Enforced remote working and the work-life interface during lockdown

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Abstract

Purpose

This paper considers enforced working from home in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and how it may differ from working from home through choice. In particular, we discuss how lockdown may be affecting work-family arrangements

Design/Methodology/approach

This is a thought piece.

Findings

The paper briefly examines the extant research on remote working. We argue that since many of the (beneficial) outcomes found for both employees and employers are associated with feelings of greater autonomy and gratitude on the part of employees for being able to exercise choice over their working arrangements, these outcomes may not be found where working from home is required of employees. We contend that women, and mothers in particular, have had little choice in relation to when work has taken place, and how much work has been done.

Originality/value

We explore this unexpected context of the pandemic and highlight the need for research which examines these different circumstances.

Practical implications

We urge employers to consider the positive and negative outcomes of emerging evidence as they review their flexible working policies. We call for a widespread review of childcare provision in supporting women and men in the labour market.

Keywords

Remote working, flexibility, choice, work-family conflict, gender, parenting, COVID-19,

Introduction

The threat of COVID-19 led to national lockdowns in many countries around the globe in February and March of 2020 and as a result many people experienced their homes becoming their place of work, often with very little warning and limited time for preparation. Lockdown also meant that nurseries, schools and universities closed their doors and education continued, or was expected to continue, in the home. These unprecedented actions resulted in many white-collar workers having to adapt to enforced and full-time working from home, while at the same time adjusting to all members of their household being together in the home 24/7. Family members potentially had to share IT equipment (laptops, tablets, printers), internet access and desk, or table-top space for working and studying. This short paper considers the implications of this lockdown for work and family arrangements and examines what is known about remote working to date and its gendered nature in this new context. Practical implications are considered, as organizations plan for and experience the easing of lockdown measures, and suggestions for future research are offered.

The global pandemic experience

For over twenty years, flexible working arrangements have been seen as a way of contributing to the achievement of work life balance, because of the increased control they give to individuals over when and where they work (Hill et al, 2008). As lockdown began, working from home was required of all those who could reasonably be expected to work from home, and offices and other workplaces were closed down. Another element considered in the debate about workplace flexibility is how much or how long employees work. This element of flexibility is associated with a contractual reduction in working hours (and associated reduction in pay and benefits) which some women opt for, particularly after childbirth. However, consideration of how many hours are worked does not only relate to fewer hours. Many individuals may have previously dealt with long hours, presenteeism and work intensification (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010), experiences which demonstrate the contested nature of choice in workplace flexibility. During this period of lockdown, employees were given no choice about where to work, and as such, we contend that 'when' and 'how much' work was done in these circumstances was connected to the change of location. For example, many parents had to juggle work commitments with the increased demands on their time, including the practical aspects of supervising children's learning, exercise and play. Together with the challenges of finding suitable space for working, access to equipment, and reliability of internet connectivity, it is important to note the other stresses and challenges of trying to work from home during a global pandemic. Amongst all the rhetoric and proclamations of the positive aspects of working from home, social media revealed heightened states of anxiety, including concerns

about the health of self and loved ones, the increasing likelihood of economic recession and potential job losses, increased social isolation and "Zoom exhaustion". Hochschild and Machung's (1989) 'second shift' covering housework and childcare expanded to include home-schooling and increased emphasis on health and wellbeing, including the responsibility for the emotional welfare of children at a time when they may also have been anxious and confused. Perhaps not surprisingly, given that the second shift has tended to fall more heavily on women, this emphasis seems to have been maintained, with concerns expressed that the lockdown may serve to reinforce traditional gender roles (Chung, 2020).

Working from home at all levels has often been connected with those in professional roles with greater autonomy over how they work; however in this context remote working suddenly became possible for many jobs and encouraged for all who could. This resulted in changes to the way work was conducted, with an absence of face-to-face meetings with colleagues, clients and suppliers and a wholesale shift to other means of communication. In some cases the nature of work activities may also have changed; for example, this is particularly salient for us as academics, with universities around the world shifting teaching online at least on a temporary basis.

