

People first in eEurope

A UNI -Europa
response to *eEurope*:

*An Information Society
for All*

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INTRODUCTION

Europe is engaging in a vital debate as our continent moves rapidly from the industrial age towards the newly emerging information and knowledge society.

We are in the early stages of a fundamental change in the way in which economies, and societies, operate. The change is being made possible by the development of new information and communication technologies, but the technologies themselves are neither inherently good nor bad. There is no pre-ordained path, which Europe is obliged to follow into the new age.

Now is the time, therefore, as we begin to set the foundations for the information age, to determine how that future will be shaped. It is indeed possible to hope for a better and more prosperous future, enabled by the enormous potentially liberating opportunities of the new technologies. But it will be important to ensure that social, cultural and moral considerations are given adequate weight in the discussions and the debates about this future: market factors alone are not enough.

Two events right at the start of the new century show that the debate is gaining momentum. The Portuguese presidency of the European Union has called for a Special European Council meeting on 23-24 March, entitled 'Employment, Economic and Social Cohesion – Towards a Europe of Innovation and Knowledge', and has also organised an Enlarged Ministerial Conference on the Information and Knowledge Society in April. To prepare for the March event, the European Commission has released a useful report *eEurope, an Information Society for All*. The European Commission has also announced, in February 2000, a new Strategy for Jobs in the Knowledge Economy.

UNI-Europa welcomes all these initiatives, and is contributing this report to add to the debate. UNI-Europa is the regional organisation of Union Network International, the trade union federation representing more than fifteen million members in 900 unions, including those who work in the European Information Society industries. UNI-Europa has 328 affiliates and some 7.5 million individual members.

It is UNI-Europa's members who engage in their day to day lives with the increasing reality of the Information Society. It is they who write the software codes, design the web pages, staff the call centres, input the data and undertake all the myriad other jobs which, a few short years ago, simply did not exist.

It is also UNI-Europa's members who experience the pains and problems which are accompanying the growth of the Information Society, when they suffer the effects of insecure (or no) employment, stressful working environments, inadequate training opportunities and the fear of redundancy.

For this reason UNI-Europa affirms that the subtitle given to the *eEurope* report, *An Information Society for All*, must be more than rhetoric and fine words. UNI-Europa too wants to believe, in the words of the *eEurope report*, in a 'prosperous future for all Europeans', but believes that this will only be possible if concrete action is taken to ensure that the difficulties and inequalities already thrown up by the Information Society are overcome. Europe, its institutions, governments and people must be proactive in this task; a passive approach would be disastrous.

UNI-Europa is well placed to engage in this debate. UNI-Europa itself is, in a sense, a response to technological change, and in particular to the convergence in recent years of the IT, telecommunica-

tions and media and graphical industries, since it is the result of a fusion carried out at the start of 2000 between the four international trade union bodies previously representing these sectors.

Through the work of its predecessor bodies, UNI-Europa also has a unique archive of experience, in the deliberations of the eight IT and ICT Forums, held each year since 1992. These have brought together European experts, active trade union members in the ICT sectors and also representatives of industry. The Forums have been organised by UNI-Europa's IT Working Group (which links trade union representatives from across Europe) and UNI-Europa's Industry, Business and IT Services (IBITS) sector. This report develops the work of the ICT Forums and the IT Working Group. It identifies a number of issues and concerns, which UNI-Europa believes, require action.

No longer is an organisation's capital based on physical assets operated by more or less interchangeable workers. In the knowledge based economy of the information age, an increasingly large part of the asset base of many organisations disappears as workers leave work for the day: or, put another way, human capital is now the most important asset of any organisation. It is this human and intellectual capital that has to be tapped if Europe is to compete in the global economy.

More than 4 million people are employed in Europe in the ICT-related sector. Between 1995 and 1997 more than 300,000 ICT-related jobs were created and ICT now creates one in every four new jobs in the European Union. New media are expected to grow by 70% by 2005 creating 300,000 jobs. However there are 500,000 unfilled jobs in IT and communications in the European Union because of alleged skill shortages.

