

# Work-life Balance or Work-life Ambivalence? Managing Flexibility amongst Self-employed Teleworkers

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**Abstract**— The recent growth in teleworking has led to a variety of studies that analyse its significance along a spectrum of advantages and disadvantages from the point of view of the teleworker. These studies tend to stress either one end or the other of the spectrum and therefore give a somewhat bipolar perspective on telework (either 'good' or 'bad'). This article argues that teleworkers' experiences are characterised rather by ambivalence – that is, that teleworkers express conflicting attitudes towards their conditions depending on whether work or home interests are uppermost in their minds at the time. The article, which is based on diaries, questionnaires and interviews amongst 70 self-employed teleworkers in France, the UK and USA, concludes that work-life balance proves elusive because of the endemic role conflict that lies at the heart of self-employed teleworking.

**Index Terms**— *Ambivalence; flexibility; self-employment; telework; work-life balance*

## 1 INTRODUCTION

A variety of concerns, originating from employers, employees and policy-makers alike, has led to a marked growth in teleworking in recent years across the industrialised world (ECaTT 2000; Ruiz and Walling 2005). Though these concerns vary in significance from country to country, they include matters like work-life balance, the costs of commuting, reducing organisational overheads and rural unemployment, all of which may arguably be addressed through the adoption of telework. However, one of the principal problems in evaluating the significance of telework lies in how to measure it. As Qvortup (1998, cited in ECaTT 2000:8) has observed, counting teleworkers is like measuring the length of a rubber band: it is not impossible but, as with a rubber band, it depends on how far you stretch your definition. Though numerous definitions exist, the following is particularly helpful as it draws attention to certain key features of telework that are developed in this article:

Telework is the work performed by a teleworker (employee, self-employed, home-worker) mainly, or for an important part, at a location (s) other than the traditional workplace for an employer or a client, involving the use of telecommunications (Blanpain et al. 2001: 6)

This definition highlights the significant point that, while telework always involves a workplace away from the employer or client, as well as the use of information and telecommunications technology (ICT), it is also compatible with a variety of forms of employment contract. Teleworkers may be employed by an organisation, they may be self-employed (with or without employees) or they may be homeworkers. Indeed, in the case of the UK, figures suggest that 55% of teleworkers are employees, 43% are self-employed and 2% are unpaid family workers at home (Hotopp, 2002: 316).

An analysis of the impact of telework on those involved re-

quires making a distinction between two of its principal aspects: the nature of the work process as such (that is, using ICT away from the traditional workplace, probably at home) and the nature of the employment contract in question (that is, employment by an organisation or self-employment without employees). Research till now has tended to focus on the conditions of employed teleworkers rather than on those of the self-employed and has sometimes conflated these two aspects. For example, it has been argued that the advantages of telework include improvements in concentration over what is otherwise possible in an office environment (Mirchandani, 1998) and the convenience of not having to commute to work (Kerrin and Hone, 2001; Pitt-Catsouphes and Morcetta, 1991). However, these advantages apply only to employed teleworkers, that is, to those who would normally work in an office environment, but they would not apply to self-employed teleworkers without employees working from home and not requiring to commute in the first place. By contrast, telework as such may allow both employed and self-employed the means to 'redress a perceived deteriorating work-family balance' (Avery and Baker, 2002: 110) because it grants them the apparent autonomy as to when and where to work (though the 'where' is generally the home). Such flexibility underpins the reasons for understanding the benefits of telework for both employed and self-employed alike (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007).

## 2 WORKING TIME AND LOCATIONAL FLEXIBILITY

Working time flexibility allows individuals to exert control over their working hours and location of work. Control over working time has been defined as an individuals' ability to increase either decrease or increase their working hours and to alter their work schedule as an when needed. (Breg et al. 2004) Working time has two dimensions: the duration of work and its timing. Control over the duration of work determines how many hours are worked each day or week, while control over

the timing governs the time of day or week at which the work is carried out. Control over both the duration and timing of their work signifies that individuals have total control over their working time (Breg et al. 2004: 331).

