Work is where the home is

Staying under your roof has its perks – and its dangers, writes Natalie Skinner.

Work is where the home is, if you get paid for it. We are all familiar with rapidly changing technology and the way it is transforming many aspects of daily life, including the way in which we engage in paid work.

Developments in information technology, smartphones, laptops, broadband and wi-fi open up opportunities for many people to work anywhere and any time. People can join meetings remotely, contact clients and customers and do computer-based work such as emailing or writing reports. These technological innovations are impressive products of our intelligence. Yet, like all powerful technology, they need to be used with consideration and care.

As a community, we need to apply our collective wisdom to ensure that the opportunity to untether ourselves from the traditional geographic and temporal boundaries of the workplace actually supports, rather than damages, our wellbeing.

The increasingly permeable boundary, supported by technology, between work and home is a double-edged sword.

In the 21st-century workforce, flexible work practices such as working from home are likely to become more common. These practices are required to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce.

Combining paid work and care is becoming more common. Most school-age children have parents in the workforce. Many baby boomers are combining paid work with elder care. Some degree of flexibility regarding where and when paid work is done, such as working from home, can be a crucial support in the “struggle to juggle” that defines the lives of many workers.

Having the flexibility to work from home can be a valuable resource. In our research at the Centre for Work + Life, many workers report that a home environment that is quiet and free of interruptions enhances their productivity. On the other hand, as we found in our large 2012 national survey of Australian workers, working from home can be a source of increased work-life pressures and demands.

Doing some work at home, whether on a regular schedule or on an “as needs” basis, is common for many Australian workers. In our survey, we found that 16 per cent of respondents work from home regularly, whereas 40 per cent take work home when needed. On average, these workers contribute about 22 hours a month through working from home. About half of these hours are paid work hours but, significantly, about half are unpaid “out of hours” work. This amounts to an average of 17 days a year of unpaid work from home.

Workers work from home – both paid and unpaid hours – for a range of reasons. Nearly 60 per cent of those surveyed said they worked unpaid hours at home to be more productive, and a similar proportion wanted the benefits of flexibility.

Unpaid hours from home are motivated by quite different reasons: 70 per cent of workers who put in unpaid hours at home said they wanted to catch up on work, and a little more than 60 per cent said they had too much work to do. These are two qualitatively different ways of working from home: paid work during standard work hours, and unpaid extra “out of hours” work often done in the evenings and at weekends. Our research shows that doing unpaid hours from home, whether in combination with paid hours or not, is clearly associated with higher work-life interference; that is, the intrusiveness of work into home, family and social life and feelings of time pressure. Other research has emphasised the importance of having time for rest and recovery, with clear detriments to physical and mental health when this “downtime” is missing in daily life.

A good friend who works as a middle manager was recently offered a smartphone so – as his boss said in a genuine spirit of helpful generosity – he could check his emails at home. He (politely) refused. Probably a wise choice – his hours spent at work are long as it is. It might be worthwhile to revisit the adage of eight hours work, rest and play a day, the underlying principle being the need for a balanced mix of activities in which work does not override other important aspects of life.

We need to match our intelligent technology with wise workplace cultures and management practices that recognise and respect other life domains and priorities, including personal, family and social time.

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