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Should we do away with teleworking? An examination of whether teleworking can be defined in the new world of work

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Abstract

This empirical paper analyses data gathered from self-employed teleworkers, matching this against teleworking's defining characteristics which appear in the literature. Our evaluation leads us to question whether the term 'teleworking' has lost much of its value in today's working world. We therefore suggest the new term 'home-anchored worker' as a less complex and more useful replacement.

Should we do away with teleworking? An examination of whether teleworking can be defined in the new world of work

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore the acknowledged problems of defining teleworking (Haddon and Brynin, 2005; Sullivan, 2003) and to begin to assess whether the term is still useful today. In particular, we examine the range of criteria that has been used to characterise teleworkers in recent literature, including working location, the reduction of travel, the role of information communication technologies, the content of the work, work-life balance and isolation (Gurstein, 2001; Haddon and Brynin, 2005; Hardill and Green, 2003; Hopkinson, James and Maruyama, 2002; Huws, Korte and Robinson, 1990; Kurland and Bailey, 1999; Sullivan, 2003). We then match these defining characteristics against the experiences of a set of people whose mode of work appears at first glance to be 'teleworking'. In the light of our investigations, we consider then whether the currently prevalent definitions appear to capture the essence of teleworking.

Terms such as telecommuting, mobile working, e-working, remote working and home working are sometimes used interchangeably with the term teleworking, often with confused varying implied modes of working. We therefore also examine elements of the teleworking concept with the aim of suggesting a new and more specific, perhaps even more contemporary, term to help to simplify the identification of teleworking individuals.

Overview of the literature

An examination of the literature which refers to teleworking helped us to collate the definitional criteria which form the basis of our study. Although there is general agreement on certain teleworking criteria, such as working in a location remote from an employer's premises and using information technologies to communicate and complete work (Huws et al, 1990), authors do vary in the emphasis they give to the various aspects of the teleworking concept as well as in the mix of definitional criteria they include.

Hardill and Green (2003), for example, focus on the location of this type of work, suggesting that work may be undertaken while travelling as well as, or instead of, in the home, as the more accepted teleworking definitions imply. Gurstein (2001) also questions the amount of time that teleworkers actually spend working in their homes. We therefore include an examination of our participants' working locations as part of our study. Hardill and Green include the terms e-working, telecommuting and mobile working as well as teleworking in their study, emphasising, as we suggested above, the variety of terms for this mode of work as well as the variety of locations. Also related to the spatiality of teleworking, there have been suggestions that teleworking may eradicate commuting (Kurland and Bailey, 1999), a feature particularly emphasised by the use of the term 'telecommuting'. We also therefore include exploration of the work-related travel habits of our participants in order to assess whether commuting eradication is useful as a defining criteria for teleworking.

In her comprehensive overview of teleworking definitions, Sullivan (2003) reviews the inclusion of information technologies as crucial to teleworkers performing their work, quoting earlier studies which questioned the

extent of their use. However, she reports that more recent empirical work found that the extent of use of information technologies was increasing, giving us further incentive to provide an up-to-date review of the current situation. We therefore add the use of information technologies for the completion of work as well as for communication with employers, colleagues or clients, as Huws et al (1990) suggest, to our list of teleworking characteristics for investigation.

The content of the work of teleworkers comes under scrutiny by some commentators looking for defining features. Hopkinson et al (2002) specify that only those whose work could be characterised as 'knowledge work' should be defined as teleworkers, even though 'knowledge work' itself is notoriously difficult to define. Other authors do not include this criterion, although it does usually appear to be understood that work will be of a non-manual nature. However, the changing content of many 'traditional' home-based occupations is highlighted by some as a further complication in the distinguishing of the phenomena of teleworking. Baines and Gelder (2003), for example, point out the new ways in which technology is being incorporated into occupations, such as childminding, which are not generally regarded as either teleworking or knowledge work but could still be said to fulfil some of teleworking's other criteria, that is, working from home and using information technologies. Similarly, home-based craft work such as rug making or throwing pots may involve planning designs on a computer or selling the final product using information communication technologies, thus again fulfilling the same two of teleworking's generally agreed criteria. Although we only recruited participants working in non-manual roles, we did decide it would be helpful for definitional

purposes for us to explore whether our ‘teleworkers’ could be regarded as knowledge workers.

