

Telework – a chance to balance professional-life and family-life¹

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Flexible working forms in the information society

By developing to an information society, employment becomes flexible on the level of time, place, and organization. A national and international reorganization of division of labor will start within and between enterprises, organizations, and administrations. Due to the rapid progress of information- and telecommunication-technologies, conventional working forms will further develop: The flexibility of working hours and telework will increase in different forms. Telework is defined as employment with the aid of information- and telecommunication services outside the conventional company workplace. As such, continuous full-time employment in offices or factories, which is based on strict schedules will be a thing of the past for many employees. Nowadays, this future perspective is undisputedly expected to come true.

According to a current study of the investigation enterprise 'empirica'², six million people throughout the 15 EC states were regular teleworkers in 1999. They worked at least once a week outside their central office being connected with their employers or customers by computers and telecommunication services. Further three million people are so-called 'supplementary' teleworkers, defined as working at home less than one day per week. As a result, 4% -in a narrow sense- and 6% -in a broad sense- of European workforce were teleworkers in 1999. In Germany, 1,5 million people -which is 4,4% of total workforce- are regular teleworkers (working at home at least one day per week). This percentage is composed by home-based telework (comprising permanent telework and alternating telework), mobile telework, and self-employed telework with nearly 1,5% in each case. In addition, this number was joined by further 570.000 supplementary teleworkers – which is 1,6% of total employees. As such, the growth rate is very high. In the near future, the rise in number of further teleworkers is to be expected.

Carried on, it means that telework's characteristics of flexible location and timing with the aid of information and telecommunication services will be an essential element of many employment contracts. As such, what today is only an abstract definition of 'telework' will be a standardized part of employment in the near future. Consequently, the term 'telework' will recede into the background as it happened before in the same way to the vogue word 'Bildschirmarbeit' in the 80ies. But telework accelerates a fundamental change in professional-life. The more telework moves from a separate position in professional-life to a standard element in a growing number of businesses, the more important become two issues: what are the consequences of changes in professional-life on gender's interaction and how could we influence it positively. Regardless of engaging in alternating or permanent telework, the consequences of any form of telework are obvious: telework dissolves old-fashioned boundaries between typical men's paid employment for mainly working in enterprises and typical women's unpaid housework and child care. But, what are the consequences of this development for the division of labor formerly determined by gender hierarchy? And how do telework's male and female pioneers handle this new situation? These issues constitute large fields of research in gender studies and are just in their very beginnings. Today, this new develop-

¹ English translation of: Winker, Gabriele; Maus, Bettina: Telearbeit – Chancen für eine bessere Integration beruflicher und familiärer Lebensbereiche. In: FIFF-Kommunikation 4/2000, S.53-57

² cf. empirica: Benchmarking Telework in Europe 1999 (GPS), www.empirica.de/ecatt/indexresultsnww.html

ment reconnected working at home with economic, sociological, and even technical investigations, whereas before, working at home used to be omitted by the academic 'main- and malestream'. Now, in the management's point of view, productivity of work is associated with telework: according to many investigations, telework definitely increases productivity.³ Moreover, how to rate all opportunities offered by telework, which are promised especially to women? Certainly, telework is promoted ever since as a chance to balance professional-life and family-life, but what this better integration looks like in everyday-life, was hardly investigated empirically so far. However, the more telework is considered to be an important technical and operational rationalization strategy by more and more enterprises, the less women engage in telework.

According to the investigation of 'empirica' (mentioned above), in Europe the percentage of women who engaged in regular telework reached barely about 20%. As such, the male percentage constitutes the evident majority of teleworkers throughout the EC. Men not only engaged in mobile telework and self-employed telework but they also engaged in home-based telework. Whereas in Germany, the female percentage of home-based teleworkers reached 34%.⁴ The low rate of female teleworkers can be explained due to a very small rate of part-time employment throughout the EC, whereas women are basically underrepresented in domains where a high rate of telework is to be found: in large scale enterprises and management functions.

So far, in the region Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg the percentage of women engaging in alternating telework is much higher. This region is the focus of the research project "Telework. A chance to balance professional life with family life?" aiming to investigate professional-life and everyday-life of female and male teleworkers. The region Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg lies in Baden-Württemberg, Germany and is regarded as a representative example of a rural region, in which the realization of telework just starts to develop. By analyzing face-to-face interviews of this region and making a quantitative survey about 214 teleworkers throughout Baden-Württemberg, the research project investigates whether or not home-based telework enables to balance paid employment and unpaid housework and childcare. The research project does not only give descriptive results, but even develops concrete requirements of organization to obtain an optimal shape of telework, which is necessarily family adequate. The project is sponsored by Baden-Württemberg's Department of social affairs; it started up in May 1999 and will take two years. As following, the first results of the qualitative interviews and the foremost trends of the quantitative survey will be discussed.⁵

