

# **European Telework Awards**

***Brussels November 5 1999***

**By Andrew Bibby**

Companies and organisations in Denmark, France, Italy, and Scotland walked off with the prizes at this year's European Telework Awards at a ceremony held in Brussels on November 5th. To do so, however, they had to beat off tough opposition from a range of other innovative teleworking initiatives from across the European Union.

The Awards have become an established part of the events of European Telework Week, which was held this year from November 1st-8th. The week, which is supported by the European Commission's DG Information Society (formerly DG XIII), provides an opportunity to put the spotlight on the new ways of working made possible by information and communication technologies. Teleworking, usually defined as remote or distant working facilitated by new technology, potentially offers important business and employment opportunities for Europe.

"Nine million Europeans are now engaged in new working practices, so this is not something just for the technological elite," said Peter Johnston, Head of Unit in DG Information Society, speaking at the Telework Awards event.

Eighteen of the entries submitted for the Telework Awards successfully made it through to the shortlist stage, and each of these entries was able to briefly explain their initiative to the audience at the Awards event. The shortlist included large IT and telecommunications corporates, public administrations, and a number of smaller businesses and community-based ventures.

Six European Telework Awards were on offer this year, for the best telework examples in a large organisation and in a small/medium-sized enterprise (SME), the best public initiative, the best initiative supporting the disadvantaged, the best contribution to public awareness, and the best telework technology or service.

This final category was the first to be awarded. British company MITEL, which specialises in network systems for the telecoms sector, demonstrated its Shuttle product, which offers home-based workers the same access to telephony services as their office-based colleagues. MITEL's Dave Hardcastle pointed out that his company was itself making use of remote working, with 500 of the employees, or about a third of the workforce, teleworking part-time.

MITEL was up against two strong entries from France Télécom. Jérôme Bergerot introduced the company's package of services for remote working (including videoconferencing and document sharing), collectively marketed as Boogie. When the votes were cast, however, the Telework Award went to France Télécom for their second entry. This was the telework trial which operated successfully in Lannion, Brittany, during part of 1998, when an employee of a locally based electronics company was able to work two days a week from home. The trial made use of the broadband communications possibilities available through the emerging ADSL technology, and was combined with telephone and videoconferencing links using Internet protocol.

France Télécom tried to repeat its success in a second Awards category, that of the best telework example in a large organisation, with PC Nomade, its training and management package for remote sales staff. Also shortlisted was the Swedish National Energy Administration for its extensive telework programme, which now covers 127 of the organisation's 167 staff. The opportunity to telework from home (which is subject to a formal agreement on issues such as insurance, training and hours of working) was introduced following the creation of the Administration in 1998 and its relocation to the town of Eskilstuna, 130 kms west of Stockholm. Teleworking staff have the opportunity to work from home for a maximum of three days a week.

The Award in this category was won, however, by Danish insurance company Danica. As Hubert Jensen explained, Danica has recently undertaken a major restructuring of its administration, focusing on customer service delivery. The company has routed calls previously handled by 57 offices to four call centres, enabling it to close almost forty sites. It has also equipped 150 of its 260 sales staff with ISDN lines at home, enabling them to operate effectively away from a conventional office base.

Denmark also walked off with another Telework Award, for the best initiative supporting the disadvantaged. The New Pathways project in Næstved Kommune offers access to distance learning courses for local people suffering social exclusion, including the unemployed and early retired. The project, which has IBM and trade union federation HK among its partners, is focused on three Open Data Centres.

Also shortlisted for this category were Online, a project providing information on employment and training opportunities for disabled people coordinated from Manchester, England, and the Periphera project, a EU-funded initiative which among other things has developed a virtual call centre for disabled people in Hasselt, Belgium.

The commune of Naples took the Telework Award for the best supporting public initiative, for its Telework and Local Development project. As Salvatore di Maio, speaking at the awards event for the authority, pointed out, Naples currently suffers a very high unemployment rate, 42%. The telework initiative includes a municipal teleservices centre.

The region of Bages in central Catalunya, which has its own telework development programme TeletreBages, was also shortlisted for the Award. The project, which is a joint public/private initiative, aims to develop telework ('teletreball' in Catalan) in Bages, an old industrial region based originally on textiles.

A third strong contender for this Award came from the Nord-Rheinland Westfalia state of Germany, where the Teleskop scheme has been providing a telework information service for small and medium-sized enterprises.

Denmark completed its hat-trick of Awards this year when TeleDanmark won the award for best contribution to public awareness. The company has been running a campaign to promote the idea of telework, which has included the publication of a telework guide (also available on the Internet). Also shortlisted in this category was the recent Dutch study which has looked at the possibility of teleworking reducing traffic congestion in the Amsterdam/Utrecht/The Hague triangle. The study, which involved surveying the commuting patterns of 10,000 people from 55 companies, attracted considerable TV and press coverage in the Netherlands.

Also competing in this category for the award was the UK specialist magazine All About Working From Home, which as its name suggests is specifically focused on the information needs of home-based workers.

If the European Telework Awards attract entries from major corporate enterprises, the event also offers a platform for innovative small enterprises to promote themselves and their work. Shortlisted for the category of best telework example in an SME were the Italian employment services agency Ali Spa and an IT venture in Norrbotten in Sweden's far north. The Award went, however, to the Work-Global ICT facilitation service in the Scottish Western Isles. Donnie Morrison of Work-Global described how telework was providing employment opportunities for people living in these beautiful but remote islands. The teleworkers' clients included firms not only elsewhere in Britain but also in Germany and north America, he said.

The voting system for the Awards took into account the views of an expert panel of judges, the votes of the audience listening to each presentation but also, in an innovative use of technology, votes cast previously on-line, via the Internet. The Awards ceremony itself was also web-cast on the Internet.

"It is important to learn from best practice, and we must increasingly focus on the best in Europe," said Peter Johnston of DG Information Society. "All the finalists deserve congratulations for their courage and commitment which has enabled them to come so far," he added.