Across the European Union, the latest figures by the European IT Observatory (EITO) show that per capita expenditure on IT between 1995 and 1999 has increased from 400 to 502 euros. However the equivalent US figures show investment in the same period increasing from 879 to 1,166 euros – more than double the European average, and further increasing the gap between the two regions. Even Japan has spent more on IT than Western Europe all together: 646 euros per capita in 1995 up to 713 in 1999. The USA continues to dominate the networked economy. With a population around 60% that of Europe, the USA will still have more Internet and other online users than Europe at least until 2002 according to EITO. On present trends, Europe is set to become a customer - of Pacific Rim and South Asia economies for hardware and software and of the USA for ideas on how to use them and the services that support and realise those ideas. Europe has no cluster of high-tech companies that compares with Silicon Valley or even Bangalore in India.

Given the importance of accelerating Europe's way into the Information Society, UNI-Europa believes that the EU Commission should go beyond mere recommendations and should adopt a procedure similar to the Luxembourg procedure, which requires Member States to develop and submit annual National Action Plans concerning employment. In these National Action Plans, the Member States should outline concrete measures to promote progress, report on achievements made and display best practice leading into eEurope.

For convenience, UNI-Europa identifies in this report ten issues of concern and action. (This seems appropriate: not only the *eEurope* report but also the 1994 Bangemann Report *Europe and the Global Information Society* chose to identify ten areas for action.) Our ten areas do not directly correspond with the ten priority areas identified in *eEurope* though the issues we raise relate directly to the main thrust of that report. They are as follows:

1. The importance of 'social embeddedness' in the European Information Society
2. Social partnership: the way forward
3. Skills shortage: how the ICT industry itself brought this about
4. Lifetime working, lifetime training
5. Working in ICT: opportunities for all
6. Online rights for online workers
7. Health and safety in the new world of work
8. Getting the data we need
9. Sustainability
10. Bridging the digital divide

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS' IN THE EUROPEAN INFORMATION SOCIETY

It was the High Level Expert Group in their report *Building the European Information Society for Us All* who stressed the importance of social issues, what they called 'social embeddedness', in an Information Society in which all may participate.

UNI-Europa concurs. UNI-Europa has set down (in a previous submission to the European Commission) four objectives for the development of the Information Society in Europe:

- The Information Society should be based on the knowledge of people, not the information in machines.
- We must put people in charge of information, not let it be used to control them.
- The Information Society must be used to unlock the power of information, not to create new inequalities between information rich and information poor.
- The Information Society should enrich life, not erode humanity.

It is to Europe's credit that the very term adopted 'Information Society' stresses the societal importance of the current technological revolution. The increasing use of the term 'information and knowledge society' seems to us even more satisfactory in this respect.

It is important that eEurope develops in a way which serves to strengthen democratic development throughout Europe, involving all European citizens, young and old, men and women, those in the periphery and the centres, and those in both rural and in urban areas.

Action:

- Whilst the European Commission should encourage governments to go online, equal emphasis should be placed on bringing other organisations, institutions and public authorities and services online as well.
- The Commission should support access for all members of society to electronic communication facilities in order to enable interaction between European institutions, the Commission, governments, politicians and citizens.

SOCIAL PARTNERSHIP: THE WAY FORWARD

It is particularly important that the ICT sector, which surely should be the most dynamic sector of the European economy, has adequate social partnership structures established to enable fruitful discussions between employers and employee representatives.

UNI-Europa welcomes that, with the support of the European Commission, the social dialogue for the Telecom sector has been set in motion. UNI-Europa Telecom and the employers' organisation ETNO have agreed to establish a Social Dialogue Committee for Telecommunications. This is a major step in the right direction. However, we urgently need the Commission's support to establish a sectoral dialogue in the IT sector.