Teleworking is also often characterised as having certain advantages and disadvantages in comparison with office-based work. Gurstein (2001) lists the assumption that home-based work allows the creation of an advantageous work-life balance, while Huws et al (1990) suggest that isolation from colleagues may be seen as a drawback of teleworking. Meanwhile, Kerrin and Hone (2001) highlight the potential increase in flexibility and autonomy. Whilst these are not strictly defining characteristics, we consider it to be useful to explore these frequently referred to facets of teleworking in order to help to understand the concept more fully. We therefore added these to the collation of criteria to be investigated during the assessment of our participants’ working situations.

The division between teleworkers and office workers have become confused, as various authors have demonstrated. Gurstein (2001) provides a typology ranging from employed teleworkers who work away from an employer’s office, through moonlighters who work at home as a supplement to a primary job, to occasional homeworkers who frequently or occasionally bring home work after work hours. Haddon and Brynin (2005) also highlight the technological developments that have allowed office-based workers to let their work spill over into working at home during evenings and weekends. In order to overcome these confused categorisations, we chose to focus on self-employed teleworkers who appeared to be permanently home-based in order to provide clarity of output for this particular study.

Methodology

There have been several large-scale quantitative research projects investigating the activities of teleworkers (Gurstein, 2001; Hopkinson and James, 2003; Kamerade and Burchell, 2004; Saxena and Mokhtarian, 1997), but relatively few qualitative studies that have explored the situations of individual teleworkers in depth. Qualitative research, such as that reported here, is valuable to begin to provide further insight into the range of individual cases which might make up the aggregated statistics obtained via quantitative surveys and thus help us towards our conclusions on the appropriateness of definitions of the term ‘teleworking’ as well as the value of the term itself.

The findings of our study were based on the results of semi-structured interviews with eight self-employed home-based workers in a rural part of the United Kingdom. Teleworking definitions are confused when it comes to a consideration of employment status: although some studies do not consider self-employed workers to be teleworkers (Pyöriä, 2003), others claim that self-employment accounts for a large part of teleworking (Hotopp, 2002). We suggest, however, that there is no reason to exclude self-employed teleworkers at this stage. Indeed it could be argued that they are a more ‘pure’ teleworker than the teleworker who is employed by a remote organisation, with no potential traditional office-based work apparently being possible to dilute the teleworking experience. These conflicting views do, however, serve to emphasise that teleworking is not easily defined and that our sample is only focused on one type of teleworker. However, we decided that it was more useful at this early stage to confine our investigation to a specific tranche of teleworker, with the

suggestion that further research could explore the situations of other types defined along a range of dimensions.

The recruitment of the participants was achieved through the use of directories to enable a focus on small independent businesses or consultancies based in a defined geographical area and run from home. Emails and follow up telephone calls to the identified participants secured their co-operation, with no-one who was approached refusing to take part.

Although all of the participants were self-employed and ran their businesses from their homes, the occupations of the eight participants were wide-ranging. Janet was a web designer who had teleworked for seven years, having lived and worked locally for twenty-seven years. Mike was a computer engineer who had teleworked for eight years in total, having moved to his current rural location around five years before as a life-style decision. Geoff was a multi-media consultant who had accompanied his wife on her job move to the area three years before and taken the opportunity to set up an independent business run from home. Colin was an architect who had spent eleven years working from home, while David had only worked from home for five months after leaving a veterinary practice to set up on his own as a consultant. Caroline had run a recruitment consultancy from home with her husband for the past four years and had recently taken on two staff, while Alan was a marketing consultant who again had made a life-style choice two years before to move to a rural area and work from home. Finally, Mark was a tax accountant who provided training as well as accountancy services, having run his business from home for the previous five years. The names of the interviewees have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Audit of the defining characteristics of teleworking

It is generally agreed that teleworkers work in locations remote from their employer or client, using computers and the internet for communication purposes (Ellison, 1999; Hardill and Green, 2003; Sullivan, 2003; Wilson and Greenhill, 2005). The participants for this study were therefore chosen because their lines of work and work addresses indicated that they were likely to show these key teleworker characteristics. To investigate whether these generally agreed teleworking criteria, along with other characteristics which appear in the literature, may be applied to our participants, we have focused on each of these in turn and used the experiences of the participants to assess their value.