What we know about remote working

Like many forms of flexible working, remote working (also termed home working and teleworking) has been the subject of much research to date. Importantly though, much of this research has focused on remote working which has been an active choice by employees to work from home (or other location), primarily for work-life balance reasons. Remote working may save time for those who have long commutes to the workplace, freeing up time for non-work activities. It may also facilitate the interspersing of work and non-work activities, where, for example, if employees are at home, they may be able to use breaks in their working day to carry out caring, domestic or leisure activities. In addition, avoiding a complex or arduous journey to work may remove a source of stress for employees and thereby contribute to better well-being. Remote working may provide a better environment, for at least some types of work, if the home offers a quieter space where the employee may be able to focus on the task in hand better, away from interruptions and the many possible distractions of the workplace.

Much extant research has focused on the outcomes of remote working for both individuals and organisations and the factors which influence successful implementation (for an overview see Kelliher & De Menezes, 2019). Remote working has been linked to enhanced productivity (Allen, et al 2015; Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). However, other studies note potential outcomes from remote working which could have detrimental effects on performance, such as

curtailing employee interactions, knowledge sharing, team collaboration and creativity (Allen et al, 2015; Thorgeirsdottir & Kelliher, 2017). Remote working has also been linked to employee retention (Moen et al, 2011), although a positive relationship has not always been found (Choi, 2018; di Sivatte &Guadamillas, 2013), suggesting that this relationship may not be a direct one.

Studies that have examined other outcomes which may influence performance have identified a positive link with job satisfaction (Kroll et al, 2017; Possenriede et al, 2016) and there is evidence that this may be mediated by perceived autonomy, gender (choice may be more influential for women who take on a greater proportion of domestic and caring activities) and experience of remote working (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Wood et al, (2018) also found an indirect link with job satisfaction through job control and supportive supervision. Organisational commitment has also been found to be linked to remote working (Martin & MacDonnell, 2012) and in some cases this has been explained by a perceived indebtedness to the employer, or by the trust built up between the two parties (Ross & Ali, 2017). In our own work (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010) we argue that a reciprocal relationship, based on social exchange, is established when an employee is allowed to work remotely for work-life reasons. Interestingly, Chen and Fulmer (2018) found that perceived availability of remote working was linked to organisational commitment, rather than the take up of the practice itself.

Research has also focused on how remote working may relate to employee well-being. Remote working, particularly from home has been found on the one hand to be a source of stress (Kraut, 1989; Moore, 2006) as a result of role conflict, where the employee attempts to deal with both work and home roles in the home environment, however, on the other, more recent evidence suggests lower work role stress and work exhaustion, which may be mediated by autonomy (Allen et al, 2015). Anderson et al (2015), comparing well-being on days when employees worked remotely with those when they were at the workplace, found that more positive outcomes were reported on the days when they worked remotely. These well-being outcomes have been attributed to better work-life balance and greater autonomy (Wardenaar et al, 2010). It is important, however, to note that much of this research has been carried out where employees have had a choice over where to work and that the perception of autonomy has been found to be an important factor in explaining the positive outcomes from remote working. Working from home during the lockdown offered no such choice and as a result employees are less likely to perceive greater autonomy, nor to feel a sense of gratitude to their employer for allowing them to work away from the workforce. Thus, whilst there may be some aspects relating to the practicalities of managing employees who are working at home (communication, monitoring of work and workload) which may be are similar to pre-COVID-

19, we argue that it is likely that there will be many differences, particularly for employee outcomes, in this context of enforced remote working.

Remote working and work family conflict

Focusing on the specific relationship of working from home with work and family conflict, evidence is similarly mixed and it is here that perhaps gender differences are more pronounced. It has been well established that women are more likely than men to experience greater tensions and blurring of boundaries between the work and family domains (Chung and van der Horst). National context and societal expectations play a role in the way such tensions are played out, as demonstrated, for example, by Kurowska's (2018) comparison of Poland and Sweden, countries which have distinct models of the division of labour. The study highlighted gender differences in both countries when balancing work and family while working from home, finding it to be greater in Poland where men played little part in care-giving and other unpaid work in the home, despite the relatively high labour force participation rate of women. The study focused on the "total responsibility burden of households" proposed by Ransome (2007: 374) which combines work and unpaid work, in contrast to recreational labour which refers to leisure and other non-work activities. Women have been shown to be more likely than men to use the time saved from commuting to engage, for example, more in childcare and housework, so still contributing to the total responsibility burden (Peters et al, 2004: Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson and Andrey, 2008). Similarly women have been shown to be more likely to use, and to be expected to use, remote working as a means of integrating the work and family domains, for example, when used for emergency child care (Moran and Koslowski, 2019). Childcare has been a major cause for concern for families during lockdown and possibly poses the biggest challenge to gendered labour within the home (Chung, 2020). The latest figures available from the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020) show that the time spent by women on childcare both developmental (e.g. supervising or helping with school work) and non-developmental (e.g. dressing, feeding or washing children), is greater than the time spent by men. In addition, women were found to spend more time on unpaid work and less time on paid work than men.

