

EXPLORING FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TELEWORKERS IN THE SEARCH FOR WORK-FAMILY BALANCE

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this paper is to present the factors that influence teleworkers in managing border between work and family in order to attain balance. By understanding the individuals characteristics may help teleworkers in balancing their work and home life. The study used the qualitative method by focusing on a single case study. Three types of techniques in collecting data were used; interviews, on-line survey and discussion forums. The interpretative analysis technique was used to analyze the data and the results were produced based on the analysis. This paper contributes to our understanding the personality factors of teleworkers success in balancing work and home life. The results show that factors such as time management, discipline, family support, motivation, and patience are important in managing work and family while working from home.

Keywords: teleworking, work-family balance, boundary, personality factors

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has made possible for people to work at any time and from anywhere. Teleworking or telecommuting, the practice of setting up home offices for employees with appropriate resources for computing and communication is one example of the working alternatives. This option has given individuals freedom to do paid work and domestic work based on their needs. Job satisfaction was reported as the most consistent individual's benefits among teleworkers (Jamal, 2007).

According to Felstead & Jewson (2000), the major problem faced by teleworkers is work-family conflict. Work-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The proposed solution to the problem work-family conflict was the idea of work-family balance whereas work and family should be balanced (Akdere, 2006). The aim of this paper is to present the findings of a study on factors that influence teleworker in managing boundary between work and family domain in balancing work and family life. Work-family balance is defined as individual having control over when, where and how they work, leading them to be able to enjoy an optimal quality of life as well as family (The Work Foundation, 2005). The focus of this study is on the eHomemakers Malaysia that is a cyber-community network that promotes working from home, teleworking and the Small Office and Home Office (SOHO) businesses through the utilization of ICT.

TELEWORKING

Based on the European Commission's E-Work 2000 Status Report, there are three main categories of telework: home-based telework, mobile telework and telework by self-employed Small Office/Home Office (SOHO). In this study, telework is defined as working from home on a full-time basis using ICT in performing paid work (Vora & Mahmasani, 2002). This definition is able to capture a wide range of activities, including work that is home-based, outsourced, self-employed, employed directly by a company or freelance or mobile teleworkers (Qvortrup, 1998).

Teleworking Benefits

The advantages of teleworking can be approached from the perspective of individual or worker, organization, and society in general. For the individual, the benefits may include increase opportunities and choices, job satisfaction, generally improving the quality of life (Jamal, 2007). For the organizations, the benefits may arise from better quality of work output; increase worker productivity and attitude of workforce in addition to financial benefits (Crandal & Gao, 2005). The benefits for the community may be in the form of intangible benefits such as helping alleviate the number of vehicles on the road (Harpaz, 2002) and consequently, reducing the amount of pollution and oil consumption (Mills et al., 2001). Rural communities also view telecommuting not only as a potential strategy for economic development but one that is environmentally friendly (Turban, Reiner, & Potter, 2003).

Blurring boundaries and work-family balance

Evidence from the literature on teleworking has shown that teleworking is not the solution for work-family balance (Baruch, 2000; Jamal, 2007; Kurland & Bailey, 1999). Since work is done at home, boundaries between work and family become blur or ambiguity (Baruch, 2000). Teleworkers have difficulties to separate their work and family activities, which may lead possible stress (Desrochers et al. 2005; Golden et al. 2006).

Studies have shown that the problem of blurring boundaries can be reduced by managing the border between work and family domain (Kowalski & Swanson, 2005; Matthews, 2007). Therefore, finding the solution on how individuals can manage the boundary is essential in order to achieve work-family balance.

Practices of Malaysian Teleworkers

In Malaysia, teleworking concept is one of the government initiatives to help women who are not working or who were forced to stop working due to domestic commitments to be able to generate their own source of income (<http://www.kpwk.gov.my>). The government hopes that this concept will encourage them to contribute to the country's economy as well as strengthen the family institution. There is minimal research on teleworking arrangement where majority of the companies in this country do not officially recognize teleworking concept (Karia et al, 2003; Ndubisi & Kahraman, 2005). Karia et al. (2003) also reported that the discipline regarding work, improved productivity, and degree of concern quality of work delivered are the motivating factors for the human resource managers to consider telecommuting as a part of their organization.