There is still no single employers' organisation representing the IT sector across Europe. UNI-Europa (and its predecessor Euro-FIET) have tried for a number of years to develop relationships and social dialogue with IT employer and trade organisations, but the absence of a European sector-wide organisation is, in our opinion, now becoming a serious weakness for Europe. It means that UNI-Europa is unable to fulfil its commitment to act as a responsible social partner, at a time when the sector is experiencing massive changes.

The aim must surely be to ensure that the mechanisms are there to promote partnership and social dialogue across the European ICT sector. Among other things this can help to enhance the employability and adaptability of employees, the flexibility of enterprises and the employment security of employees. At core, the objective of this partnership must be to enable enterprises in Europe to compete and flourish in national, European and global markets.

The aim must also be to ensure that multinational firms without any sense of social partnership do not gain dominant control over the ICT infrastructure in Europe through mergers and acquisitions. The proposed merger between two such multi-national giants, MCI WorldCom and Sprint, would result in monopoly control over the global Internet and a duopoly in international long distance communications. European competition policy must address this.

Action:

- UNI-Europa calls on the European Commission to take steps to help put in place appropriate structures for social partnership.

- UNI-Europa calls on the European Commission to promote social partnership in all policy contexts, including competition policy.
- As an immediate step UNI-Europa calls on the European Commission to convene a meeting of top industry and trade union representatives in order to break the deadlock and develop a joint agenda for urgent action.

SKILLS SHORTAGE: HOW THE ICT INDUSTRY ITSELF BROUGHT THIS ABOUT

EU Employment Commissioner Anna Diamantopoulou has talked of the goal of equipping the next generation of workers with the skills necessary for them to be the 'net generation'. The Commission's Strategy for Jobs in the Knowledge Economy reports: "The skills gap already exists today with unfulfilled demand for highly qualified workers limiting growth in software, services and telecommunications sectors. The shortage of IT specialists in Western Europe could reach 1.6 million equivalent jobs by 2002."

UNI-Europa maintains that it is the key companies in the ICT industry which were largely responsible for creating this skills shortage of which they now complain. In the first half of the 1990s the ICT sector suffered a series of devastating restructuring programmes, which saw thousands of highly skilled ICT specialists made redundant or outsourced into quasi self-employment. The experience of a generation of workers was treated with disdain as companies sought to cut their costs by employing younger, less experienced staff who were paid less (and frequently asked to work long hours).

If there is indeed today unfulfilled demand for highly qualified workers, part of the explanation could be because the industry failed to adopt a longer-term staffing strategy ten years ago, chasing short-term profits at the expense of long-term development.

It is not that these companies should necessarily be 'blamed' for their actions; it is simply that there must be recognition in Europe that the short-term market imperatives which drive companies are frequently not adequate for ensuring a healthy information economy in the longer run.

There are, however, indications that the industry is not using the current labour market potential and is thus creating a deterioration in the current situation. In a number of European countries substantial numbers of ICT specialists are registered as unemployed. There are also indications that the majority of those unemployed specialists are sufficiently qualified but are over 50 years of age. Apparently the industry does not believe that people of that age can cope with the pressure and workload prevalent in the sector.

It is also common practice in the industry to terminate contracts with employees in their late forties or early fifties because they allegedly become too expensive in terms of salary levels and acquired entitlements and benefits.

The IT industry also is regrettably reluctant to hire people who have chosen to retrain in ICT skills either to update their knowledge or as a means to remove themselves from unemployment.

Action:

- The ICT industry has to make substantial efforts to change its image and the perception of work in ICT. The common view is still of insecure jobs, high workload, pressure and stress, long hours, a highly competitive environment, and no chance of employment for women and older professionals; the industry has to implement improved retention policies and enable a better work/life balance.
- Industry, social partners and public authorities (primarily the education sector) have to do more both to attract young people and women into ICT and to retain older employees; young people have to be encouraged to take up studies in information technology, software engineering, etc.
- Training and re-training in ICT has to be provided to the unemployed and those working in industrial or service areas which will become obsolete through industrial change.
- The implementation of life-long learning will be key to the Information Society. The European Commission, in co-operation with the social partners and national public authorities, has to solve the problem of how to realise this generally accepted principle in terms of methods, time available and pay.
- The general climate for entrepreneurship has to improve. There is still too much red tape in place and capital necessary for start-ups is too difficult to raise. This must be changed since most of the new jobs are being created in new companies.