Appearance of telework in rural regions

First of all, it has to be remarked that the new working form telework is not very common in the rural region Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg yet. All in all, we found approximately 140 home-based teleworkers⁶ in this region. In the region Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg, 217.200 people were employed in 1999.⁷ But carried on, when taking over the average percentage of 1,5% home-based teleworkers, consequently there should be 3200 teleworkers in this region. Even though we could

³ cf. and others; Godehardt, Birgit: Telearbeit. Rahmenbedingungen und Potentiale, Opladen 1994; Glaser, Wilhelm / Glaser, Margrit: Telearbeit in der Praxis. Psychologische Erfahrungen mit Außerbetrieblichen Arbeitsstätten bei der IBM Deutschland GmbH, Neuwied, Kriftel, Berlin 1995; Kordey, Norbert / Korte, Werner B.: Telearbeit erfolgreich realisieren, Braunschweig, Wiesbaden 1996

⁴ empirica: Benchmarking Telework in Europe 1999 (GPS), S.49f

⁵ further information about this research project on www.telechance.de

⁶ Home-based telework includes telework and alternating telework, concerning employees and self-employed in both cases.

⁷ Baden-Württembergs State Office for Statistical Data, Mikrozensus 1999.

not make representative survey in the region Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg, one can definitely say that the average percentage of 1,5% is not reached at all in this case. We suppose that in this region, telework only reaches about 0,3% of total employment.

There are only few branches in the region Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg, in which telework is to be found: on first position of the ranking of branches introducing telework is the computer branch with 38% of established telework, the producing business represents with 24% the second position of this ranking, and then at last the media and publishers with 10%. All other branches provide telework only rarely.

There are only very few enterprises in this region, which provide telework as an operational strategy in order to increase productivity. The explanations for the fact few enterprises providing telework are as following: the first reason is the structure of trade, which is rarely orientated by services; the second reason is the structure of enterprises comprising only few large scale enterprises; the third reason is to find in the rural structure of the region. Moreover, established enterprises of the computer branch reached an average of only three telework places; enterprises of producing business provided even less than two telework places.

As such, those people engaging in telework, enforced telework in their enterprise by themselves. That is why we distinguish between *employer-induced* telework and *employee-induced* telework: today, *employer-induced* telework is advancing especially in large scale enterprises of the computer branch but this branch is rarely represented in rural regions. In the case of *employee-induced* telework, there are some employees who consider it to be a new opportunity of balancing professional-life and family-life in a more individual way.

Ameliorated co-ordination in timing of family-life and professional-life

Teleworking female and male pioneers can be divided into two groups: firstly, mothers balancing out family-life and professional-life on a level of equal priority; they engage in telework -especially part-time telework- to co-ordinate requirements of both domains with the advantage of more flexibility in timing. Secondly, there is a group of full-time working men who focus on work – but in case they have children, they participate more in childcare when engaging in telework.

Housework and employment cannot be done at the same time, even telework will not change this fact. Due to a lack of take care for children in school and kindergarten, female teleworkers who got interviewed by us organize person who look for their children on a private level as kinship, nanny, or aupair girl. By engaging in telework, mothers succeed to adapt a flexible timing between professional requirements and as well foretelling as ad hoc family requirements. Being present at home, give mothers the security to be there when their children need them in exceptional situations. The mother's presence is needed especially in the case when the child or a relative is ill, moreover she has to be present when the person who usually looks for the children is not available at that time.

Frequently mentioned advantages such as 'flexible timing' and 'adaptation of working hours on one's personal rhythm' do not come true in the case of being mother. A mother's run of the day is dominated by the family's needs: "He [her son] is very often ill. Even though his infections are usually not severe, he can't go to kindergarten. As a consequence, I can't work in the morning except of some urgent phone calls. But I can't sit in front of the computer and do my job, I have to do this in the evening."

Especially mothers of infants or very young children usually work in the evening when the child is sleeping (very often they work until 11 p.m.), or they work at the weekend when their husband or companion takes care for the children. Our quantitative survey shows that over 60% of all teleworkers do not finish their work at 7 p.m. but work even later than that. Over 50% of all teleworkers work on Saturday and over 40% work on Sunday. As such, the rate of mothers working on Sunday is extreme high.

Even though working hours shift into the evening, women see telework in a positive way. Due to telework, women can maintain the continuity of work in their curriculum vitae and uphold their qualifications. But first essential for family adequate, alternating telework, teleworkers are allowed to decide themselves when and where to work. They should be able to change the workplace and vary working hours immediately, when incidental situations in the family occur.

