Flexwork in Canada: Coping with Dis-Ease?

Whole Lives Stream
CMS Conference July 13-15th, 2009

By

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Changes in organizational processes and practices and technological innovation have given rise to a diverse menu of work arrangements which fall under the larger category of ‘flexible work practices’, e.g. flextime, flexwork, a compressed work week, telecommuting and remote working (Johnson et al. 2007; Tietze 2005; Towers et al. 2006; Tremblay et al. 2006). The term ‘flexwork’ is adopted here because it was used by the organization at the centre of this study to describe the particular work practice described and explored here.

Flexwork is one example of the broader category of ‘telecommuting’ practices comprising “any policies and practices, formal or informal, which permit people to vary when and where work is carried out” (Maxwell et al. 2007: 138). It is a situation where, like telecommuting, “workers are given (opportunities) to work from home rather than reporting to a centralized office location” on a daily basis (Shia & Monroe 2006:456). The participants in the study regularly work from home two or more days a week and are, therefore, part of the growing number of employees who are conducting some portion of their work outside the traditional space of a designated office (Baruch 2001; Tietze 2002; Tietze & Musson 2003). Indeed, they form part of what Moos and Skaburskis describe as one of the most important trends in workplaces today (2007).

While an increasing number of employees are engaged in some form of teleworking, finding exact numbers can be challenging because it can take many different forms, ranging from the flexwork described in this paper to home-based ‘piece work’ and/or work done in satellite offices (Tremblay, 2002; Tremblay et al. 2006). Definitional and quantification challenges notwithstanding, Moos and Skaburskis (2007) cite estimates of approximately ten per cent of the workforce in the US, Europe and Canada, with expectations of further increases, particularly among professional, technical and middle managers (Johnson et al. 2007; Moos & Skaburskis 2007). A recent study of three large Canadian cities (Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver) has reported that 3.9% of employed adults between 15 and 74 years old work at home for pay, representing 6% of the labour
force in the respective cities (Moos & Skaburskis 2007). The same study also found that business and other services had the largest number of homeworkers followed by finance, insurance and real estate (Moos & Skaburskis 2007: 1788). According to Schweitzer and Duxbury, however, “research on Canadian teleworkers is particularly scarce” (2006:116). Thus, this paper will address this gap by exploring the experiences of seventy six Canadian flexworkers. In addition it will attend to the call to “collect more qualitative data on these work arrangements” (Schweitzer & Duxbury 2006: 116).

Focusing on Canada as the ‘host’ country for the study at the centre of this paper, there has been a growing interest in telework and alternative working arrangements amongst Canadian researchers and particularly their impact on work-life balance and work-family conflict (see, for example, Korabik et al. 2008; Lanoie et al. 2001; Schweitzer & Duxbury 2006; Tremblay 2002; Tremblay et al. 2006). Tremblay et al. (2006) have explored increases in working from home and whether motivations to do so are driven by family concerns and responsibilities. Other Canadian studies have explored individual experiences of telework, the perceived implications for men versus women and the ‘blurring’ of boundaries between work and home domains (see, for example, Johnson et al. 2007; Tremblay 2002). These foci reflect similar trends in the US and Europe where, for example, Kelliher and Anderson (2008) have explored how teleworkers negotiate and manage their time, suggesting that they were likely to move fairly seamlessly between fulfilling the demands of home and work. Tietze (2002) has also explored the coping strategies that teleworkers use to manage their respective work arrangements and responsibilities more effectively, whereas Harris’s study of a ‘work from home initiative’ stressed the need to ensure perceived ‘mutual gain’ (Harris 2003: 232) and described how teleworkers (particularly men with young children) faced challenges in marking out the boundaries between work and home responsibilities because they had to renegotiate both their time and personal space.

