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Telematics opens up West

IN MANY PARTS of the western United States jobs are geographically out of balance with the people to fill them. In some rural areas, people want to work but there are no jobs for them. Yet in some western cities good jobs go begging.

According to a recent report by The Aspen Institute, the 1987 unemployment rate in metropolitan counties in 13 western states was 5.9 percent, while in rural counties in these states, the unemployment rate was 9.1 percent. The gap between metropolitan and rural unemployment rates is, in fact, higher in the West than in other parts of the country.

Meanwhile, increased distances between jobs and homes in some western urban centers are resulting in commuting times that are too long and rush hour traffic congestion that is becoming intolerable.

These are tough challenges for civic leaders in both the private and public sectors. But in both cases, telematics, the new technology of mating computers with telecommunications — along with the concept of moving information instead of people — might provide solutions. For example, companies can now set up information-intensive branch operations — called “back offices” — wherever telecommunications can reach, which is almost anywhere.

Consider, hypothetically, an insurance company worker whose job is checking previously filled-out forms for completeness and errors. In a traditional office, the forms might be delivered to this form-checker by a worker sitting at a desk to his or her right. After the forms have been checked, they might be handed off to another desk to the checker's left.

However, with image transmission via telecommunications, those desks to the right and left of the form-checker could be across town or even thousands of miles away. A computer terminal attached to a telecommunications network can efficiently deliver the forms to and from the checker's desk from distant locations.

This means that economic development officials in rural areas can now look to

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information-based branch offices of telemarketing firms or insurance companies, for example, as alternatives to traditional industries like agriculture, mining and forestry which have experienced significant job losses.

According to a report in *The Wall Street Journal*, an Omaha-based telemarketing firm created 500 telephone sales jobs in Breda, Iowa and other small mid-western farm towns in the past two-and-a-half years.

The jobs were quickly filled by local residents who might otherwise have moved away or remained unemployed or underemployed.

In urban areas also, telematics is a new force shaping work and life styles. The same technologies bringing new jobs to small towns can also bring work closer to — or even into — the homes of workers.

This is known as “telecommuting.” In Los Angeles and Sacramento officials are already exploring telecommuting as a way to cut rush hour “people commuting.”

In Washington state, Gov. Booth Gardner recently convened a special conference to explore telecommuting as a means of reducing traffic in the Seattle area. As a result of the conference, business, government and union officials are planning a project in which 300 workers in a dozen organizations will try telecommuting in 1990.

The idea of moving information instead of people, whether from urban centers to back office word processing operations in rural areas, or as a means of reducing rush hour traffic in cities, is an idea whose time has come.

Telematics is now increasingly available as a way for westerners to avoid the curse of urban traffic congestion, while, at the same time, providing jobs for those who prefer a rural lifestyle.

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