A study by eHomemakers (2003) found that ICT usage and time flexibility have improved the life of teleworkers especially women. However, they found that women have greater difficulty in separating their work and home life as they often face problems in balancing their careers and family responsibilities. In December 2009, Ministry of Works has launched three months work from home pilot project where thirty-nine (39) draftsmen from Public Works Department (JKR) have been selected as pioneers (The Sun, January, 2010). The government reported that the project was successful where the staffs' productivity has 100% increases while working at home. The government planned to continue the programmed in future

depending on the approval from the Department of Public Service (Utusan Malaysia, 18 September, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was used in this study with the focus on a single case study. This case study would offer a rich depiction of the teleworking and helps the workers relationship, interpretations and behaviors

In order to test the consistency of the findings, triangulation method was used (Yin, 2003). The data was collected using interview and online survey method where semi structured and open question were prepared to achieve the clear view of the teleworkers characteristics in managing border between work and family life towards work family balance. Data was also gathered from a discussion forum in eHomemakers portal. The sampling frame for this study was individual who have registered with the eHomemakers Malaysia. The eHomemakers Malaysia is a community for housewives and home workers who have opted for the role of parenting as their main responsibility and home office as an alternative lifestyle. In summary the study focuses on three types of telework in the eHomemakers that is: (1) home-based workers; (2) mobile workers; and (3) self-employed in SOHO.

RESPONDENTS' PROFILE

A total of seventy six (76) respondents have participated in this study. Out of this, five (5) were responses from interview, and seventy one (71) were from online survey. About 71% of the respondents are women. Respondents are spread across all age groups; from 21-30 to 56 plus. Majority of the respondents (62%), are in 31-40 years old, 14 (18%) are between 21-30 years, 11 (14%) are between 41-50 years and four (5%) are above 50 years. Majority of the respondents (71%) are Malay. About 76% are married, 9% respondents are single parents, and 14% are still single. Referring to the academic background, 37 (49%) of the respondents possess bachelor degree, 24 (32%) respondents have Diploma, 10 (13%) respondents with Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM), four (5%) respondents possess master degree and one (1%) respondent has Sijil Tinggi Peperiksaan Malaysia (STPM). All of the respondents are self-employed. More than half respondents (51%) had experience less than 2 years, 36% respondent between 2 to 4 years and 13% respondents with more than 5 years. Majority of the respondents (62%) have average monthly income between RM1001-RM3000.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The questions were provided to identify factors influencing teleworker in managing border to attain balance. The study has classified the answers into five thematic categories including i) time management, ii) discipline, iii) family support, iv) motivation, and v) patience.

Time Management

From a total of 76 respondents, only 38 (50%) stated that having a good **time management** such as scheduling and proper planning in terms of time, space and people will ease them in managing of home and work. Teleworkers said that they can manage their own time according to their task at home. They were able to break up assignments into manageable chunks or deadline into steps.

Discipline

A total of 30 (39%) teleworkers stressed that strong **self-discipline** is very important to individual who work at home. They suggested that discipline is a vital factor that influences them in managing the border between work and family domain to attain balance

Family Support

The next theme is **family support**. A total of 17 teleworkers identified support from spouses and children as critical to their ability to manage both their professional and personal responsibilities. High on the list of family support was spousal support, in which respondents overwhelmingly credited their husbands' support as the reason they are able to meet the expectations and demands of their jobs. They agreed that understanding, negotiation and cooperation from the family members contribute to achieve balance in work and family life.

Motivation

Another theme is **motivation** where 16 of them (21%) stated that strong self-motivation such as self-driven, positive thinking, high spiritual, strong foundation in religion, and love for family have influenced them in managing border between work and family in order to attain balance. A male respondent with five years of experience working from home stressed the need for strong motivation and discipline in order to complete work.

Patience

The next theme for the factors that influence teleworkers in managing border between work and family is **patience**. Thirteen respondents (17%) claimed that patience is a fundamental characteristic in order to achieve work-family balance while working from home. For instance, a respondent with two years of experience working from home has talked about patience and passion and both should come together in order to manage work and family effectively.

There are also other factors that influence balance between work and family namely **spirituality, professionalism, responsibility, love, teamwork, knowledge as well as IT literacy**. Several respondents credited the strength they draw from their spiritual faith as foundational to their ability to cope with and manage their professional and personal responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

The paper contends that teleworkers in this study did achieve balancing in their work and family life by having certain characteristics such as high self discipline, good time management for work and family, highly motivated, patience and tolerance. These findings also show that employee must be self disciplined, a good time manager, organized and able to work without structure as supported Kinsman, (1988) in Riley & McCloskey (1996). This study help us to understand the consequences of new ways of working that enable individuals and interested parties (e.g. self-employed people) to explore innovative ways to achieve business and personal goals. In addition, it contributes to making plans for improving the individuals in developing their skills in managing boundaries between work and family life.

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