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The experience of teleworking: a view from the home

Book section

Original citation:

Haddon, Leslie (1998) The experience of teleworking: a view from the home. In: Jackson, Paul J. and van der Wielen, Jos M., (eds.) Teleworking: New International Perspectives From Telecommuting to the Virtual Organisation. Routledge, London, UK. ISBN 9780415173544

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Available in LSE Research Online: October 2016

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The Experience of Teleworking: A View from the Home

Leslie Haddon

(1998)

In Jackson, P. and Van de Wielen, J.(eds)

**Teleworking: International Perspectives.
From Telecommuting to the Virtual Organisation**

Routledge, London.

In 1992-93 an in-depth study of twenty teleworking households in the UK was conducted as part of longer term project organised by Professor Roger Silverstone and funded by PICT, a programme within one of the British research councils. The aim of that project, based originally at Brunel University and later at Sussex University, was to examine the experience of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the home.

The first Sussex study was of teleworkers, who were chosen to explore the relationship between home and paid work in a situation where the boundaries between them were being challenged in a particularly dramatic form. An additional advantage of focusing on this group was that it could build on the authors previous empirical research (Haddon, 1991, 1992; Haddon and Lewis, 1994). It is worth emphasising that some of the insights from this study apply to many more workers who use their home partially as work base (e.g. mobile workers), who bring some of their work home after leaving offices, or who allow themselves to be contactable at home for work purposes. Some of this results of this case study are reported elsewhere (Haddon ,1992; Haddon and Silverstone, 1992, 1994/5) the most detailed report being Haddon and Silverstone, 1994.

The Importance of Technology

Given that telework has frequently been picked out as emerging out of the information society it is worth asking just how important the actual technology is for this mode of working. It was clear from this study (and others) that there are some forms of telework where ICTs can play an essential role: for example, for teleworkers programming a distant mainframe computer via a modem, analysing data using software packages, or mediating computer conference. Such teleworkers, often but not always employees, could now bring their essential tools home - they were no longer tied to work because of the need to access a centralised facility. However these types of telework appear to be relatively few in comparison to work involving text production or else clerical or professional forms of administration: for example, secretarial word-processing, report writers or accounting. For these teleworkers, predominantly self-employed, ICTs make the work easier and quicker and they offer some new options. Indeed, they have become more essential given clients expectations about the speed of production or their desire for electronic output. Yet, this work could have taken place in the past without the aid of new ICTs. In fact, in our sample, both an editor and an abstract writer had worked for nearly 20 years at home, only starting to use new telecoms and electronic technology as they appeared in the 1970s and 1980s. Before this the only technologies they used where the typewriter and basic phone. These examples represent forms of professional and clerical work - not captured in literature on traditional manufacturing homework - which have always been conducted at home by a few.

In between these two sets of teleworkers there are those for whom ICTs are more than just a facilitator because of magnitude of the task and the time pressures involved. For these, mostly but not exclusively self-employed, ICTs make telework more of a feasible option. Examples for our study included an executive managing director, a publisher trading in international book rights, and various consultants producing substantial reports and packages at short notice. In these cases, communication was a significant element in their work, or else they were producing major texts in a short time span which require a professional appearance. The existence of ICTs which provide the kind of personalised technological back-up that they might expect in an office had made teleworking viable.

In sum, there are different degrees to which technology is a facilitator of telework, with one key variable being employment status. But even where ICTs have been relatively more important for conducting the telework, it is important to appreciate that they act as an enabling force rather than driving one. For companies, the social-economic factors driving telework such as the need to reduce building overheads or to retain staff have already well documented in the telework literature. Equally, it is mainly social considerations which shape individuals' decision to telework, as we will see below.

If telework appears at this moment to be attracting more attention in this country and elsewhere, this is as much a result of social causes as changes in technology. Such causes include a greater awareness of this option, the fact that working at home has become more acceptable to employers or clients, the rise of teleworker organisations offering various kinds of support and - more negatively - the massive restructuring of companies in the recession which for some means telework is the only alternative to unemployment or early retirement.

