Current Practices of Self-Employed Knowledge Teleworkers in Managing Work and Family

Nafishah Othman, Shafiz Affendi Mohd Yusof, Wan Rozaini Sheik Osman

School of Computing, Universiti Utara Malaysia, Malaysia {Nafishah, Shafiz, rozai174}@uum.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the practices of self-employed knowledge teleworkers in managing work and family life in order to attain balance. Effective ways in managing work and family could help self-employed knowledge teleworkers who are struggle to create harmony in the contexts of work and family life and may strengthen and enhance their business achievement. This study employed a qualitative methodology using a single case study of 76 self-employed teleworkers from the eHomemakers organization in Malaysia. Three types of techniques in collecting data were used; 1) face to face interviews; 2) online open ended survey; and 3) observations of online discussion forum. The interpretative analysis technique was used to analyze the data. The results will provide insight into practices and development needs of knowledge teleworkers that may lead to the development of a guideline for individuals who choose to telework. This is also important to better understand the working arrangement, without incurring any family and personal problems, in balancing work and family life. Thus, this can further improve the quality of work-family life.

Keywords: self-employed, knowledge teleworker, practices, work-family balance, border

I. INTRODUCTION

Work-family balance has always been a concern to those interested in the quality of working life and its relation to the broader quality of life (Akdere, 2006). The work-family balance refers to individual are in control on their work and family life as well as leading them to be able to enjoy the quality of life (The Work Foundation, 2005). Balancing these multiple roles has become a critical challenge to many working individuals (Akdere, 2006). The failure to balance these roles may result in serious and undesired life events such as marriage breakdowns, social problems and ill health (Dowse & Underwood, 2001). It is reported that when employees experienced conflict between work and family roles, they also experienced greater job dissatisfaction, fatigue and lower life satisfaction (Frone, Russel, & Cooper, 1992; Edwards & Rothabard, 2000).

Nevertheless, there are positive impacts on work-family balance to the knowledge teleworkers (Eaton, 2003; Kurland & Bailey, 1999). For instance, they are able to carry their work and at the same time spend time with their families. This gives them the opportunity to have more control over their children's life (eHomemakers, 2003). The teleworkers also claimed that their work followed a very flexible pattern that enabled them to improve their work-life balance (Wilks & Billsberry, 2007). For instance, the use of a PC at home allows work activity to take place at any time of the day or night, which will eventually give the chance of teleworkers to plan their leisure times, and to balance their time between their work and family (Harpaz, 2002). Although, knowledge teleworkers are satisfied with the flexibility and control of working at home but they struggled to deal with blurring boundaries between work and home life which mean that individuals have greater difficulties in separating work and family's activities (Desrochers, Hilton, & Larwood, 2005; eHomemakers, 2003; Hill et al., 1998; Igbaria & Guimaraes, 1999; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001; Tietze & Musson, 2005).

Knowledge teleworkers have a high level of skills and expertise which are gain from their high level of education and experience (Davenport et al., 1996; Sulek and Marucheck, 1994). Moreover, their use of ICT has increase the permeability of work-family boundaries because these technologies have made the boundaries of work and family increasingly blur (Lewis & Cooper, 1999; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Finding the balance can help to improve the knowledge teleworker's well-being as well as his or her work outcomes (Standen, Lamond, & Daniels, 1999). Therefore, it should be done carefully to ensure that individual is capable to control and manage his or her work and family needs (eHomemakers, 2003).

The aim of this study is to understand how self-employed knowledge teleworkers manage between work and family life in the search of work-family balance. This study has used the work-family border theory (Clark, 2000) to describe the phenomenon. This theory explains how individuals manage and negotiate the work and family domain and the borders between them in order to attain balance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The work-family issues have been discussed in the teleworking studies since the design and structure of work itself can be one of the root causes of work-life conflicts (Crandal & Gao, 2005; Kossek, 2003). The demands of work could dominate life and result in imbalance, as such work–family balance could help promote well-being if properly implemented (Kofodimos, 1993). According to Guest (2002), most of the research confirms that a work-life imbalance has negative consequences for well-being and effective functioning. He urged that work-life balance is the essential in determining quality of working-life and its relation to quality of life. The inability of individuals in balancing their work and family may cause them experience a high levels of stress, low quality of life and ultimately reduces their effectiveness at work (Kofodimos, 1993).