Working location

Closely aligned to the characteristic of remoteness from clients, the location of the teleworker is also central to many definitions of the teleworker. While some researchers regard teleworkers as necessarily working from home (Gurstein, 2001), others agree that telework can include work in a variety of locations as long as it is remote from the client or employer (Sullivan, 2003). Clear and Dickson (2005) also point out that teleworking may also be hidden or casual, with workers completing tasks off-site which may have remained unfinished in the office. Hardill and Green (2003) acknowledge that there is a continuum from those teleworkers who work almost entirely from home to those who work occasionally from home but on the basis of the data collected for this study, we found it difficult to place most of the individual teleworkers in this study on this continuum with any consistency from week to week. Janet and Alan, for example worked almost totally in their homes, only rarely leaving them for work purposes:

'I very rarely meet clients...so it's quite an isolated existence really'

(Janet);

'I would spend certainly between five and seven hours a day...every day...except weekends' [working in the house] (Alan)

But even they admitted to occasionally meeting up with clients, perhaps to build trust: *'I'd never do a job for a client I hadn't met [as] it's always as well to know who you're dealing with'(Alan)* or just for convenience *'the local ones I might go and see them or they might pop in and see me' (Janet).*

Other participants spent from half a day a week to complete weeks working away from home in face to face meetings with their clients or work associates. Mark, for example, spent sustained periods at clients' premises delivering training as part of his work:

'I've got a training business which involves travelling around the country updating accountants on latest tax developments ...although the training business operates from home in that I generally write my training material and resource all the information to write the materials at home...'(Mark)

Mark's home / away balance varied seasonally though, with him having *'relatively quiet times of the year in July, August, January'*. Similarly, Colin also mentioned meeting clients face to face:

'between a half and one day a week could be spent surveying and meeting people, meeting clients and customers and looking at projects.' (Colin)

Caroline explained that she spent time away from home in discussion with clients: *'we actually go and visit them'* and interviewing people before registering them for employment *'we hire a room in the library or community*

centre'. Although David regarded home as his working base and used the internet every day, he also travelled extensively round the country advising pharmaceutical companies or lawyers, discussing animal welfare issues with colleagues, or giving lectures:

'I'm due to do a lecture tour that will take me around a lot of the south west and central England... so I do a fair amount of travelling as well as work from home. There's some of it I can't do from home, some of it I'm actually needed there, for example I can't be cross-examined over the phone by a court.'
(David)

On the basis of this evidence, it is questionable whether either remoteness of clients and employer or a fixed home location is a consistently useful element of a teleworking definition. The value of using these criteria as a defining characteristic of teleworking is also doubtful when the situation of traditional office-based workers operating in the same professions as those we interviewed are considered. The clients of an office-based tax accountant or an architect, for example, are unlikely to reside in the same building as their advisor, and they are likely to communicate with a similar mix of information technologies and face-to-face meetings. Yet, they would not be regarded as teleworkers. Similarly, although all of the participants worked *from* home, regarding home as their working base, and spent more time working there than perhaps an office-based worker would, the amount of time they spent literally working *at* home varied considerably, with consequent possible implications for blanket definitions.

