Gender and Telework in Information Technology[1]

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Information technology (IT) work is often distributed geographically through practices such as teleworking. Telework lends itself well to IT workers because they work easily with information technology, which is required for telework, and because many IT jobs consist of knowledge work—the creation and analysis of symbols and ideas—which may be done anywhere and anytime.

Advances in information technology make distributed work possible. Globalization and the need for organization flexibility make distributed work necessary (Davis, 1995). Organizations distribute work to take advantage of scarce and inexpensive talent, enhance innovation and product design, and to reduce real estate costs, development time, and labor costs. Workers choose distributed work to balance work and life demands, reduce commuting time, accommodate disabilities, and take advantage of distant opportunities. Telework, a form of distributed work first described by Nilles (1975), has established itself throughout the United States. We discuss telework trends and provide some data describing teleworkers in IT professions in the United States.

Four forms of telework are commonly used (see Key Terms; Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Kurland & Bailey, 1999). Most teleworkers use a combination of these forms, although home-based telework is most prevalent (Davis & Polonko, 2001). Each form of telework is practiced for different reasons and produces different work experiences and outcomes (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Davis & Polonko, 2003; Helling, 2000).

A national survey of telework practices in the United States was conducted in 2001 under sponsorship of the International Telework Association and Council (ITAC) and AT&T (Davis & Polonko, 2001). The sample was stratified to represent all U.S. households and was diverse with respect to gender, ethnicity, occupation, organization size, and industry. Results showed that there are approximately twenty-eight million teleworkers in the U.S. Compared to nonteleworkers, teleworkers are significantly more likely to be from the Northeast and West, male (54% of teleworkers), have higher education and income, work in professional/managerial occupations, work in industries such as construction, professional/scientific/technical services, health care/social assistance, and work in very small and very large organizations. There were no significant differences in telework practice for marital status, race/ethnicity, and age.

Davis and Polonko (2001) report several findings concerning telework and its impact on ability to balance work and family demands that are relevant to IT professionals. Teleworkers, especially those who work at home, are more likely than nonteleworkers to report working longer hours and that the demands of their personal life take time away from their work. They also report more difficulty relaxing at home when doing non-work related activities. However, teleworkers are also more likely to state that their family members and friends report less unhappiness with the amount of time they spend working at home, report that their home life is less likely to prevent them from working the amount of time they want to work at home, and that working at

home interferes less with other activities in their personal life. These differences suggest that teleworkers may be better able to manage the time they spend working at home compared to nonteleworkers. While teleworkers may experience some personal costs, such as difficulty relaxing, they experience significant benefits compared to nonteleworkers in terms of less interference between work and family roles. Women may particularly benefit from telework because they are often responsible for childcare.

Research examining women teleworkers shows mixed benefits. Women teleworkers may experience less stress because they have more control over their time, do less commuting, experience fewer distractions, and are available to their families during the day (Kraut, 1988; Olson & Primps, 1984). On the other hand, women teleworkers may also experience greater stress due to reduced separation between work and family obligations resulting from bringing the workplace into the home (Olson & Primps, 1984). All teleworkers report working more hours (Davis & Polonko, 2001; Mirchandani, 1998).

Men and women adapt differently to work at home. For example, the time saved by reduced commuting gets used differently; women tend to use this time to do household chores, whereas men use this time to do more job-related work (Steward, 2000). Both men and women maintain a separation between work and family, but they do so for different reasons. Mirchandani (1999) reports that most women state that they separate work and family to reduce the stress of simultaneously attending to work and family obligations, whereas no men report such reasoning. She adds, "For women, the home is not a place of nonwork, but rather another workplace" (p. 92). Women teleworkers, especially those with children, may experience more difficulty in balancing work and family life than men (and women without children). Yet women claim to choose to telework as a means for balancing work and family obligations (Beasley, Lomo-David, & Seubert, 2001).

TELEWORK IN IT ORGANIZATIONS

Telework may be easier for IT workers due to the knowledge content of their work and their facility with using technology, although research results are mixed. A study of IBM teleworkers and nonteleworkers showed no difference in work family balance (Hill, Hawkins, & Miller, 1996; Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1999). In participant interviews, many claimed that teleworking helped them fulfill family obligations and strengthen family relationships, whereas others felt that teleworking blurred the boundary between work and family life and therefore made it more difficult to balance work and family demands.

Telework affects different aspects of work-family conflict. Selgrade and Davis (2005) studied a sample of teleworkers that included IT workers as well as workers from other professions from eleven organizations throughout the United States. They found that the effects of work interfering with family (WIF) were different than the effects of family interfering with work (FIW). Results showed that WIF, but not FIW, was negatively related to telework satisfaction and organization commitment and positively related to turnover intentions. Moreover, WIF increased with telework duration, whereas FIW increased with the number of children (Selgrade, 2004).

We report the following findings from a study of IT workers in eleven organizations. Major, Davis, Sanchez-Hucles, Germano, and Mann (2006) describe the research in more detail. We report here differences between IT teleworkers and nonteleworkers. All differences are statistically significant except where noted.

Forms of Telework

We found that 39.8% of IT workers report teleworking (less than one day per week to five days per week), mostly from home. Of those teleworkers who reported working at home, the majority of them do so less than one day per week (78.3%), whereas 21.7% report working from home one day per week or more. Of those teleworkers who reported working at telework centers or satellite offices, the majority of them do this less than one day per week (59.1%), whereas the remainder (40.9%) report teleworking one day per week or more. Finally, of those teleworkers who reported working on the road, 47.2% report doing this one day per week or more.

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