LIFETIME WORKING, LIFELONG TRAINING

The *eEurope* report is rightly concerned with the young. UNI-Europa wants to go beyond this, to ensure that all the members of the European labour force, whether they are young, middle-aged or older, can play their full part in the work of the Information Society.

It is not acceptable for experienced, capable workers in their fifties, or their forties, or even (hard to believe, but sometimes true) in their thirties to be told that they are too old for the new jobs. This is wasteful not only in economic terms, but also in human terms.

UNI-Europa welcomes the proposed Directive on equal treatment in employment and occupation (published by the Commission on 25 November 1999) which among other things would outlaw age discrimination in employment.

Europe needs to assert that the work of building the Information Society will require the work of all ages. The way in which this will be possible is through adequate training and job development opportunities available for all.

Vocational training is an area that lends itself to consultation between the social partners. But unfortunately experience suggests that training issues are too often treated by employers as of only minor importance, worthy of only limited support.

Lifelong training must be seen as having strategic importance for Europe's path to the Information Society. UNI-Europa considers that this is not an issue that can be safely left to the industry itself.

Action:

- UNI-Europa welcomes the Commission's launch of the "e-Learning" initiative to speed up the adjustment of education and training in Europe to the digital age.
- UNI-Europa urges the Commission to develop initiatives to maintain and sustain skills development, such as:
 - Developing a European-wide training scheme for the ICT sector for skilling and re-skilling of employees aimed in particular at providing funding to employers who may lack their own resources.
 - Establishing a 'talent bank' – a multi-employer European-wide electronic clearing house to match skills no longer needed by one employer with skills needs required elsewhere.
 - Expanding the pool of supply of employees from non-traditional areas available to the ICT sector through skilling of unemployed people, women, older employees, etc.
 - Creating a trans-European employer/trade union network to facilitate good practice in recruiting and retention of employees within the ICT sector.
- Supporting research in order to identify future skill requirements and promote systems of skill certification and a pan European ICT skill and qualification framework, such as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL).

WORKING IN ICT: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

An area that has been left completely blank in the eEurope report is working in eEurope. Neither in the key objectives nor among the ten priorities for action set out by the report is there any mention of employment, job creation, modernising work organisation or new ways of working.

UNI-Europa welcomes the fact that this void has been filled by the more recent Communication on "Strategies for Jobs in the Information Society", which tries to set out a co-ordinated approach by taking into account the broader social and employment aspects of the transformation process into eEurope.

UNI-Europa underlines the fact that today's ICT industry is extremely exclusive. Only around 20% of all employees in the ICT sector are women. This appears to be a European phenomenon, since in other parts of the world higher percentage figures for women are common.

In particular, UNI-Europa stresses the importance of ensuring that the Information Society is as open to women as to men. It is unfortunate that at present (as the European Commission has pointed out) women make up only a quarter of Internet users in Europe, compared with 50% in the USA.

The ICT industry unfortunately does not always project an image attractive to younger women, particularly the prevailing "long hours culture". Pressure is often put on people either by management or their peers to work long hours in order to be seen to be productive and 'part of the team'. This discrimi-

nates against people with family responsibilities, and hence particularly against women and older employees.

Women do, however, make up the majority of workers in the very fast-growing call centre industry in Europe. This work, whilst made possible by technology, is often poorly paid and low-status, with limited career progression opportunities.

Women will not have the chance to participate equally with men in the emerging new work opportunities of the Information Society if the current gender inequalities are not recognised, and measures put in place to combat them.

UNI-Europa is pleased to see that consideration is given in the *eEurope* report for participation by people with disabilities in the European Information Society. UNI-Europa endorses the measures proposed.

