

Brussels, 27 June 2001

OPINION

of the Committee of the Regions

of 13 June 2001

on the

Communication from the Commission on Strategies for jobs in the information society

(COM(2000) 48 final)

The Committee of the Regions,

HAVING REGARD TO the Communication from the Commission on *Strategies for jobs in the information society* (COM(2000) 48 final);

HAVING REGARD TO the decision taken by its Bureau on 13 June 2000, under the fifth paragraph of Article 265 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, to direct Commission 5 for Social Policy, Public Health, Consumer Protection, Research and Tourism to undertake the preparatory work;

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on *Public sector information: a key resource for Europe - A Commission Green Paper on Public sector information in the information society* (COM(1998) 585 final) (CdR 190/99 fin¹);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on *Learning in the information society: An action plan for a European Education Initiative (1996-1998)* (COM(1996) 471 final) (CdR 368/96 fin²);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the *Green Paper on Living and working in the information society: People first* (COM(1996) 389 final) (CdR 365/96 fin³);

HAVING REGARD TO its Resolution on *The information society: from Corfu to Dublin - The new emerging priorities - The implications of the information society for European Union policies - Preparing the next steps* (COM(1996) 395 final) (CdR 337/96 fin⁴);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the *Communication from the Commission to the European*

Parliament and the Council on a multi-annual Community programme for purposes of stimulating the development of a European multimedia content industry and of encouraging utilisation of this multimedia content in the emerging information society (INFO 2000) (COM(1995) 149 final) (CdR 22/96 fin⁵);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission on *Europe's way to the information society - An action plan* (COM(1994) 347 final) (CdR 21/95 fin⁶);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission to the Council, the European Parliament, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on *the Universal service for telecommunications in the perspective of a fully liberalised environment - An essential element of the information society* (COM(1996) 73 final); (CdR 371/96 fin⁷);

HAVING REGARD TO its Resolution on *The implementation of the European employment strategy* (CdR 461/99 fin⁸);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on the Communication from the Commission on *Learning in the information society: An action plan for a European Education Initiative (1996-1998)* (COM (1996) 471 final) (CdR 368/96 fin⁹);

HAVING REGARD TO its Opinion on *The Role of local and regional authorities in linking education and training establishments to enterprises* (CdR 346/96 fin¹⁰);

HAVING REGARD TO the draft Opinion (CdR 303/2000 rev. 2) adopted by Commission 5 on 19 April 2001 (rapporteur: **Mr Tögel** (D/PSE));

CONSIDERING

1. that the global economy is increasingly being transformed into an information society for which new rules apply and which offers, because of its powerful underlying dynamism, enormous opportunities for growth and employment by boosting growth and creating new jobs;
2. that the EU has therefore set itself the task of eliminating mass unemployment over the next ten years by means of the consistent development of the information society;
3. that the information society already accounts for a significant proportion of EU GDP and has recorded a higher level of growth than that of any of the other sectors of the economy. The information society already provides employment for several million people;

CONSIDERING

4. that, although the EU is not yet exploiting the employment potential of the information society to the full, it did, however, highlight the possible impact of the information society on employment at the Employment Summit held in Luxembourg in November 1997. In the wake of the European Council in Vienna in December 1998, a high level group was set up within which the Member States exchange information on their national strategies for the information society. Furthermore, the national employment action plans (NAP) drawn up under the European employment strategy have since 1999 contained actions relating to the information society. The EU has also recently listed the information society as one of its priority subjects,

as was also demonstrated by the eEurope initiative adopted at the European Summit in Lisbon at the beginning of the year;

4.a that the Commission Communication pays no attention whatsoever to the special situation of rural and peripheral areas; without specific attention these areas will be seriously marginalised even further with respect to the development of the information society.

The Committee would also point out that the Communication makes no specific provision for the agricultural and rural development sector, in terms of entrepreneurs, employees or related activities;

5. that it was also recognised that this task can only be fulfilled if life-long learning is applied as a fundamental principle in all areas of society and if all the necessary prerequisites can also be in place to enable a vast pool of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) specialists to be trained;
6. that the high level of skills, the creativity and the versatility of the EU workforce, the internal market, the introduction of the euro and the adaptability of EU enterprises should all be harnessed with a view to tapping the employment potential of the information society, whilst ensuring that priority is given to adequate intervention in rural and peripheral areas;
7. points out that some local and regional authorities have already introduced specific, innovative measures in this field. Their experience can serve as a valuable catalyst for projects which can be transferred to other EU Member States. It is therefore important to help authorities to carry out effective exchanges of experience;
8. that in order to consolidate this initial favourable net balance, a European strategy for jobs in the information society should not focus exclusively on commercial interests but should also focus on their social implications;
9. that the quality of life of employees, the real value of new technical possibilities to both the individual and society and the social, environmental, democratic and ethical justification of these technical possibilities should therefore, represent decisive reference variables in the context of the development of strategies for jobs in the information society;
10. that, in the light of persistent unemployment and the consequences which this has for regional and local authorities, the greatest challenge facing all players is to ensure that the net effect on employment of the introduction of the information society is either neutral or positive; considerable efforts will need to be made in both the political and social fields in order to achieve this goal;
11. that the introduction of the information society will not, in itself, provide a solution to the employment crisis or intensify it. There is rather a danger that the use of new ICT for rationalisation purposes over the next few years will bring a further decline in the level of employment which may, however, be offset in the longer term by the simultaneous growth in the number of jobs in new production and service sectors;

