Work–life Balance and Working from Home

T r a c e y   C r o s b i e   a n d   J e a n n e   M o o r e[1]

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In recent years, there has been increasing focus on the question of how to balance work and life commitments in both academic and political debates. Homeworking is one initiative that has been promoted as a way of improving the work–life balance. This paper examines the experience of homeworking drawing on a recently completed ESRC study on homeworkers. Using the data from 45 interviews and 3 focus groups with homeworkers from different socio-economic backgrounds, it explores the question of whether working (or not) from home improves people's capacity to balance their work and life commitments.

Introduction

In recent years a new discourse surrounding the work–life balance has emerged replacing family friendly policies (Bryson *et al.*, 2000; DTI, 2001a, 2002; Duncan, 2002; Dean, 2002; Hogarth *et al.*, 2001; Williams, 2000). According to the DTI

> regardless of age, race or gender, everyone can find a rhythm to help them combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations, and the work–life balance involves adjusting working patterns in ways which allow people to achieve this rhythm. (DTI, 2002)

The government has introduced funding for companies wishing to explore work–life balance initiatives and recent legislation to facilitate flexible working for parents with children under the age of six, on top of the family friendly policies introduced in the 1999 Employment Relations Act.

One of the ways in which the government suggests that a balance between work and other life commitments might be achieved is by working from home (DTI, 2001a, 2002.) This forms part of a wider trend in which homeworking is presented as an antidote to the stresses of working life (Aldrich, 1982; Bulos and Chaker, 1991; Galinsky *et al.*, 1993; Mahfood, 1992; Qvortrup, 1992; Hutchinson and Brewster, 1994; Duxbury *et al.*, 1998; Hill *et al.*, 1996; Mirchandani, 1998; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). However, homeworking is being promoted in this way without a full examination of its value or limitation as a contributor to the work–life balance.

Homeworking research

Homeworking is an increasing phenomena, between 1981 and 1998 the number of people in the UK working mainly from home almost doubled rising from 345,920 to 680,612 (Felstead and Jewson, 2000). More than a quarter of Britain's labour force are reported to work at least part of the time from home (Labour Force Survey, 2001). This is predicted to rise to at least a third of the workforce by 2006 (Henley Centre, 1998).

There is however a digital divide (Loader, 1998) which has extended to teleworking/ homeworking (Dwelly, 2002; Labour Force Survey, 2001). However traditional forms of homeworking continue to be a low paid activity for millions in the UK (National Group on Homeworking, 2002).

There are many definitions of homeworking (Felstead and Jewson, 2000), but our research broadly defined it as any paid work that is carried out primarily from home (at least 20 hours per week). This broad banner therefore includes those working at home (e.g. employees) or working from home (e.g. self-employed) (Felstead and Jewson, 2000). This approach allowed for a diversity of experience in homeworkers across the socio-economic spectrum. It therefore moves beyond much of the research in this area that tends to lend legitimacy to the experiences of one section of the homeworking population by examining homogeneous samples of homeworkers.[2]

Many researchers acknowledge the differentiated nature of homeworking. Home-workers are diverse in demographic terms and in relation to gender, skills and income. In addition not all homeworkers successfully negotiate the social, personal, temporal and physical transitions between the boundaries of home and work (Nippert-Eng, 1996). There are potential difficulties and tensions that come with homeworking and teleworking (Bussing, 1998; Gurstein, 1991; Gurstein, 2001; Haddon, 1998; Huws, 1994; Moran, 1993). Homeworking can increase the permeability of the boundary between work and family domains, causing attempts to juggle work and family schedules to become more difficult (Bulos and Chaker, 1995; Olson and Primps, 1984; Crossen, 1990; Foegen, 1993; Gottlieb *et al.*, 1998; Madigan *et al.*, 1990; Royal College of Art, 1999; Sullivan, 2000).

