

# THE CONCILIATION BETWEEN LABOUR AND FAMILY LIFE THROUGH HOME-BASED WORKING'S FLEXIBILITY

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## RESUMEN

La Era de la Información está transformando la idea de que trabajar implica trasladarse y que para poder realizarse correctamente es necesaria una localización fija. Las TIC's están permitiendo cambiar la manera de organizar el trabajo. La convergencia de ciertos factores técnicos y económicos está permitiendo realizar ese cambio. De este modo, la tecnología y la flexibilidad en la localización a la hora de trabajar, en concreto, el trabajo con base en el hogar, se pueden combinar para alcanzar la conciliación entre la vida familiar y laboral. El resultado es que un gran número de trabajadores pueden trabajar en casa, es decir, utilizar su hogar como base, aumentando los beneficios. Estos beneficios pueden ser medidos en términos de conciliación entre la vida familiar y laboral.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Trabajo con base en el hogar, Conciliación de la vida familiar y laboral y flexibilidad.

## ABSTRACT

The Information Age is transforming the idea that working involves making a journey and that it needs to take place at a fixed location. ICT's are enabling to change the way that work is organized. Convergence of technical and economic factors is making possible a change. In this manner, that technology and flexible location working, in concrete, home-based working, can be combined to achieve the conciliation between labour and family life. The result is that a great number of employees are able to work at home, or use their home as a base, achieving benefits that can be measured in terms of the conciliation between their labour and their family life.

**KEY TERMS:** Home based work, conciliation between labour and family life and flexibility.

## Introduction

The history of home working in Western economies only can be understood by means of changes in the systems of production in Europe and North America and through changes in the general sphere of women's responsibilities, which typically include family work as well as paid work (Johnson, 2003). Both new situations produce the most important change: the change in work venue.

The development in industrial production has been an uneven and changing pattern, beginning with artisanal guilds of the Middle Ages and continuing through to industrial production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Boris, 1996). Mistakenly, the process of industrialization has often been characterized as a unidirectional shift of production from home to factory (Johnson, 2003), but the reality has been very different. The earliest forms of industrialization first appeared within the home setting (Albrecht, 1982). One of the initial impetuses for the use of home-based working arrangements among such employees was provided by the oil crisis of the 1970s which, in conjunction with advances in computer technology, led to a surge of interest in "telecommuting" among white collar workers (Niles, Carlson, Gray & Hanneman 1976). However, it was not until the development of personal computers and networked systems in the 1980s that home-based working arrangements experienced significant growth, growth that has been particularly pronounced among executives, managers, scientists and engineers in large corporations (Bureau of National Affairs, 1991). This home-based working's revival, on the early 1980s, was linked to the shift in the structure of employment and production in post-industrial economies of North America and Western Europe (Lipsig-Mummé, 1983). Years later, in the 1990s, this subject was treated again but with a new vision. While adoption of telework was slow during the 1980's, the subsequent decade's information revolution resulted in considerable growth in new work forms (Robertson, 2005; Moss, Whitfield, Johnson & Andrey, 2006) The "renaissance" was interpreted as a symptom of economic restructuring that put increased pressure on domestic industries from off-shore producers (Leach, 1998).

The 1990s and now, in the 21st century, have seen a significant increase in work that is conducted entirely on-line (Gurstein, 2002). Since 1990s business conditions have changed, workers have become more mobile and the guilds of the future may also come from new organizations (Malone, 2004). It is well-known that work is changing becoming increasingly "person based" rather than "place based" (Couclelis, 1998). For these reasons, the way in which the working arrangements in firms adapt in response to these changes is of crucial importance for conciliation between labour and family life (Evans, 2001).

