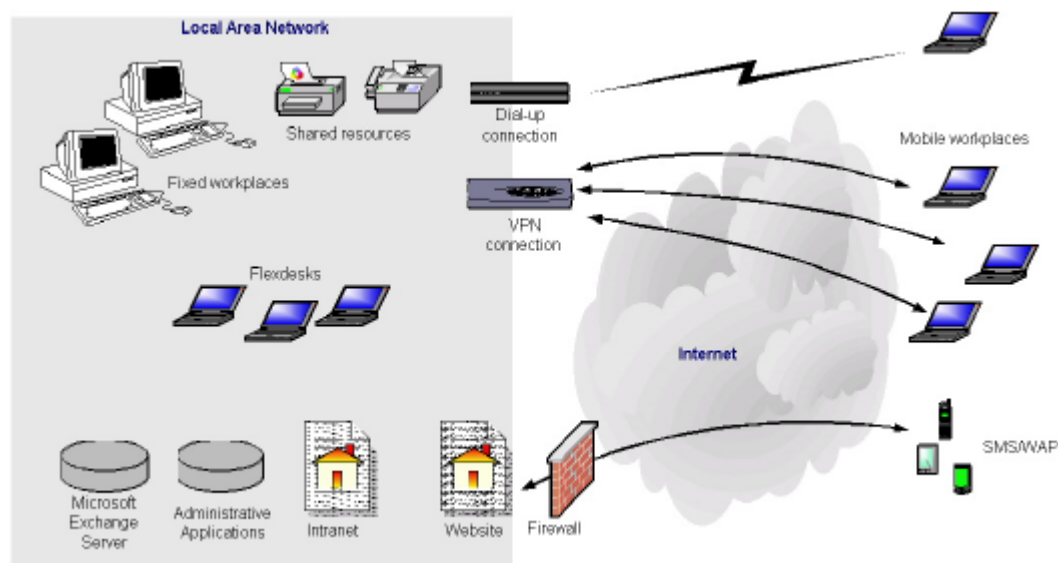


Figure 2: ICT infrastructure The Vision Web

When employees connect to the virtual office, the first thing they see is the news. Everyone can write a news item and post it. Via the menu it's possible to get access to a variety of applications. To name a few: a customer relation management system, a dashboard with a visual presentation of the performance of Business Projects, a who is who system, a knowledge browser and an executive viewer. Because openness is very important in our company, all facts and figures are open for everyone. Including everyone's salary.