Action:

- The European Commission should recognise the current gender inequality in the developing structures of the Information Society and put in place specific action plans and measures to combat it.
- It is important that concrete actions are taken to encourage more young women to take up studies in ICT, software engineering, electrical sciences, etc.
- The industry will have to improve its image and implement appropriate schemes to enable employees to better balance work and life.

ONLINE RIGHTS FOR ONLINE WORKERS

The emerging Information Society is leading to a rapidly increasing reliance on electronic means of communication in the workplace. To encourage healthy industrial relations and social dialogue in the European Information Society, it is important that workers, and their representative bodies, have access as of right to these on-line information and communication networks.

Unfortunately, there is currently no guarantee that workers will be able to take advantage of the new technologies in this way. Whilst some companies arrange for employees to be able to use e-mail and to have Internet/Intranet access to communicate with their trade unions and works councils, others do not.

For this reason UNI-Europa, and before it its predecessor organisation Euro-FIET, has been running an Online rights for Online Workers campaign. The campaign includes the following objectives:

- The right of free access by employees and by trade unions and works councils to corporate e-mail systems, so that employee members can receive information and communicate with their representatives.
 - The right of free access to the Internet (and to corporate Intranet networks) by employees, to
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enable them to access trade union web sites and other information relevant to their rights at work.

The campaign is also concerned with the dangers to individual workers' rights of electronic monitoring in the workplace.

Action:

- UNI-Europa invites the European Commission and other organisations to endorse the aims of the Online Rights for Online Workers campaign.
- UNI-Europa invites the European Commission and the European Parliament to enshrine the aims of the Online Rights for Online Workers campaign in the European Internet Charter.
- UNI-Europa invites employers and employee representative bodies to use the Model Electronic Facilities Agreement it has prepared.
- UNI-Europa proposes that the Council of Ministers take steps to establish the right of online access and appropriate measures to regulate surveillance at work.

OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH IN THE NEW WORLD OF WORK

Compared with the industrial age, the workplaces of the Information Society can seem very 'clean' environments.

However, this superficial view can be misleading. The introduction of computer terminals and PCs raise considerable occupational health and safety concerns. These include keyboard-induced musculo-skeletal disorders (such as carpal tunnel syndrome, RSI), which have been described as almost a white-collar epidemic in recent years. UNI-Europa is concerned to note evidence that the existing EU Directive on display screen equipment is not always being adequately followed in, for example, new call centres.

More generally the use of computers and PCs is associated with increased levels of psychological stress and information overload. The blurring of work and home time, as more flexible patterns of working are introduced, contributes to this trend.

It would be ironic, at a time when (as the *eEurope report* points out) there are exciting new possibilities for digital technologies to improve the productivity and scope of health care, if inadequate attention were paid to the new health hazards of the electronic workplace.

Action:

- Much greater awareness of the seriousness of the risk of repetitive strain injuries is needed. The issue needs to be addressed in education, research and at the work place.
- The European Commission should investigate ways and means of ensuring that the European Directive on "VDUs" (90/270/EEC) is properly enforced in all Member States.

GETTING THE DATA AND INFORMATION WE NEED

Already at this early stage of the Information Society we are confronted with an information overload, whilst at the same time crucial information is not always available.

It is vital that Europe has comprehensive statistical information about employment in the newly emerging ICT-related sectors of the economy. Reliable, comparative and up-to-date data are urgently needed in order to evaluate trends and be able to design policies, in case developments go off target.

The speed of change has meant that this information is not always in a form that adequately reflects the contemporary economic reality. Old ways of categorising economic activity can make it difficult to assess the real employment situation.

Europe's citizens also need easy access to the information they need, for example from government and public organisations. If democracy is to be deepened and a damaging digital divide within societies avoided, ways must be found to ensure that these information services are readily available to all.

Action:

- EuroStat should improve the statistics related to the ICT sectors. The European Commission must give a much clearer view of the employment situation and developments.
- Encouragement should be given to the development by local communities of comprehensive and user-friendly information services for citizens.