A further dimension of flexibility is the ability to choose the location of work. Teleworking does not necessarily mean 'working from home' as it may be carried out while travelling, at a local centre or any remote location. In this respect, it also differs from 'home work' which generally implies work performed at home by the semi-skilled or unskilled on a piece-rate basis (Bradley et al., 2000: 60). By contrast, teleworking – a skilled or professional activity – can be conceived as the potential for working where and when it's best to do so for the individual (Status Report on European Telework, 1998). In brief, then, teleworkers may work from home, but do not necessarily do so.

Overall, in view of these opportunities for flexibility, telework has often been associated with moves towards improved work-life balance. Work-life balance – 'an overall level of contentment resulting from an assessment of one's degree of success at meeting work and family role demands' (Valcour 2007: 1512) – may be achieved when people have enough time to fulfil activities in both work and family contexts (De Cieri et al. 2005; Voydanoff 2005). Temporal and locational flexibility are key elements in its achievement: the ability to control working time is essential in managing multiple demands (Thomas and Ganster 1995), while the opportunity to work from home allows people to handle family commitments with greater peace of mind (Hill et al. 2001).

### 3 WORK-LIFE BALANCE AND TELEWORKERS

Research relating to teleworking and its impact on work-life balance tends to polarise between studies that stress the advantages and those that stress the disadvantages. Some studies reveal positive benefits for work-life balance (Bains, 2002; Bailly and Kurland, 2002; Mann and Holdsworth, 2003; and Hill et al., 1996). One analysis, reviewing 46 studies in the literature covering 12,883 employees, concluded that teleworking is 'associated with increased perceptions of autonomy and lower work-family conflict' (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007: 1535). A further study that compared teleworkers with non-teleworkers discovered that teleworkers had fewer perceptions of family conflict when compared with non-teleworking counterparts (Madsen, 2003).

However, another body of studies highlights opposite effects. Some of these focus on the 'permeability of boundaries' between family and work, and 'the degree to which either family or work encroaches on the other because they occupy the same place and, potentially, time' (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate 2000; Edwards and Rothbard 2000; Nippert-Eng 1996). Negative emotions may follow from the spill-over of work into the home with some people finding it difficult to 'switch off' from work (Bains and Gelder 2002). Indeed, loneliness, worry, guilt and irritation may also arise (Mann and Holdsworth 2003), while the most frequently cited impact on social and emotion-

al life is isolation (Monnier 2001). Family conflict may result from having to find new ways to organise work space and run the household, for example, when changing the division of household tasks (Haddon 1994).

### 4 METHODS

There is, then, inconsistent evidence in the literature about the consequences of teleworking on work-life balance. Though it does increase opportunities for temporal and locational flexibility, it is less clear that these opportunities improve work-life balance as such. However, most research on teleworkers till now has focused on the employed rather than the self-employed (Bains, 2002; Osnowitz, 2005).

Participants had to fulfil three criteria to qualify for inclusion in this research: they had to be self-employed; their main place of work had to be the home; and they had to be using ICT to communicate with clients. They also had to commit to keep a diary for a period of four weeks, and to complete a survey. Initially only individuals from the UK were contacted but, as this resulted in a very limited response, the search was widened to include individuals from France and the USA as well, countries selected on the grounds of comparatively low and high levels of teleworking respectively (ECaTT, 2000; Nilles, 2000).

In October 2004, 671 e-mails were sent to prospective participants in France, UK and the USA using a variety of databases listing journalists, museum consultants and translators in these countries. The data were collected between November 2004 and March 2005. Seventy individuals completed the questionnaire, giving an overall response rate of 10.4% (24 from France, 25 from the UK and 21 from the USA). Of these 53 (76%) were female and 17 (24%) were male. Only four were unwilling to keep a diary. All 70 respondents were contacted later to participate in a telephone interview on boundary management. Of these, 20 agreed (seven from France, nine from the UK and four from the USA). The full sample therefore included 70 respondents who completed the questionnaire, of whom 66 also kept a diary and 20 were interviewed. The combination of these three methods – diaries, questionnaires and interviews – helped to ensure the validity and reliability of the research.

