

“My Home Workplace Is My Castle”

Functioning in the Home Work Environment

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Abstract: Telework provides an alternative to working in a traditional office. Women are drawn to telework, because it offers a means of combining work and family responsibilities. In this study of 40 teleworking and at-office information professionals and their work, teleworkers were found to have less organizational support than their at-office counterparts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Telework, is promoted as a means of combining work and family responsibilities. One of the most commonly stated organizational reasons for adopting telework is that it enables companies to draw upon an otherwise inaccessible work force of people, such as women with children, who need flexible work hours. Haddon and Silverstone (1993) found that a major factor in a woman's decision to go home was childcare. Once at home, however, the teleworker faces new challenges in the new work environment. In this study, teleworkers were found to have less organizational support than their at-office counterparts. To compensate, teleworkers adapted their home environment to meet their work needs, blurring the boundaries between home and work in the process. Problems with the home work environment, including location of workspaces, involvement of domestic duties during work time, and provision of work tools, prevented women and, interestingly, men teleworkers from gaining the additional control over their work and work lives that is often expected from a teleworking arrangement.

2. BACKGROUND

Role theory, which looks at the roles or sets of specific behaviours associated with an individual [9], suggests that teleworkers should have greater control over their work since they have the opportunity to spend longer, more concentrated periods of time on particular tasks. Researchers vary in their assessment of how environmental factors influence teleworkers, in particular women, and their work lives. Duxbury, Thomas, and Higgins [4] have examined the impact on family roles for employees who supplement their regular office hours with computer-based work at home. They found that working at home did not reduce childcare for women and that women performed twice as much childcare as men. On the other hand, they suggest that the flexibility associated with telework reduces stress for women by increasing an their ability to control and absorb change in work and family settings.

The Empirica study [7] of teleworkers in the United Kingdom and Germany revealed that work done at home by male teleworkers is often accomplished in a separate, designated room for work with spouses caring for children and stray callers. While women teleworkers usually work in a communal area, such as a kitchen, playroom or living room, and are also responsible for children and other dependents, as well as the running of the house. Dawson and Turner [3] concluded that domestic responsibilities and environment have caused significant problems for women working at home. Although participants liked the flexibility of working at home, as well as the tax advantages and the convenience for their families, they also reported that they found home and work difficult to separate and that they did domestic work instead of taking real breaks.

Given the difficulties that often accompany work done at home, especially for women, this paper examines the work environment and its effect on work done at home. This study compared the teleworking environment to the at-office environment to gauge the difference between the two. To this end, the following questions were explored: Do teleworkers have less organizational support than at-office workers in terms of tools required to complete work tasks? How does a lack of provision of tools affect work functions? Does the work environment change the teleworker's control over work compared to the control exercised by at-office workers?

3. METHOD

A snowball sample of twenty teleworkers matched by work responsibilities with twenty at-office co-workers participated in this study.

All participants were information professionals working in the field of library and information science, an area containing positions for which growth in telework continues to be predicted [8, 10]. While at-office workers were divided evenly between men and women, three quarters of the teleworking participants were female. The high ratio of women in the study approximates the proportion of women to men in the library and information science profession [1].

To explore work environments, participants were observed as they worked and interviewed to gain a better understanding of how they functioned in their workspaces. They were asked to identify the equipment and other tools they used to complete their work tasks. They were also asked about how they organized their work and domestic demands on their time. Finally, participants' workspaces were photographed. Since teleworkers are often depicted as working in idyllic settings with a laptop on a table, a cup of coffee in hand, and their children at their side, photography supplied an accurate representation of work environments, which permitted a fuller assessment of teleworking and at-office workspaces. In addition to comparing photographs of home and at-office workspaces, four independent evaluators (two women and two men) were asked to identify the workspace as a home or central office workspace, as belonging to a woman or a man, and as a workable or not workable workspace. Responses were analyzed using Holsti's simple proportional reliability formula ($\underline{E} = 2(C_1, C_2) / C_1 + C_2$, where \underline{E} = the evaluators' level of agreement, C_1, C_2 = the number of category assignments agreed upon by both evaluators, and $C_1 + C_2$ = the total number of category assignments made by both evaluators). Chi tests were then calculated to determine whether there was a relationship between the evaluators' responses and home and central office workspaces.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Availability of Computer Equipment and Work Tools

A key factor in workers' success in achieving work goals is the provision of tools needed to complete work tasks. In this study, teleworkers generally had most of the equipment they needed to perform work duties at home. However, the equipment in home workspaces varied in quality with organizational approaches to telework.