Employers offering opportunities to work from home are frequently characterized as socially responsive and ‘employee friendly’. Indeed, being able to work from home has been widely understood as one of the precursors to achieving work-life balance, having
less work-family conflict and stress and more work satisfaction (Fang & Lee, 2008; Galinsky & Backon, 2007; Kossek, 2005). Yet, there is an equally broad body of literature indicating that employers also stand to benefit from such initiatives through increased employee productivity, satisfaction and organizational commitment and reduced turnover and real-estate costs (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Bloom & Reenen, 2006; Crandall & Gao, 2005). Some researchers have also suggested that allowing employees to work from home has a positive environmental impact by reducing traffic congestion and urban pollution (Harpaz, 2002; Manoochehri & Pinkerton, 2003; Tremblay, 2003). Conversely, however, others have recommended a more cautionary approach. Tietze and Musson (2003), for example, contend that removing the boundaries between work and home, exposes the family and private domains to more economically-driven forces. Drawing on a discourse approach to understanding the potential conflict between work and home Tietze (2005) argues that because the home (or family) is a context of love and nurturing and work is a context within which making money is the primary objective, their ‘co-presence’ can create challenges for both individuals and their families.

This paper commences from the assumption that in the context of flexwork diverse professional and personal identities are more interwoven and interdependent. In this respect it echoes research on teleworkers, by positing that flexwork, like telework, creates a situation where ‘work comes home’ and is, therefore, “characterized by the meeting of two previously distinct meaning worlds” (Tietze & Musson, 2003: 442). This approach accords with other dimensions of the existent literature on teleworkers which has highlighted the connectivity between teleworking, identity construction and the development of the self (see for example Brocklehurst, 2001; Tietze, 2002). The potential connectivity between telework and identity construction has already been addressed in a study of female teleworkers in a large Canadian financial-sector firm (Johnson et al. 2007). However, that study focused specifically on gender identities and whether aspects of participants’ femininity influenced their response to home-based telework. This paper will develop a further line of enquiry by drawing on Gergen’s (1991) conception of ‘the saturation of the self’ and ‘dis-ease’ and the extent to which they might be used to understand participants’ experiences of flexwork.
The Postmodern Self: An Affirmative Approach

According to Holstein and Gubrium (2000) there are “two options for the postmodern self” (p. 56). Affirmative approaches, as reflected by Gergen (1991), adhere to a notion of the self as socially constructed and located in a world that “multiplies and hybridizes our identities” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000: 56). It is a context where the self continues to exist albeit as an evolving entity which is consistently challenged and evaluated by a multitude of experiences and interactions. However, a key point here is that the self is not ‘eliminated’ as it might be by the more radical postmodern approaches (e.g. Baudrillard, 1983). Adopting this perspective, Gergen (1991) suggests that the ever increasing demands of contemporary life have created a situation where individuals are experiencing a ‘saturation of the self’. They are pulled, he says, in ‘myriad directions’ making it increasingly difficult to maintain a sense of ‘unity’. A consequence of this lack of unity is the condition of ‘multiphrenia’ and ‘dis-ease’ where individuals struggle to meet the competing (and perhaps even contradictory) demands for attention and domination. This paper will consider the extent to which, in seeking to meet the needs of diverse identities and responsibilities, flexworkers experience ‘saturation of the self’, ‘dis-ease’ and ‘multiphrenia’. It will explore whether the flexworkers who took part in the study experienced a sense of being “pulled in myriad directions” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000: 58) as they sought to manage and satisfy the demands of what they referred to as their ‘home and work selves’. It will describe how many participants felt that being on a flexwork schedule meant that they were living their ‘work self’ in much closer proximity to their ‘home self’ and that this was a good thing. Yet, at the same time they were also implementing specific mechanisms to redraw the boundaries between their home and work self. Whilst this finding seems to reflect an element of contradiction, what is important is that they were redrawing the boundaries between the home and work self according to their own circumstances. In other words, they were customizing the boundaries according to their individual circumstances. Indeed, echoing themes described in the call for papers for this stream, they described the blurring of boundaries between
their personal identities, roles and experiences and those of their professional lives as a positive experience because it meant that they could redesign the boundaries between them, which allowed them to live “fuller” more “holistic” lives.

