The Work Experiences of Professional Men and Women Who Telecommute: Convergence or Divergence?

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Researchers have found that men and women frequently encounter different work experiences. There has been some speculation that women who choose to telecommute will have more negative experiences than men who choose to telecommute. This study examines whether the work experiences of professionals who telecommute differ by gender. An analysis of 44 professional men and 45 professional women who telecommute from a large telecommunications firm fails to show a difference in work experiences, including autonomy, boundary spanning activities, career support, work-family conflict and career advancement prospects. In fact, the only significant differences between these groups were the number of hours spent in caretaking responsibilities and salary.

Telecommuting has been proposed as a work arrangement that could potentially offer many benefits to employees. Telecommuting may benefit employees by providing schedule flexibility to help reduce stress and meet both work and family responsibilities (Bailey & Foley, 1990; Davis, 1995; Ford & McLaughlin, 1995; Goodrich, 1990). Others have speculated that telecommuting can have negative impacts on employees including overwork, burnout and limiting career support and career advancement prospects (Baig, 1995; DuBrin & Barnard, 1993; Solomon & Templer, 1993). Telecommuting has been assumed to be of particular interest to women for family reasons. Research has attempted to address whether there are differences in the work experiences of telecommuters and non-telecommuters (DuBrin, 1991), but has not yet addressed whether there are significant differences in the work experiences of men and women who telecommute.

Research has shown that women face many challenges in the work world, such as restricted career advancement (Landau, 1995), less career support (Betters-Reed & Moore, 1992; Morrison & VonGlinow, 1990; O’Leary and Ickovics, 1992) and lower salaries (Drazin and Auster, 1987; Pfeffer and Ross, 1990). Ilgen & Youtz (1986) suggest that such discrimination may result in less favorable career success, including limited career advancement prospects. There has been some speculation that the potential negative outcomes of telecommuting will be stronger for women. If this is the case, women may choose to avoid this work arrangement. This would deny the organization the potential benefits of
telecommuting, such as reduced costs (Riley & McCloskey, 1997; Snizek, 1995) and increased productivity (Bailey & Foley, 1990; Davis, 1995; DuBrin, 1991).

Studying potential gender differences in telecommuting experiences is particularly important given that women have been identified as being very interested in participating in this work arrangement. Risman and Tomaskovic-Devey (1989) suggest women with young children would be the most likely candidates for telecommuting. Other research has indicated that women are more interested in telecommuting than men (Kinsman, 1988). Given this level of interest, it is important to address whether women who choose to telecommute will have the same work experiences as men.

Despite the importance of understanding this phenomenon, there has been no research on whether there are differences by gender in the work experiences of professionals who telecommute. This study addresses this gap by studying whether there are differences between men and women who telecommute on a number of important work experiences. The following sections introduce the work experiences examined.

**Autonomy**

Autonomy is the degree to which a job provides freedom, independence and discretion in the completion of work (Hackman & Oldham, 1975). Telecommuting is believed to contribute to more autonomy by giving employees more control over when and where work is completed. It has been suggested that women assume less authority and responsibility on the job (Harlan & Weiss, 1982) which would result in less autonomy. Research has found that professionals who telecommute experience more autonomy than clerical employees who telecommute (Olson & Prims, 1984). However, research has not addressed whether autonomy levels differ for men and women who telecommute.

**Boundary Spanning Activities**

Boundary spanning activities involve the interpersonal transfer of information across organizational boundaries (Keller, Szilagyi & Holland, 1976). This is an important work experience to consider for telecommuters because it relates to an employee’s visibility across organizational boundaries. It has been suggested that women are less likely to be in positions with boundary spanning opportunities (Larwood & Gattiker, 1987; Powell, 1988). Research has not examined whether boundary spanning activities differ for men and women who telecommute.

**Career Support**

Career support is the extent to which an employee perceives his/her supervisor as being interested in and supportive of career aspirations (Greenhaus, Parasuraman & Wormley, 1990). Supportive relationships from supervisors, in the form of career guidance and the assignment of challenging and visible assignments, may enrich an individual’s career (Baird & Kram, 1983). Supervisor career support has been found to be positively correlated with supervisor promotability assessment (Greenhaus, et al., 1990).

Interviews with women who had chosen to telecommute indicated that they believed working at home was more detrimental to their careers than the careers of male peers who telecommute. The women felt that they needed to be seen to be considered serious (Pratt, 1984). Other research has suggested that women may be discriminated against in terms of career development (Fernandez, 1981; Rosen, Templeton & Kichline, 1981). Differences in career support for men and women who telecommute would be a serious problem since career support can have an impact on career advancement prospects. Research has not addressed whether career support differs for professional men and women who telecommute.

**Work Family Conflict**

Work-family conflict is a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from work and family domains are mutually incompatible (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The perceived impact of telecommuting on work-family conflict is quite diverse. Many believe that this work arrangement will provide the flexibility to meet demands from both work and family (Crossman & Burton, 1993; DiMartino & Wirth, 1990; DuBrin, 1991). Others have suggested that telecommuting will make it difficult to separate work and family, thus increasing conflict and stress (Brown, 1994; DuBrin and Barnard, 1993). Telecommuting is viewed by some as a method of decreasing work-family conflict and by others as a work arrangement that will result in increasing this conflict. These views are not necessarily contradictory. Researchers have proposed that work-family conflict is comprised of time, strain and behavior-based conflict (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). It is possible that telecommuting will impact these three dimensions differently, thus decreasing some dimensions of work-family conflict and increasing others. Preliminary research suggests that telecommuting will have differing impacts on these three dimensions by gender.

Time-based conflict suggests that the demands of one role make it difficult to be either physically or mentally available to the other role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). A classic example of time-based conflict is when an individual has a task that must be completed for work and also has a family commitment, such as a sick child, demanding attention. Telecommuting is believed to lower an employee’s time-based conflict because it provides the employee with the flexibility needed to address both work and family demands. This dimension may differ by gender.

Although Bedeian, Burke and Moffett (1988) found there was no significant difference in the level of work-family conflict for professional men and women, other researchers have found significant differences (Greenhaus, Bedeian, & Mossholder, 1987; Higgins, Duxbury & Lee, 1994; Olson & Prims, 1984). It has been suggested that when women work at home they try to meet concurrent work and family demands (Beach, 1989; Hall, 1972), such as caring for a child or doing...