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Working from Home During Covid-19: How Do We ‘Do’ Social Interaction at a Distance?

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Abstract. With the rapid adoption of homeworking by organisations across the world owing to Covid-19, employees have been separated from their informal, social networks in the traditional office space. This paper explores how individuals maintain social interaction with colleagues when working remotely. A diary study technique was employed and snowball sampling was used. Initial results from the diaries of 29 participants are presented. The findings highlight various challenges that homeworkers face, including task-related inefficiencies relating to technology-enabled communications in the absence of face-to-face interaction. The paper ends by briefly highlighting how the study analysis will proceed.

Keywords: Homeworking, Social interaction, Distance working

1 Introduction

‘Homeworking’ picked up pace in the 1990s with developments in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and with organisations offering more flexible styles of working to their employees. Essentially, ‘homeworking’ is where traditionally office-based workers now work from home via means of ICTs. Fast forward to 2020, we see that the Covid-19 pandemic has really shaken up the definition of concepts such as the ‘workplace’, ‘organisation’, ‘teamworking’ and ‘colleagues’ [5] due to the sudden shift from office-based working to homeworking for a large percentage of the global white-collar workforce.

There is a notable amount of literature on homeworking in fields such as Human Resource Management, focusing on issues such as remote working and increased employee flexibility, wellbeing and productivity [7], stress, job satisfaction and costs [18], as well as homeworkers’ ability to segment and balance their work-home lives [11, 22, 25]. However, the topic never garnered much interest in the Information Systems field aside from a limited number of studies [e.g. 3, 12, 13]. Thus, there are still important issues requiring further investigation. For example, how homeworkers adjust, adapt and manage their use of technology – increasingly mobile in nature – for

various purposes within the home-workplace. Furthermore, how individuals manage their social interactions with colleagues via technology when working remotely is under-researched. Such topics are gaining interest in the popular press. However, empirical evidence into these topics is scarce.

The aim of this paper is to *investigate how homeworkers engage in technology-enabled social interactions with colleagues when working from home*. This paper presents some initial findings from a study that we are currently working on. Please note that the paper provides initial findings following the first-round of analysis of data that has been collected. Thus, we do not aim to make bold assertions, but aim to provide insights into the types of patterns that appear to be emerging from the literature. The paper is structured as follows: an overview of the literature in relation to homeworking and social isolation is firstly presented, followed by the methodology. The latter includes the analysis techniques employed for the first-round of data analysis. This is followed by a brief discussion followed by a conclusion which expands on how we intend to extend the analysis going forward.

2 Literature Review

Traditionally, the ‘workplace’ equated to, and in the main still refers to, a specific place to which an individual travels in order to fulfil their work obligations within a specified period of time [6]. Owing to the recent global changes caused by the pandemic, this has clearly changed. Previous arguments that the extent and benefits of homeworking are rhetoric as opposed to reality [2], working from home is not useful for all organisations [23], and organisations have been slow at adopting flexible working styles [15] are called into question as industries across the world have experienced a surge in homeworking.

A considerable amount of research has examined how homeworkers have tackled the issue of no longer having spatial and temporal distinctions between their work and home lives by reconstructing these boundaries in the home-work place [4]. There has also been some research on how homeworkers construct boundaries in relation to mobile devices [3, 9, 10]. However, lesser-researched topics focus on how homeworkers are able to manage their social interactions with colleagues in order to avoid feelings of social isolation in the absence of the day-to-day socialisation and relationship-building communication shared in the traditional office space [12]. It is a basic human need to want to associate and identify with others via long-term, positive relationships: not having face-to-face social interaction can affect communication and camaraderie, interpersonal networking and the sharing of work-related information and gossip which has the effect of enabling employees to create identification with the company [12]. The proliferation of more advanced ICTs since the early days of homeworking suggests that homeworkers should be able to retain communication via different technological means, allowing individuals to feel more ‘socially present’ [5].