While maintaining a predominantly exploratory stance, this paper considered the following questions:

- How useful are conceptions of a ‘home’ self and a ‘work’ self for understanding participants’ experiences of flexwork?
- How useful are conceptions of ‘saturation of the self’ and ‘dis-ease’ for understanding participants’ experiences of flexwork?
- How do participants’ satisfy the responsibilities of different ‘selves’ that are likely to evolve in the context of flexwork?

**Data collection**

**Sampling**

The sample comprised seventy six flex workers who were working from home, subject to their manager’s approval, two or more days per week. They had all been provided with a laptop and IT support which enabled them to work from home, or elsewhere, and to communicate with their manager, colleagues and customers. The sample was self-selected where an invitation to participate in the study was circulated by the employer throughout the head office (just under three thousand people are based in this office). Participants were invited to contact the researcher directly to set up a time for interview, or to clarify further details about the study. One hundred and thirty eight employees volunteered to take part. Due to time and financial restrictions, seventy six interviews were conducted each lasting roughly 45 minutes to one hour.

Demographic details of the sample are presented in Appendix 1. In order to provide a general overview a few features of the sample will be noted here. First, interviewees are distributed widely across the organization, which provides a broader range of perspectives and experiences. Fifty participants used ‘hot desks’ as they did not have a
permanent desk in the organization. ‘Hot desking’ was an arrangement where participants make use of a specific desk/work cubicle when they come into the office but only on a temporary basis. The sample reflects a broad range of tenure at the organization, from less than one year to over ten years, thus providing views from those with extensive ‘corporate memory’ and more recent employees. Over half of interviewees did not have a managerial or leadership role whereas 27 did. Participants were spread across all age groups: from 20-25 to 56+, although a majority was in the 36-50 age range. A majority also had one or more children currently living at home.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and ‘coded’ according to the principles of template analysis (King 2004) and using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. This involved creating lists of ‘nodes’ representing themes contained in the data. Some of the themes such as blurred boundaries between home and work responsibilities, managing multiple identities/selves, and impact of technology on participants experience of flexwork were identified apriori from the existent literature on flexible work practices and teleworking. While these nodes presented a useful starting point, it was important that the apriori themes did not become a ‘conceptual grid’ (Atkinson 1992: 459). Therefore, others such as maintaining a ‘visible professional self’ and the perceived implications for career advancement, creating rules/mechanisms for interaction with family members and the ‘learning curve’ of flexwork emerged from the data. Parallel coding captured the overlap and connections between themes and thus enhanced validity. Once analysis was complete, the final list of nodes was entirely data driven. As analysis progressed it was possible to identify dominant and subsidiary themes – thus, for example, ‘maintaining a visible professional self’ emerged as a dominant theme because it was mentioned extensively by the majority of participants, it could also be broken down into further subsidiary themes such as ‘maintaining a visible professional self’ for relationships with managers’ and ‘maintaining a visible professional self’ for relationships with peers’ and ‘connections with career advancement’. Coding reports identified which participants etc had ‘contributed’ most (or least) to specific nodes.
Limitations

Although self-selection may attract individuals who have an agenda of complaints or praise, analysis of the findings suggests that this was not the case here. Indeed, most accounts had both positive and negative themes. Whereas focusing on one particular company allows an in-depth insight and is instructive as a case study, the findings may not be generalizable to other organizations/flexworkers. First, they may not be applicable to smaller organizations or organizations in other countries because empirical studies have found significant cross cultural differences in managers support for telework (Peters & Den Dulk 2003). Second, while the study is based in Canada, it does not necessarily reflect the experiences of other Canadian flexworkers because policies and procedures for managing flexworkers in this particular organization may be very different to those used in other organizations in Canada. Indeed, the VP and AVP of HR said that the organization had developed their own approach to flexworking according to their specific organizational culture. Third, the organization at the centre of this study is technology-based and has extensive expertise to support flexworking. Indeed, that it is able to support teams of flexworkers sets it apart from other organizations which tend to use more individualized teleworking arrangements (Tremblay 2002).