Defining work–life balance

The pursuit of a balance between work and the rest of our daily lives is a fairly recent con-cern. It has emerged amid growing concerns over contemporary demographic develop-ments that are bringing about dramatic changes in the gender and age of the work force (European Commission, 2002; Labour Market Trends, 2001) and increased concerns within the UK in particular over its long working hours culture (Dean, 2002; Hyman *et al.*, 2002). These developments have accelerated concerns over health and fitness, occupational stress and the difficulties in combining work and childcare (DTI, 2001b).

The trends toward flexible working patterns are also influenced by technological developments whereby business can be conducted away from the specified office environment and often at considerably lower financial costs, making working at 3am and on holiday de riguer (*The Observer*, 2002).

There is a financial incentive to encourage flexible working which has been explicit in any material aimed at the commercial or public sector but this remains hidden where the benefits are being sold to employees and workers in general.[3] It is important therefore to challenge the current view that that their are only positive benefits to be gained by pursuing the work–life balance (Hyman *et al.*, 2002).

Combined with the recent interest in flexible working patterns has been an increasing focus on the home environment as a place where we work, live, shop and seek entertain-ment (Henley Centre, 1998; Moore, 2000). This shift to combine work and life more effectively is part of a cyclical trend which predates the industrial revolution whereby home and work were not viewed as separate aspects of life spatially or conceptually. Recent work has suggested that the integration or separation of work and home spheres

in contemporary western societies is determined by the ways in which people negotiate the boundary between the two and is in this sense a matter of individual preference (Nippert-Eng, 1996). This would seem to suggest that the issue of work–life balance is a subjective matter.

Government documents offer little explanation or detail of what the work–life balance actually entails. As pointed out by Guest (2001: 4) this is not unusual as

> [d]ebates about work–life balance often occur without any clear and consistent definition of what we mean by work–life balance.

However there have been numerous attempts to operationalise the concept. This includes both subjective and objective approaches; however the emphasis within research in this area is on the latter (Guest, 2001; Hyman *et al.*, 2002). The 2003 European working time directive defines 48 working hours a week as an appropriate maximum. The 'objective' definition implied by this is that those who regularly work more than 48 hours a week will have an imbalance between work and the rest of their life (Guest, 2001). A more subjective approach would be when there was a perceived balance between work and other life responsibilities. Clark (2000: 750) defines balance as 'satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict'.

Most of the work in this area makes a simplistic distinction between home life and work–life and does not differentiate between different classifications of responsibilities within each sphere. Williams (2000) suggests that we can map people's work–life needs within three different but connected areas of their lives. First, there is personal time and space: what do we need for the care of self and maintenance of body, mind and soul. Second, care time and space: what do we need to care properly for others. And thirdly there is work time and space: what do we need to enable us to gain economic self-sufficiency. According to Williams (2000) a balance between work and daily life could be said to be achieved when each of these areas are balanced together.

Working from home and work–life balance: in harmony or out of tune?

In this paper we draw on the data from 45 interviews and three focus groups carried out between December 2001 and June 2002 as part of a study funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Seventy per cent of those who took part in the interviews and focus groups were female.[4] All of those selected to take part in the focus groups and interviews carried out paid work at home for 20 hours or more per week and had done so for over a year. Nearly all lived with a partner and or children. Of those who took part in the interviews and focus groups 22 worked in professional occupations (e.g. designers and managers), 20 worked in semiskilled occupations (e.g. typists and sewing machinists) and 19 worked in unskilled occupations (e.g. tight packers). The focus on each of these occupational types is supported by the findings of earlier work (Phizacklea and Wolkowitz, 1995).

All but six of the interviews took place in the participants' homes, while the focus groups discussions were held in surroundings familiar to the participants. The interviews were semi-structured and lasted an hour, on average. The focus groups' schedules were designed around similar questions to those used in the interviews and lasted between one and a half and two and a half hours. A thematic approach was used to analyse the material with the support of NUD*IST software.[5]

When selecting individuals to be interviewed or to take part in the group discussions, three types of workers were targeted: professional workers (e.g. designers, managers) semi-skilled (typists, sewing machinists) and unskilled (e.g. assembly piece work).[6] The focus on each of these types is supported by the findings of Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995) who demonstrated the diversity of experience between low-skilled and high-skilled homework. Of those who participated in interviews or focus groups, 19 worked in unskilled or semi-skilled occupations, 20 worked in skilled occupations and 22 worked in professional occupations. While every effort was made to encourage men to take part in the research the numbers of men (17) and women (44) that took part in focus groups and interviews offer further evidence that there are more women than men working from home in general terms.