Nippert-Eng (1996) noted that the use of new telecommunications technologies has also impacted the work-family balance, especially when those technologies may provide the potential for employees to be available twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Using such devices, these employees are expected to be available anytime and anywhere. However, at the same time these technologies may blur or blend boundaries by keeping the domain of work constantly accessible. Consequently, this will lead to greater stress (Shamir, 1992; Desrochers & Sargeant, 2004). Tietze (2005) indicated that all knowledge teleworkers reported difficulties in adjusting to working from home. They found it harder to establish "*who they were, felt in-between*"or not quite sure "*whether I am suppose to be a father or a manager first and foremost*" (when working from home).

Kossek et al. (2006) reported that the fundamental problem facing growing numbers of individuals is how to develop appropriate strategies to maintain a positive work identity, given their increasing workload and non-work demands. Moreover, they suggested that individuals must renegotiate with household members in terms of schedule, and workspaces that may potentially intersect with relaxation and entertainment spaces. The problem of blurring boundaries can be minimized by structuring the working time and space (Ahrentzen, 1990; Salazar, 2001). To prevent their home from becoming a workplace, individuals are advised to work only at certain times and in certain places in the house to avoid interference (Ahrentzen, 1990; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Kossek, Noe & DeMarr, 1999; Salazar, 2001).

Based on the literature, there are only a few studies that have examined home workers perceptions of a blurred boundary between work and family roles; these are by Ahrentzen (1990), Hill et al. (1996), Nippert-Eng (1996), and Desrochers et al. (2005). Balance can be achieved by analyzing the border, because the nature of the border itself permeates into individuals to control it physically and psychologically (Guest, 2002). Kowalski & Swanson (2005) suggested a number of strategies in order to create boundaries between work and family. For instance, one can adopt approaches that provide a specific space for work only, establishing morning rituals at home to make the transition to a workday (e.g., dressing up as if going into the main office), using dependent care services (e.g., children or elderly parents), and introducing the teleworking concept to family, friends, and neighbors to inform them that they are not to interfere during his/her working hours.

In this study, the theory of work-family border was used as the theoretical framework. Work-family border theory explains the ability of individuals in managing and negotiating the borders between work and family to balanced their work and family life (Clark, 2000). Further, she stated that "work and family are two different domains that influence each other". The border between these domains is represented by the lines of demarcation between the work domain and the family domain. It allows for analysis border in terms of psychological, temporal and physical and people around them.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study used the qualitative method by focusing on a single case study of self-employed teleworkers from the eHomemakers organization in Malaysia. The purpose of a case study is to shed light on a phenomenon. Case studies usually provide qualitative data for analysis and interpretation (Neuman, 2000; Sekaran, 2003). It is also the most useful approach to understand the meanings people make of their experiences (Creswell, 1994). The eHomemakers Malaysia is one of the cyber community network that promotes working from home, teleworking and the running of Small Office and Home Office (SOHO)

businesses through the utilization of information and communications technology.

Three methods of data collection were used: semi-structured interviews with the respondents; online open ended survey and reading the messages from the online discussion forum of the eHomemakers's portal. This study used the same questionnaire for the interview and online opened ended survey. The purpose of the variety of methods for collecting data was to triangulate data to ensure that the data is valid. The data analysis was done immediately as soon as each or a group of questionnaires had been received. The data was analyzed using the interpretive technique until the information categories became saturated. Initially, the data was coded and then analyzed to produce results. The data from the interviews and online open ended survey were analyzed using an inductive process through thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis, historically, is a conventional practice in qualitative research that involves searching through data to identify any recurring patterns (Subvista, 2011). Data was examined and compared for similarities or differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), then the researcher used open coding to highlight themes within the data and assign categories within these themes. Similar or almost similar answers were grouped under the same theme. Otherwise, a new theme was created. The process was repeated until all data were completely analyzed. Finally, member checking technique was used to seek confirmation of the validity of the data collected and analysed with the respective respondents. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) this technique is important to establish the credibility of data.