FINDINGS

Managing Multiple Selves in a Context of Blurred Boundaries

The notion of having a ‘home self’ and a ‘work self’ emerged in all interviews. The majority of participants indicated that the advantage of flexwork is that it allows the home and work self to operate in closer proximity. Similarly, all of the participants in this study described how flexwork created a situation where they might be required to play a variety of roles simultaneously. This notion of living both the home and work self at once, or at least in closer proximity, was closely connected with the belief that in the context of flexwork, like telework, the boundaries between home and work become blurred. However, rather than seeing this dimension of flexwork as problematic, the
majority of participants believed that it added something to, rather than detracted something from, their lives.

Yet, whilst the majority of participants felt that having a flexwork arrangement was a positive experience because it blurred the boundaries between home and work, they also expressed some concern about the extent to which it might impact on their ‘sense of direction’ or purpose. Some participants also talked about the risk of being ‘overwhelmed’ by the need to manage and satisfy their responsibilities to their work and home selves simultaneously rather than in, what one participant described as, a ‘more compartmentalized way’. These descriptions have some synergy with Gergen’s (1991) notion of living all our selves at once and the subsequent potential of ‘saturation of the self’ and ‘dis-ease’. In particular the accounts suggested that some participants felt that during the initial stages of a flexwork arrangements they did feel as though they were living both the home and work self at the same time. Moreover, for some, this did give rise to feelings of being overwhelmed or saturated by the respective demands and responsibilities of those selves. Yet, as noted above, there was also an interesting contradiction where many participants indicated that they had requested a flexible work schedule precisely in order to reduce or eliminate the boundaries between their home and work selves. Put another way, they had requested a flexible work schedule so that they could ‘live all their lives at once’ or, as one participant put it, ‘operate in a more holistic fashion’. Indeed, there was widespread agreement that eliminating (or at least ‘blurring’) those boundaries would allow them to be more productive and effective in multiple domains of their lives. Yet, as noted above, there was also a strong sense that when they started out with a flexwork schedule many participants also struggled with a sense of ‘dis-ease’ precisely because those boundaries had been eliminated or blurred, and precisely because they were living their work and homes selves at once. Jean, for example, describes her own adjustment and subsequent approaches to being on a flexible work arrangement:

When I started out, I’d vacuum or do my laundry (whilst on a conference call) but you cannot do that and remain focused. I couldn't, so I had to structure my day and some of my colleagues told me you have to structure your day if
you're working from home just like you were going to the office and that's what I started to do and that's where I'm finding my success. The only thing is that I carry that throughout my day. So I have to remember to shut-off at a certain time. (Jean)

Jean’s description of the need to ‘remain focused’ and ‘shut stuff off’ reflects the challenges that she and many other participants had faced in seeking to maintain a sense of direction by redrawing the boundaries between their home and work selves. Their descriptions of this challenge and how they managed it also reflected Gergen’s concern about the consequences of being “pulled in myriad directions at the same time” (Holstein & Gubrium: 58). Reflecting on his own experience as an academic, for example, Gergen (1991) describes feeling overwhelmed by the multiple demands of his professional and personal life ranging from demands from publishers, students, administrative staff and colleagues to responsibilities to friends requiring ‘relational time’ (1991:1).