Differences and experiences: homeworkers' lives

The participants in this research shared some of the benefits and difficulties in bringing work inside the home. A key theme, which emerged from the interview and focus group data, was that there were common supports and barriers to successful homeworking across the sample. For every positive support, there was a set of negative barriers. However for the most part the difference in experience was due to differing skill levels, income or space levels, as well as gender.[7] This support and barrier theme is organised into three sections to illustrate each of Williams' areas of life necessary for work–life balance. The differences and shared experiences across the sample are highlighted.

Personal time and space

There are personal and psychological consequences of home-based work (Ahrentzen, 1992; Gurstein, 1991) which include personality as well as developed strategies for working from home (Anderson, 1998; Gurstein, 1991; Lamond, 2000). The current study found that many of those who took part in the research had developed numerous strategies for coping with motivation isolation and stress. These included: developing support networks with colleagues; setting personal targets for the completion of work; making appointments to socialise with friends or relatives; taking part in regular social activities outside of the home and developing daily and/or weekly work timetables or schedules. However many found there were personal implications of homeworking through either reduced social contact, loneliness, lack of self esteem and motivation. A professional mother employed by an international organisation said: 'It's easy to sit in your office and be de-motivated and have no one there to gee you up and that kind of thing' (Female executive: Interview 22).

Personal time became fragmented for some homeworkers. During a discussion group with five Asian women who worked as machinists, one the women asked her colleagues 'When you work outside of the home you come home to relax. Where do you go when you want to relax when you work at home?' Their reply to this was laughter and calls of 'Nowhere. Nowhere at all' (Female sewing machinist: Focus Group 1). However, others found that they had more personal time when working from home. In the main part those with more personal time tended to be either professional men or professional women without young children.

Much of the research on homeworking has found that homeworking is diversified by gender (Olson and Primps, 1984; Gurstein, 1991; Gunnarsson and Huws, 1997).[8] The indication from the current study is that because men define themselves primarily as wage earners, they have fewer personal conflicts when combining home and work than women. However, traditional male homeworkers suffer increased tensions because they tend to earn very little. This stratification of gender differences according to occupation was also found amongst women. Professional women suffered the most personal conflict between their roles as homemakers and workers, as they tended to see these roles as equal. This role conflict was most problematic for professional mothers with young children. Traditional female homeworkers on the other hand tended to define themselves primarily as homemakers and carers and therefor found prioritising their roles as mothers and workers much less problematic.

There were also other differences between the self-perception of traditional and professional homeworkers that were not differentiated by gender. Most of those in traditional homeworking occupations said that homeworking needed no special skills. Those in professional homeworking occupations on the other hand were much more likely to value their abilities to motivate themselves to organize their work loads and their abilities to cope with the blurring of the boundaries between their work lives and their home lives. A professional woman when asked if they thought everyone was suited to homeworking said: 'I would very much doubt it. I think you have to have fairly robust sense of yourself and what you're doing' (Female organisational consultant: Interview 42). A female traditional homeworker replied to the same question 'I wasn't trained to do anything because I stayed at home to look after my family and I think I lacked confidence back then and now it is too late to do anything else' (Female audio typist: Interview 5).

Care time and space

Some advantages of homeworking recently cited include familiarity and comfort, flexibility, self management, quiet and working undisturbed, no travel, being with the children (Daniels *et al.*, 2000; Royal College of Art, 1999). All of these were echoed by our sample. This study found that most homeworkers felt that homeworking afforded them some level of flexibility in how they used their time, which allowed them to balance the responsibilities of their paid work with their responsibilities of care for others. The responsibilities homeworkers said they could manage more easily included the care of spouses, children, older people or disabled relatives as well household tasks, such as cleaning, washing, shopping, gardening and paying bills. However, there are tensions inherent in these advantages, as being with the children does not support working undisturbed. Furthermore, traditional homeworkers, doing low-skilled work for low pay, tended to mind their children while they were working, in contrast to most professional homeworkers.