The topic of homeworking and social interaction/isolation is, at best, briefly included as part of a wider study examining the implications of flexible working [16] where it

was found that half of respondents felt that ‘no professional/social interaction’ was a pre-telework concern. However, the study did not expand on actual experiences of such interaction once the change in work style had been made. Below we present details of three studies that do provide some explicit insights into homeworkers and feelings of social isolation; as mentioned above, such studies are very limited in number.

In a study of sales staff working from home [8], it was found that 63% of homeworkers said they felt isolated since starting homeworking, stating that they felt forgotten and left to muddle through when working remotely. Homeworkers felt that the lack of timely and tangible company action to support them was due to a lack of employer concern, subsequently resulting in a detrimental impact on trust and relationship with their employer. Within the year, labour within the sales team increased to nearly 20%: the previous annual average was 6%. Lack of in-person interaction resulted in a reduction in the speed of problem-solving and knowing what was going on as it became more difficult to share experiences. Further, infrequent team meetings were described as formal with full agendas and little scope for informal discussions with employees feeling invisible.

In their study [14], it was found that 67% of individuals working remotely acknowledged feeling loneliness, compared to 0% of office-based counterparts. The lack of face-to-face communication was an issue: there was no-one to talk to at the end of a difficult day and homeworkers would go out to the shops to have face-to-face interaction with somebody. Further, increased use of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) reduced feelings of belonging with the company which is necessary for creating loyalty to colleagues and the organisation, and homeworkers lacked social support which could give rise to other emotions such as feelings of insecurity and lack of confidence in their abilities. The authors assert that the social interaction of the workplace is “utterly important” and homeworkers feel the stress of separation from colleagues and social banter within the office (p. 208).

Our study [12] found that homeworkers were provided with work mobile phones and social interaction via these devices could be managed to keep work and home lives distinct. Three main types of information were exchanged: general gossip about other colleagues, information about developments/changes in the company and advice on how certain work tasks could be completed. The study highlighted that homeworkers would seek social interaction with family members to compensate for the lack of social interaction with colleagues. Furthermore, the sender of the message thought carefully about the best mode of communication (e.g. a SMS was less intrusive at the weekend than a call), and that a small network of close colleagues was key both for work support and social interaction. Very few studies investigating how homeworkers use/manage their technologies, particularly mobile technology, in the home-work place have been conducted since the study by Lal and Dwivedi [12] in 2009 [e.g. 10].

Other issues faced by homeworkers included feelings of loss of career opportunities due to lower visibility, loss of organisational identity and the fact that coping strategies needed to be developed when work comes home [25].

Considering the above, there is little doubt that maintaining social interactions with colleagues is important on many levels. Technology offers promise in terms of enabling homeworkers to retain some level of social interaction with colleagues. However, as

aforementioned, empirical evidence in terms of how this is done is limited. The following section provides details of the methodology employed in investigating how homeworkers engage in technology-enabled social interactions with colleagues when working from home.

3 Methodology

This study was an exploratory study utilising the diary-keeping technique. Diary studies tend to be used more commonly in areas such as social and personality psychology [20] and the sciences. There were key reasons as to why diary studies were selected. Diaries allow researchers to gather data on participants' natural life contexts such as at home or in the workplace: this data can take the form of events, behaviours, feelings and thoughts [21]. In this study, the aim of the diary was to get an insight into participants' behaviours in terms of their social interaction with colleagues.

We requested participants to complete daily diary entries over a period of ten working days. Not only did this offer an insight into participants' everyday lives as it naturally unfolded [19], but respondents were able to record responses on the day. Diaries were kept between May and June during the height of the lockdown. There were six standard questions that participants had to consider daily: (i) their working hours; (ii) how they felt personally/professionally while working remotely; (iii) whether they had any social interaction with colleagues; (iv) if 'yes' to (iii), then the method of communication used, information exchanged and time of interaction; (v) whether they did any non-work-related activities to keep positive, and (vi) any other comments they wanted to make. The questions were intentionally kept simple so participants did not perceive completing them a daily chore, to reduce the likelihood of participants dropping out of the study and, owing to the exploratory nature of the study, enabled participants to record what was important for them. Participants were also asked to complete an additional information sheet which provided details such as demographic data.

Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. This entailed the researchers initially contacting individuals they knew had recently transitioned to full-time homeworking due to the pandemic, and then these participants recommending other potential participants. Diaries were completed by a total of 29 participants.

Data was analysed as follows, following guidelines by Miles and Huberman [17]: a contact summary sheet was created for each participant. This entailed going through the ten days' diary entries in order to summarise the data provided. Codes were applied to the data which was the first stage of analysis: we did not have a start list of pre-existing codes prior to the data collection that we were trying to match to participants' data as this study was more exploratory in nature and there is currently limited empirical data which can be used to formulate pre-existing codes. A complete list of codes was also separately created. Codes were revised as necessary.

Having a record of daily experiences and the additional information sheet helped us to build a better picture of the participants which helped to develop more of a context

to their responses. Thus, we could interpret the codes and data in the given context. This led onto provisional pattern codes being developed. Please note that for the purpose of this study, we have done a first-round of descriptive and interpretive coding, with initial insights into patterns (key themes and links) that emerged.

4 Initial Findings

This section provides some initial findings based on the initial first-round level of analysis. There were 15 males and 14 females who participated in this study. Occupations of participants were varied and included: Web Administrator and Digital Marketer, Software Developers, Academics, Science Policy Analyst and Sales Account Executive. 19 participants used either solely personal devices or personal plus work devices provided by their company for work. 10 participants used only devices provided by the company. 9 participants had never worked from home before the pandemic, whereas 20 participants had.

4.1 The Meaning of ‘Social Interaction’

Participants were asked whether they had any social interaction with colleagues on each day they kept a diary. We intentionally did not define what ‘social interaction’ was in order to understand how participants defined it. In most cases, social interaction was defined by participants as *any type of communication with colleagues*, whether this was work or non-work related.

There was no doubt that social interaction had reduced because of working from home:

“I feel like the proportion of casual/personal conversations I am having with colleagues is a lot smaller when working from home (i.e. nearly all conversations are about work matters). For example, today all messages I exchanged with colleagues were about work. Without the casual conversations to break the day up, it can give the work day a more serious feel.” (p. 14)

4.2 Absence of Face-to-Face Interaction

Less than a half of participants stated that they missed face-to-face interactions with colleagues for social banter:

“I do miss my office, interacting with colleagues, and just the separation between Office and home... This human interaction, work chats, corridor talks and laughs...are the best part of my job which I miss.” (p. 18)

Some participants missed in-person interaction; however, the overall benefits of working from home appeared to outweigh the drawbacks:

“I do not miss the ‘norm’. But I started to think about the things I did at work that I enjoyed and miss: 1.The staff member you encounter at the kitchen or the hallway...

2. Going to the gym at lunch time and have a quick chat at the changing room, 3. The person you consistently encounter on the way to the office...you would exchange greetings or a joke or a nice gesture that makes you feel nice... On the other hand, I have much longer time with my family.” (p. 2)

Approximately two thirds of participants stated that the reason for missing face-to-face interaction was more work-related: working from home could sometimes prove inefficient for getting work done. This was especially the case when needing to work with others. However, again, some offset the drawbacks with the positives of working from home.

4.3 How Social Interaction Is ‘Done’

Participants tended to communicate via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Slack, Google Chat/Meet. These were used for individual chat, group chat, video and voice calls related to work and non-work. Other communication methods were also used, although to a lesser degree, including: e-mail, telephone, WhatsApp, Facebook, FaceTime, Xbox Live and SMS.

Non-work discussion was built into work meetings, often for a few minutes before/after a meeting. This limited social interaction was not cited as a problem. There were very few participants who had time specifically dedicated for social interaction:

“I also had a coffee chat with another department I work with so that we have that level of social interaction as we have while at work...discussing what we are doing to stay sane and active. And catching up what we did the previous week. Also we see each others pets or show our shopping.” (p. 12)

4.4 Amount of Work and Communication

Virtually every participant appeared to be very busy, which could explain the longer hours many were working. Subsequently, some participants highlighted that working from home was beneficial as it enabled them to avoid distractions typically experienced in the office and instead concentrate on their work. Again, the benefits of working from home could potentially outweigh the drawbacks:

“I do miss some face-to-face discussion. On the other hand working without walk-in traffic does not feel too bad” (p. 15)

Although participants could avoid in-person distractions, this was not necessarily the case with technology. Homeworking naturally emphasises the role of technology in completing work tasks and communications. This appeared to be taking its toll on homeworkers:

“[Since working from home, there has been a] significant increase in time dedicated for meetings, skype, video calls...This in turn leaves lesser time to focus on your own work for which one needs thorough concentration and hence end up sitting back late or outside business hours to get it completed.” (p. 27)

“it was a long day and I felt tired after back to back video calls throughout the day. I needed some time by myself so that I could sit for an hour quietly while working before speaking to members of my household at the end of the day.” (p. 30)

Alongside the above, several other key trends started to appear from the data. These included: interpretation of online communications and related issues, the ‘rules’ of online communications which includes thinking about whether you are bothering colleagues by contacting them, the issues relating to online social interaction including some people taking over the conversation, technology issues which affect communication and productivity, and mixed feelings towards video calls which had become mandatory for many participants. Additionally, the turbulent environment created by the pandemic resulted in different pressures for all participants such as increased workloads and fear of redundancies. These factors will be investigated with further analysis.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

Previous empirical research on how homeworkers interact socially via technology is very limited, which means any insights on this topic are potentially new insights. Regarding the aim of this paper, how homeworkers engage in technology-enabled social interactions with colleagues when working from home, what can be deduced from the initial findings is that social interaction is declining for the majority of homeworkers and work communication dominates virtually all communications with colleagues. This, in turn, removes some of the casual conversations typically had in the office and results in the working day feeling more formal. Few participants have time especially dedicated for social interaction and, in the majority of cases, social interaction was built into formal communication – such as jovial banter for three minutes before the start of a meeting - and this did not appear to raise any issues. There were very few participants who could dedicate time for a catch-up with their colleagues either via a video call or online gaming with colleagues during their lunch break.

An interesting finding was that in contrast to the findings of [8, 14] where it was found that a significant portion of homeworkers felt socially isolated from their workplace, this study suggests that approximately only one third of homeworkers stated that they missed social interaction with colleagues in the traditional workplace. It appears that some participants offset the negatives of working from home with the positives; for example, they missed in-person interaction but valued the extra time they had with their family. In fact, the findings suggest that in-person social interaction was perceived as a distraction which some participants were happy to avoid as this enabled them to concentrate on their work. Face-to-face interaction was missed more for work purposes than for social interaction as working remotely made it inefficient to complete certain tasks, particularly those requiring discussions with colleagues. A noticeable pattern that was emerging was that a number of participants stated that they were experiencing communication overload which was tiring, affected their productivity and subsequently ate into their personal time, as well as potentially affecting their

interactions with individuals in their home. One may suggest that such a situation could explain why few participants were not inclined to spend more time on technology for social interaction with colleagues. However, this is subject to further analysis.

Overall, the literature suggests that social isolation is felt by the majority of homeworkers which can have an array of negative implications, ranging from loneliness to trust in their employer. Thus, social interaction is regarded as key for staff wellbeing and their relationship with their employer. Although the findings of our study are provisional and the data is subject to further analysis and scrutiny, initial analysis does suggest some divergence from the literature, particularly in terms of what ‘social interaction’ means to a full-time homeworker who has no option to meet colleagues face-to-face during the lockdown, and how much they miss traditional office banter. This may be considered surprising given that the lockdown meant social distancing from colleagues, friends and family, which had the prospect of heightening feelings of social isolation. Nevertheless, the context of homeworking during Covid-19 is very different to homeworking prior to the pandemic: there is less social interaction with other people, yet at the same time the pressures have increased with participants citing increased work and stress due to redundancies, cost-cutting and other changes within their organisations. Such factors, which require further analysis, could explain issues such as communications overload and perhaps a lower inclination to want to socially interact with colleagues. Moving forwards, the researchers will conduct deeper analysis in defining patterns within the data from which to draw affirmative conclusions.

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