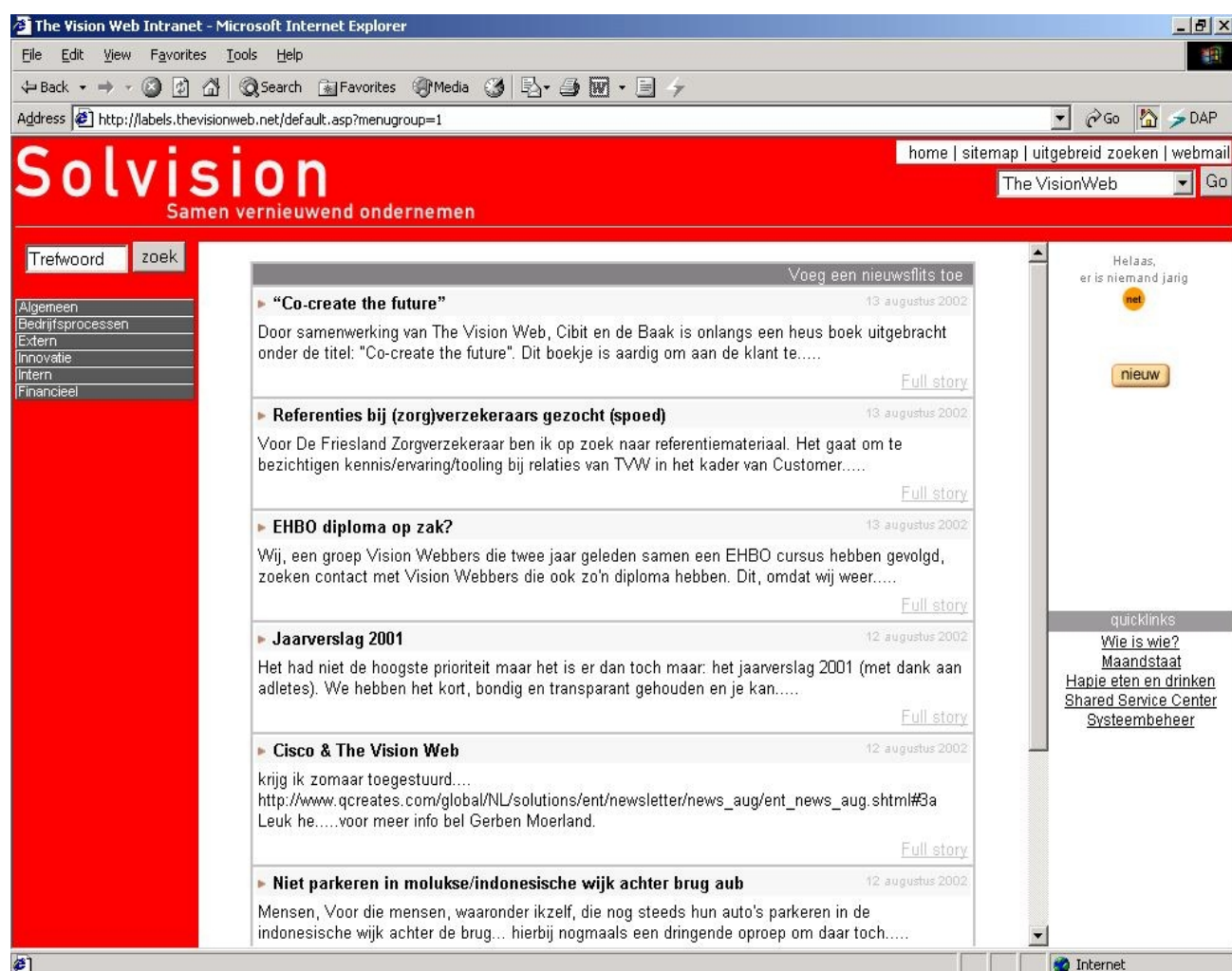


Figure 3: screen dump of the intranet welcome screen

Technical support for the virtual office and telework equipment is arranged by The Lodge (also a company within The Vision Web), formalised in a Service Level Agreement. Every Business Project pays a fixed amount for every member, every month. All new employees get a two-day orientation course on the flexible office concept and the company's philosophy. During this course they are taught how to work with the virtual office.

## Results and Lessons Learned

Because there is no before and after situation to compare it is quite difficult to get a complete picture of the results. But most of our employees have worked with or for other companies. They report some major advantages concerning the Solvision way of working.

### *More job satisfaction*

Working in autonomous teams gives a lot of job satisfaction. There's no manager telling you what to do and how to do it. Decisions are made by the team and the influence an individual can exert on his own tasks is maximised.

### *Improved concentration*

The possibility of working at home is highly valued by most people because it's much easier to concentrate. No ringing phones, talking colleagues or social obligations.

### *Combination of work and care*

Employees report high satisfaction for the possibilities to combine work and family care. For example, when a child is ill it is easy to work at home. But also bringing or collecting children to and from kindergarten is more relaxed when there is no obligation to sit eight hours a day behind the same desk.

### *Less traffic jam annoyance*

In the Netherlands, traffic jams are a major problem on the main roads during rush hour. Because employees can work anywhere, they are not forced to spend useless time in their car. They can plan their mobility and spend their time in an efficient manner.

From an organisational perspective three major achievements can be reported.

### *Lower costs*

By using a flexible office concept, major costs savings are being achieved. In the table below you see our costs for a fixed workplace and our costs for a flexible workplace.