SUSTAINABILITY

The principle of sustainable development, as defined more than a decade ago by the Brundtland Commission, is the requirement that current generations meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Market-driven pressures in the ICT industry have seen companies compete to bring out ever more powerful or faster technological hardware. In this helter-skelter dash for performance, the life span of new ICT equipment is falling sharply.

UNI-Europa draws attention to the excellent initiative by the Swedish trade union organisation TCO, whose TCO99 international standard scheme provides a mechanism for the environmental labelling of personal computers. The TCO99 scheme takes into account a wide range of factors, including environmental and ergonomic issues, usability, emission of electrical and magnetic fields, energy consumption and electrical and fire safety.

Whilst technological innovation is to be welcomed, concern also needs to be paid to issues of sustainability. One topic, which has not been adequately addressed, is that of how outdated technology can be disposed of.

UNI-Europa welcomes the proposal of the eEurope report to address “intelligent transport” by using technology to make transport more safe and rational. However, the most intelligent way to use technology would be to reduce the overall volume of physical transport and people commuting.

Action:

- The European Commission should resist US government and business pressures and move now to implement the proposed EU Directive on Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment, placing responsibility for recycling waste electronic technology on the manufacturers. The European Commission should sponsor research to find ways to improve the recycling of materials used in outdated hardware and other technology.
- The European Commission should aim to promote initiatives that use ICT to reduce commuting journeys and encourage safer transport.

BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Many have talked of the dangers of a growing divide between the information-rich and the information-poor. Lip service to the need to bridge the digital divide has been paid, for example in President Clinton’s National Infrastructure Initiative and in the EU’s Bangemann Report.

However, for this welcome process to take place, practical measures have to be put in place. UNI-Europa welcomes the objective set out by the *eEurope* report “to bring everyone in Europe – every citizen, every school, every company – online as quickly as possible”.

The high cost of Internet access in Europe would be exacerbated if one carrier were allowed through acquisition to dominate the global Internet. Europe must ensure a dynamic Internet sector with multiple participants driving growth. European competition policy must continue to reject any merger among top-level Internet carriers (such as the proposed MCI WorldCom/Sprint merger) that would result in one carrier dominating the global Internet infrastructure.

Europe already has too many of its citizens who suffer from social exclusion: the poor, the elderly, the disabled, those from minority groups, and others. This exclusion damages all, not just those who directly suffer it but the whole community.

The task of ensuring that the coming information age does not increase the levels of social exclusion is not an easy one, and must be given the highest priority. But a virtuous circle should emerge: the more efforts that are taken to give all Europeans access to the tools of the Information Society, the more opportunities will emerge for new business prospects and new employment. Bridging the digital divide brings not just social benefits, but economic benefits as well. There is still a big divide between North and South Europe, between rural and urban areas and between high and low income groups.

UNI-Europa for its part will do its utmost to bring unions online. UNI-Europa will encourage unions to harness the combined purchasing power of their members to provide cheaper PCs and access to the Internet.

Action:

- UNI-Europa suggests that the European Commission investigate the possibility for Member States to provide cheap recycled PCs as computers for all (such as the example in the UK).
- UNI-Europa invites the Commission to promote the idea among Member States to provide public access points to the Internet such as in libraries, supermarkets and town halls.
- UNI-Europa invites the Commission to promote and encourage diversity in Internet access platforms particularly in areas where Europe is strong in comparison with the USA, such as digital television and mobile telephony.
- UNI-Europa calls for every effort to be undertaken to bring down barriers to Internet access and usage. It is not only researchers and students who need faster Internet connection. High speed and broadband Internet access should be available everywhere in Europe. This is one of the prerequisites if e-business is to develop its full potential.
- UNI-Europa calls for European competition policy to reject any merger among top-level Internet carriers (such as the proposed MCI WorldCom/Sprint merger) that would result in one carrier dominating the global Internet infrastructure.