In the present circumstances, we question whether the experience of remote working gives more control and choice to individuals. In reviewing the impact of home-based working, van der Lippe and Lippenyi (2018) explore the consequences of such working patterns on family life, taking into account the workplace context and examining the gendered effects. Their study confirmed that working from home is more likely to lead to work family conflict, partly due to the continuous connection possible through the use of smart phones and other media. Similarly, organizations with cultures reflecting the ideal worker norm, where conflicting

demands are not tolerated and commitment is doubted if patterns of work involve less face time, were found to have a stronger link between working from home and work-family conflict.

Furthermore, we argue that there is a need to respond to these current changes in working practices from a wider perspective. Gendered attitudes to parenting have shifted in recent times, with fathers still facing the societal expectation to be a provider, alongside being more involved in caregiving (Gatrell, Burnett, Cooper and Sparrow, 2015). The introduction of shared parental leave in some countries has been accompanied by a greater encouragement to fathers to make use of work-family entitlements such as flexible working arrangements (Moran and Koslowski, 2019). However, in the context of these unprecedented times, employees may be concerned about job security and so may not want to risk making extra demands on their employer (Gerson, 2011), given the potential anxiety about furloughing and the increasing likelihood of significant numbers of redundancies across many sectors. Such concerns may reinforce the gender division of unpaid labour in heterosexual households.

In addition, we acknowledge that much of the debate on work-life balance and its gendered context has been dominated by professional and middle class workers. Warren (2015) observes that work-life imbalance is not only about the issue of time, but the need and wish for people to work fewer hours. However, she emphasises the relative absence of the working class in that debate and highlights the need to incorporate economic precariousness in any conceptualisation of work-life balance. Interestingly, many of those classed as key workers during the pandemic, such as care workers, food retail and delivery staff are also low-paid workers and may be on zero, or minimum hours contracts or sometimes self-employed. An important learning from the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 was the value in maintaining attachment of workers to the labour market through short-time working schemes, allowing organizations to retain skills and expertise and giving employees greater employment and income stability (Eurofound, 2020). Similar schemes, such as the UK furlough scheme, have been used with similar intentions in the current context.

Practical implications and future research

Undoubtedly, recent months have proved that many more jobs can indeed be successfully carried out from home rather than necessarily in the workplace. This may help to convince those employers who had previously been resistant to staff working from home to be more open to flexible working in the future. However, we caution employers not to assume that the way in which they managed remote working previously and the benefits that they gained, will be replicated in these circumstances. As such we suggest that they should not change policies and practices, without further exploration and examination of the relevant factors

regarding their duties of care towards their employees, whether working from home or the workplace. It is essential that organizations maintain an evidence-based approach to policy-making and continue to distinguish between different forms of flexible working which lead to different outcomes, such as employee attitudes (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2017). Boundary control is a matter of preference with some individuals preferring to keep work and family separate or segmented, while others prefer greater integration of the domains. It is worth remembering that home-working and other forms of flexible working are *"neither inherently good nor bad, but their success or failure is driven by the ways in which they are made available and are used."* (Perrigino, Dunford and Wilson, 2018:606).

We welcome the responses of organizations who recognize the potential for greater homeworking for their employees, such as Fujitsu who have announced their Work Life Shift programme (BBC News, 2020), and Twitter's proclamation that "employees can work from home forever" (Guardian, 2020), but encourage organizations to consult widely with their employees to ascertain the best way forward in meeting employee needs while meeting business objectives. Most of what we know about the gendered nature of flexible working, the individual and organizational outcomes, and factors affecting successful implementation, has come from research where employees have had varying degrees of choice in the decision to work from home. Further research is required to understand these new circumstances as a result of the enforced remote working, in order to broaden the knowledge base and to explore some of the issues which may have been more or less salient in lockdown. As well as employers considering their organizational policies and practices, we encourage a widespread review of childcare provision in supporting working parents (women and men). These months have been strange and many employees have been resourceful and have adapted well to the circumstances, but equally many may be glad to reclaim the home space as private space for at least part of the week, rather than a place of full-time work and study, as well as being a home.

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