The heterogeneity of telework

Telework is by no means a unitary phenomenon. It is important to underline at the outset the fact that the circumstances of teleworkers vary greatly and hence so does their experience and evaluation of this mode of work. In fact, asking current or past teleworkers whether telework is, overall, a 'good' or 'bad' thing you would probably get as wide a range of responses as asking people to evaluate work in general.

First, they have different reasons for taking up teleworking. This study and past research suggest that domestic reasons would appear to predominate, especially for women. But this can include being home, perhaps reducing working hours, to be more to be available for children as well using telework to escape from the purely domestic role, perhaps as a stepping stone to office work. Alternatively, the decision to telework can be prompted by work or work-related considerations: to avoid commuting, as a reaction to problems experienced in offices, as part of a decision to embrace a more entrepreneur role, of a consequence of redundancy when there is little chance of being employed again because of age. So telework can be a positive choice, perhaps a lifestyle choice. Or it can simply

be the best option open, one chosen with ambivalence, and with at best a partial commitment. It can be 'choice' with varying degrees of voluntariness.

If we consider the route into telework as a career trajectory, the question of where people are coming from, as well as their reasons for taking that path, are also a consideration. For example, it makes a difference to suddenly switch from full-time office work to teleworking compared to coming from the domestic role of house-husband or wife. The organisation of the day and the expectations of one's social networks are different and have to change in different ways to accommodate this mode of work. In addition the status of the work is different in different households - ranging from being the equivalent of a full-time office job to be a means to earn a little extra money for the family. And lastly the control which teleworkers have over the timing, pace and amount of work varies - for both professional and clerical teleworkers.

The dynamics of telework

Domestic life has its own rhythms and routines, its temporal and spatial patterns, its shared values and rules as well as its domestic conflicts. These all shape how teleworking can enter the home and whether and how it can be accommodated. Hence, although the arrival of telework can have a bearing on those domestic patterns, telework also has itself to be adjusted to fit in with home life.

But this is not just a question of establishing a teleworking pattern once and for all. Both telework and domestic life have their own dynamics. Telework can change in terms of such matters as its content, the necessity for contactability, the balance of work inside and outside the home, the spatial requirements of work and the times when work has to take place. In households, the fact that children are born and grow up introduces constantly changing demands on domestic space and time. Relationships also change, with tensions, conflicts, the negotiation of new ways of organising household life, the break up of households and the formation of new ones. There is also material change, with the acquisition of new homes and hence opportunities for new spatial arrangements.

The consequence of these dynamics is that the experience of telework changes. It can take place at different times in different places. At times it can become more stressful, as new problems constantly emerge - at other times it can be easier to accommodate. As a result, we can talk of telework trajectories not just into the home but telework careers over time. Indeed, after longer or shorter periods, some give up this mode of working and return to office-based work or else cease to be part of the labour force - thereby establishing trajectories out of telework. In other words, the decision to telework should not be seen as being final. Teleworking is a provisional, sometimes temporary, commitment to a working arrangement. For some people telework is indeed the final stage in their career while for others teleworking is only a stage in their lives, an option

like taking a career break, or the decision of many mothers to work part-time while the children are young and return to full-time working later.

Time and space

One of the great benefits that advocates of this mode of working seize upon is the flexibility it offers to teleworkers. Yet, any temporal flexibility which telework may offer is in practice constrained by social factors. First, there are the demands of work. These include the requirement of employees to co-ordinate activities with others who are working core hours in an office or the need to be contactable at certain times. Our case study revealed instances of managers regularly having to face crises at times not of their own choosing, and of clerical and professional self-employed teleworkers working longer hours than they would have liked because of rush jobs, the need to bring new products to market, consultancy deadlines, or short-term notice of work.

At the same time, teleworkers often experience pressures to synchronise their non-work with others both inside and outside the home. In our study those female clerical teleworkers, and some professionals, who could not afford to pay for childcare could often only work when the children were not around or when their partners could look after them. In cases where young children were present this meant working in the evenings and at weekends. Or some teleworkers tried to keep weekends free to retain a place in the community - since that was when social activities were most likely to occur. In addition, many teleworkers preferred to stick to the approximate times when they used to work in offices because this routine helped their self-discipline.

