

Working at Home: Experiences of Skilled White Collar Workers

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Abstract:

Based on a comprehensive literature review and detailed semistructured interviews with skilled workers who work at home, this article explores six research areas: reasons for working at home, the creation and maintenance of home/work boundaries, problems of isolation, distractions and temptations facing at-home workers, workaholism, and gender differences. The results indicate that white collar workers usually choose to work at home to reduce work/family conflicts or because of factors in the external labor market. Problems of creating and maintaining home/work boundaries, isolation, distractions and temptations at home, and workaholism do exist, but there was evidence that they may have been exaggerated in previous writing about at-home work. A combination of gender and life course stage better predicts differences in the experiences of the interviewees than does gender alone.

Keywords: White collar workers | Work at home | Work habits | Gender

Article:

The increasing number of white collar workers who work full time at home has recently attracted the interest of the popular press and scholars because working at home has advantages and problems different from those experienced in office work. Anecdotal accounts in the popular press (e.g., Edwards and Edwards 1994; Fryer 1997; Jones 1997; Schepp 1990) are useful for identifying the problems at-home workers face and their strategies for managing them, but they often focus on top-level professionals and may exaggerate the problems. More scholarly studies (e.g., Ahrentzen 1987; Beach 1989; Christensen 1988; Felstead and Jewson 2000; Owen, Heck, and Rowe 1995) provide interesting insights, but most use samples that include both part- and full-time workers or clerical and skilled white collar workers, thus combining workers with different experiences and problems.

This study takes a somewhat different approach. We focus on the work experiences of skilled white collar workers who work full time at home, but are neither clerical workers nor top level professionals in major metropolitan centers. Drawing on existing research, on theory about role conflict and problems of maintaining boundaries between roles, and on data from lengthy interviews with a sample of such workers, we explore six topics: reasons for working at home, creation and maintenance of home/work boundaries, the distractions and temptations facing home workers, workaholism, the problem of isolation, and gender differences.

WORKING AT HOME: THE CHANGING SOCIAL CONTEXT

Technological change has repeatedly shaped and reshaped the relationship between work and home. Before the Industrial Revolution, most Americans worked at home. Schedules and tasks were set by the season, family members often worked together, and periods of intense activity were often followed by celebrations and rest (Gutman 1988). Industrialization altered this, replacing home work with factory and office jobs for men and for single women (Seward 1978). The transition was not always easy, and the complaints of the farmers and craftsmen who moved from home to factory work were almost a mirror image of the problems facing today's at-home workers. They reported difficulties with accepting separation from family, with their unavailability for family needs and rituals, with adjusting to fixed time schedules, and with being under surveillance at work (Cowan 1997; Das and Kolack 1989; Gordon 1978; Gutman 1988; Wilensky and Lebeaux 1986).

Before World War II relatively few married women, most of them poor, worked for pay outside the home, and married women who did participate in the cash economy often worked at home, doing piecework or taking in boarders (Anderson 1988; Tilly and Scott 1987). In recent decades, increased job opportunities and the women's movement have added many married women and mothers to the ranks of office and factory workers, and some formerly male-dominated skilled white collar jobs have become more gender integrated (U.S. Census Bureau 1998). Dual worker marriages have become more common (Mintz and Kellogg 1988; U.S. Census Bureau 2000), and the number of single parent families headed by women has increased (U.S. Census Bureau 1998). Although cultural expectations and patterns of discrimination from earlier periods continue to influence public consciousness and the allocation of household tasks (Reskin and Padavic 1994), by the end of the twentieth century, work outside the home had become the normative pattern for women.

Today technological changes are once again reshaping the relationship between work and home, in some cases reversing the historical flow of workers from home to office (Bailyn 1988). Two types of white collar occupations, with rather different characteristics, are involved (Fredriksen-Goldsen and Scharlach 2001). First, some clerical employees who perform repetitive tasks, such as telemarketers and customer service representatives, now work at home. In general, they are remotely monitored and usually continue to work standard shifts. The second category—the focus of our research—corresponds loosely to the census category, professional and technical

workers (U.S. Census Bureau 1998). The tasks of these workers generally allow greater flexibility and autonomy than clerical work, and their higher wages and more extensive training make such workers more apt to be psychologically invested in work. They usually require quiet time and privacy to plan, write, and analyze, although they may also need to consult with colleagues (Perin 1991; Perlow 1997). They do not necessarily work standard hours, and even those with office jobs often do some work at home (Nippert-Eng 1996; U.S. Census Bureau 1998). These characteristics make some such workers, especially those who work mainly with computers, prime candidates for working at home (Kraut 1987; Olson 1989; Perin 1991; Turnage and Spielberger 1991; Venkatesh and Vitalari 1992).

Tensions built into the present work-family system have provided a pool of skilled white collar workers inclined to take advantage of this opportunity. In a society that provides little social or government support for two-job families and single parents, balancing work and domestic life has emerged as a stressful juggling act (Ferber, O'Farrell, and Allen 1991; Silberstein, 1992). The stress is particularly acute for women, who remain responsible for a high percentage of household tasks and child care (Christensen 1988; Hochschild 1989; Reskin and Padavic 1994; Robinson 1988); however, a gradual trend for men to assume more household duties (Bianchi, Milkie, and Sayer 2000; Reskin and Padavic 1994; Robinson 1988) means that men are far from exempt. Time pressures have been exacerbated by steadily increasing work hours (Schor 1991). Since long hours are often equated with productivity and job commitment, especially in skilled white collar work, workers find themselves working longer to remain competitive and fulfill employer expectations, with attendant pressure to forego time off for family matters (Fried 1998). Moreover, in a "24-7 economy," many must cope with nonstandard schedules (Vannoy and Dubeck 1998).

