

Working from home: Online technology and the changing locations of women's labour

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While on the road, being able to remotely access company information is critical to a growing financial business like mine. And being able to simply touch a button to make a video call to my family is equally vital to me as a mum. I love being able to see my kids when business takes me away from home.

I can be at a business conference in Perth, and still see my kids swim in Sydney.

Margaret Lomas, Destiny Financial Solutions NSW Business Woman of the Year, Telstra Next G advertisement, *The Australian* Tuesday, May 1 2007, p 7

In the height of the employment boom in the past decade, Australia's then Treasurer Peter Costello urged Australian women to take advantage of new technology to combine work in the paid market and in the home.¹ In these visions an internet connection was regarded as a postfeminist tool: new media devices were putting an end to women's alienation from career success and the culture of long hours necessary to achieve it. The study I'm reporting from today set out to investigate the assumptions behind the government's directive, and the growing number of images appearing in mainstream media illustrating the ease and convenience of working from home.² The research shows how online technology has significant consequences for part-time work that - in Australia particularly - women are encouraged to take to balance child care. The combined impact of working from home (off the clock) and part time hours are a major underlying dimension contributing to the gender pay gap, and yet it is women's willingness to engage in unpaid work that will be clear in the stories that follow.

Susan, a 37 year old university lecturer, epitomised the affordances of new communication technologies when she became pregnant with twins. This was the tipping point that led her to subscribe to broadband internet and install a wireless modem at home. As the head of a small university department, Susan carried a lot of responsibility in the organisation and anticipated that her absence on maternity leave would pose a problem for colleagues. As it turned out, her workplace did contact her every day of her maternity leave with queries of one kind or another.

¹ Peter Costello (2006) 'National Press Club address: Launch of the 2006 Census of Population and Housing,' National Press Club, Barton, 24 July.

² The findings from this 3 year ARC Discover fellowship, *Working From Home: New media technology, workplace culture and the changing nature of domesticity*, will be published in book form as *Work's Intimacy*, published by Polity Press later this year.

By the time the twins were born, Susan had developed a reliance on her home connection to stay in touch with work: "I'm a bit obsessive about it," she said, estimating that she would check her email roughly every half hour. "Even if I'm cooking I'll go and check if I've got another email come through. Is that bad? That is bad". Her regular morning routine was to get up early to check her email before the rest of the house woke:

I start at about half past six in the morning and do an hour or so before I leave to go to work and that's mainly just clearing emails and things like that so I can start the day ready to do "work".

Returning from work at the end of the day, she would take her laptop out on the deck with a glass of wine to answer her email, which was "kind of unwinding while still doing something." Susan was an archetypal multitasker – as I realised one night when she replied to my email immediately while also sitting on a conference call. Like a number of other women interviewed, she regularly answered email while watching tv and even when she was in bed. Susan had decided to stay home one day a week to spend time with her boys, and cut down on the number of days they were in childcare. Susan lived away from her extended family and had to work out caring arrangements with her partner, a school teacher.

"Someone said, why don't I cut down my work to four days week? I said, well I do more than five days a week work anyway, so why should I not be paid for it?" Susan didn't feel guilty about spending the day with her kids, because she knew she would make up the time later. She used the time the boys were sleeping to do essential work on her home day: "They're only little for so long and I don't want to have them in care all the time, and I know I miss out seeing all these little milestones being achieved".

Susan's arrangement was working as a temporary measure, even though it was harder than she'd expected to work at home with the boys present. On our second meeting she was realizing that:

Even in the first half of the year it was easier. They were doing two two hour sleeps a day, whereas now we've moved to one sleep and it's not always two hours. It's become more problematic, and they are wanting more and more of my attention at the moment.

Susan was finding that one of the few things she could do while the boys were awake was "answer small emails. Sometimes I can mark some assignments and do a bit of searching on the web. Anything that requires full concentration, I have to wait until they are asleep". One example she mentioned was how she would try to get the boys playing together: "I get down on the floor with them and get the Duplo blocks out and get them going with that. But as soon as I walk away they want to come. I can't do anything. I find that is starting to become more and more apparent. It's like their awareness when I walk away is increasing".

Susan's solution was slightly different to the other mothers in the study, who chose to work part-time for child-care reasons.