## **Background**

We have seen in the previous section that home working has an extensive history related to patterns of change in industrial production, settlement, gender roles and family life (it has generally performed by married women who are usually mothers of young children). Home-based working includes a variety of types of work, done in various occupations, and by workers of various social classes what produces very important differences and similarities among the working conditions of various categories of homeworkers (Johnson, 2003). On the early 1980s, Lipsig-Mummé (1983) used a broad definition of home-based working to include service, white-collar and professional, as well as industrial homeworkers. Home-based work is typified as work performed with help of information and communication technologies where employees are connected to corporate networks

while working from their homes<sup>1</sup> (Gurstein, 2002). Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995) conducted an extensive review of research on the impact of gender, race and class on home-based work. In this research, the findings showed that women (who used the ICT's) were more likely than men to consider the ability to look after children as an important advantage of working at home. Nowadays, home-based workers represent a relatively small but growing proportion of the workforce (Johnson, 2003), in the case of the North America, an estimated one-quarter of the working population does some or all of its paid labour from home or close to home. This implies that the number of people who combine work and family responsibilities has increased over the past two decades, especially as more women are participating in the labour force.

The societal, demographic, economic and cultural changes that characterize developed societies, as well as the growing rates of woman incorporation to paid work, have situated the conciliation between labour and family life on the top of the Human Resources Management (HRM) research. Specifically, the demographic variable is an essential factor in analysing problems and developing appropriate policy responses – and a key factor behind social and economic cohesion<sup>2</sup>. Demography is assuming increasing significance in all European countries as reduced population growth combined with increased ageing continue to transform the age pyramid at an accelerating rate, therefore, the effects of this marked transition towards an older population. Many of the European countries have low birth rates and this implies lack of future manpower and incomes. It is believed that one of the reasons is that many couples find it difficult to combine or conciliate family life and working life. In some countries, this is partly linked to the working hours, the long lunch break and late working hours.

The conciliation between labour and family life has become an important issue for more families,

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<sup>1</sup> Telework (or telecommuting as it also called in the United States), as distinct from others forms of work based in the home, is defined as work-related substitutions of telecommunications and related information technologies for travel (Huws, Korte & Robinson, 1990). See Helling & Mokhtarian (2001) and Haddon & Brynin (2005) for classifications of different types of telework depending on extent, employment arrangements, and use of technology.

<sup>2</sup> The Lisbon Strategy, launched in March 2000, paid particular attention to the demographic challenge in setting up the EU medium term policy approach for economic growth and social cohesion. The Lisbon Strategy underlines the importance of balance between work, family and gender equality in an ageing society and the demographic challenge raised by low birth rates. In the other hand, The European Commission issued a Green Paper on "Confronting Demographic Change: A New Solidarity Between Generations" in March 2005 and the issue was discussed at a conference in Brussels July 11-12- 2005. The debate focused on the policy responses that are needed (in areas such as e.g. family policy and work life balance) to allow our societies to cope with demographic change in a successful way. The European Commission is currently preparing a White Paper on the demographic future in Europe, planned for 2006, as a follow-up to the Conciliation of paid work and family life is expected to be a central element in the forthcoming White Paper.

business and government because conciliation should not be seen as an individual issue, it is a national challenge, and it involves men as well as women, also we have to understand that conciliation is not only linked to family life, but to private life in general; conciliation between professional and private life is an issue for all, not only for those with children. The European Commission is aware of this fact and it has announced (early 2006) an initiative particularly targeting conciliation of work and family life. The Social Partners at European level (CEEP, UNICE & ETUC) have recognised the importance of the topic and adopted to this end, in 2005, a framework of actions on gender equality, with supporting the work-life balance as one of four main actions. The European Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) adopted at the General Assembly in mid-may 2006 a “European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in local life”, supported by the European Commission. The Charter recommends that local authorities elaborate local action plans to achieve equality for men and women at local level. The debate over the conciliation between labour and family life has come to prominence quite suddenly, for this reason, the discussion has often been plagued by ideas that are ill thought out or even misleading because the literature addresses various aspects of work-life balance but it is unfortunate that so few studies deal with home-based working. Over the last two decades, sociologist, human resources specialist and political observers around the world have spilled a great deal of ink on this question (Lavoie, 2004).

