

How Gender Dynamics Affect Teleworkers' Performance in Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

eHomemakers (<http://www.ehomemakers.net>), also known as Mothers for Mothers when it was first formed in 1998 in Malaysia, is a network of mothers and working-at-home persons from multiethnic communities. They are of various ages and are involved in networking activities to develop and promote the concept of working at home. The network believes that through ICT, homemakers, especially mothers, can earn an income without having to leave their homes or sacrifice their family responsibilities in the Malaysian social context. ICTs allow women to balance home and work life, thus enabling them to have the best of both worlds (Yip, 2000). In 2003, eHomemakers was a testing partner of the Association of Progressive Communications' (APC, n.d.) worldwide Gender Evaluation Methodology, and an evaluation plan titled "How Gender Dynamics Affect Teleworkers' Performance in Malaysia" was written.

eHomemakers aims to use the evaluation results to promote the creation of telecommuting opportunities and the establishment of virtual offices to the Malaysian government and the corporate sector. The findings are especially valuable to organisations that have tried telecommuting unsuccessfully. They also serve as a performance guide for teleworkers and would-be teleworkers who juggle child care, household chores, and paid work at the same time. The study was also used as a guide for eHomemakers to launch a special national campaign to advocate the promotion of teleworking for women.

BACKGROUND

Objectives of the Study

The main objective was to explore how women's family lives and home situations affect teleworking and work performance. The evaluation team conducted group discussions and interviews to identify the following:

1. Barriers and challenges faced by women who work from home
2. Ways in which working from home has impacted the women's lives and their families
3. Optimum home-office situations of a group of virtual office members
4. Characteristics and skills needed by a woman to be able to benefit fully from working from home

Research Questions Analysed

The following research questions were analysed.

1. How ICTs and gender issues affect telecommuting
2. How (if at all) ICT can affect the efficiency and productivity of a teleworker
3. How a teleworker can use ICT as a tool to balance home life with work life, and still be efficient and productive in her work performance
4. What conditions enable women to be efficient teleworkers

Methodology

The study took 4 months to complete and involved 70 respondents. The study team used a triangular methodology: home visits, focus-group discussions (FGDs), and a questionnaire survey. Respondents of the study included members of eHomemakers' virtual team (VT), staff members who worked from home, and eHomemakers members. The selection of respondents was made based on one key criterion: They were mothers who have been multitasking and working at home for less than 3 years. The justification for the criterion is that mothers who have just become teleworkers need time to adjust to their new lifestyle and so they face more barriers and challenges than mothers who have worked at home for more than 3 years. Except for the VT members who had fixed fees per month, all respondents worked on a freelance basis with their home-based consultancies against the backdrop of an unsupportive social and business environment.

Only two fathers who telework were included in the study as a control as it is not socially acceptable still, for men and women, to telework.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Reasons for Getting into Telework

All the VT members had experienced working from a physical office. The majority of the women gave up their jobs to become mothers, full-time homemakers, or home-based workers. A few got into home-based work as a result of retrenchment. Most were married while one was a single mother.

A similar pattern is reported by Amyot (1997) for a Canadian survey. The respondents, predominantly women, chose teleworking as an alternative to working full time in a regular office. Edwards and Field-Hendrey (2002) found that teleworking was a viable alternative because of the greater flexibility it afforded to people who have responsibilities at home like caring for children, or aged or disabled persons.

Benefits of Teleworking

All the respondents agreed that the biggest benefit was flexible time management. The female respon-

dents made it clear that their first priority is their families and that most of them had left their former careers to raise their children.

Some of the women mentioned an increased sense of confidence that comes from having their own income and not relying on their husbands for their expenses. They also emphasised that they enjoyed being involved in something outside the realm of their husbands and children. They felt that it is important for women to have interests beyond the home and that teleworking improves their overall relationship with their husbands and children. Their ICT skills had also greatly improved because, unlike in the office, they had to learn how to troubleshoot minor computer problems on their own.

One respondent related how she was able to negotiate with her husband to start taking on some of the household tasks. Prior to her home-based business career, she was expected to do everything at home even though she was working full time outside while her husband claimed he was too tired from work to help out at home. Now, she used the same reason (being too tired because she is working) to get her husband to do some of the tasks himself.

Other benefits cited include not having to deal with traffic jams, saving time, not having to deal with office politics, and not having to worry about office wardrobe and how you look.

Other studies have also cited the advantages of teleworking. They range from flexibility in working hours to better quality of life and increased job satisfaction (Abu Hassan Asaari & Karia, 2001), as well as a lifestyle that allows workers to concentrate on the household and thus combine paid and unpaid work in the same workplace (Osnowitz, 2005).

Factors that Affect Home-Based Work

Perception of Home-Based Work

One of the barriers encountered was the negative perception about home-based work by family members and peers. Home-based work is often not considered a real job, and consequently, family members often interrupted the respondents' work and assumed that they were available for a chat, to run errands, or to do household work because they are home based.

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