



Rapid change or slow evolution? Changing places of work and their consequences in the UK

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ABSTRACT

It is often suggested that work is changing rapidly and that working in a fixed place, such as an office, is a thing of the past for a growing number of workers. By piecing together a variety of UK surveys of both employers and workers, this article shows that while work is being detached from conventional places of work, it is happening at a much slower rate than some claims suggest. The article also discusses the consequences these changes have for how and what individuals learn at work, and in particular, how individuals cope with working in a number of contrasting locations.

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1. Introduction

In a world of hyperbole and exaggeration, journalists and headline writers have seized on the suggestion that working for 8 h a day in a fixed place is outmoded. Indeed, many readers will have experienced first-hand, the notion that the world of work is spreading its tentacles throughout time and space. The days when paid employment was confined to designated hours in a specified place are fast fading for managers, professionals and other white-collar workers in particular. Mobile phones, laptops, e-mail and internet connectivity mean that work can be done wherever we are and whatever the time. Work can be done using a PC in the back bedroom, a mobile phone headset in the car, a table at a motorway service station, a desk in a corporate office building, a rented meeting room in a serviced office building and/or a chair in a hotel lobby. Furthermore, all of these places can be used by one person in a single day. Everywhere has the potential to become a place of work.

Contrasting locations call for different skills and working practices. Getting reports written in a crowded railway carriage involves mentally shutting out the noise and distractions of fellow passengers, as well as grabbing and holding on to a seat. Making business calls while stuck in traffic requires that all the right phone numbers have been stored on the handset. Preparing for a meeting by reading the relevant documents while relaxing on a sofa at home entails negotiations with family members who want to watch TV or play games. Time spent in the office building requires balancing pressures to maintain informal contacts with co-workers with the need to get things done. In short, some places of work

pose challenges of isolation and detachment, while others entail managing contacts with family, colleagues and strangers. The diversity and fragmentation of workplaces requires not only coping with a range of demands but also slipping effortlessly from one place to the next (Halford, 2005). These changes have profound implications for the everyday experience of work and the nature of daily life.

This article has two aims. First, it charts the extent to which work is becoming detached from place. Previous studies have tended to compare the demographic and employment profiles of 'homeworkers' or 'teleworkers' with those working in the conventional workplace (Felstead, 1996; Hakim, 1998; Felstead et al., 2001; Huws et al., 1999; Hotopp, 2002; Haddon and Brynion, 2005; Ruiz and Walling, 2005). These studies have done much to focus attention on the home as a place of work. However, they have failed to highlight other places of work such as the spaces used while working on employers' premises and the spaces used while 'on the move' travelling from place to place (Hislop and Ax-tell, 2007; Alexander et al., 2010). The first aim of this article, then, is to chart with available data for the UK, the shifting locations of work, both outside and inside the office. The article reports on the changing proportions and numbers of people carrying out work away from the conventional physical boundaries of the office or factory. It also examines the past, current and future use employers are making of techniques intended to effect this change for office workers in particular. In so doing, it adds new statistical evidence to the debate by updating data presented elsewhere (see Felstead et al., 2005a,b) and analyzes data sources not previously examined from such a perspective. Secondly, the article discusses some of the consequences these changes may have for how and what individuals learn and how they cope with working in a variety of contrasting locations,

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not all of which may be conducive to all types of task. The article is structured around these two aims. We begin, however, with a brief review of existing research in this field in order to contextualize the article and its contribution.

2. Existing research

A key feature of early factories and offices was that they gave individual workers a spatial fix. The allocation of each person to a place and each place to a person was the foundation of regulation and control embedded in the physical construction of assembly lines and 'personal offices'. 'Placing' workers made the security of materials and regulation of work flows much easier. More subtly, it made possible disciplinary devices associated with panoptical surveillance, the normalizing gaze and the regimentation of time. The design of offices played an important role in this regime of discipline, policing and control. A cube of space in the workplace (desk, bench or machine) became synonymous with a unit of labor on the payroll. Tayloristic management practices were applied in, indeed constituted by, Taylorized buildings (Baldry, 1999; Baldry et al., 1998). The term 'office', which had once meant a position or function, increasingly referred to a place. Furthermore, in the 'personal office', an individual worker became synonymous with a designated space.

Set against this backdrop, recent developments in information and communication technology (ICT) have led to a weakening of the spatial fixity of the workplace with workers increasingly detached from their personal cubes of space. This has made it possible for professional and managerial workers to share space and facilities in 'collective offices', allow more work to be done at home, and permit work to be carried around and completed wherever and whenever possible. This has prompted many research studies from across the social sciences and in particular from disciplines such as sociology, geography and human resource management. As a backdrop to the contribution we make here, this section outlines some of the key debates.