Claire, a 33 year old marketing professional we interviewed, also chose to work part-time. For the first two years of the study, Claire was working three days a week in the office and looked after her son on Thursdays and Fridays. Claire described these as her "catch up days".

Thursday and Friday are my days off, but at the moment we have, I'll be setting up a meeting for Thursday, and typically Thursday morning is a bit of a catch-up morning for me anyway to send out a lot of emails and get a lot of things moving so that I don't have to wait until Monday before I can get momentum happening on things.

Without this extra work, Claire thought that her return to the office on a Monday would be "really stressful. Yeah, and that's why I do it, it's not because there's pressure from the management team to do it at all, but it's more just for my own sanity." Claire explained her arrangement as "about me being in control," even though by the time of our second meeting the amount of work she was doing outside the office had increased. Whereas initially it was just a case of keeping an eye on things during her day off, only "occasionally doing that extra bit," in the space of 12 months it had become "pretty regular." She emphasised that:

Management would never expect me to be online, you know. But it's more just if I don't, like if I've had a really crazy day of meetings, like yesterday, and there were so many back to back meetings, and I just knew my email was out of control and I had things that I needed to get done, I will sleep better if I spend an hour or an hour and a half at night just getting on top of that, otherwise I will wake up at 4am in the morning and I'll be just spinning around my head. Got to do this, got to do that. So yeah, for my own sanity.

Claire's husband Scott was a mortgage broker, and quite often they would spend evenings "sitting on our couch with our laptops on our laps doing work". While in our first interview she was joking that this was a bit unfortunate, by the second year she'd decided:

it's just sort of something that we've realised for both of us, that just keeps us sane. So it's not that that's all the time we spend together, but I suppose we're lucky with our son... he'll be in bed at 7.30pm, so then you're right for the night if you do want to catch up on a bit of work as well as relax.

Note here the arrangement of the sentence. It's relaxing to be able to catch up on work together. It's a way of being at peace and at ease with the family. For Claire, the home is a site for various kinds of work, care and leisure, often in close proximity. And the potential for paid work is seized opportunistically in the free moments of her day.

Wireless internet meant that Claire could work anywhere in the house, so "if we are out the front playing cars with my two-year-old on the driveway I can

still be doing a bit of work as well". Thursdays and Fridays were the days "when I'm not properly at work" and "I just want to do a bit". But she was also concerned about her responsibility to be a good mother. She didn't want to spend all her time on the computer "when I should be giving my son attention. I think if I can sort of juggle the two and still be rolling cars down the driveway or playing fire engines, then that's OK."

Claire was one of a number of working mothers in the study who felt grateful for part-time hours:

I do feel very thankful to be able to work part-time with my sort of job. It is not really typical that you can do a project-based job and only be there half of the week. It is not a transactional thing. So I feel very thankful and that's why I want to make it work and I don't mind working extra on those other days, particularly just keeping an eye on things so that it works.

While Claire considers her arrangement to be somewhat exceptional, her experience corresponds strongly with part-time employees in other organisations. A sense of reassurance was shared by working mothers who relied on a home internet connections to keep track of work or finish things they didn't have time to do during office hours.

A third participant in the study working part-time from home was Jenny, a policy officer with a state government library. On Mondays and Tuesdays, when Jenny was looking after her son, it was normal for her to "log onto work and just leave the email open and the laptop on just there and just walk past and check things and deal with things on the fly". A number of Jenny's colleagues, including her boss, would email her on days off so that she would be kept aware of developments and have time to think things over before getting to work on Wednesdays.

Jenny maintained that it was her "own style" to keep up with her email outside work; it is her personal preference that makes her "happy to take 10 minutes out of my day at home and check". Like other employees who demonstrate anxiety about the potential of work, she said checking in on work was justified "because it almost gives me a peace of mind that I don't have something really big waiting for me".