Despite the potential danger of becoming ‘unfocused’ during the early stages of a flexwork arrangement, the majority of participants reported that as they gained experience with flexible work schedules they learned to manage their multiple roles and their respective ‘selves’ in order to avoid some of the characteristics of ‘dis-ease’ and ‘saturation of the self’ that Gergen (1991) has described. Mechanisms for managing the different demands included, for example, taking steps to ensure that one ‘self’ and its respective role/s and responsibilities were accorded the requisite amount of attention albeit not at the expense of ‘another self’. As a further note here, the majority of participants felt that some managers (and organizations) resist flexwork initiatives through fear of the ‘home self’ being accorded more importance (and hence more time and energy) then the ‘work self’. However, the findings of this study suggest that such fears may be unfounded because all participants, including those with children, had created strategies to ensure that they fulfilled their work roles and responsibilities. Moreover, there was widespread evidence to suggest that unless such strategies were adopted then they would, indeed, feel a strong sense of ‘dis-ease’. In this respect we see how they were creating mechanisms for avoiding the ‘dis-ease’ of not being able to fulfill the needs of their ‘work selves’. Tina, a senior sales manager, for example, described
how she had introduced a rule in her household that if she was working in the basement her children had to play in their bedrooms so as not to disturb her. Her concern was to focus on fulfilling the responsibilities of her ‘work self’ rather than being distracted by those of her ‘home self’. Similarly, Michael described having to ‘lay down some ground rules’ for his family:

My kids and wife would think that I'm working from home so it's like "let's go shopping!" I had to make a point of saying - you know, this is work time and this is personal time. (Michael)

On a related theme, virtually all interviewees with small children (aged between 1 and five years) used childcare facilities when they are working from home in order to engage fully with their ‘work self’. Several interviewees (males and females) were at pains to emphasize that although working from home allows parents to spend more time with children, having access to childcare outside of the home is still essential. Therefore, rather than succumbing to ‘dis-ease’ the participants in this study have devised mechanisms in order to avoid it.

As noted above, the majority of participants described their concern to accord each ‘self’ what they believed was the requisite amount of attention. This included both avoiding a situation where the ‘home self’ “took over” at the expense of the ‘work self’, but also preventing the ‘work self’ from dominating which would mean that they were “working all the time”. This concern was closely connected with a fairly widespread desire to maintain what was described as ‘work-life’ balance – in this case understood as a balance between the ‘work self’ and the ‘home self’.

Many participants took a task-oriented approach to the creation and implementation of mechanisms for satisfying the needs of work and home. They identified what they felt were the specific skills or competencies for managing flexwork effectively. ‘Effective management’ was generally understood as fulfilling their responsibilities to both their home and work selves i.e. to their employer and to their families and the private/home domain. Whilst a number of skills or competencies were identified, ‘time management
skills’ emerged as the most important. Participants like Jane and Melanie, for example, believed that time management was essential in order to maintain a sense of balance but also to maintain what the majority described as ‘focus and direction’:

You definitely have to have time management skills, I think it's very important and you have to try and be an organized person because you no longer have an office to keep your paper-work in or stuff like that. I guess I've now reduced my paper load because I now keep everything electronically and I guess multi-tasking. (Jane)

Self-discipline and organizational skills, thinking carefully about ‘what am I going to do today, during what time?’. You know, being able to prioritize, prioritize between certain types of work that you need to get done throughout the week and what you can do when you're working from home most effectively. (Melanie)

‘Effective planning’ was also seen as another skill required for flexwork, as suggested by Penny, below:

One of the things you have to do is thinking ahead. ‘Ok, who am I going to meet? Where am I going to be working tomorrow, is it home? Is it the regular office? Is it the other office?’ and then ‘What am I going to need for that day?’ So I'll be thinking a couple of days ahead. I think beyond that, I've really gotten organized on my email and my planning, so that I know what has to be done and when. (Penny)

It is notable here that Penny adopts a very specific strategy in order to avoid being overwhelmed by the blurring of boundaries between her home and work selves and their respective responsibilities. There is a strong sense here that she (and many other participants) was aware of the potential of ‘dis-ease’. Indeed, as already noted above, some participants described feelings of being overwhelmed when they first started out on a flexwork schedule because they had a sense that they were living both their home and work selves at once. That planning one’s time effectively emerged in the majority of interviews suggests that this is something which may be essential in order to avoid the sense of ‘dis-ease’ that arises when work and home selves operate in closer proximity.
What is particularly interesting here is how these participants are explicitly stressing a need for order and separation of the ‘work and home self’ even though many had requested a flexible work schedule precisely so that the boundaries between them might be more blurred. For example, Penny stressed the need to plan ahead in order that she could fulfill the responsibilities of her work self. However, later in her interview she also accorded equal importance to planning her home life and responsibilities towards her family. The process of planning described by Penny, and others, reflected a clear concern to avoid what many described as the ‘confusion’ and ‘chaos’ of trying to live one’s whole life at once. Yet, Penny and many other participants had also reported requesting a flexwork schedule in order to live a more ‘holistic’ life where home and work were not operating as two separate domains.