Both female and male teleworking participants routinely absorbed some or all of their equipment and other overhead costs. Discussions with

teleworkers revealed that equipment provided by organizations was often not new. Instead, items, such as computers, might be surplus office equipment or the teleworker's at-office computer. Surplus equipment often meant that teleworkers were using computer tools which had been replaced by more current technologies.

Given the potential for losing or not acquiring skills by missing exposure to new technologies which are used to perform primary work functions at the central office [2], surplus equipment may prove problematic for teleworkers attempting to maintain the same skill level as their at-office counterparts. However, teleworkers who had chosen to work at home were much less likely to demand organizational support (e.g., an ergonomic chair or new equipment) than teleworkers who were sent home to work, because they considered telework a privilege. Over time, however, the lack of current technology may cause problems with task completion, including problems with compatibility between central office and home computer systems and differences in efficiency caused by the slower processing speed of outmoded surplus equipment.

4.2 Workspaces

While at-office employees worked in central offices surrounded by the workspaces of their colleagues, teleworkers worked alone. One half of teleworkers (six women and all but one man) set up their home office spaces in spare rooms. These teleworkers considered dedicated space of their own to be important. Nevertheless, some of these rooms doubled as guestrooms. Most women worked in other locations, such as the bedroom, livingroom, basement, kitchen, or dining room. These work environments contributed to a blurring of home and workspaces. In some cases, teleworkers opted to use more than one workspace during the course of a period of work. While at-office workspaces were dedicated work areas then, teleworking workspaces often varied in number and function.

Teleworkers who worked in shared or public home areas tended to work around other household activities. Lack of permanent space posed problems for information storage and for long term work activities. Temporary workspaces in public areas of a home create work atmospheres that are open to interruption by other domestic events. One teleworker worked at her kitchen table. It provided her with greater space in which to spread her work. However, because the table served more than one purpose, she cleared her work from the table when her son came home for lunch and again at the end of her workday.

In addition, one half of teleworkers, usually women, shared their workspaces with family members. Even in a home workspace that had been

dedicated to teleworking purposes, teleworkers might share the work area with a child or spouse. Although part of the purpose of working from home was to provide flexible work times, a sharing arrangement often limited working hours, usually to accommodate familial obligations. In addition, to having no space dedicated to work tasks, teleworkers often lack their own storage space. The workspace does not seem to belong to the teleworker; instead they seem to be more of an interloper.

The use of temporary workspaces increased the blurring of home and work activities and spaces. It is not an uncommon practice among employees to personalize their workspaces with family photographs, plants, and newspaper clippings. However, when teleworkers worked in makeshift or shared function workspaces, they blended their work into spaces primarily intended for home activities. Blurring of physical space means that the worker never really leaves work or home behind. The presence of both home and work encourages the worker to think about activities in both realms, and this combination of domestic and work roles means that the person divides these roles to fit everything into a day. For instance, Dawson and Turner (1989) found that teleworkers replaced their work breaks with domestic work in order to satisfy both home and work roles. Indeed, teleworkers in this study often did laundry and planned family meals during breaks in their work. Participating in home activities meant that they combined their home and work roles, a double burden reminiscent of that found in homework sweatshops. This division of work may appear to improve the work life of an individual, but may really cause a loss of power. If the employee cannot satisfy the conditions of work as a result of trying to juggle more than one role, that person's position may become more vulnerable to fragmentation.

An analysis of photographs of workspaces using Holsti's formula to calculate levels of evaluator agreement for each question also shows that differences existed between home and at-office workspaces. The results show that the evaluators were able to achieve a high level of agreement about whether a work environment was in the home or the central office, and they were correct most of the time. Overall, the evaluators were able to distinguish between home and at-office spaces. Evaluators noted that they assessed workspaces by the size of space, the presence of windows, signs of organization, ergonomics and comfort, clutter, and overall atmosphere. Three of the four evaluators suggested that they would not work in more than one-half of the spaces depicted in the photographs (Evaluator 1 = 41.7%, Evaluator 2 = 69.4%, Evaluator 3 = 66.7%, Evaluator 4 = 69.4%). Overall, the evaluators were more likely to want to work in at-office rather than home workspaces ($\chi^2 (1) = 11.634$, $p = 0.001$). This finding, combined with the evaluators' ability to distinguish home from at-office workspaces, confirms that home and at-office workspaces were different.