The reduction of travel

Teleworking, sometimes alternatively called ‘telecommuting’, has been offered as a solution to the problems of traffic congestion and pollution (Baines, 2002; Pyöriä, 2003), with the assumption that travel will be reduced due to the eradication of commuting journeys. Wilson and Greenhill (2005) report that advocates of teleworking assume that this reduction in travelling will allow workers to spend more time at home. None of our participants journeyed regularly by car to a workplace every day. However, although Caroline commented: *‘well, personally I like the fact that I don’t have to commute’*, she did say that she spent around two days out a week seeing clients and applicants and while Colin asserted: *‘I prefer not commuting, certainly’*, he did admit to journeying between his two houses, which were around twenty miles apart, and working at both of them, as well as visiting sites and so on.

Almost all of the participants did travel to see clients at least once a week, while three of the sample spent a substantial amount of time on the road, despite seeing themselves as home-based workers. Mark, for example, explained that: *‘I just get fed up of travelling. I’ve done a lot of miles this week already and it gets very tiring.’* Mike also spent around seventy percent of his week out seeing clients, who could be located up to thirty miles away, while David was about to embark on a lecture tour which would take him around a lot of the south west and central England and asserted *‘I do a fair amount of travelling as well as work from home’*.

So again, the definitional aspect which assumes that teleworkers are replacing journeys to work with communication via computer is not confirmed by our participants’ working lives, despite them all still regarding their working

base as their home. For Janet and Alan it did appear that work-related travel was minimal, but the lack of travel to work did seem to be replaced to some extent by travel for shopping and other purposes, which commuters may combine with work-related travel, as Nilles (1996) concludes. The balance between workers who travel a lot for work and those who don't amongst our participants is, we suggest (although we admit we cannot confirm this as part of this study) perhaps little different from the balance to be found in any sample of workers between those who commute and those who live very close to their working locations and are able to walk to work rather than to drive.

The role of information communication technologies

Despite several of the teleworkers feeling the need to retain some face-to-face contact, all of our interviewees did also mention the key role of information communication technologies in their work, as suggested in several definitions (Baruch, 2001; Sullivan, 2003). Janet, for example, observed:

'...most of the things come by email, so I'm on the internet a lot to communicate with my clients...so I'm working in the virtual world rather than the real world most of the time'.

Similarly, Alan commented:

'the centre of the business is entirely the pc. Most of the thing is done by email...you can have real-time chats with the client and make amendments, hit the button and send it over to get it approved, which is great...It's almost like, if my computer's down, it's like being without a car. You're just not plugged into life you know'.

Colin confirmed that *'I found IT absolutely liberating because of the better, clearer communication with more people'* and Geoff asserted that his

work is *'totally'* dependent on the computer and internet. Caroline, Mark and Paul all explained that they are *'online all the time'*, although Caroline did say that *'a lot of what we do is on the telephone, the telephone starts ringing at 7 o'clock in the morning and never stops'* mainly due to her clients' reluctance to use email to book temporary staff.

It should be noted, though, that this heavy use of computers is not unique to teleworkers, as a visit to any large organisation's office would confirm. Its value as a definitional characteristic for teleworkers is therefore of little value. Although, information technology did appear to be integral to all of the participants' work, several teleworkers in our study also mentioned substantial parts of their jobs where it is not: Colin described site surveying and David still occasionally did hands-on clinical work, for example.

Teleworkers as knowledge workers

The European-wide SUSTEL (Sustainable Teleworking) project adds 'content' as an additional dimension to the teleworker definition, suggesting that only those individuals involved in knowledge-orientated tasks should be defined as teleworkers (Hopkinson et al, 2002). However, the term 'knowledge-work' has also been the subject of debate, with Pyöriä (2003) defining knowledge work as meeting three criteria: use of information technology, independent design of the job, and a college degree. Whilst all of our participants fulfil the first two criteria: all use information technology and all appear to control their own work as both Mark and David confirmed: *'I am completely my own boss as far as time management goes'* (David). However, Janet, Colin and Mike did not have degrees so three out of our eight teleworkers could, according to Pyöriä's criteria, not be considered to be knowledge workers and would not therefore,

according to Hopkinson et al, qualify to be defined as teleworkers. Conversely, other home-based workers may qualify as knowledge workers, according to Pyöriä's definition: craft workers selling on-line meet the first two criteria, and some may have a college degree. These workers would not generally be thought to be teleworkers, although they appear to qualify under certain definitions.