As regards actual strategies for organising time, key patterns emerged. In one, work was relatively more imposed upon domestic life and, if necessary, household routines had to be adjusted. For example, many employees on telework schemes continued to work in the day and so that time was blocked out for work: they did not suddenly take on more domestic tasks by virtue of being home nor did they make themselves totally accessible to others in the household. Alternatively, the demands of work meant it took place outside traditional office hours - but again, work took precedence. This appeared to be a more masculine style, but one also adopted by some women, particularly professional employees. In contrast, a more common female pattern, especially clear where the telework was part-time, involved fitting work into domestic rhythms, fitting it in around the times when the children or partners are absent and hence not making demands, or fitting it in between other domestic responsibilities.

In terms of when work takes place, the pattern whereby telework was imposed on home life was more often associated with virtually no change from core office hours. There was perhaps just a little more flexibility than flexitime offers, which is often useful for child management. The contrasting pattern involved working non-standard hours - either when work was fragmented and fitted in and/or performed in the evenings or at weekends. For

those working long hours, of course, prioritising work meant working both the core day and evening and weekend work.

Turning now to questions of space, social constraints also affected the location of telework. Although regular commitments to visit one or more worksites may limit teleworkers' choice of where they would want to live, of far more significance is domestic inertia. Our teleworkers were established in houses, were part of communities, their children had friends at local schools and they had partners whose own work commitments had to be considered. In our sample, only one household, where both partners teleworked, was considering relocating to the south of France. On the whole, the flexibility offered by telework does not lead people to radically relocate and decamp to the countryside.

The location of telework within homes was also constrained by domestic considerations. A common image of teleworking is one where telework is conducted in a home office - and hence, work-related ICTs are based in a separate defined work space. This did happen to an extent, although it was more likely in the case of professional teleworkers because they tended to have bigger homes. But even professional teleworkers and certainly clerical ones often operated in a shared space: in multi-purpose rooms, guests rooms, dining rooms, often bedrooms, caravans and even in kitchens. The point was that both work and, especially, children made competing demands on space. Because these demands changed over time, as work changed, as children grew older, telework sometimes had to move around the house, at one point taking place in a dining room, at another in a bedroom, at another, if a larger house was acquired, in a study. Such constraints on space became significant for the teleworker's scope for impression management, for creating an image of their telework both to other household members and to outsiders. This included constraints on the manner in which they could display their technology as a means to identify with high-tech images of telework.

Maintaining boundaries between home and work

Making time and finding space for telework involves some negotiation within households - albeit negotiation where some household members may well be able to mobilise more power than others. In particular, teleworkers have the problem of boundary maintenance: to greater or lesser extents, they need to separate work and home life and prevent their mutual interference. This works are a number of levels. For example, some teleworkers became self-acknowledged workaholics as the proximity of work that they enjoyed was just too tempting. For others work used to 'hang over them' because it was so near at hand, sometimes visible while the home felt less like a home - with teleworkers choosing to spend more time in their gardens or take weekend breaks to 'get away'. These were perhaps more extreme strategies, but the general, in part psychological, dilemma still had to be faced and managed by those introducing work into their homes.

One important level at which boundary maintenance operates involves creating rules and understandings about the accessibility of teleworkers to other household members or contactability for either work or social purposes. In our study ICTs could sometimes help to manage the latter. For example, both incoming work and social phone calls could be directed to certain time spots, or to different phones. Some teleworkers also used the answerphone, and to some extent the fax, to control the timing of communication, taking and responding to different types of message when it suited them. This allowed them better to control interruptions - from work or social calls - to whatever task is at hand.