IV. DISCUSSIONS OF THE RESULTS

Table 1 depicts the profile of respondents participated in the study. About 71% of the respondents are women. Majority of the respondents (62%), are in 31-40 years old. Majority of the respondents (71%) are Malay. About 76% of them are married and have children. Referring to the academic background, 49% of the respondents possess bachelor degree. 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 respondents are married, living together with family that comprises of husband, wife, child, mother and father, mother and father-in-law, younger brother or sister or brother in-law as well as home maid. All respondents use ICT facilities for work purposes.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

	Number	Percentage%
Gender		
Male	22	29
Female	54	71
Age		
21-30	14	18
31-40	47	62
41-50	11	15
Above 50	4	5
Marital Status		
Single	11	14
Married	58	76
Single parent	7	10
Race		
Malay	54	71
Chinese	16	21
Indian	4	5
Others	2	3
Formal education		
SPM	10	13
STPM	1	1
DIPLOMA	24	32
DEGREE	37	49
MASTER	4	5
Type of Job		
Online Business	48	63
Freelancer	22	29
Home based	6	8

The questions were provided to identify the practices used by the teleworker in managing the border between work and family domain. This border represents three forms, which are physical, temporal and psychological. The physical border is related to domain behavior that takes place in spaces or rooms for the workplace, or places for the home. The temporal border is the time period allocated when work is done and time taken for family matters. The psychological border is concerned with the mind and thoughts of individuals regarding their work and family life. Each form of this border can be controlled through border characteristics such as permeability, flexibility, blending and strength.

Physical border
This study shows that most of the respondents (60 out of 76, 79%) did provide special workplace to perform work such as a special room equipped with ICT facilities. A female respondent who works as online business with six years of experience working from home provides an example as stated below:
"My husband has transformed one the room at home to be an official office for us to work. There, all the stock, laptop, fax etc are stored"

There are 36 respondents that have specific room which they do not allow their workspace or equipment to be shared. They do not allow family members to use the work space and equipment due to security purposes because the room is full of their valuable work equipment's. A male respondent who is doing online business mentioned that the reason he needs a special room for work is because his room is very sensitive, as follows:

"No, because that room is purposely for me and it is sensitive of any interference"

Another 21% of respondents used places such as living room, bedroom or car to do work as long as equipped with ICT facilities. They also allow their family members to use the work space and equipment when they are not working as practiced by a 42 year's old male respondent who works as MLM agent:

"Besides my laptop, I have a handphone that can be used to check email and browse internet. So even though I'm not bring my laptop, I always can communicate with my clients, Yes, I can work anywhere, I do not mind if my family shares the room with me"

In term of physical appearance, most of the respondents (90%) did not distinguish their appearance while working and with family. They are more comfortable to wear casual, sometimes even pyjama while working. The proper dressing is only practiced if they need to meet client. For instance, for this female respondent, appearance do not play important role as stated below:

"I don't care so much because I work at home, on my own. There is no need to apply make up. Normally I do work in my pajama only"

Temporal border
Regarding to the temporal border, majority of respondents (53 out of 76, 70%) reported that they have set their workings hours. Majority of respondents set their working hours starting from morning. Most of them mentioned that they start working at 9 am to 4 pm or 5 pm. They choose to work in the morning because their children have gone to school. Some of these respondents (17 out of 53) reported that they will also continue working at night if their schedules are packed. A consultant and also a translator with six years of experience working from home set her working time from 9 am to 3 pm. When her schedule is hectic, she starts at 8 am and ends at late midnight, as stated below:

