Telecommuting (2003)

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Basic Concepts & Definitions

Telecommuting, sometimes called "telework," is a subset of the group of alternative work options where:

1. Work is conducted at an off-site location (e.g., away from the "office") ; and

2. The employee uses telecommunications technology, including computers, video and telephone systems, fax machines, and high-speed hook-ups for data transfers.

Telecommuting is usually considered to be work done from the employee's home for at least part of the workweek, where the work is at least partially supported by telecommunications technology.

Telecommuting usually does not refer to work that is conducted either very occasionally (e.g., person who works at home maybe once a month) or work done "on the road," such as training or sales. It is also important to make a distinction between telecommuting and flexible scheduling. Although many telecommuters work according to flexible schedules, some telecommuters are expected to work according to a fixed schedule (e.g., they need to be available 9 to 5, etc.).

There are between 13 and 19 million teleworkers in the U.S. today. Some of these employees telecommute on a full time basis, but most work at home for one or two days a week (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000).

The typical telecommuter is a middle-aged, college-educated, white male who owns a home computer and earns at least $40,000 per year. Telecommuting works best for jobs that demand a high degree of privacy and concentration, are predictable, and information-based (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000).

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Telecommuting has implications for work-family studies since the design and structure of work itself can be one of the root causes of work/life conflicts. There are two competing schools of thought on the effects
of teleworking on work-family conflict. Some scholars believe that telecommuting may reduce work-family conflict, by reducing commuting times, or allowing one to be closer to one's children or elders should problems occur. Others believe it may increase work-family conflict since employees may work longer hours as they are working when office employees in similar jobs might be commuting, or eating lunch or socializing.

**State of the Body of Knowledge**

Scholars and practitioners are still grappling with documenting the incidence of telework, since there is no single operational definition used by employees and organizations. For example, some employers don't consider working from home one day a week to be teleworking.

Most of the studies conducted to date have examined the relationships between productivity proxy measures and either: 1) characteristics of the telecommuting employee (e.g., tenure, personality traits, etc.), or 2) work tasks completed by the telecommuter (e.g. data entry, knowledge creation etc.).

The telework research has its roots in studies conducted about home work. Christensen (1988) found that homework may have differential impacts on men and women due to the family and household responsibilities that they assume. A recent study by Sullivan & Lewis contrasted telework that is a form of exploitation with telework that is a solution for managing work and family. The authors conclude that although telework may be viewed as family-friendly if it allows women to combine their work and family roles, but it may not be gender-equitable in terms of reducing work-family conflict.

It is important that future research examines the specific household and caretaking responsibilities of teleworkers when examining the impact on women and men.

There continues to be a lack of quality empirical evidence that documents the outcomes of telecommuting, either for employees (at work or at home -- however those boundaries get defined), the workplace organization (including coworkers and supervisors), or the employees’ families. Finally, there have been no published studies that examine how variations in the telecommuting situation, itself, might be related to different outcomes.

This summary should be updated in a few years when more empirical work is done, as there is little quality, published research in top refereed journals on telecommuting.
Implications for Practice & Research

Telework can offer benefits to employees and employers.

Telecommuters can save time by eliminating or reducing commutes. Employees may report that the stress associated with long or difficult commutes is reduced. Sometimes, employees may either reduce their work time or work more efficiently because they minimize being interrupted by co-workers (Mirchandani, 1998).

If the employee is able to telecommute according to a flexible schedule, they may be able to more effectively integrate work and nonwork tasks, such as taking care of sick children or fulfilling personal/family responsibilities that might need to be managed during the traditional work day (Hill, 1998).

Some employers have used telecommuting as a strategy that enables employees to postpone or eliminate the need for relocation or resigning to avoid moving.

The extent to which employees accrue these benefits depends on the telecommuters being able to maintain a reasonable workload and being able to clarify the boundaries between work and not-work (both for the employee as well as for the employees’ family). There is evidence in the literature that employees should not try to simultaneously perform child care and work responsibilities (Riley & McCloskey, 1997).

Employers can benefit from telecommuting by saving money on expensive office space, increasing employee productivity, and improving worker morale, which might increase firms’ ability to retain the best employees (U. S. Department of Labor, 2000). Some scholars believe that teleworkers generally work longer hours than their non-teleworking counterparts due to a "gratitude effect", shorter commuting times, less time socializing, and easy accessibility to work. Telecommuting is sometimes used by organizations in major metropolitan areas as a strategy for meeting Environmental Protection Agency plans to reduce air pollution.

It is often noted in the telework literature that supervisors' expectations and norms of supervision (such as "face time" and "line of sight") have an impact on the availability and the outcomes of telework arrangements. Practitioners have raised questions, such as, "How can a manager effectively supervise workers who are not present in the workplace? How can a manager organize the work of teams when an employee is a teleworker?" Although the practice literature offers "advice" about these issues, there is little empirical work that helps to guide their decisions.

Early evidence suggests that the benefits of telecommuting may be overstated in the popular literature, as some workers may not be able to effectively manage their times well at home. Others may overwork, as
they feel that they can never get away from their jobs. These employees may have problems maintaining boundaries between work and home. Other potential problems include: increased isolation, depression, lack of space for a home office, and difficulties in accessing adequate telecommunications technology to support working at home, especially in rural or small town locations where infrastructure may not be state-of-the-art.

References


Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:


www.amanet.org


Other resources

www.gilgordon.com - A website established by the telecommunity consultant and author, Gil Gordon.

Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. (More about the Matrix ...).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry’s topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.

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Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains
Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for
determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.

**Process**

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants. Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsoughes at pittcats@bc.edu
Assumptions

Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. **Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term “work-family” to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves.** Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term “work-family” (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. **It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, caregiver/caretaker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal.** Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, “Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study,” on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a “work in progress.” We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.
Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map

The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

Work-Family Experiences: The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

Antecedents: Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
• Workplace Antecedents
• Community Antecedents
• Societal Antecedents

Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

• Individual Covariates
• Family Covariates
• Workplace Covariates
• Community Covariates
• Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

• Individual Decision and Responses
• Family Decisions and Responses
• Workplace Decisions and Responses
• Community Decisions and Responses
• Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

• Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
• Outcomes & Impacts on Families
• Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
• Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
• Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
Table 1: Matrix of Information Domains (9/30/01)

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