There were times when Jenny would say "right, this weekend I'm not doing any work", especially since her partner "would probably prefer I was online less". Jenny claimed her partner didn't "truly understand or relate to the idea and notion of the work I do online at home". She also added – even though it "will make him sound not very good" – that her partner didn't tend to notice her working habits "when the football season is on". An interesting phenomenon emerged from Jenny's time diary for the study in this regard. In the weeks following our interview, she wrote:

Have noticed my partner does get annoyed when I log on at night to check my email. I try to limit it but I sometimes find myself quickly checking my email

- *before he gets home*
- *when he goes to the shop*
- *when he is downstairs gardening etc.*

Jenny's relationship to work here reads almost like a clandestine affair that she needs to hide from her partner.

Taken together, the inevitability of working from home is factored in to all three of these women's schedules. None of the organisations had formal policies for managing online obligations or guidelines for appropriate response times. Instead, employees operated on the basis of vague and self-imposed ideas about what management would or wouldn't expect. In the case of the part-time workers, there was simply no framework for discussing how flexible hours were positioned in light of the widespread reliance on online technologies in team-based office cultures. Technology served to confirm, when it did not also accelerate the temporality of the workplace. Improvised and makeshift arrangements left many part-timers feeling apologetic for their so-called "flexible" positions. Across different workplaces they navigated the perceived expectations of others on their own, only sometimes managing to develop strategies to share extra work among other women in the same position.

These findings bear clear relevance to ongoing debates about gender equity in the workplace. For part-time workers, often described as being less career-focused than those in full-time positions, there is evident commitment to the job among women who put the needs of others, and the organization, before their own material compensation. For full-time workers, as was the case with Susan, the university lecturer, it's clear that decisions about having and raising children are inextricably related to concerns about meeting the performance expectations of a job unforgiving of workers pursuing other obligations. As Susan put it:

I don't intend to work at home one day a week forever. I think probably that towards the middle of next year I'll have to face the reality that I want to move forward in my career, I really have to be here every day. Whereas at the moment I feel I'm on a bit of a holding pattern. I'm doing my job and I think I'm doing it well but I'm not extending myself to the point where I could see myself moving. If I'm looking for a promotion in the next year or two, I wouldn't be thinking about that until I could really put more than my 100% in.

The choice of phrase is telling. Susan's perception that she would need to put "more than my 100% in" is a reflection on the kind of workload fulltime employees feel is expected. To think about how part-time work fits in relation to this is a significant organizational challenge.

Susan's comments are a worrying illustration of the choices many working women feel they face:

I think that having children is detrimental to your career. But it's a choice you make because you want to make it. I look at my capacity to work now compared to my capacity to work two years ago, it's remarkably different. For

me, it was nothing to get up on a Saturday morning and spend two to three hours doing a little bit of work. By the time 10 o'clock comes around I can say, I've started at seven; I've done three hours, now the rest of the day to myself. Whereas now I can't do that because [the kids] get up at 6:30am and need attention. There's washing to do and all sorts of additional responsibilities that being a parent gives you.

During the course of this study a multitude of images appeared in mainstream media depicting women effortlessly attaining “work-life balance” through mobile devices. By contrast, women’s actual use of technology indicated that such models are among the least satisfying in providing sustainable and adequately measured workforce participation. In double income families, women moved between various phases of a never ending working day, with only a fraction of this time recognised financially. Paid work was maintained alongside other home-based responsibilities, or pushed into distant and antisocial hours, before children woke up, or after they have gone to bed. It is in this way that the term “flexible work” takes on its truest manifestation, as women learned to fit their work obligations around others’ needs.

What must be acknowledged is that women’s decision to perform paid work at home beyond their contracted hours makes it difficult for their employers to register. When this work is also conducted in the witching hour of late night sessions and pre-dawn email schedules, as was the case with many women interviewed, such recognition is especially unlikely. Women’s acceptance of their ascribed role as homemakers and care givers leads directly to this “second” or “third” shift, making them complicit in perpetuating the home as the primordial site for their labour. Whether or not this was the intention of feminism’s collective movement for women to participate in the market economy, women’s extended history of working from home certainly prepares them well for the mobile, multi-tasking, high-paced environment of the contemporary workplace. In fact, their decision to engage in work at home might be read as further testimony to their innovative resourcefulness: a response to the *lack* of flexibility in workplaces which proffer a range of obstructions to getting the job done. Working women’s desire to be productive certainly marks them as ideal employees, as other feminist commentators have noted. But the findings in this paper certainly question whether they may be proving a little too efficient for their own good.