	<b>Fixed Workplaces</b>	<b>Flex desks</b>
Rental of office space	€ 250	
Other housing costs	€ 100	€ 100
Deprecation of inventory	€ 30	
(Mobile) phone, including use	€ 15	€ 110
ISDN or xDSL subscription		€ 35
<b>Total</b>	<b>€ 390</b>	<b>€ 245</b>

Figure 4: costs fixed workplaces versus flex desks per month

### *Lower sickness rates*

The combination of more job satisfaction and flexible work provides for a very low sickness rate compared to the line of business average. During 2001 Solvision's sickness rate was 1.25%, compared to 5.3% nationally (benchmark for companies providing business services). Taking the rougher benchmark 'company size' it proved that companies with a headcount of 100 people and more had a sickness rate of 7.2%. (All figures derived from the Dutch central agency for statistics.)

Solvision's low figures are probably partly due to the fact that people can work at home. With mild complaints it can be too much to drive to the office, whilst working at home in a slower pace is still possible.

#### *Higher level of innovation*

Having people work in their own micro-enterprises, speeds up innovation. The team decides which new developments to explore and the members are fully committed to make it work. Also, the Business Projects have their own network of internal and external partners that can give innovation a strong impulse. To give a recent example: one Business Project created an application together with Cisco Benelux to give mobile workers (sales persons, service engineers) access to SAP R/3 data by any mobile device (phone, PDA, laptop etc).

### **Lessons Learned**

Over the years we learned a lot. As stated in the introduction: some things work out, other things don't. It is impossible to present a full list of lessons learned, so we selected three general lessons learned in the categories ICT, organisation and people.

#### *Specialised knowledge management system brought no added value*

Because we're a knowledge organisation, we thought we could use a specialised knowledge management system. So we invested in LiveLink, a web based application. After a few years it proved no one really used it. Employees simply saw no added value. For knowledge purposes they used the intranet or file sharing on the internal network and of course their personal contacts within the company. As a result, the LiveLink application was removed.

#### *Rather difficult decision: dissolving a Business Project*

A Business Project is created by its members, which results in a strong emotional commitment. It can be very hard to decide the time has come to end it. In the past some Business Projects went on and on trying to make it work, but suffering big financial losses. In order to prevent that from happening too often, every Business Project must now compose a 'sounding board'. This consists of five or six people chosen by the Business Project members with enough seniority to point out the group's blind spots and to suggest an adequate course of action.

#### *An unconventional way of working makes not everyone happy*

At Solvision flexible working is part of the corporate philosophy, which is communicated quite clearly. This attracts staff that agrees with this philosophy. But still, some people can't cope with the practical consequences (not having a fixed desk, no one telling you what to do). Quite often those people decide to leave during their probationary period. People that hang on beyond this two-month period are quite happy with the way of working. Most of those who eventually leave the company do this to set up their own company, often based on the same principles.

## **Appendix A**

### **Vision Web companies and their services**

ChangeVision: interim and programme management

CreXX: building and implementing applications

FiNext: transform financial departments into business support centres

Solvision: ICT consultancy and project management

The Lodge: sourcing services and hosting

## **Appendix B**

### **Solvision Facts and Figures**

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Branches:

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Groningen

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Leuven (Belgium)

Year of incorporation: 1996  
Chamber of Commerce of Haaglanden: 27174219  
Number of staff at the beginning of 2002: 183

1999 sales: 35,5 Mln NLG.  
2000 sales: 37,6 Mln NLG.  
2001 sales: 41,8 Mln NLG.

*Market segments:*

Telecommunication  
Industry  
Chemistry  
Banking institutions  
Public authorities  
Employment Agency industry  
Software Houses  
Utility companies  
Hardware Suppliers  
Insurance industry  
Food industry  
Media  
Training institutes  
Consultancy firms  
Transport  
Logistic service providers  
Retail  
Commerce  
Agricultural sector  
Pharmaceutical  
Business services  
Lease Companies  
Tourism and Recreation  
Construction industry  
Financial services