### **Home-based working’s flexibility & conciliation between labour and family life**

The Information Age is transforming the idea that working involves making a journey and that it needs to take place at a fixed location. ICT’s are enabling to change the way that work is organized (Malone, 2004). Where once there were only flexible contracts and flexible working hours, there is now flexibility in location as well. Malone (2004) argues that a convergence of technical and economic factors (e.g. the rapidly falling cost of communication) is making possible a change. The result is that new forms of flexible working, that enable workers to conciliate labour and family life, are emerging as technology gets better and cheaper<sup>3</sup>.

The broad term flexible working covers flexibility in terms of time and location, and it is used to describe two different concepts of change:

1. **Change in the nature of employment**, in other words, the “non traditional” working practices that offer the varieties of flexible working: flexible contracts, flexible hours, flexible location and flexible task.
2. **Changes in technology**, which refers to developments in information and communication technologies that are enabling the new methods of working. ICT’s can have a powerful impact on introducing flexibility of location, in particular on home-based working. Using new technologies is making easier to adjust the work requirements towards the needs of employees, wherever they are.

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<sup>3</sup> Brannen, Meszaros, Moss & Poland (1994) provide a review of studies of the question for the United Kingdom. An instructive comparison of views is to be found in Check (1996) and Wallis (1996).

The analysts in both the UK and US think that increases in productivity depend on adopting new models of work organization that involve the use of “innovative work practices” (Michie & Sheehan, 1999). This combination of technology and flexible location working, particularly home-based working, can be the way to conciliate labour and family life and increase the productivity. Furthermore, home-based working, combined with flexi-time<sup>4</sup>, can ensure that an employee is always equipped to get with his/her work at the same time that he/she can cover his/her domestic responsibilities the moment that this is necessary. It is very difficult to implement flexible work arrangements in organizations where the focus is on hours rather than output and on presence rather than performance. This means that organizations that want to increase employees labour-family balance need to introduce new performance measures that focus on objectives, results and output (i.e. move away from a focus on hours to a focus on output). To do this they need to reward output, not hours, and what is done, not where it is done.

In the first moment, the objectives of both employers and employees can seem different because workers have specific needs for balancing professional and personal responsibilities, and employers, for their part, must face certain production constrains (Lavoie, 2004) but the joint use of technology and home-based working can be arranged to meet these objectives. For this reason, an increasing number of organizations, in both the private and public sectors, are introducing home-based work as a flexible working option (e.g. sales personnel, social services practitioners, financial advisers, mobile maintenance engineers and call-centre agents). Therefore, beneficiaries of this new way of working include both employers and employees:

- **Employers** can boost staff morale and introduce practices that are more efficient and effective. When workers make their own decisions about how to do their work and allocate their time, they often put more effort, energy and creativity into their labour life (Amabile *et al.*, 1996). To increase the utilization and effectiveness of their own policies and contribute to a more collaborative, systemic effort, we believe employers need to adopt new approaches to dealing with labour-family issues. Firms should continue to act in their self-interest by expanding the array and reach of family-friendly benefits and practices to better enable workers to contribute to their business objectives and meet their family and personal responsibilities. Therefore, to reduce labour vs family conflict and improve overall quality of life, employers need to focus their efforts on three sets of initiatives :
  - providing flexibility around time and place of work;
  - increasing employees' sense of control; and
  - focussing on creating a more supportive work environment.
  