4.3 Combining Family and Work Responsibilities

Although teleworkers usually cite flexible work hours as one of the great advantages of telework over traditional at-office arrangements, the teleworkers in this study did not experience greater control over their work time than their at-office counterparts. Instead, both women and men teleworkers often worked around hours set by the central office and their families' needs. Teleworkers did not differ from at-office workers in their assessments of how closely their work hours followed central office work hours. In addition, although telework is often promoted in the literature as a means of combining childcare and work responsibilities, teleworkers and at-office workers did not differ significantly in how they said they organized work time around family needs. Thirty-five per cent of participants felt that they often or always worked around their families' needs.

The numbers of children living at home help to illuminate participants' responses about arrangement of work time around family needs. Teleworkers and at-office workers in this study had similar numbers of children. Of the participants who had children, one-half of teleworkers and sixty-five per cent of at-office workers had children under the age of twelve. In addition, participants who had no children still arranged work time around time spent with partners or, in one case, with an elderly parent. In general, teleworkers had some form of child or eldercare, ranging from babysitters, schools or spouses, which enabled them to devote time to work. At-office workers' children attended school during the day or were adults, meaning that at-office workers usually did not have to arrange childcare while they worked.

Although they had care arrangements, some teleworkers spent time with children during the course of a workday. One teleworker arranged his time, so that he worked early, ate breakfast with his children, and then returned to his desk. This attention to family was not restricted to teleworkers with small children. One teleworker paused to talk to her son-in-law when he visited her to borrow something from her during her work hours. During the summer months, another teleworker reported that he admonished his teenage children for interrupting him and for expecting him to pay attention to them when he was working.

Nearly all teleworkers also juggled other domestic duties around periods of work. For instance, most teleworkers reported that they performed household chores during breaks and lunchtime. A few teleworkers, particularly women, emphasized that they made a conscious effort to avoid domestic responsibilities during their scheduled work time at home. For instance, one teleworker tried to schedule doctor's appointments with her elderly parent late in the afternoon, to avoid interrupting her workday. By

reserving domestic tasks for another part of the day, these teleworkers tried to protect their work time.

Although the research on telework suggests that teleworking is likely to have a particularly negative effect on women because they are likely to mix home and work responsibilities [9, 4], the men in this study also fulfilled domestic responsibilities when working at home. The teleworking men in this study were actively involved in the upbringing of their children and also juggled childcare with work. Teleworking women and men did not differ significantly in numbers of children and both groups valued elder and childcare arrangements. However, both men and women still spent time with family members while they were working. The participation of both women and men teleworkers in domestic roles appeared to be the result of working at home in proximity to household activities, rather than a dual role accepted only by women. Indeed, when evaluators were asked to identify the photographed workspaces as the spaces of women or men, they were unable to differentiate reliably between them.

5. DISCUSSION

Although some researchers and teleworkers praise telework as a means of getting away from the central office work environment, the teleworkers in this study did not increase control over their work lives by changing work environments. Rather, working at home often meant working in poorer working conditions than were found in the at-office work environment. Lack of organizational support did not improve teleworking work environments.

The negative impact of telework on the work environments of both men and women teleworkers in comparison to at-office work environments needs further investigation. While the teleworkers in this study were most often women, men also were often affected their work environments. In other studies of telework, men were not found to be affected by the teleworking arrangement. One possible reason for the difference in findings lies with the approach to investigating telework. For instance, while other studies have focussed on teleworkers, this study compared teleworking arrangements to at-office arrangements for a more accurate picture of the impact of telework on teleworkers' work lives. In addition, the men in this study were information professionals, not the power brokers (e.g., male executives) often discussed in the literature about telework.

The problems associated with the home working environment deserve further attention. Lack of organizational support suggests that employers may not fulfill their responsibility for creating effective teleworking situations for employees. Indeed, organizational commitment to telework

seems to be conditional; that is, telework must not cost an employer money. In addition, teleworkers need to place greater importance on the nature of their work environments, if they wish to increase their control over their work activities. An obvious means of achieving sustainable homework environments is the cooperative employer-employee development of and adherence to clear detailed telework policies that address the physical arrangement of workspaces. Training for employees and their employers can also improve awareness of and means of coping with the difficulties associated with telework. Given the continued growth of teleworking arrangements, problems with location of workspaces, involvement of domestic duties during work time, and provision of work tools must be resolved before telework can provide the liberating work option workers intend it to be.

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