adopted the following opinion by a unanimous vote at its 39th plenary session held on 13 and 14 June 2001 (meeting of 13 June):

The Committee of the Regions

12. considers that one of its most important tasks is to support suitable initiatives for new areas of employment and thus to contribute to the creation of new jobs and to counter the migration of jobs;
13. points out that the IT sector could develop into one of the key industries of the 21st century and thus become a major reference point for the education and employment system as well as for an active European labour market policy;
14. supports the Commission in its development of socially acceptable strategies for the full exploitation of the employment potential of the information society in the framework of the European Employment Strategy;
15. welcomes the report as an important contribution to, and support for, the e-Europe initiative which aims to make Europe ready for the digital age;
16. also notes that lifelong learning for knowledge acquisition will occupy a special place in the information society, as workers will require a high level of qualifications, skills and adaptability;
17. with due regard to the principle of subsidiarity, therefore takes the view that regional and local authorities should be put in a position:
 - to integrate information-society instruments into education systems,
 - to support the incorporation of information-society and multimedia instruments into syllabuses (public-private partnership),
 - to support the establishment of regional and local networks for educational content producers,
 - to ensure that all teachers possess verifiable knowledge of the information society,
 - to provide Internet access for every school,
 - to improve the multimedia capacity of computers in schools;
18. points out in this context, however, that with a view to achieving the above aims, the following prerequisites should be met: the public education system is developed; all schoolchildren to be given access to the new technologies; funding to be provided for more staff and the necessary technological resources for the further training of teachers and the development of teaching models which promote the integration of the new media into the teaching process in an intelligent way;
19. stresses that the employment opportunities offered by the information society should not entail the large-scale marginalisation of the public education system in terms of infrastructure and technology. The important role which education plays, and will continue to play, in the future means that it is in no way appropriate for the regional and local authorities to withdraw from their responsibility for public education. Ways of regulating the relationship between private industry and schools should therefore be investigated;
20. also points out that work in the information society does not follow traditional organisational models, but rather requires flexible, adaptable, multi-skilled employees, many of whom work in areas which focus on knowledge and information. This flexibility and adaptability must not entail reduced quality of work or job-instability;
21. points out that the regional and local authorities have for some time been engaged in

intensive discussions on the subject with industry, associations and trade unions. As the regional and local authorities are both responsible for education and a driving force behind economic development, they can help build bridges between educational and vocational training institutions on the one hand and industry on the other. In many regions and areas an important step has been taken with the introduction of new IT training professions. In this way it has been possible in a relatively short time to train workers up to a high level of practical competence in skills of direct relevance to the workplace, above all in the use of technology. This has made it possible to remedy a major shortage of skilled workers in the sector, which had hitherto concentrated its personnel policy mainly on graduates and skilled staff from other sectors;

22. therefore reiterates its call for support for the regional and local authorities in:
- offering every worker the opportunity to acquire knowledge of the information society,
 - establishing a framework and practical arrangements at regional and local level for greater use of teleworking, as an innovative way of creating jobs which will promote the integration into the labour market of young people living in rural areas, thus contributing to the maintenance of territorial balance. Moreover, the development of information-society initiatives must go hand-in-hand with the creation of jobs for women which make it possible to reconcile work and family life,
 - increasing the supply of, and demand for, places in tertiary-level education, with due regard to gender balance,
 - supporting secondary-level IT courses,
 - improving the employability of the disabled,
 - preparing specific actions for entrepreneurs and workers engaged in agriculture, rural development and related activities, to facilitate access to information society tools, technology and language,
 - developing activities to promote lifelong learning, particularly activities aimed at guaranteeing universal access to basic digital skills and at establishing local learning and e-learning centres;
23. expects the integration of labour and further training policy, in view of the clear need - also stressed by the social partners - for workers to acquire skills equipping them for the new demands of working in the information society, and for lifelong learning to become an integral part of working life. Shorter working hours, with the time being devoted to "education modules" for the acquisition of vocational skills, could give a major impetus to employment as well as a significant boost to the "skills offensive" which is being demanded from every quarter;
24. recognises that in the information society it may be necessary for the vocational education system to be increasingly complemented by company-financed training. And yet, through the new IT training professions, the existing education system has made an important contribution to economic structural change and it has passed an important test in the transition to the information society;
25. therefore feels, in this context, that the need for comprehensive modernisation of labour and social law and training arrangements should be looked at, with the aid of the social partners, in order to ensure that they meet the requirements of work in the information society. An employment policy for the information society should shape the new forms of organisation of work, e.g. teleworking, and new work relationships, e.g. network-based self-employment, in a socially acceptable way, to ensure that the opportunities for workers and for society are exploited and in order to prevent social dislocation and potential divisiveness;