Those with children over the age of 12 gave very positive accounts of how working at home improved their relationships with their children and their ability to care for them. One of the professional mothers interviewed said that despite working longer hours she spent more time with her children. 'I tend to play more with the kids, whether it's because I'm here and they're in the house, and I feel guilty because I'm not with them. So I do think although I work longer hours I spend more time with them' (Female office administrator: Interview 35).

Different ethnic groups would seem to have particular homeworking practices. Asian women in the focus group and interview sample reported the strength of their family support structures which allowed them to combine paid work with domestic work. For example a young mother was able to work and look after her baby at the same time because she lived with her mother in law. She said: 'The baby needs me sometimes. If he is being really difficult my mother in law looks after him for a little time' (Female sewing machinist: Interview 11). However, many commented on the lack of differentiation between their paid work and domestic chores, highlighting the cultural differences in the distinction between home and work (Nippert-Eng, 1996).

Work time and space

Earlier research has shown that support and tension within the homeworking experience are shaped by the use and sharing of spatial resources (Bulos and Chaker, 1991 and 1995; Ahrentzen, 1990; Gurstein, 1991). The current study found that having a dedicated workspace was emphasised as a necessity by many of the professional homeworkers, whereas homeworkers in traditional homeworking occupations viewed it as desirable rather than essential. Some homeworkers moved their offices to an outside shed or to the attic to try and increase the boundary between home and work. For others the intrusion of public working life through phone calls and post created tensions with others in the family. For some especially those in traditional homeworking many of the tensions within the homeworking experience were related to a lack of space. For example when asked if the building he lived in felt like home a young father replied: 'Sometimes I feel like throwing all my work things out of the window. When the room is full of cartons and work things it is not my home it is my factory but my family have to live in my factory' (Male electrical assembly worker: Interview 6).

Many homeworkers said that they had problems with the amount of time they spent on their paid work. These problems included working longer hours than they are paid for and working longer hours than someone who did a similar job to them outside of the home. This tendency to work long hours caused problems in people's family relationships. Almost half of those interviewed said that their partners/spouses complained because they worked too much. The reasons given by traditional and professional homeworkers for working long hours reflected the differentiation in their incomes. Many of those in traditional homeworking occupations found that they had to work very long hours due to their low rates of pay. Professional homeworkers gave other reasons for the extra time they devoted to work, such as professional pride, they were starting their own business, or they felt their job was a vocation.

> What I try to do is, is try to make a distinction between work days and non-work days . . . If I don't make that distinction . . . I'll be back to doing a 40/50 hour week and I'll just be getting paid for 30 hour week. (Female policy officer: Interview 18)

How 'balanced' is homeworking?

Applying Williams' broad framework to the experience of homeworkers has allowed us to explore different aspects of daily life with regard to time and space. Williams' framework is useful as an objective lens with which to view working from home and other flexible

working practices. However in doing so, two issues emerge. First, as Williams would no doubt agree, understanding home, work and family life in terms of these three areas alone does not reveal how balanced they are for the people concerned. The homeworkers in our sample reported mixed feelings about working from home, representing the practice as a double-edged sword (see also Tietze, 2002). Williams' model, although allowing for increased focus on different aspects of home and work, does not offer us a way of evaluating their impact, assessing which elements feel more pressurising or liberating, regardless of how they seem to outsiders looking in. Objective criteria will always be inadequate in isolation.