Knowledge workers are usually thought of as working with intangibles; however, from our sample of teleworkers, the architect (Colin) and the computer engineer (Mike) could both be said to be dealing with tangibles, thus indicating parallels with the craft worker. Non-teleworking office-based workers may also be involved in knowledge-orientated tasks, as well as using information technology and possibly directing their own work. Many also have degrees. It seems, therefore, that knowledge orientation of their work is also of little value in confirming the identification of a teleworker.

Work-life balance

Although not strictly a defining characteristic, work-life balance is often mentioned in relation to teleworking. Gurstein (2001) and Kurland and Bailey (1999) highlight the assumption that working from home allows a more advantageous work-life balance, although Gurstein does question whether this is actually the case. More radically, Tietze and Musson (2005) suggest that the boundaries and discourses of work and home blur when people telework: one of their participants, for example, spoke of doing his thinking work while gardening, while Wilson and Greenhill (2005) suggest that gendered identities and roles will be renegotiated due to the promised flexibility of telework. Although they found that working from home was not interruption-free, Tietze and Musson (2005, p. 1342) did find, however, that the teleworkers they

interviewed reported that they were able to carve out 'lazy time' to benefit themselves or their families, and that these 'snatched moments' were much appreciated.

Mark was among several of our participants who commented on this theme, highlighting his willingness to take on household tasks, as well as to take advantage of the flexibility of his working day:

'...when I'm at home I might do the washing, I might make the kids' tea, I might nip out and do some shopping. Then at the weekends, when most people would say that's leisure time as opposed to work time, I will still do little bits on Saturday and Sunday so there's no real...it's very difficult to see the cut-off between work and not work'.

Similarly, Caroline explained that:

'the disadvantages are that you don't just walk out at 5 o'clock and get on with your life; you just get drawn back in here because you know you've got things to do'.

Colin also commented that *'you're never really away from your desk'*, and David suggested that *'it requires quite an amount of self-discipline to ... make sure that you keep your work-life balance in perspective'*. Janet talked of drifting inside on a Sunday and *'somehow you find yourself sitting at your desk working'*.

Because the self-employed teleworker can directly link time spent at work to income, this issue of work-life balance is perhaps even more likely to be significant than it is to the teleworker who is employed by a company. Janet confirmed that *'because we're both [she and her husband, who also works from home] self-employed and not earning a huge amount of money, we do tend to*

work, probably much more than somebody in a job'. David also noted that because he is doing something he enjoys, as seemed to be the case with most of the participants, the temptation is to overdo it and spend too much time on his work.

Another potential stress of working at home was highlighted by Mike, who confirmed Tietze and Musson's (2005) observations on interruptions, when he complained that one drawback of his constant presence at home was having *'people turning up on the doorstep day and night'* because they know he is in.

All of the participants did claim that their work followed a very 'flexible pattern', which is sometimes thought to facilitate an improved work-life balance. Colin commented: *'I've got complete flexibility'*, although he attributed this freedom to being self-employed rather than specifically to working from home. Geoff also explained:

'it's about flexibility to manage your time, you know, you work on a 24 hour time scale and there's no such definement between work and non-work'.

There was considerable evidence that the flexibility of teleworking could be used to enhance out of work life, however. Geoff used this flexibility to keep his 'paid' working hours down to enable him to spend time on community activities, while Mark found it an advantage for his role as a school governor. Similarly Janet would occasionally take advantage of nice weather to take the dog for a walk, do some gardening, or visit the supermarket when it was less busy. However, at the other extreme, Caroline could sometimes be working from 7am to 10.30pm, leaving no time to spare for anything else, and Janet commented about how difficult it was to take time off, indicating that the work-life balance had perhaps been tipped more towards 'work' than the more

commonly approved of 'life'. However, even Caroline commented that *'it's fantastic that I can roll out of bed in the morning, even if it's seven o'clock, with my hair unkempt and my nightie on and make phone calls and nobody knows - as long as I keep the blinds closed'*.