### 5 FLEXIBILITY: THE CHALLENGES

To evaluate in greater depth the challenges facing respondents in managing their temporal flexibility, 20 telephone interviews were conducted from the original sample of 66 diary-keepers (four from the USA, seven from France and nine from the UK). The data from the interviews indicate that all 20 respondents experienced the tension between work and non-work activities and that, when there was a conflict between the two, work generally took priority, as it was a source of family income (Bains and Gelder, 2002).

Such conflict arose from a variety of sources. Some respondents experienced constant interruptions, and sometimes their work was not taken seriously by their family. They might be

expected to deal with domestic issues whenever they cropped up, and they might suffer from a sense of isolation at both professional and social levels, placing pressure on their motivation and health.

### ***Interruptions***

Interference with work resulting from interruptions by family and friends was reported by 15 of the 20 respondents interviewed. They observed that interruptions disrupted the work they should have been doing and their sense of duty towards their home.

Sometimes my parents used to come, and that was a problem because they kept interrupting me and I could not concentrate as much as I would like. They live five minutes' walk from my house. [Helene]

Keeping people away was regarded as a general problem:

That is one of the most difficult things, to get people to understand that you may be at home but you are working. That is really difficult, so now I end up saying, 'no I am not available at that time' or 'I am not available on that day', and they just have to come in the evening if they want to see me, or we can sort things out by phone. [Nadine]

### ***Family needs, perceptions and expectations***

Family members often expected respondents to be involved in all home-related activities since they were physically present at home. This led to a sense of work-life imbalance as they tried to manage the demands of their work alongside the expectations of their family. Eleven respondents found that because they were always at home their families had high expectations of them.

### ***One observed:***

When I accept a large translation I have to work a lot every day, so I don't have time to look after the house properly, and my family complains because the house is not very clean, and they don't understand. If I wasn't at home it would be different. [Joanna]

Taking care of other family members was also a challenge for some respondents and sometimes actually affected the volume of work they accepted:

The problem is when I started working in 2003, my father was already ill with cancer, so I usually used to talk with him because I knew that he would not be with me all the time. So it was very difficult to say no, but sometimes I had to tell him that I could not talk because my deadline was very tight, but I did not like to do that. The fact that my parents live nearby, and that they are old and my father was ill – that was a limiting factor to my professional activity because I did not try to get many clients. I voluntarily reduced my work because of my family. [Laila]

Another noted that her flatmates leave things that need to be done by her, as they know that she is going to be around:

In terms of the people I live with, it's a bit annoying. Because they know that I'm at home, they'll leave some chores for me. If the cat needs taking to the vet or something, they will assume that I'll do it because it's easier for me as I'm here anyway at home, whereas for them it would involve taking time off work. [Mary]

In addition to this, it was often felt that the work respondents do is not taken seriously. Fifteen out of the 20 interviewed complained that others did not perceive their work as 'proper' work:

When you work from home people do not view it as proper work, and so friends will phone expecting to have a long chat during the day and not respect the fact that I am trying to work. I often do not pick up the phone during the day. [Katriona]

These expectations cause pressure and role conflict. Being physically present in the home places extra demands on self-employed teleworkers. Families may place a strain on attempts to achieve a work-life balance by expressing little understanding for heavy workloads and tight deadlines.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

This article has focused on the issue of flexibility, which was raised by most respondents as a key determinant of their high level of attachment to teleworking. 'Flexibility', 'freedom', 'independence', 'autonomy', and 'control' are words used by respondents to describe why they would generally not return to traditional forms of employment. Their flexibility is something very valuable to them and they are not willing to give it up, even in exchange for higher levels of job security. Respondents mention the ability to structure their own working day, something they greatly appreciate.

However, despite the temporal flexibility which respondents enjoyed, many reported challenges in reconciling the demands of work and home. Most said they felt a tension between the two. Self-employed teleworkers faced constant interruptions from family members who did not regard their work as being 'proper' and expected them to be available throughout the day. This was stressful, particularly during times when deadlines were tight.