New steps towards men taking care for children

Men and women with children differ in their motives when engaging in telework: men's motives are such as shorter commuter hours and the opportunity of concentration when working undisturbed at home. We have some indications that men in telework take more care for the children and are closer to the family, although their prior motive used to be different before. One male teleworker described very detailed how it used to be before he engaged in telework when he came back home after work in the evening: he had to deal with problems of everyday-life, such as correcting the children's assignments, conflicts in and out of the family and so on. He said he felt attacked by it due to his long working day. To participate in family-life meant to him stress and overcharge. But today, he experiences these discussions in a different way, since he spends more time with his family due to mutual meals, he feels closer involved in family-life. Now, he feels needed by his family instead of overcharged:

“The fixed timing of my day used to bother me. When I would come back home at 7 p.m. suddenly I got confronted with problems or interactions in the family, it just stressed me out. I would be hungry, and sometimes I stopped on my way back home just to buy something to eat, because I couldn't stand confrontations when being hungry. It used to be hard to handle all this in a short evening.”

Consequently, our quantitative survey reflects these changes in life experiences: since fathers engaged in telework, they realize obviously more changes in interaction with their children than women do. About 50% of male teleworkers say that they communicate more with their children as they did before they were teleworkers. Whereas women are used to be involved in their children's life, teleworking fathers participate more and more in their children's life i.e. correcting assignments, playing together, doing sports, and putting the children to bed etc.

Due to their gender role, women used to be exclusively responsible for childcare and housework: now teleworking mothers even strengthen their traditional gender role, whereas teleworking fathers could continuously change gender roles by experiencing childcare and taking responsibilities.

However, less obvious are changes concerning teleworking men doing housework. Men still neither iron nor clean the house. Though it is noticeable that at least about 20% of male teleworkers declare that in their relationship both partners would equally do housework or the male part would do even more. As such, housework obviously remains to be a women's domain. But since men

work at home, the trend moves towards men doing more housework. This is also the case in traditional relationships, in which the (married) woman as usual does the major part of housework.

Pioneers introducing future models

Some realistic future models already exist, equalizing formerly typical gender-specific responsibilities in housework and childcare. One of our interviews was a couple, both reduced working hours to 60% of full-time employment in alternating telework. Their lifestyle aimed at equality, which is not that easily to transfer into everyday-life.

Our quantitative survey showed that this couple is not an exception. In 20% of our cases both partners were engaged in telework. In this group are exceptionally many couples dividing housework on an equal level or even the male partner doing unconventionally more housework and childcare. When the wife is working, the husband takes care for the children. This lifestyle is possible a.o. because he is obviously more often employed in part-time. The extremely high representation of these pioneers in our investigation is to be explained by these pioneers –also called ‘early adopters’- being open-minded and interested in new working forms and ways of life. As such, on the one hand, one should not conclude that an equal division of housework is automatically obtained by engaging in telework. But, on the other hand, it is to say that telework offers new opportunities for open-minded couples to obtain an equal division of housework.

Blurred boundaries between professional-life and family-life

All interviews made clear that paid employment and unpaid housework got merged when being engaged in alternating telework. Due to doing housework and home-based telework in the same location, one can hardly say when working hours are finished of and houseworks starts up and vice versa. Most of the interviewed female and male teleworkers prefer this missing boundary, whereas literature about telework complains especially about this missing boundary.⁸

“I mean, a family is a kind of flat-sharing community, one should take care for. Because we don’t have that much time for each other and we don’t want to reduce our family-life to just one single hour per day where everyone of us has got time. Therefore, it is easier and more relaxed to merge family-life and professional-life. The only disadvantage is when you can’t separate family-life and professional-life in the case it would be necessary. Well, I think this merging is much better. Everything in life is connected with other things, it is like a tooth system. I think it is better to cope with it instead of separating things in life.”

In the quantitative survey too, almost no interviewed teleworker complained the merging of professional-life and family-life. In the contrary, the merging was considered to be a positive aspect of alternating telework.

Increase in unpaid overtime

In the region Schwarzwald-Baar-Heuberg, telework is exclusively offered to employees, who worked for the enterprise for years. As such, those who become teleworkers consider it to be an honorable mark of confidence and consequently they are very ambitious to do their best. As such,

⁸ Textbooks of some Federal Departments even contain suggestions to keep a dress code for each domain (‘job wear’ vs. ‘leisure wear’) to avoid merging professional-life and private life. (cf. Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Sozialordnung, Bundesministerium für Wirtschaft, Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft, Forschung und Technologie (ed.): Telearbeit. Ein Leitfaden für die Praxis, Bonn 1998, S.26f.)

these teleworkers react in a very flexible way to the enterprise's needs and even do unpaid work in addition to their official working hours:

“Sometimes I work on Saturday when the office needs my work urgently. That's okay. I think, my enterprise gives me the advantage of flexible work conditions when my boss says: ‘You don't have to be present in the enterprise, you can work whenever you want to, but important is that you hand in your work in time and nobody will complain.’ In return, I co-operate with my boss and I say: “Okay, then I work even on Saturday, but naturally I do not ask for more money.”