A key issue surrounds definitions. How do we define who's a 'homeworker', a 'teleworker' and a 'mobile worker'? What is a 'collective office' a 'hot desk' and 'touch down desk'? The short answer is that there is no agreed definition of many of these concepts and as a result debates can often produce apparently conflicting results (see Mirchandani, 2000). In response, several authors have set about defining precisely what they mean by the terms they use and reinterpreting the work of others in the light of their endeavors (e.g., Wilks and Billsberry, 2007; Haddon and Brynin, 2005; Sullivan, 2003; Felstead and Jewson, 2000). In this article, we are more pragmatic in our approach since statistical data on where people work is exceedingly scarce. We therefore provide a more data driven approach, albeit with a clear discussion of what we are measuring and how. As a result, we eschew the use of terms such as 'homeworker' and 'mobile worker' in what follows. Instead, we use the phrases to which survey respondents gave their replies.

Forecasting the future shape of work has been a key feature of the debate. The results have prompted considerable interest, although with the benefit of hindsight the estimates produced have exaggerated the rapidity of change. For example, back in 1999 and looking forward to 2010, it was estimated that '40–50% of the work activities of many managerial and professional activities (sic) are likely to be undertaken at home' (Scase, 1999, p. 28). According to some estimates around 32% would be doing so by 2006 (estimates reported by Lees (1999, p. 14)). As we will see, even we take the widest of interpretation of home-located working, it is difficult to reconcile these predictions with current

estimates which put the use of the home as a place of work for at least 1 day a week far lower. Nevertheless, predictions that the 'growing capabilities of communication technologies are likely to shift the emphasis towards the home' and that 'individuals will become more mobile in all spheres of life including work and employment (Scase, 1999, p. 28, 5) have been confirmed by evidence that has subsequently emerged.

More recent predications of the future, however, have begun to emphasize the spatial fluidity of work: 'for a substantial proportion of workers, work in 20 years time will be more about movement than staying put' (Moynagh and Worsely, 2005, p. 101; Urry, 2000, Chapter 3). Some have suggested that the literature itself 'has placed significantly more emphasis on the movement of work into the home than work done "on the move"' (Hislop and Axtell, 2007, p. 37) and may therefore be missing some of the major developments in the changing location of work (see also Vartiainen and Hyrkkänen, 2010). Empirical evidence also suggests that this blind spot may be significant. For example, a survey of 25,000 rail passengers in Britain suggests that in 2010 over half (54%) of business travelers spent at least some of their travel time working and a third (34%) claimed doing so for the majority of that time (Lyons et al., 2011).

The consequences of these changes for home life have sparked considerable interest, especially the suggestion that more time will be spent working at or from home for some of the time. Bringing work into the domestic spheres requires workers to negotiate with other household members over the disposition and management of time and space. The domestic life of the household is confronted with the need to incorporate relations of employment into its midst. The ways in which this is achieved by men and women as well as by different occupational groups has been the focus of investigation (Marsh and Musson, 2008; Crosbie and Moore, 2004; Fitzgerald and Winter, 2001).

Changes in the places of work also means that workers are physically distant from their colleagues based elsewhere, particularly their managers. This leads to another set of uncertainties and ambiguities. The potentiality for managers to observe personnel is significantly reduced when their charges work at a distance. This is of great significance since managerial strategies of control have long rested on the visibility and presence of workers within employers' premises. The absence of continual surveillance is a mixed blessing for many workers since it creates opportunities for an enhanced degree of self-determination and, even, for evasion or avoidance of managerial supervision. However, the corollary of increased autonomy can also be feelings of isolation from the guidance of supervisors, advice of colleagues and support of co-workers. They may feel left out of the flows of job information, task instruction, tacit knowledge, learning contexts and promotion prospects. The supervisory relationship thus becomes more problematic for workers and managers (Taskin and Edwards, 2007; Dimitrova, 2003).

Finally, the pattern and extent of change to the places where we work has far-reaching implications for the transport infrastructure and urban planning. On the one hand, the scale of such changes affect workers' travel needs and thus the mix of travelers, destinations, trip purposes and amenities required. This has significant consequences for transport and city planners (see Helling and Mokhtarian, 2001). On the other hand, the multiple purposes to which travel time is now put – aided through technology – lessens the importance of making journey times quicker since travelers are also 'equipped' to do other activities while travelling (Jain and Lyons, 2008). The economic arguments, then, for greater investment in public transport such as high speed rail networks are weakened by the extent to which work can be carried out while travelling.

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