- **Employees** can reduce stress, and become more productive and more motivated as they achieve a better work-life balance (Johnson, 2003). Control over the use of time is one of the most obvious

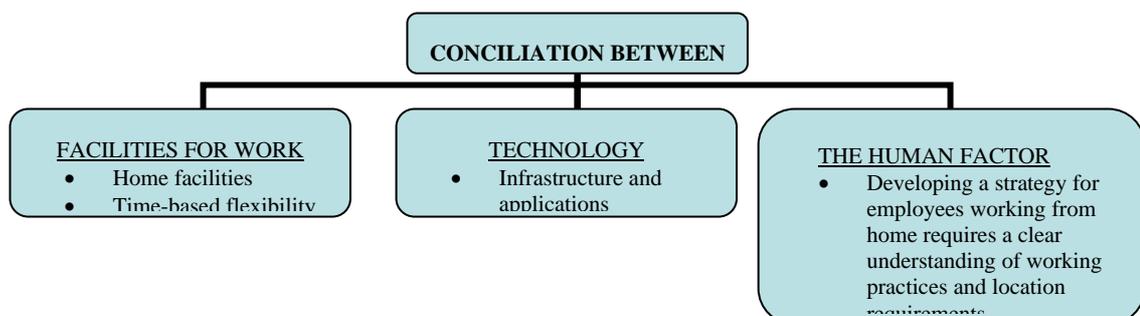
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<sup>4</sup> The term flexi-time is refers to workers’ freedom to work in any way they choose outside a set core of hours determined by the employer.

advantages of home-based working compared to the daily schedule of an office worker (Gurstein, 2002). Some studies have found that home-based work introduces flexibility for employed parents, can reduce role overload and thereby supporting family life (Huws, Korte & Robinson, 1990; Higgins, Duxbury & Lee, 1992; van Sell & Jacobs, 1994; Duxbury, Higgings & Neufeld, 1998; Pratt, 1999). The main gain for the employees from home-based working arrangements is the increased opportunity to fit other commitments and activities in with work, and make better use of their free time. Higgins, Duxbury & Lee (1992) observed that “work time and work location flexibility have the potential to balance work and family by increasing an employee’s ability to control, predict and absorb change in work and family roles”. For these reasons, employees feel more in control of their workloads and manage a better balance between life and work. Home-based working has many advantages for people with heavy domestic responsibilities and it can be particularly helpful for people caring for children or other dependants.

The home-based worker of this Information Society should possess the ability of being flexible, working in network and have a rapid access to information, using for this today’s technologies which are available to him/her. Employees must be brought into the process of designing and implementing flexible schedules and practices. Not all who try working at home have the required self-discipline or all infrastructure required to work effectively in a home workspace (Johnson, 2003), for these reasons more highly-skilled workers, and those with longer tenures, tend to be offered more family-friendly benefits (Evans, 2001). Working at home is based on the use of communication technologies using for that the various tools made available by technology (modem, fax, telephone, etc.) and in the management of Human Resources by objectives. This fact favours an increase in the flexibility of workers, who thus are able to manage their time better, adapting it to their needs. This increase in flexibility has as first result the promotion of a greater conciliation between family and professional life. This is an important fact particularly when workers have to play the role of mother/father, wife/husband and professional. Therefore, home-based work and flexibility are strictly related to improve the conciliation between labour and family life. In this article we have managed the three most important areas: Facilities for work, Technology and Human Factor. The idea is that when these areas are combined it is possible the conciliation between labour and family life, as we can see in the figure 1.

Figure 1. The conciliation between labour and family life



Source: Own Elaboration

In conclusion, given the right ICT's infrastructure, it should make no difference where employees are located. The result is that a great number of employees are able to work at home, or use their home as a base, achieving benefits that can be measured in terms of the conciliation between their labour and their family life. Following Duxbury, Higgings & Coghill (2003), we propose that society begin working together to achieve four high-priority objectives:

- **Work Design.** Employers, employees, and employee representatives should work together to adapt work systems, processes and schedules to meet the dual agenda (labour and family) of improving work and organization performance and personal and family life. This means seeing potential members both as employees and as citizens, parents, and members of households with varying needs. Doing so would mean expanding the organizing model from a narrow one aimed at achieving majority status for collective bargaining to one that provided a full array of representative services to members and their families and to one that pooled resources to reduce the costs of child care, education, job market information, career counseling, etc.
- **Technology.** We have to bear in mind the challenges faced by people along with their responses and organizing strategies, as they adjust to new technologies, and also, the roles that family, ideology, state policies and trade union structures can play in distributing information technology-related employment. Particularly, we have to know the differences in the interests and needs of different groups, specifically their vision of technology and science. "Technology makes many changes possible, but only those that fulfill people's needs and desires actually happen" (Malone, 2004).
- **Place and Hours Flexibility.** These options are needed to allow employers and employees to negotiate arrangements that better suit their varying needs and to administer them together in ways that are mutually beneficial. Employers need to provide employees with more flexibility around when and where they work. The criteria under which these flexible arrangements can be used should be mutually agreed upon and transparent. There should also be mutual accountability around their use – employees need to meet job demands but organizations should be flexible with respect to how work is arranged. The process for changing hours or location of work should, wherever possible, be flexible. Most of American employees spend part of the week at home and part in the office, thereby avoiding such problems as isolation, loneliness, and invisibility (Gurstein, 2002).
- **Community Empowerment.** We need to recognize the importance of community based institutions by fostering greater investment in their services and by facilitating volunteerism in their programs. These groups are diverse and all must be taken into account when work-family problems are defined and work-family solutions are created.

## **Future Trends**

This article recognises the increasingly complex interplay between people's work and personal lives and the challenges involved in managing work, family and lifestyle responsibilities. It is committed to helping employers and employees establish workplace practices that improve work-life balance, and have introduced a variety of initiatives on work and family. We have to look for new solutions, apart from introducing policies that may help both mother and fathers balance their work, family and lifestyle responsibilities because the creation of a father-friendly workplace requires intervention that goes beyond the introduction of these policies. There should be an emphasis on education and communication regarding the importance of work-family balance for men and women. In addition, it is important to ensure that the workplace culture supports all employees to use these policies. In fact, we need to map out a radical approach that begins to recognise the importance of wider and fundamental questions about the conciliation between labour and family life. This will require much more research into the nature of modern paid employment, to the character of local labour markets and the recruitment strategies of employers.

## **Conclusions**

The traditional family model with one parent working full-time and the other parent staying at home full-time is now less widespread, with an increasing number of single parent families and dual income families. Nowadays, one of the most striking long-term trends in the labour market has been the increase in the proportions of couple families where both parents are in paid employment, and lone-parent families where the parent is working. Many firms have begun to find ways of adapting their human resources policies to these changes (Evans, 2001), in the context of new technologies that allow new workplaces. The key point in this article is that technology and flexible location working, in concrete, home-based working, can be combined to achieve the conciliation between labour and family life. If the employees have the use of the right ICT's infrastructure, it should make no difference where they are located. Certainly, the new telecommunications technology supports such workplace flexibility (Johnson, 2003). For this reason, a great number of employees are able to work at home, or use their home as a base, as they can reduce stress due to achieve a better work-life balance, and become more productive and more motivated.

Most people struggle to balance their work and home lives, and a little more flexibility in location and time could benefit many people, whilst at the same time increasing efficiency. In the majority of instances, this is not full-time, but appropriate task can be undertaken from home with productivity benefits. It is almost impossible to work effectively and care for children "at the same time" but home-based working can make the organization and management of childcare much easier and less stressful. It also enables contact with children at crucial times of their day, rather than dashing out of the houses as they do, and not being there when they return. A worker free of parental guilt may be a happier and more motivated worker. In addition, home-based working combined with flexi-time can ensure that an employee is always equipped to get on with some work. In other words, employees will avoid the stress of commuting at peak times if their start and finish times are staggered or if they work from home, and many employers find that introducing home-based working arrangements reduces

their sickness levels.

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