Teleworkers do not complain concerning the increase in unpaid overtime. Moreover, they consider to be formerly paid work as now being non-work, which is one more reason for unpaid overtime. Such kind of non-work is i.e. cleaning the home office, important informal and personal contact with fellow workers.

The increase in unpaid overtime is impressively mentioned in ‘empirica's’ study: 50% of non-teleworkers throughout the EC work more per week than they have to according to their employment contract, whereas about 80% of teleworkers work more per week than they have to. Our investigation confirmed this discrepancy, too: in Baden-Württemberg, approximately 80% of teleworkers work more than they have to, whereas 56% of non-teleworkers throughout Germany work more than they have to.⁹ However, these studies do not show reasons for this phenomena.

It is important to take serious obviously unpaid overtime, as shown in the study of ‘empirica’, which was done throughout the EC, and which was shown in our proper investigation. But most important is, to avoid teleworkers’ unpaid overtime – in other words self exploitation- so that by telework private life will not be subordinated to operational criteria of efficiency. Higher time stress can be counteract by organized and continuous exchange of experience between teleworkers, i.e. labor-unions could organize collective communication.

Further training is important, too –in our investigation, 75% of interviewed teleworkers asked for it. They were especially interested in technical know-how and soft skills, i.e. skills to work independently, skills to organize everyday-life, time management, training on communication, cooperation and assertiveness. According to Voß and Pongratz, psychological advice and job guidance can prevent self exploitation.¹⁰

New ways of breaks, time for further training, sabbaticals, and vacations should develop as well. The more employment becomes flexible, the more different ways of individual breaks should become important.

Finally, one should take serious the growing need of operational and co-operational requirements in telework. They could be improved by information- and telecommunication services. Studies easily ignore the higher difficulty of managing professional-life and private life. That is why information- and telecommunication services are exclusively applied in professional-life, whereas in private life the development and use of these services is not very common, i.e. using calendars.¹¹ This is one more reason to integrate gender studies in information- and telecommunication sciences.

⁹ cf. Bundesmann-Jansen, Jorg; Groß, Hermann; Munz, Eva: Arbeitszeit '99, Köln 2000, p. 47.

¹⁰ cf. Voß, Günter G.; Pongratz, Hans J.: Der Arbeitskraftunternehmer. Eine neue Grundform der „Ware Arbeitskraft“?. In: Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, 50, Heft 1, 1998, p.152

¹¹ cf. Winker, Gabriele: Geschlechterverhältnis und vernetzte Systeme. In: Zeitschrift für Frauenforschung, 17.Jg., Heft 1+2/99, p.9-25

Aiming at individual sovereignty of time and location

The goal to reach in the near future should be to mix up work conditions of teleworkers and non-teleworkers. To aim at individual flexibility of time and place means that mainly the employee and not his employer balances out personal requirements with the aid of information- and telecommunication services: individual flexibility of time is given when employees influence distribution and length of time according to their personal requirements; in the same way, individual flexibility of place is given when employees decide independently where they want to work i.e. at home, with the customer, in the office, in the telecenter. Our research project's future vision of telework is similar to interviewed teleworkers' demand for the right to do telework: more than 75% of interviewed teleworkers wish for an individual right of telework, except of the case enterprises are not able to offer it because of organisational objections.

Due to individual flexibility of place, pros and cons of a final decision for telework are superfluous: every employee gets the opportunity to decide of his own whether or not, when, and for how long he wants to work at home. Then, home-based employment could be applied according to different kind of life situations i.e. for a longer period of time or for only a few days when children or relatives are ill.

To reach this aim, the prerogative right of telework for all employees has to be enforced by labor legislative, except of the case enterprises are not able to offer it because of management objections. This could be done in accordance with the right of part-time employment during motherhood vacations, which was prescribed by law for enterprises with more than 15 employees in Germany. The concept of individual flexibility of place would overstep the current concept of 'voluntary' telework: until now, 'voluntary' telework is only agreed by the enterprise, when its management decided whether or not, to whom, and when telework can be provided.

Summing up, it may be said that merging public employment and private housework offers opportunities to call in challenge traditional gender roles and to develop new ways of life. However, to meet these requirements, firstly, the increase of unpaid overtime must be counteract, secondly, conditions of telework must no longer be determined by enterprises' management but conditions of telework must be conceived by teleworkers according to their individual requirements.