It seems, therefore, that although teleworking was seen as flexible by the participants, it cannot necessarily be characterised as work-life balance enhancing as some of the definitions suggest. A beneficial work-life balance is therefore not particularly useful as a defining characteristic. In our participants' cases too, it also appeared that it was perhaps their self-employed status which was a major contribution to the potential flexibility rather than their teleworking status, leaving us doubtful if any progress at all would be made towards an enhanced work-life balance by teleworkers employed by companies.

Isolation

The isolation of teleworking, with its potential for limited face-to-face contact with colleagues, is one feature which is often seen as particular to this mode of working (Baruch, 2001; Wilson and Greenhill, 2005) and was commented on by Janet: *'it's quite an isolated existence really'*. However, other participants (Mark, Mike) spent a large proportion of their time out and about meeting clients as described above and Alan highlighted the potential of the internet as a communication tool:

'you could feel quite cut off I think round here in one sense if it wasn't for the net, knowing you can just go anywhere in the world you want'.

So perhaps this characteristic should not be seen as a vital component of a definition of teleworking either. Interestingly, the perception that views

isolation as a drawback may depend on the characteristics of the individual.

Janet asserted that she loved working from home but suggested:

'you've got to be the right kind of person to cope with it. I don't think everyone would like it because they'd just find it too quiet and I think a lot of people would be lonely'.

Conclusion

Characterising and defining teleworking is, it seems, becoming ever more difficult as technology, office working and home working develop and become entwined in new ways. As we have pointed out, all office-based work as well as a large proportion of so-called 'traditional' work make use of technology, whilst workers who appear at first glance and may even claim themselves to be home-based may in practice spend a large proportion of their time travelling and working away from home. We did not find it possible to link teleworking decisively to improved work-life balance, as is also often suggested in the literature: indeed it did sometimes seem to be detrimental to this in the experiences of our participants. What is clear from this research, however, is that it is difficult to confirm exactly who may be defined as a 'teleworker' using the range of definitions and characteristics in the recent literature, although we certainly agree with the literature's assertions that teleworking as a concept is complex.

Although our study was an exploratory one, using a small sample of self-employed teleworkers, the in-depth nature of the methodology did also allow us to emphasise Gurstein's (2001, p. 31) claims that 'in general, teleworkers cannot be treated as a single group'. Further similar research with other types of teleworker, such as those employed by companies, rather than

self-employed teleworkers as in our sample, as well as a comparison with the experiences of office-based workers is recommended to confirm and extend our conclusions. Part-time as well as full-time teleworkers could also be considered for study to aid definition.

In our opinion, based on our data, the most useful and consistent distinguishing feature of teleworking is the transfer of the locational anchor of working life from a traditional office base to a home base, a characteristic which was confirmed by all of our participants. If the home as working anchor is assumed as given, it would then be possible to usefully explore related issues such as work-life balance, isolation and household roles. We also recommend a focus on teleworkers whose anchor is always 'home' rather than including 'partial teleworkers' who split their time between home and a traditional office, if useful conclusions are to be reached. Indeed, we would question whether there is any value in labelling part-time or mobile teleworkers with the term 'teleworkers' at all.

In the light of these recommendations, we therefore suggest that a new term of 'home-anchored worker', as opposed to 'office-anchored worker', could be more valuable than the catch-all term of 'teleworker'. This differs slightly from Felstead and Jewson's (2000) 'home-located producers' and from Baruch's (2000) 'home-workers', by allowing for the possibility of roaming beyond the home in pursuit of work, whilst still seeing the home as the working base.

Although we stress that this was a small-scale exploratory study, focusing on self-employed teleworkers only, we believe that the data is illuminating and would benefit from further replication. In summary, rather than

specifying which particular category of teleworkers is being studied, as Sullivan (2003) and Haddon and Brynin (2005) suggest, we recommend that researchers need in future to dispense with the term teleworker altogether due to its problematic definition. We also offer the new term of 'home-anchored worker' as a more useful and less complex replacement for 'teleworker'.

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