26. points out, for the purpose of clarification, that changes in work in the information society will make it necessary to think about redefining the concepts of worker and company, establishing a single protective framework for teleworking, laying down suitable data protection arrangements for the world of digital work, ensuring that works and staff councils and trade unions have access to firms' electronic networks, broadening the criteria of social security systems - e.g. by bringing in the "new self employed" - and implementing effective minimum social and labour standards;
27. welcomes the idea of the training funds established by some ICT firms as public-private partnerships open to other partners, from which the following measures, inter alia, are to be financed:
- increase in the number of places available at vocational training establishments and higher educational institutions, universities and comparable institutions. Graduates are offered the opportunity to acquire an additional ICT qualification,
 - grants for students of ICT-related subjects,
 - promotion of specific and inter-disciplinary further training; in particular skilled ICT workers could be trained as part of a sectoral further training offensive, outside the system of training offered by public institutions,
 - exchange of staff with research institutions;
28. agrees with the Commission that public services will be radically changed in the information society and that this requires determined efforts by all regional and local authorities and public bodies to accelerate the day-to-day use of information-society instruments and thus to improve the efficiency and quality of their services and bring government and citizens closer together; also welcomes the idea of individual learning accounts as a useful and effective instrument for disseminating knowledge of information and communications technologies and as a new way of mobilising financial resources to promote lifelong learning;
29. proposes that an examination be made of possible ways of assisting regional and local authorities in:
- establishing user-friendly Internet pages providing clear information on citizens' rights and links to the main regional and local authorities and services,
 - establishing public-access Internet sites and carrying out on-the-spot training of employees in information-society skills,
 - establishing central contact points for companies,
 - establishing in the urban centres which provide a focal point for rural and peripheral areas, special telecentres to provide young and very young people, in particular, with the opportunity to learn IT skills and access the Internet, which are prerequisites for teleworking;
30. supports the Commission in its belief that the information society and electronic commerce will promote economic growth and create jobs. New areas of activity will open up for firms in the information society and continuous innovation using information-society instruments will be extremely important in improving competitiveness and creating jobs;
31. strongly recommends that the regional and local authorities be supported in their efforts to ensure that:

- local companies can develop new services,
 - a higher proportion of risk capital goes to firms in the sector,
 - cooperation between industry and research bodies at regional and local level is promoted,
 - the needs of SMEs are taken into account in all public programmes at regional and local level in a socially acceptable way,
 - more companies use ICT services;
32. considers, however, that even in the information society regulatory mechanisms will need to be brought into effect with the participation of the social partners, in order to ensure that account is taken of collective agreements on minimum wages, holiday entitlement, sick pay etc. when creating new jobs;
33. also believes that, in order to tap the undoubted employment potential of the transition to the information society, job-creating product innovations and the purchasing power-based demand which is essential for the mass consumption of new goods and services should be specifically promoted;
34. supports the establishment of networks of IT companies for the analysis of needs, exchange of experience and cooperation on recruiting and training skilled workers. In this context the establishment of industry associations for initial and further training should be initiated or mediated, and support for these provided via coordination or guidance bodies involving providers of training services. Suitable guidance bodies could be set up, e.g. in collaboration with local structural and economic support organisations and associations. This is the way to persuade more IT firms to provide training places;
35. recommends examination of ways in which support can be provided to the central and eastern European applicant states, in order to help them develop socially acceptable strategies for jobs in the information society.

&nb sp; Brussels, 13 June 2001.

The President

The Secretary-General

of the

of the

Committee of the Regions

Committee of the Regions

Jos Chabert

Vincenzo Falcone

¹ OJ C 57 of 29.2.2000, p. 11

² OJ C 116 of 14.4.1997, p. 89

³ OJ C 116 of 14.4.1997, p. 81

⁴ OJ C 42 of 10.2.1997, p. 31

⁵ OJ C 129 of 2.5.1996, p. 39

⁶ OJ C 210 of 14.8.1995, p. 109

⁷ OJ C 116 of 14.4.1997, p. 33

⁸ OJ C 226 of 8.8.2000, p. 43

⁹ OJ C 116 of 14.4.1997, p. 89

¹⁰ OJ C 116 of 14.4.1997, p. 98

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