Rapid Change or Slow Evolution? Changing Places of Work and its Consequences

Professor Alan Felstead
Cardiff School of Social Sciences
Cardiff University

‘This is a significant book, which will stimulate everyone interested in the sociology of work to rediscover and rethink the socio-spatial organization of work’, British Journal of Industrial Relations, September 2008.
The Meanings of ‘Work’

• Work as an activity, mental or physical – ‘I’m working’
• Work as place, office or factory – ‘I’m going to work’
• For many years, both notions have been unified - activities carried out in a place of work (the workplace)
• Technology has (potentially) untethered some activities from these places, hence the notion of teleworking

The argument is that work is changing, so that …

• it is possible to work without travelling
• to work while travelling
• to work while in places and times previously regarded beyond the boundaries of work

None of this has been lost on advertisers of mobile technology (e.g. mobile phone manufacturers) and travel companies (such as airlines and train operators)
Working *Without* Travel

Work *While* Travelling Between Places
Work Spilling Over into Non-Work Life

Globetrotting executives have the office at their fingertips.

Spare time is of the essence in mobile war.

High-tech way to fill lost time on trips.

Ah . . . sun, sea, sand and laptops.

Workaholics on holiday can keep in touch from a poolside office. But is keeping connected more folly than fun, asks Amon Cohen.
Limits to Technologically-mediated Communication

But Signs of Resistance

Subject: e-mails at 35,000 feet
Airlines are experimenting with in-flight internet access. But not all frequent flyers welcome the move, writes Roger Bray

Growth in WiFi users poses threat to US coffee culture

This area voluntarily cell phone free

For Dining ONLY
OK, there’s some anecdotal evidence, but what do the facts and figures tell us?

In particular,
1. How extensive is the change or is it just media hype?
2. If there has been change, where has it been most rapid?
3. Who has been most affected?
4. Have conventional workplaces changed in response?

Data Sources on Work Location
• These are very patchy, more research is required, but …
• LFS started in 1981, stopped for 11 years, started again in 1992 & more added in 1997
• Less frequent individual surveys do carry some questions e.g. Skills Surveys
• Occasional employer surveys also carry work location questions e.g. FOW surveys, WERS

Some interesting evidence can be extracted
Has working at home and on the move become more prevalent in the UK?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Working Mainly ‘In Own Home’</th>
<th>Working Mainly ‘In Different Places Using Home as Base’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>346,000</td>
<td>642,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>661,000</td>
<td>1,201,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>629,000</td>
<td>1,566,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>673,000</td>
<td>2,130,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>749,000</td>
<td>2,410,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>820,000</td>
<td>2,395,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QLFS spring release for 1981-2010.
How prevalent is the use of the home as a workplace for at least one day a week & is ICT an important facilitator?

![Graph showing the increase in one day a week at/from home working and the importance of ICT in 1997 to 2010.]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Working At Least One Day A Week At or From Home (1)</th>
<th>Reliance on the Telephone and Computer to Work At or From Home (% of 1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>2,987,000 (11.3%)</td>
<td>33.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>3,566,000 (13.4%)</td>
<td>47.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>4,201,000 (14.9%)</td>
<td>52.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>4,384,000 (15.3%)</td>
<td>58.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: QLFS spring release for 1981-2010.
Who has this affected most?

- Sizeable proportions using their home as a workplace are from groups who are long history of working in this way
- However, the rise has affected groups with weaker traditions of doing so
- Two-thirds of the rise one day a week based working is accounted for by employees
- Similarly, up to 2/3 of the rise in the use of the home as a workplace comes from office workers

Has the conventional factory, office and shop declined as a place of work?

![Chart showing changing places of work, 2001-2006](image)

Source: ESRC supported Skills Surveys.
Have offices also changed?

The short answer is ‘yes to some degree’:
• personalized space is being challenged with ‘hot desks’ (bookable shared office space) and ‘touchdown desks (available on first-come-first-served basis)
• but tendency to ‘warm desk’ by resisting collectivization (people prefer their own space at work)

Source: ESRC FOW supported survey of HR managers of 128 of the largest UK organizations.
Who has this affected most?

Learning at a Distance

- Physical distance makes participative learning more difficult
- More difficult in some spatial circumstances than in others since the ‘opportunities for individuals to participate in activities & interactions’ (learning affordances) differ according the spatial arrangements of work

Source: ESRC FOW supported survey of HR managers of 128 of the largest UK organizations.
Learning How to Work at a Distance

• Balancing physical *distance from* colleagues & clients with *physical closeness to* family, friends & strangers
• ‘Collective offices’ – informality, uncertainty & mobility emphasized over the formality, certainty & static nature of ‘personal offices’
• ‘Working on the move’ – occupation of transitional spaces shared with strangers, so getting to know what can be done most effectively where & how

• ‘Working at home’ – managing the twin pressures of isolation from colleagues with the need to fend off interruptions from family & friends when ‘work’ and ‘home’ are brought into close proximity
Conclusion

• Attention-grabbing headlines are exaggerated
• However, work is being de-centred but gradually
• The process is being facilitated by ICT
• Office workers and the relatively privileged are benefiting most
• Difficult to learn from others given spatial separation, but there is an enhanced need to learn what works where and how

References

Felstead, A (2009) ‘Detaching work from place: charting the progress of change and its implications for learning’, Beyond Current Horizons Challenge Paper, a programme organized by the FutureLab and funded by the Department for Children, Families and Schools, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and Foresight
Contact Details:

alanfelstead@cf.ac.uk
www.cf.ac.uk/people/alanfelstead