In addition to creating their own mechanisms, some participants felt that their employer should also take some responsibility for providing them with training and support in order to manage their home and work selves and their respective roles and responsibilities. Yet, they also said that it is ultimately a matter of personal preference because how one manages ones’ selves depends on one’s own predispositions and life circumstances, e.g. being married, having young or teenage children etc as evidenced by Seamus, below:

> I believe people see how I manage voice-mail, how I manage communications, how I manage the structure piece of it. Whether they say ‘hey, that seems to work for Seamus maybe I'll try that’, I don’t know. I think that given the complexity of our jobs and the volume of work that we're asked to contribute to I think everybody has to find out what works for them….it also depends on your own individual situation and life circumstance. (Seamus)

A key point here is that whilst some participants felt that the employer may be encouraged to offer support to help employees manage a flexwork arrangement there was a strong sense that it is ultimately up to the individual. Indeed, some participants indicated that if the employer does intervene too much in managing this process then it
detracts from the necessarily individualized nature of flexwork and may be seen as the employer ‘intruding’ into the home domain.

**Preserving the ‘Professional/Work Self’**

A dominant theme in the majority of interviews was the need to maintain what was widely understood as the ‘professional’ or ‘work self’. Just under half of the participants without managerial responsibility also emphasized the importance of ensuring the visibility of their ‘work self’ to other flexworkers, managers and office-based colleagues. A key theme in these discussions was the implications of not doing so for work performance, career opportunities and/or social networks. This finding clearly identifies other employees (be they flexworkers, managers or office-based employees) as ‘significant others’ in the sense that they are individuals, whom participants respect, want acceptance from or identify with (Richardson, 2009). Just over half of participants made a particular point of stressing the need to maintain contact with colleagues who were entirely office-based. Echoing another study of teleworkers in Canada (Tremblay, 2002), which suggested that for individuals with ‘career aspirations’ maintaining professional visibility in the office is important, fifteen participants in this study said they went into the office specifically in order to maintain ‘visibility’ for career development. Protecting the ‘work self’ involved ensuring, for example, that they were seen by office-based managers, thus identifying those managers as ‘significant others’ whom participants wanted to impress or at least gain acceptance from, as suggested by Tina, below:

> It’s the informal meetings where you talk and, you know, have a coffee with somebody. I just had a coffee with my VP of sales, today and he says “I don't really know you very well” and I thought – “mmm, not a good sign!”

Other participants, such as Rob and Michael, echoed similar themes emphasizing the importance of face-to-face contact with office-based and flexworking peers as well as with senior management as a means of preserving (and indeed promoting) their ‘work selves’:

> Another advantage of being in the office versus working from home from time to time is to be able to walk in and
check in with people and to put yourself into those social situations within the corporate community and take advantage of that. If you're working form home 100% of the time you've just removed yourself from that part of the equation. (Rob)

For me, it's important to have face-time with my manager, face-time with my peers and, in fact, sometimes maybe meet up socially when you're done. You can walk next door to somebody's office, you know, you can get a five minute coffee, talk about business and so forth. So when you have a local office versus when you are away from the office you have to find time to build that relational piece in with customers and your peers. (Michael)