"Normally, my official hours are from 9am to 3pm with breaks for lunch. But when there are

packed schedules, then the hours may start as early as 8 and end past midnite"

Some respondents (23 out of 76, 30%) chose to work at any time they like. The reasons reported are easy to manage the household chores, can spend more time with children, can freely manage time as well as free from employers' authority. As mentioned by a female respondent who is a freelance property negotiator for 4 years working from home sets her working time freely so that she can attend to her family needs, as follows:

"For me, I worked whenever I'm free The reason is that, working from home do give me flexibility in time, means whenever I'm free and at the same time I can take care of my 4 childrens"

Another male respondent working as creative director claimed that he always sets up his daily schedule because his working time constantly changes. He feels that he has the freedom to work at any time he likes as stated below:

"I keep a daily schedule instead of a monthly one, as my time varies everyday, because of freedom"

Psychological border
In term of psychological border, many respondents (49 out of 76; 64%) agreed that they always think about other things while working like those informed by a respondent who has two daughters:

"Yes..all the time..my daughter is only two..that's the reason why I work at home in the first place"

The similar answer received a female homemaker with six years of experience:

"Of course. When u r working at home, u have flexibilty to work at anytime u want, but doesn't mean that u have to neclect your family"

However, small amount of respondents (27 out of 76, 35%) told that they avoid thinking of other things while working in order to focus on their job as said by a female respondent working as MLM agent:

"No, it may distract my focus on work"

Current Practices of Working from Home for the Self-employed Knowledge Teleworkers
This study identifies the work-family balance by focusing on the construction of border and it's characteristics between work and home domain based on Clark's theory (2000). This theory posits that the outcomes driven by the characteristics of the border between the domains of work and family in determining work-family balance. This study provides

knowledge that the nature of border and its characteristics can be managed by examining how individuals can adapt to and shape their work and home activities. Based on the findings, this study has identified the current practices of working that being applied by the self-employed knowledge teleworkers as follows:

1. Creates working schedule and proper planning in terms of time and space. Working from home will give the knowledge teleworkers the freedom to choose the working hours. However, it is still important to prepare a working schedule to prevent confusion in arranging time between completing tasks and being with family.

2. Provide a specific workplace in the house to keep all the works and the ICT facilities. Knowledge teleworker is advised to have a specific room in their house solely for them to keep all the files and the computer. This is very important because they tend to print a lot of documents and if they have a specific room to keep them in place, they do not have to worry about losing them. If the house is not spacious, they can still buy storage to keep all the files and do her tasks in places like the bedroom and the kitchen.

3. Family members have to be informed in advance when a knowledge teleworker is planning to work from home. Negotiate and discuss among the family members regarding work and family activities. Help them understand about the needs of a knowledge teleworker to prevent misunderstanding in the future. Their cooperation and support means the most in order to maintain the harmonious family life.

4. Develop skill in managing business, ICT and family. Knowledge teleworkers obviously have to be someone with acceptable skill in managing business while using ICT at the same time. There is no doubt that if they managed to have both of the skills, they will work wonders in the future.

5. Knowledge teleworkers must be open to any risk, accepting and tolerating with family and friends. They must not oppose to any suggestions from the family members. For example, they can still help with the chores at the house even if there are tasks to be completed because it is still the right thing to do.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Working from home automatically integrates home and work domains. Thus, individuals have to manage the borders between both domains by identifying the ways to conduct their work and family activities in order to achieve work-family balance. This study help individuals or interested parties to make plans to develop their skills in managing work and family life on the teleworking concept as an alternative work option especially women, people who are disabled, unemployed and retired workers, remote workers and entrepreneurs in generating income without creating any family and personal problems. This study may also contribute in creating lessons learnt from the work experiences from individuals who telework and would provide insight to those who like to opted for this style of working environment. Recommendations for further research include the conducting of a similar study but with a different set of potential employment.

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