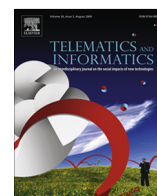




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Telematics and Informatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/tele

Mapping ICT use at home and telecommuting practices: A perspective from work/family border theory

Louis Leung^{a,*}, Renwen Zhang^b^a Centre for Communication and Public Opinion Survey, School of Journalism & Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong^b School of Journalism & Communication, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 November 2015

Received in revised form 1 June 2016

Accepted 4 June 2016

Available online 5 June 2016

Keywords:

Flexibility

ICT use

Permeability

Technostress

Telecommuting adoption

Work-family conflict

ABSTRACT

This study draws on the work/family border theory to investigate the role of information communication technology (ICT) use at home in shaping the characteristics of work/family borders (i.e. flexibility and permeability) and consequently influencing individuals' perceived work-family conflict, technostress, and level of telecommuting. Data were collected from a probability sample of 509 information workers in Hong Kong who were not self-employed. The results showed that the more that people used ICT to do their work at home, the greater they perceived their work/family borders flexible and permeable. Interestingly, low flexibility and high permeability, rather than the use of ICT at home, had much stronger influences on increasing, in particular, family-to-work conflict. As expected, work-to-family conflict was significantly and positively associated with technostress. Results also showed that the telecommuters tended to be older, had lower family incomes, used ICT frequently at home, and had a permeable boundary that allowed work to penetrate their home domain. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have largely freed employees from the restrictions of a fixed, central work place, enabling mundane tasks to be distributed across remote locations (Harrison et al., 2000). Telecommuting or telework, therefore, has become a prevalent and global practice (Davey, 2012). Telecommuting refers to a flexible work arrangement that allows employees, usually with the aid of ICTs, to perform their tasks in various locations, primarily at home (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Baruch, 2001). Studies on the effects of telecommuting and work-related ICT use at home, however, have yielded mixed results. Some contended that the flexibility in scheduling individual tasks led to increased productivity, improved job satisfaction, and work-family balance (Hill et al., 1998; Tremblay, 2002); while others argued that the connectivity of communication technologies blurred the boundaries between work domain and home domain, inducing work-family conflict and negative cognitive responses such as stress and anxiety, which is termed “technostress” (Brod, 1984; Felstead and Jewson, 2000).

The mixed results were partly due to the fact that ICT use may not have a direct influence on individuals' work and family lives, but exert effects by altering the scope of activities and performance of duties in different domains. Previous research has found that role stress, triggered by role overload and role conflict, was the most significant cause of work-family conflict and technostress (Ayyagari et al., 2011; Tarafdar et al., 2007). Individuals find it hard to balance their work and family roles

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: louisleung@cuhk.edu.hk (L. Leung), zrw1992@gmail.com (R. Zhang).

due to the excessive workload and intrusion of personal lives brought about by ICTs, which may result in job burnout, marriage breakdown, physical and mental health problems, and life dissatisfaction (Ford et al., 2007; Frone et al., 1992). Therefore, balancing work and family roles, while working at home, has become extremely crucial for telecommuters (Thatcher and Zhu, 2006).

Although role stress and reliance on technology have been identified as the primary antecedents of work-family conflict and technostress (Arnetz and Wiholm, 1997; Tarafdar et al., 2010), the mechanism through which ICTs exert impacts on work-family interface is largely unknown. The present study, therefore, fills this gap and extends previous literature by incorporating the boundaries around work and family domains into analysis. Drawing on the work/family border theory (Clark, 2000), this study investigates the role of work-related ICT use in shaping the characteristics of work/family border—flexibility and permeability—and its subsequent impact on individuals' perceived work-family conflict and technostress. The status quo and antecedents of telecommuting adoption in Hong Kong are also delineated. Understanding how ICT use shapes the border of work and family domains provides insights into the process by which conflict occurs and the way individuals navigate their work and family lives and manage the borders between them in order to strike a balance.

We now turn to review of the literature covering telecommuting and ICT use at home, work/family border theory, work-family conflict, and technostress in Section 2. Section 3 presents methodology, which includes sample and sampling procedure and measurement for each variable. Section 4 reports the results followed by a thorough discussion in Section 5 and conclusion of the study in Section 6.

2. Literature review

2.1. Telecommuting and ICT use at home

The need to foster productivity has led to the adoption of ICT in the workplace (Davey, 2012). By diminishing the spatial and temporal boundaries among different activities, ICTs largely support multitasking behaviors and aid employees in coordinating different tasks, speeding up work processes, and accomplishing projects efficiently (Cardona et al., 2013). ICT-based practices have also given rise to flexible work arrangements, such as flextime and telecommuting, which increase the amount of autonomy that employees have in their work (Hill et al., 2003).

Telecommuting, also known as telework or remote work, is a flexible work arrangement that allows employees, usually with the aid of electronic communication devices, to accomplish their work in various locations instead of a fixed, central worksite (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Baruch, 2001). Telecommuting can be either full time or part time, with the latter prevailing in recent years (Leung, 2004; Standen et al., 1999). According to the Gallup's Annual Work and Education Poll conducted in 2015, 37% of U.S. workers say they have telecommuted, up slightly from 30% last decade but four times greater than the 9% found in 1995. The poll also showed that average worker telecommutes two days per month and 46% of telecommuters do so during the workday (Jones, 2015).

Central to telecommuting practice is ICT use, whereby telecommuters interact with their central office and other colleagues (Nilles, 1994). In particular, using ICT to work at home has become indispensable to telecommuters because, compared to remote offices and telework centers, home is the primary location where they perform their tasks (Davis and Polonko, 2001). Telecommuting has its merits in different aspects. At the individual level, telework saves on travel time and the cost of commuting, clothing, food, and day-care for children. Working mothers can fulfill their dual role when working at home. At the organizational level, telework saves overhead costs such as parking, office space, and supplies. At the societal level, telework can cut commuter traffics, and, in turn, save energy, create less air pollution, less wear in transportation systems, and reduce environmental costs.

Although telecommuting has been lauded for increasing productivity and work-family balance (Apgar, 1998), some scholars have expressed concerns about the negative outcomes of pervasive ICT use (Goldstein, 2003). It has been argued that the connectivity of communication devices blurs the boundaries between the domains of work and home, leading to the invasion of work into private lives and inducing negative cognitive responses, such as stress, anxiety, and mental fatigue among users (Brod, 1984; Tarafdar et al., 2010). For employers, ICT can also be used to monitor employees as well. Consequently, teleworkers might encounter career stagnation, marital discord, and life dissatisfaction (Baruch and Nicholson, 1997).

Previous studies on telecommuting and work-family balance has primarily focused on developed countries, such as the United States, Canada, and England (Greenhaus and Parasuraman, 2005), while research on telecommuters in developing countries are still scarce (Nafishah, 2013). In 2004, Leung surveyed 623 information workers in Hong Kong and found that less than three percent were teleworkers, partly due to the low Internet adoption rate at that time. Ten years later, however, the penetration of mobile phones (2.5G and 3G/4G) and household broadband has grown to 228.8% and 83.2%, respectively (Hong Kong Communications Authority, 2015), providing a different scenario of telework practice in Hong Kong. However, to the best of our knowledge, since Leung's study, no follow-up research has been conducted since then. Thus, a primary objective of the present study is to provide an update about the telecommuting situation in Hong Kong and fill the gap between the East and the West in the telecommuting literature. Thus, our first research question is as follows:

RQ1. How widespread is the adoption of telecommuting in Hong Kong and who are the telecommuters?

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