Secondly, exploring the experiences of even a small number of participants, in this case homeworkers, leads to greater insight as to the tensions and differences among them, than to an overall conclusion about work–life balance. In this way, this paper suggests that adopting a model such as that proposed by Williams allows the work–life balance to be evaluated and monitored for specific groups of people. Home-based work in itself does not facilitate the breakdown of traditional gender roles (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001: 141) nor does it smooth out the inequalities that education and income bring. As Phillips *et al*. (2002) recently argued a 'one size fits all' policy on flexible working is inappropriate. The model does not take into account the expectations, motivations and experiences of homeworkers which shape their overall satisfaction with homeworking. Our experiential approach would suggest there is further merit in exploring the work–life balance from the perspective of those trying to work flexibly, as important factors such as gender, skills and income shape the whole experience of working life (LaValle, 2002). In particular the inequality that underpins homeworkers needs to be taken into account.

Furthermore, home life is not necessarily rosy for all, and the home, despite its continued stereotypical representation as our castle, safe haven and respite, is fraught with tensions for many (Moore, 2000). Until the work–life balance debate includes a realistic appraisal of home life, acknowledging inherent tensions, it will remain generic and removed from most people's experience.

In conclusion, the current emphasis on work–life balance should be welcomed, as for those companies which take it seriously, it offers the potential for greater flexibility and choice for a broad range of workers. Little progress can be made in the development of policy in this area if the term remains ambiguous and ill-defined. However a more cautious approach to homeworking would be wise given that so little is known about its effects on home and family life. As Dwelly and Bennion (2003) have recently concluded, many organisations are considering adopting homeworking policies, but there is some uncertainty as to how to proceed and a lack of agreed guidelines. Creating a balance between work and home life is certainly a goal worth pursuing. However for many homeworkers this harmony is out of reach due to the poor pay and long hours that sewing, packing and assembling outwork involves. There are many difficulties remaining in the enforcement of the minimum wage for homeworkers which merits additional effort.

For professional women, especially those with small children, the problem is more personal in nature. One suggestion is to offer semi-career breaks, where those with young children are offered part-time employment while they prioritize caring for their children. If the same type of semi-career break was offered to mothers and fathers, this might help in some small way to closing the gender divisions in childcare and therefore contribute to a shift in the work–life balance for many. However, as research in Sweden suggests, there are many factors which shape the uptake levels of available parental leave, including

individual attitudes, family negotiations as well as workplace culture (Haas, Allard and Hwang, 2002). This would suggest that one direction for future research is the way the work–life balance is negotiated within the family (cf. Jarvis, 1999).

Finally, homeworking is not the panacea for modern working life (Moore and Crosbie, 2002; *The Independent on Sunday*, 2003). Those who are thinking of working from home should give careful consideration to their personality, skills and aspirations. For example, those who have a tendency to work long hours outside of the home, might find that home life is even further marginalised by work life. Due to the size of our sample many of the conclusions drawn in this paper have to be tentative in nature. If we are to fully understand the effects of homeworking on home and family life more research is needed from the perspective of homeworkers.

Notes

1 We are grateful to the Economic and Social Research Council (R000223592) for funding this research.

2 For example see Duxbury *et al*., 1998.

3 It is questionable that the new working arrangements introduced by organisations in recent years are in the interests of employees (see Purcell *et al*., 1999).

4 With efforts made to include male homeworkers this proportion offers further evidence to suggest that more women than men do paid work from home (Felstead *et al*., 1996, Felstead and Jewson, 2000).

5 This was NUD*IST software by QSR International Pty Ltd., a qualitative data analysis software package designed for handling non-numerical unstructured data by techniques of indexing, searching and theorizing.

6 The difficulties involved in gaining access to homeworkers in traditional occupations are well documented (Felstead and Jewson, 2000). Here let it suffice to say that, without the help of the National Group on Homeworking and others working in the community, it would have been impossible to conduct this research.

7 On the whole traditional homeworkers have what are conventionally described as skilled semi-skilled or unskilled occupations which are predominantly low discretion forms of employment in that they are predictable, routine, standardised and rule dominated (Felstead and Jewson, 2000). Professional homeworkers, on the other hand, have high discretion professional or managerial occupations that tend to be variable, complex and choice dominated forms of employment (Felstead and Jewson, 2000).

8 A recent survey by the Department for Education and Employment suggests that men are increasingly asking to work from home (*Observer*, 19 November 2000).

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