The stickiness of the job? The impact of flexible working

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For her MA dissertation in Human Resource Management at UWE, Bristol, Philippa Bolton explored the introduction of Smarter Working at a telecommunications company based in the South West. Smarter Working is a bespoke, total flexibility policy that allows its employees to work when and where they work best.

Background

Employees are frequently pushing for increased autonomy and agility in order to achieve an adequate work-life balance and decentralised working arrangements, such as working from home, are one way of achieving this (FOWI, 2012). Although the literature frequently documents the benefits of flexible working (Perez *et al.*, 2002), a paradox exists; those who struggle to separate their work and home lives may also fall victim to work intensification, displaying decreased productivity due to poor quality recuperation (Noonan and Glass, 2012).

This phenomenon is commonly explained using boundary theory (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2006). High integrators struggle to distinguish between what belongs to home or work, and where and when they are engaged. High segmentors, on the other hand, treat work and non-work domains as separate entities, and may suffer fewer negative ramifications.

Interestingly, previous research has shown that although remote working can provide flexibility for both men and women, women seem to struggle more in managing the work-home interface (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001). Despite the changing division of domestic labour in contemporary society, residual gender norms may limit the positive effects for women due to the presence of the 'double shift'; the management of a woman's dual role as a domestic worker and a mother (Wheatley, 2012).

The research

The telecommunications company at the heart of this study strives to achieve 'simply smarter communication'; better business communication regardless of where professionals are working. Remote working forms the structural backbone of this Smarter Working policy. Enhancing the agility of employees means that the company is better able to respond to customers in different time zones, and accommodate working parents. Since the introduction of Smarter Working in 2011, the company reports that levels of engagement have risen (Clapperton and Vanhoutte, 2014). Moreover, results of a company survey demonstrated that Smarter Working increases perceived levels of productivity and job control, and reduces perceived stress.

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Although this survey documented the benefits of Smarter Working, the study also suggested that working in this way can extend working hours. The research upon which this MA dissertation is based therefore aimed to explore how far Smarter Working has led to the intensification and extensification of work, and the impact that this has on work-life balance across both genders, and those with caregiving responsibilities. Nine employees completed 24-hour time-use diaries across two Smarter Working days. The same nine respondents and an additional nine employees also participated in semi-structured interviews to capture rich data on the impact of Smarter Working.

Time-use diaries were analysed using content analysis in order to identify common patterns in employees' routines. Decontextualised category codes were produced: core hours work, non-core hours work, lunch breaks, social activities, leisure activities, family activities, caregiving activities, and domestic activities. Semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis; this allowed a comparison between participants' perspectives of Smarter Working with records of actual behaviour documented in diaries.

Results

Work extensification

Diary findings revealed that employees work between 7-11 hours per day, and working time ranged from 07:00-23:45. Seven employees reported work extending beyond the core working hours (before 09:00 and after 17:00). During the evenings, it was common for associates to combine work and family activities such as checking e-mails and watching the television. Interview data revealed that working outside of the core hours was an accepted part of the working day as employees remained mindful of US-related business needs. Narratives also revealed that the extensification of work was also associated with weekend work. Although this was not encouraged, seventeen out of eighteen interviewees reported working at the weekend.

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Evidence of work extensification supports existing literature documenting that remote working is likely to encourage overtime work, during non-traditional work hours (Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2013). Normalised adaptation of working time around US business needs appears to contribute significantly towards the extensification of work. Evidence of Smarter Workers elongating their hours may indicate limited respite from work (Grant *et al.*, 2013), although it appears that in some cases negative ramifications may be ignored or go unnoticed.

Intensification

Diary findings suggest that Smarter Working can lead to the intensification of work. Diaries revealed that over half of the respondents worked in 3-4 hour blocks without breaks. Despite diarised evidence of heightened work intensity, interview narratives initially revealed that associates perceived remote working to be of a similar or lesser intensity as office-based working. Upon deeper reflection, however, associates re-assessed their initial perceptions and concluded that home working does indeed lend itself to prolonged periods of concentration

without breaks, although this did not hamper feelings of satisfaction with heightened levels of autonomy. This could be attributed to the presence of a 'social contagion effect' (Macky and Boxall, 2008). Heightened work effort could become the norm in the presence of amplified work-effort expectations.

Boundary Management

Dissonance between perceptions of boundary management strategies and the reality of actual behaviours was startling. Diary data revealed integrating behaviour, which was characterised by a spillover of home and work activity during core and non-core working hours. Findings are congruent with evidence documenting the ability of remote workers to fit work with private life (Rothbard *et al.*, 2005). However, in the majority of cases diary data revealed evidence of negative work-home spillover. Over half of the respondents recorded checking for urgent e-mails during the evenings, suggesting spillover into time for recuperation.

Interview narratives once again revealed initial dissonance between perceptions and actual behaviours. Despite diarised evidence of negative spillover, the majority of associates reported their ability to keep their work and home lives separate, consistent with evidence suggesting that most people prefer to segment rather than integrate (Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2013). The startling gap between associates' perceptions and actual behaviours was somewhat narrowed as associates eventually alluded to the fact that negative work-home spillover was rife, particularly in the evenings. This appeared to be the norm, even amongst those who reported being 'expert' boundary keepers.

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Caregiving and Gender

Time-use diaries revealed that a proportion of associates combine Smarter Working with caregiving responsibilities. Associates appear to be able to maintain full-time hours while also satisfying caregiving responsibilities, supporting the unitarist view that remote working benefits both the employee and the business (Kroon *et al.*, 2009). Contrary to existing literature, diary findings were indicative of the transformation of the 'housewife contract' into one of equality (Crompton, 2006), as male associates seemed to feel a responsibility to perform domestic activities, particularly in dual earner households.

It appears that where existing literature emphasises juxtaposing gendered constructions of time (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001), men and women in this study experienced time polychronically, which meant that both genders were likely to combine work and domestic tasks. Smarter Working may permit performance parity in work and domestic life; however the combination of home working with domestic and caregiving activities could place pressures on employees regardless of their gender.

Conclusion

The core theme to emerge from this research, then, is that the extensification and intensification of work is facilitated, ironically, by increased autonomy – the very foundation of the Smarter Working policy. This problem appears to be exacerbated by the permeability of personal boundary management strategies. With no managerial presence or informal reminders to switch off from work, those who are inexperienced or inefficient at managing their own time could experience difficulties extricating themselves from what one associate described as 'the stickiness of the job'. It is hoped that pertinent evidence documenting the existence of work extensification, intensification, and boundary management issues will be used as a point of reference for research in other organisations (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

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A number of areas for future research have been identified. It would be unwise to ignore the possibility that work extensification and intensification are a wider cultural issue at the company, and are problems not merely confined to the respondents in this study. Moreover, future research might also relate to the way in which work is managed across time zones. European associates commonly struggled to adapt work schedules according to US business needs, so it may be interesting to ascertain whether the onus is entirely upon European associates, or whether US associates report similar issues.

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