Family Structure and the Telecommuter’s Quality of Life

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With many individuals telecommuting from home, the boundary between home and work is made very thin. As a result, a person’s family structure may impact how stressful telecommuting is for the individual. One hundred and nineteen individuals participated in a mailed survey to determine which family structures provide the least stress and highest quality of life for telecommuters. In this study, eight family structures were examined according to gender, presence of other adults, and presence of dependents in the household. Comparisons were also made between telecommuters and non-telecommuters. Organizational support was an important factor affecting stress: higher organizational support resulted in lower reported stress levels. Also, stress had a strong inverse relationship with both quality of work and non-work life. Comparisons between telecommuters and non-telecommuters showed that in most instances similar levels of stress were reported. However further exploration revealed that the sources of the stress were different.

This topic is important because telecommuting is currently seen as a way in which young mothers can effectively combine work and child care, to the exclusion of all other potential telecommuters (Gordon, 1988; Christensen, 1992). Although the majority of permanent home-based teleworkers are believed to be women with young children (Huws, Korte, & Robinson, 1990), this may be the family structure associated with the highest stress. To date, there has been little research examining this aspect of telecommuting.

Exploration into whether there are differences between telecommuters and non-telecommuters faced with similar family structures will also be examined to help determine whether telecommuting can successfully combine work and non-work obligations.

Hypotheses

A diagram of the proposed research model is shown in Figure 1. Gender, family structure (depicted as number of adults and number of dependents in household), and organiza-
tional support are independent variables proposed to directly affect perceived level of stress. Stress is proposed to directly affect the outcome variables: quality of work and non-work life. The following sections describe the variables and related hypotheses.

Gender

With telecommuting seen as a way to combine work and family, it is important to determine whether gender will have any effect on the telecommuter’s perceived stress. Roles that society deems to be ‘acceptable’ for males and females may result in undue stress if individuals are performing tasks outside of these traditional roles.

There is some research that provides comparisons between men and women telecommuters. Kohler, Moran, and Tansey (1988) feel that women have more non-work roles to perform than men which could lead to greater conflict. Fast and Frederick (1996) also report that options that are supposed to be “family-friendly,” including telecommuting, are often more stressful for women than working the traditional forty-hour work week. In their study of the effects of telecommuting and gender on work/family conflict, deLay, Ayman, and LoVerde (1997) found that women reported greater conflict than their male counterparts.

Traditional gender roles appear to partly explain why women in households with children have higher perceived levels of stress than their male counterparts. Women are now devoting time to careers, but are still responsible for the majority of household and family responsibilities. Therefore, in households with children present, it appears that female telecommuters will perceive higher levels of stress than male telecommuters.

Because only four of the family structures being examined have children, it is also important to look at those family structures without children. Huws, Korte, and Robinson (1990) found that in the case of single telecommuters, social isolation was found to be higher in women. Therefore, it appears that even without children present, women perceive more stress than men. The preceding evidence supports the first hypothesis:

H1: Female telecommuters will perceive higher levels of stress than their male counterparts.

The Presence of Dependents in the Household

Telecommuting is perceived as a way to combine both work and dependent care (Van Sell & Jacobs, 1994). Most often, dependents are children in a household, but there is also the possibility of elder care. By working at home, the perception arises that telecommuters are able to produce work for their organization and watch over their dependents simultaneously. Many researchers have found this perception to be false.

Kraut (1987) cites telecommuters who state that having children make them less likely to want to work at home and to believe that they could do it successfully. In a study on home/work stress and social support, Ray and Miller (1994) found that “participants with children ... were particularly vulnerable to home/work stress” (p. 357). The above discussion results in the following hypothesis:

H2: Telecommuters living in households with dependents will perceive higher levels of stress than telecommuters living in households without dependents irrespective of gender.

The Presence of Other Adults in the Household

In examining the presence of other adults in the household, the presence of dependents will play a major part. Therefore, the discussion of other adults in the household will be discussed in two sections: situations in which there are dependents in the household and situations in which there are none present.

Other Adults Present in the Household, No Dependents Present

If there are no dependents in the household, either the telecommuter is living alone or there are other adults in the household. As Olson (1983) points out, the single telecommuter may seem to have the ideal situation because there will be no distractions from others. In spite of this lack of distractions however, single telecommuters may have increased stress due to social isolation.

Huws, Korte, and Robinson (1990) found social isolation to be a big disadvantage of single telecommuters. In their study, single telecommuters quit working at home because of their need for social interaction. Kraut (1987) found that having a spouse lead individuals to want to work at home. Other adults in the household may provide some of the social contact needed for telecommuters to successfully work at home. It appears, therefore, that telecommuters with other adults (and