The need to maintain and preserve their ‘work selves’ also arose in discussions about participants’ relationships with family members and neighbors or friends. Just over half of participants expressed concerns that flexworking could have an adverse effect on how they were viewed by family members and colleagues. The specific concern here was how family members in particular accord more importance to the ‘home self’ and its responsibilities because it is that self with which they are most familiar. Linda, for example, said that when she started flexworking her husband assumed that because she was home all day then childcare would no longer be necessary so she took deliberate steps to promote her ‘work self’ by emphasizing to him that she stayed home to meet work rather than family responsibilities. She also talked about how she had had to sit down with him and describe her work responsibilities, whereas when she was office-based she did not feel any obligation or need to do so. Len provides a further example of this theme:

My family and friends who don't have a work from home option, they don't really understand the fact that I'm actually working and people might stop by in the afternoon. Like even my dad will stop by on occasion and I'll be on a conference call for two hours and I'll have to say “look, I can't talk for two hours ….Just because I'm home, it doesn't mean that I'm accessible or have time or am working less”. (Len)
The reactions and behaviours of Len’s family and friends suggests that they are somehow unable (or unwilling) to engage fully with or at least accommodate his ‘work self’ and its respective roles and responsibilities. Connecting this finding directly with the notion of ‘dis-ease’, what we observe here is how participants like Len were concerned to protect their work self – presumably from domination by the home self. Indeed, it was the prospect of failing to preserve the work self which seems to be a potential source of ‘dis-ease’.

Technology

As noted above, all participants who took part in this study had been provided with technological support in order to allow them to work from home. Indeed, all participants indicated that most, if not all, work responsibilities can be fulfilled in the home, as suggested by Ashley, below:

There's very little that can't be done at home that can be done only at the office. We've invested substantially in technology that allows us to be able to work from home. Any application, any piece of data, anything I need, can be done so there really is no compelling reason to go into the office. (Ashley)

This finding points to the impact of technological development and the extent to which it creates situations, like flexwork, where multiple selves co-exist and must be managed simultaneously. Gergen’s (1991) notion of “technologies of saturation” provides a useful framework to understand this part of the findings. He suggests that with rapid technological development comes the potential of ‘informational overload’ and the requirement to manage different selves simultaneously. In this particular situation all employees on a flexwork schedule had access to a form of ‘instant messaging system’, e-mail and conference calls/videos. To that extent they had access to multiple sources of information and were required to participate in interactions using all mediums as an integral part of their work life. Several participants indicated that they had created mechanisms for managing how they used the technology – particularly the instant
messaging system and e-mail, specifically in order to avoid a sense of saturation as suggested by Chandra:

You have to take control of it otherwise work never ends and I guess it depends on the nature of the work you do but especially in the IT world, it's becoming more and more difficult to turn off because the technology is becoming more and more dominant in our everyday lives. So you have a blending of the personal and your business. You've got all these devices that are converging in on us.

(Chandra)

The majority of participants were acutely aware of what many referred to as the ‘danger’ of allowing e-mail to dominate their lives and in particular to how work-related e-mails could dominate and/or interfere with their personal lives. There was also a strong awareness that not managing the technology effectively (notably ensuring that their work self didn’t dominate) would create problems for their ‘home self’. In this regard we observe how technology can indeed operate as a source of dis-ease, unless it is managed appropriately.