Another dimension of boundary maintenance involved impression management: being able to convey to outsiders - clients, employers and others contacted in the course of work - the image of being in a workplace. This often meant regulating how telephones were answered and who could answer them under what conditions. It could also mean regulating the sound regime of the home in general or at least the spaces in proximity to telework - so that domestic noise neither interfered with work nor created the wrong impression for outsiders.

The final example of boundary maintenance involved stipulating whether and when different household members could have access to work-related ICTs. There were sometimes tensions, for example, over the use of computers by children where teleworkers feared it might damage the hard- or software. And certainly, access to shared PCs by others in the household was likely to take second priority to the teleworker's own use. Similarly, use of a single phone line could lead to conflicts over the way domestic calls blocked the line and hindered incoming work-calls. Any rules about use could be either accepted or flouted. Alternatively, for some teleworkers, especially employees where equipment is supplied by employers or professional self-employed workers, the solution was to avoid sharing ICT resources and instead acquire a second (or third) computer dedicated to work or one or more extra phone lines specifically for work.

Teleworking and others

Clearly teleworking has a bearing on and is affected by a range of social relationships within the household. In this research not only did the responses of other household members, particularly partners, have to be taken into account when considering telework. Others in the house could support, or alternatively resist, telework in a variety of ways. They were sometimes enrolled in the actual work itself. Partners could support telework in practical terms, by taking over childcare or keeping children away from teleworker, enforcing boundaries and regulations. This appeared to be far more significant, for example, than doing more to help with routine domestic tasks: telework apparently made little difference to the gendered division of labour in more households.

In addition, partners and sometimes children could literally help with the work. Sometimes this assistance as auxiliary labour involved no particular help with the actual

technology of production: it might, for instance, involve picking up and delivering work material or acting as a sounding board for ideas. But, sometimes others in the household did take part in the production process, either, in the case male partners usually, acting as a technical support or else using ICTs and developing new computer and telephone skills.

Finally, social networks outside the home could play a role in supporting telework. Most often, such support had no bearing on actual technologies: it might be in the form of networks who could help take on some of the workload, provide additional childcare back-up or simply provide social contact to overcome any sense of isolation. But that support also included networks who, like partners, could provide technical advice and assistance relating to the teleworker's technologies.

Implications

This review of the Sussex research first examined the influence of technology on the development of telework. While ICTs enable some forms of telework and facilitate others this mode of working is not some automatic product of a new information age - its growth, of certainly its greater visibility, reflects wider social, cultural and economic developments and considerations.

The heterogeneity of telework demonstrated here serves to question some media and futurological stereotypes, be they utopian or dystopian. The sheer variety of trajectories into telework and the status and control over that work underline the fact that it can be experienced in different ways by a wide range of people for different reasons. This must make us reflect on assumptions that only people with certain psychological orientations are suitable for or take up this kind of work.

For those who would manage company telework schemes it should be clear that some aspects of telework are simply beyond the control of managers because the household has its own dynamics. There are various domestic reasons, as well as career decisions, which lead people to take on telework at one stage and give it up at another. This also means that when organisers of telework schemes calculate the use of future office space, equipment needs etc. they would need to ask what difference it makes if telework is regarded as being transitional, and they can therefore expect a certain proportion of their teleworkforce to want to return to the office. As for those giving advice on self-employment at home, they need to think not just about how to handle the trajectory into telework, but also the trajectories through it and sometimes out of it. A more general observation is that future scenarios of teleworking are misleading if they suggest any secular trend whereby teleworking jobs replace on-site ones. If teleworking is transitional for many, the picture is rendered far more complex. Teleworking is no longer simply displacing traditional office-based work. Instead, it is an option open to more and more people as a component in their work career.

Finally, this review has covered a number of points about the issues facing teleworkers have been explored. It is clear that despite popular images there are limits to the flexibility offered by telework, both in terms of time and space. All teleworkers have somehow to confront the issue of managing the boundaries between work and home, an issue which appears again and again in a number of guises and some teleworkers manage it better than others. But here we need also to appreciate the fact that they are not isolated individuals but live in social contexts with others, both inside and outside the home, whose support (or resistance) has a bearing on the whole experience.

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