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Reframing the infomated household-workplace[☆]

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Abstract

'Reframing', a managerial tool for understanding organizational complexity (Bolman & Deal, 1997), is applied to Australian households that possess a large amount of information and communication technology (ICT). Applying reframing to interviews conducted in households indicates that major changes, including some contradictory changes, are occurring as a result of adopting ICT and home-based working. Viewed through the structural frame, boundaries between work and home are blurring, while simultaneously attempts are being made to reinforce the separation of these activities. The human resource frame indicates ICT is improving communication, convenience and recreation, but hampering relationships and increasing interference and distractions. Looked at through the political frame, power shifts and new ICT-related conflicts occur, but members are also empowered by having their own ICTs to achieve individual goals. Finally, symbolism arises from the very presence of ICT and work activities in the home, enabling the emergence of dual identities, 'household' and 'workplace'. The findings are discussed in the context of contradictory organizational consequences of ICT reported in other situations. In relation to remote working, it is suggested that the household is a vital third element, in addition to the employer and employee, and that reframing can be used by those considering home-based working, to help them understand the likely impacts on their household and to facilitate the transition to home-based working. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Home-based work; Reframing; Household; Information and communication technology; Remote working; Virtual organization; Organizational change; Contradictory impacts

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1. Introduction

Rapid increases in information and communication technology (ICT), dramatic falls in communication costs, and a shift to work involving information, ideas, and intelligence mean that the location and time of work are less relevant than ever before (Cairncross, 1997; Davenport & Pearlson, 1998; Wilde, 2000). For some workers, the office no longer means a permanent desk, chair, phone, or piles of physical files. At least one day per week, their office may instead be in their home or car, at a client's premises or telecenter, or in their briefcases — in the form of their mobile phone, computer with modem, and organizer.

This 'anytime, anyplace' work-world is underpinned by ICT that allows people to work remotely. In this paper, the general term 'remote working' is adopted, but researchers elsewhere may use 'teleworking' (UK) or 'telecommuting' (US) to refer to a range of working arrangements outside the traditional workplace (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). Kurland and Bailey (1999) distinguish four broad categories of remote working arrangements: home-based working, satellite offices, neighborhood work centers, and mobile working where people have no fixed work location.

Our focus is on home-based working, which itself can encompass a variety of different arrangements. It can involve carrying out work that is either central to or supplemental to the person's normal work. Arrangements can be formally or informally made with the employer, and cover either full-time or occasional work at home. In addition, home-based work need not involve an employer–employee relationship at all, but instead may involve people who are self-employed or operating a small business using their homes as their principal workplace.

Current estimates for the number of remote workers in the US vary between 3 and 11 million (3–8 percent of the workforce), depending on the definition of remote working (Scott & Timmeran, 1999). European estimates of 'home-based teleworking' range from 1 percent in Spain and France to 6 percent of the workforce in Sweden and Finland, according to a 1999 survey (European Telework Online, 2000). Nilles (2000) predicts that nearly 30 million US workers will work remotely by 2003.

For employers, encouragement of remote working appears to be driven by a variety of considerations, from enhancing employee productivity and saving rental and other costs, to attracting and retaining valuable staff (Apgar, 1998; Behr, 1999; Bond, Galinski, & Swanberg, 1998; International Telework Association and Council, 1999; Kurland & Bailey, 1999). Different motivations underlie individuals' choosing to work remotely, particularly at home. These include the need for extended periods of concentration and avoiding the interruptions found to prevent workers from being productive in the office (Perlow, 1999), the convenience of not having to go to an external workplace (Avery & Baker, 2000), and as a possible way to redress a perceived deteriorating work-family balance.

1.1. The household as ICT-supported workplace

Homes are becoming 'infomated' environments that support remote working using ICT (Darrah, English-Lueck, & Saveri, 1997). In 'infomated' households, members

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