A striking feature of the questionnaires, diaries and interviews is the complexity of variables that they reveal. The range of personal circumstances of the respondents was wide in terms of age, gender, presence of a partner (working or not) and children, presence of other dependants (such as elderly relatives), number of clients, reliability of work flow and attitude towards working time, to name just the most salient. It was impossible to correlate these variables to the number and timing of hours worked, though the French worked the fewest hours and the least anti-social hours, and the Americans the most. However, the sample was not representative, and it was not the intention to draw statistically valid conclusions from the research.

What emerges overall is a sense of ambivalence amongst the teleworkers towards their working conditions. The literature implies that self-employment and teleworking are likely to benefit work-life balance on account of the flexibility they bring. Indeed, the diaries analysed in this article reveal great flexibility in the number of hours worked and when (for example at weekends or at night). The timing of hours worked compensates for time otherwise spent with the family – for example, time spent during the day with the children can be made up at night when they are in bed. However, the interviews reveal the challenges: the interruptions, and the conflicting family needs, perceptions and expectations. These challenges help to explain a certain polarity in the literature between those researchers who emphasise the advantages and those who emphasise the disadvantages. This article reveals that the truth may lie between: namely that the same teleworkers who appreciate the flexibility at one moment may also experience considerable conflict the next. The advantages and disadvantages are not an either/or as sometimes portrayed in the literature, but rather a both/and. The use in this article of questionnaires, diaries and interviews helps to uncover the shifting moods and reactions of respondents in a way that only one method would not.

The key concept here is ‘ambivalence’: ‘the simultaneous existence of attraction and repulsion, of love and hate’ (Smelser 1998: 5):

The nature of ambivalence is to hold opposing affective orientations toward the same person, object or symbol... With some exceptions, preferences are regarded as relatively stable; ambivalence tends to be unstable, expressing itself in different and sometimes contradictory ways as actors attempt to cope with it. (ibid: emphasis in original)

So a teleworker may welcome working time flexibility, but get exasperated by the interruptions; she may welcome the relief from commuting and office politics, but regret the isolation; she may welcome the autonomy of working with clients, but feel guilty at leaving the children to fend for themselves. These disjunctions are not experienced when working at an office. The organisation helps to create the division between work and non-work by establishing separate physical locations for each: at work the employee is a professional, a colleague and a salary earner, whilst at home she is a partner, parent, relative or friend. As the following quotation reveals, such role divisions may break down for teleworkers:

Sometimes I feel that I would be spending more time with my children if I had a traditional job because I could really cut, I would say I would leave the office and that is it and the rest of the time is with my family. Now I still answer calls in the evening. [Helene]

Role is therefore a critical element in understanding the contribution that telework makes to work-life balance: ‘Social roles...are bundles of expectations directed at the incumbents of positions in a given society’ (Dahrendorf 1973: 18). Conflict between roles occurs ‘when a person [is] obliged to play one

or more roles with contradictory expectations’ (Dahrendorf 1973: 54). This article has documented both the roles of teleworkers – at work and in the home – and clear cases of conflict between these roles, particularly when attempting to meet the expectations of clients in producing good quality work to deadlines on the one hand and the expectations of family with respect to domestic responsibilities and dealing with emergencies on the other. Without the temporal and locational barriers between home and work provided by commuting to an organisation for purposes of paid employment, the teleworker is thrown back on her own resources to manage the competing expectations generated by clients and family. It is for this reason that teleworkers express such ambivalence towards their working conditions: her views will change according to the interest uppermost in her mind at that moment – her ability to produce a good piece of work for the client (in which case she will focus on the advantages of flexibility) or her concerns about the family (in which case she will focus on the disadvantages of working at home).

An important finding of this article therefore is that although individuals do experience a degree of temporal flexibility and are able to fit in non-work related activities in their working day, this does not necessarily mean that their work-life balance is enhanced. It is certainly not a straightforward solution to balancing the needs home and work. Social attitudes, particularly those expressed in the home, do not yet understand the demands of telework. Temporal flexibility brings with it new challenges which have to be managed carefully: self-employed teleworking brings with it a set of benefits and challenges which co-exist, and to emphasise the one at the expense of the other may be misleading. ‘Work-life ambivalence’ may be nearer the mark than ‘work-life balance’ for these workers.

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