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Variability in the use of mobile ICTs by homeworkers and its consequences for boundary management and social isolation



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ABSTRACT

We examine how the use of mobile information and communication technologies (ICTs) among self-employed homeworkers affects their experience of work, focusing particularly on where work is carried out, how the work/non-work boundary is managed, and people's experiences of social and professional isolation. Positively, their use enhanced people's sense of spatio-temporal freedom by allowing them to leave the home without compromising their work availability. This also helped reduce people's feelings of social isolation. More negatively, their use enhanced people's sense of 'perpetual contact', creating a sense that work was difficult to escape from. However, the extent to which mobile ICTs were used, and the extent to which their impact on people's experiences of work were understood, were found to vary significantly, highlighting the agency that users have with regard to technology use. The findings are framed by combining Nippert-Eng's boundary work theory, with an 'emergent process' perspective on socio-technical relations.

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1. Introduction

The work-related use of contemporary mobile and wireless information and communication technologies (ICTs) is a topic that has received much attention in recent years. Many writers suggest their impact on the nature and experience of work has been significant. For example, Matusik & Mickel (2011, p. 1002) suggest that mobile ICTs are 'revolutionizing when, where, how, and how long employees work'. However, this represents a relatively embryonic topic area and many gaps in knowledge exist. Thus, while there has been some research on the work-related use of mobile phones and other types of mobile ICTs such as personal digital assistants (PDAs), this has typically focused narrowly on office-based professionals (see for example, Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011; Tennakoon, da Silveira, & Taras, 2013). Very few studies have considered the use of these technologies by home-based workers. One of the main themes of the research on mobile ICT use is the flowing of work into the non-work and home domain (Derks & Bakker, 2012; Fenner & Renn, 2010; Golden & Geisler, 2007; Orlikowski, 2007; Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011; Sarker, Xiao, Sarker, & Ahuja, 2012). The use of mobile ICTs for people whose home represents their primary workplace therefore raises interesting questions about how the use of these technologies affects the experience of work, and the character of the work/non-work boundary. This paper contributes to knowledge by examining this topic.

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In examining home-based workers, the specific focus here is on the ways in which mobile ICT use affects their spatio-temporal flexibility, with a particular emphasis on how mobile ICT use affects where work is and can be done. Building from the assumption that ‘where work is done makes a difference for working practices and to organizational and personal relationships’ (Halford, 2005, p. 20), the paper also considers how mobile ICT use impacts on how the work/non-work boundary is managed, as well as people’s experiences of social isolation while working.

The paper makes linkages between the literatures on the work-related use of mobile ICTs and homeworking, and in doing so contributes to both. Conceptually, the paper contributes to knowledge by linking together an ‘emergent process’ perspective on technology (Orlikowski, 2010) with Nippert-Eng’s (1996) boundary work theory, both of which focus on the agency of actors operating within the constraints of their particular personal and work circumstances. It does this fundamentally through examining how some self-employed homeworkers’ use of mobile ICTs affected their work experience, a topic not examined to any great extent in either literature. The paper makes a further contribution to the homeworking literature by examining a neglected type of homeworker, those who are self-employed. Despite the heterogeneity in the character of homeworkers that exists (in terms of factors such as employment status and occupation), the academic literature on this topic has tended to focus narrowly on managerial and professional workers who are employees (Tietze, Musson, & Scurry, 2009).

The paper begins by reviewing relevant literature on the use of mobile ICTs, with a particular focus on how their use affects the way people manage the work/non-work boundary and experience isolation. This section concludes by highlighting gaps in the literature with regard to home-based workers and summarizing the research questions examined. Following this, the methods used for identifying and selecting research participants, and the collection and analysis of data are outlined. The paper’s empirical findings are then presented, through using relevant interview quotes to highlight participant’s views and experiences. Finally, the paper concludes with an extended discussion.

2. The experience of homeworking: Work–life balance, boundary management, and isolation

Before proceeding any further, it is useful to clarify the terminology being used to describe the workers examined here. One feature of the literature on teleworking/homeworking is the diversity of labels that are utilized (Tietze et al., 2009). For the workers examined here, their homes constitute their primary workplace, but they do make extensive use of ICTs in carrying out their work. Thus, the workers examined here are referred to as (self-employed) technology-dependent homeworkers.

As one of the central foci of the paper is on how homeworkers’ use of mobile ICTs affected their experience of work, it is useful to begin this literature review by outlining the perspective on technology–human relations utilized here. A key reason why it is necessary to do this is the diversity of perspectives on this topic that exist. A useful paper in this respect is Orlikowski’s (2010) review paper. We adopt what Orlikowski labels the ‘emergent process’ perspective, which is based on an ‘ontology of separateness’, which regards technological artifacts and human action as separable and ontologically distinct. The ‘emergent process’ perspective is sensitive to the socially constructed nature of technology, taking active account of the role played by technology designers and users in shaping how technologies are used and evolve. In doing so, this perspective takes account both of how people understand and make sense of technology and how they use it. A key feature of this perspective is a central focus on the role played by human agency in shaping technology use. This perspective that is utilized here as the key empirical focus during data collection was on how homeworkers made sense of and utilized mobile ICTs in carrying out their work, with limited attention being devoted to the micro-level detail of how the materiality of these artifacts also shaped how they were used.

The two central aspects of homeworkers’ work experience that are examined here relate to (i) issues of work–life balance, and the character of the boundary between the domains of work and non-work, and (ii) issues of social and professional isolation. Both topics have been identified as being important features in the academic literature on homeworkers’ work experiences (see below), and homeworkers’ experiences in both domains have been affected by changes and developments in ICTs.

2.1. Work–life balance and the management of the work–life boundary

Although one of the articulated advantages of homeworking is that it improves people’s ability to achieve a satisfactory work–life balance (see for example Baruch, 2001), empirical research findings on this topic are somewhat ambiguous. On the plus side, the autonomy and temporal flexibility provided by homeworking typically produces a positive work–life balance impact, giving people the scope to synchronize work and non-work schedules and commitments (Maruyama, Hopkinson, & James, 2009). However, more negatively, the fact that work is carried out in the home means that the boundary between the domains of work and non-work can become blurred, which can increase the occurrence of work/non-work conflict and mean that homeworkers find it difficult to ‘switch off’ from work (Maruyama et al., 2009; Tietze & Musson, 2005; Tietze et al., 2009).

In examining the topic of the work/non-work boundary, it is useful to link to the influential work of Nippert-Eng (1996) who developed the theory of ‘boundary work’ to make sense of how people manage this boundary. The segmentation–integration boundary preference spectrum she developed represents a key aspect of boundary theory. This argues that people’s preferences regarding the character of the work–non-work boundary exist on a spectrum between the extremes of segmentors, who like to keep these domains totally separate, and integrators, who do not distinguish between the domains, and who are happy to have them continually blended together. Central to boundary theory is the agency of individuals, who continually shape and manage this boundary on a day-to-day basis, with their activity in turn shaped and constrained by the specific character of their home and work domains. Thus, this focus on human agency links well with the ‘emergent process’ perspective on technology–human relations adopted. Further, by taking account of the specific character of people’s work and home domains, it allows full account

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