**Conclusion and Discussion**

While the different dimensions of participants’ lives and identities may never have been (and are unlikely ever to be) completely separate (Brocklehurst, 2001) flexwork, by definition, means that employees are simultaneously challenged to manage their ‘professional’ selves as employee, salesperson, supervisor and/or manager alongside those more closely associated with the home, such as mother, father, daughter, partner etc. That each of these selves may have quite diverse characteristics, demands and responsibilities adds further to the complexity of the challenge. Drawing on Gergen’s (1991) affirmative post-modern perspective (Holstein et al., 2000) of the self, this paper has explored the extent to which flexible work practices may create a ‘saturation of the self’ culminating in a sense of ‘dis-ease’ (1991). It has also explored the strategies that individuals may use to cope with or avoid that ‘dis-ease’.
The paper has suggested that a major source of ‘dis-ease’ for the flexworkers in this study was the possibility of what Johnson (2007) refers to as “leakage of home and household into the work domain” (2007: 152). For the purposes of this particular paper, this ‘leakage’ can be broadly understood as a ‘leakage’ between the ‘work’ and ‘home’ self. The paper has reported that participants were reluctant to allow too much “leakage” between one self and another for fear that it would create problems in both their home and work domains. Whilst not denying the potential for ‘dis-ease’ in contemporary living, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) have criticized Gergen for failing to take into account that rather than living “all their circumstances at once” (p, 222) individuals “take the moral order in circumstantial doses” (p, 223). This study has reported that whilst participants opted for flexwork precisely because it blurred the boundaries between the home and work selves, during the initial stages of a flexible work arrangement that blurring caused them to feel a sense of ‘dis-ease’ because they felt emotionally, physically and psychologically in both places at once. Given this to be the case, flexwork seems to have some potential for ‘saturation of the self’ and the concomitant spiral into ‘dis-ease’. Yet, this ‘potential’ notwithstanding, in order to avoid dis-ease participants had redrawn those boundaries but in accordance with their own personal circumstances. This redrawing of boundaries meant that rather than experiencing ‘dis-ease’, most participants thrived on flexwork. Indeed, it is notable that all participants felt that they were more effective in both the work and home domains precisely because they were on a flexible work arrangement that was more attuned to their individual circumstances.

The paper has reported that the majority of participants indicated that flexwork provides them with opportunities to live their lives ‘more fully’, ‘holistically’ or ‘together’. Just over one third of participants suggested that the advantage of working from home (albeit on a part time basis) was that it allows them to construct a ‘whole life’ rather than a life which one participant described as “disjointed, flipping between home and work”, where home and work operate are more physically removed from one another. Whilst the potential for ‘dis-ease’ was acknowledged, the paper has suggested that it is most likely during the earlier stages of flexworking which was characterized by a ‘learning curve’ during which they developed the requisite ‘coping mechanisms’. The mechanisms they
described echo those used by teleworkers (Tietze, 2002, 2005; Tietze & Musson, 2003), thus demonstrating the similarities between flexworkers and teleworkers. What we can take from this finding is that while ‘saturation of the self’ and ‘dis-ease’ is a potential risk for the neophyte flexworker, it applies less to their more experienced counterpart.

Reflecting Gergen’s (1991) notion of the self as evolving and socially constructed and maintained, the paper has indicated that participants were able to “stand outside themselves” by taking on the role of the other (in this case senior managers or other ‘significant others’ in the office), which led them to actively and purposively enhance their ‘professional self’. It has also reflected Cooley’s notion (1972) of the ‘looking-glass self’ where participants looked “away from and out of” themselves to understand how they might be perceived and evaluated by others, which further impacted on their desire to maintain professional visibility by engaging in social interactions with office-based managers and colleagues. This finding reflects broader concerns about teleworkers being isolated and losing their sense of professionalism (e.g. Bailey & Kurland 2002; Baruch 2001; Crandall & Gao 2005; Harris 2003; Whitehouse et al. 2002). Echoing further the centrality of interaction in the evolution of the self, the paper has noted how participants were concerned about becoming isolated from colleagues because of the implications for career advancement and social relationships in the organization more generally – a concern that was particularly acute for new employees with limited organizational connections and networks.

Concerns about the potential problems associated with working from home notwithstanding, this paper has suggested that flexwork can be a positive experience. Moreover, whilst not denying that blurring of the boundaries between work and home can be problematic, it has suggested that it can also provide an opportunity for employees to redraw those boundaries according to their own individual circumstances and that it is this more ‘customized redrawing’ which allows them to live more holistic lives.


## Appendix 1

### Employee Status for all Participants

![Employee Status for all Participants](image)

### Number of Children for All Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Children</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Child</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Children</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three Children</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Children</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult Children</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: “Adult Children” refers to children who have left home.*

### Tenure in Host Organization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - 2 years</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 - 4 years</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 - 6 years</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 - 8 years</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 - 10 years</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>