Some employers, faced with the rise of dual-career families and single parent households, increasingly long work hours, and work/family conflicts that interfere with job performance, have experimented with "family-friendly" options, including telecommuting from home (Gilbert 1993; Lechner and Creedon 1994). Other workers have created opportunities to work at home by going into business for themselves. Several studies suggest that women, in particular, choose to combine self-employment with work at home because it provides flexibility and the chance to accommodate work and family (Arai 2000; Boden 1999; Carr 1996; Jurik 1998; Owen, Heck, and Rowe 1995). Working at home might be especially attractive to women to the extent that they are more likely than men to have a "home-centered" rather than a "work-centered" orientation (Hakim 1998, 2000, 2002), but structural and cultural factors, such as the assignment of caregiving to women and discrimination in the workplace, also clearly play a major role (Crompton and Harris 1998a, 1998b; Rogers 2002; Roth 2002). Jurik (1998), for example, found that women with grown children and women who did not plan to have children gave reasons for wanting to work at home similar to most men's.

WORKING AT HOME: ROLES AND BOUNDARIES

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identify three types of conflicts between work and family obligations: time-based conflict, strain-based conflict, and behavior-based conflict. Time-based conflicts occur when time constraints and work schedules force workers to choose between competing role obligations. When work takes place away from home and is rigidly scheduled, home obligations that occur during scheduled work hours necessarily produce role conflicts; role overload occurs when the total time demanded by home and work roles exceeds the time available (Coverman 1989; Hecht 2001). Strain-based role conflicts occur when one role is so physically or psychologically taxing that it becomes difficult to meet other obligations, even if time is available. Behavior-based conflict occurs when behavior appropriate for one role, such as giving orders at work, is inappropriate for the other.

Skilled white collar workers who choose to work at home often do so with the goal of reducing time-based work/family conflicts by being physically present at home and having greater flexibility in work scheduling. However, the promise of saving time can prove deceptive. If new home obligations are added to existing ones—a particularly likely scenario for women—the result is apt to be time- or strain-based role overload (Owen et al. 1995). Role overload can also occur if working at home leads to increased work hours, either because work is always around or because the demands of skeptical employers or of a home business result in pressure to work longer hours. Working at home can reduce time-based stress if home workers save time by not dressing for work or traveling to work, choose to work fewer hours for pay, work more efficiently at home than the office, or find ways to perform work and home tasks simultaneously. However, it does not necessarily lessen behavior or strain-based work-family conflicts. Indeed, performing work and family roles in the same place can actually increase stress, as when children's or pets' demands for attention coincide with job deadlines.

To successfully manage working at home, workers must thus negotiate and maintain viable boundaries between home and work roles. This process is the primary concern of a body of literature that can be termed “boundary theory” (Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate 2000; Nippert-Eng 1996; Zerubavel 1991). By focusing on the “strategies, principles, and practices that people use to create, maintain, and modify cultural categories” (Nippert-Eng 1996:7), this approach helps to explain how individuals deal with potentially conflicting roles and with the “cross-over” between seemingly separate domains, such as home and work (Clark 2000; Nippert-Eng 1996; Zerubavel 1991).

In boundary theory, the range of possible relationships between work and home is often conceptualized as a continuum between two ideal types: complete segmentation of home and work versus their complete integration (Ashforth et al. 2000; Beach 1989; Felstead and Jewson 2000; Nippert-Eng 1996). Integration exists when the work role is flexible and permeable; with segmentation, it is inflexible and impermeable. A work role is inflexible when rules about when and where it is performed are rigid. It is permeable to the extent that other roles are allowed to “creep in” and make demands or influence behavior while one is working (Ashforth et al. 2000; Hall and Richter 1988; Pleck 1977). Scheduled office work is generally relatively

inflexible and impermeable. At-home workers often hope that more integration will reduce role conflicts, but integration can prove problematic if the increased flexibility of the work role and increased permeability to home obligations reduce time available for work, reduce work efficiency, or increase stress.

At-home workers are not usually free to arbitrarily establish whatever home/work boundaries they choose and are often subject to contradictory expectations from role senders. Culturally dominant assumptions shaped by office work favor the segmentation of work from family, personal, and leisure activities (Kanter 1977). Cultural standards from this dominant pattern—including expectations about work hours and scheduling and about the priority of family and work—can colonize and complicate the lives of at-home workers, both in the form of external pressures and internalized norms. On the other hand, cultural norms about appropriate behavior at home demand responsiveness to family demands, such as being polite to relatives who phone or greeting children arriving home from school. At-home workers must thus negotiate home/work boundaries with numerous role senders, including family, coworkers, and supervisors, who may have varying expectations. And once boundary roles have been established, these role senders may function as “border-keepers,” reminding workers about role expectations and boundary rules (Clark 2000; Goode 1960).

People who work at home may also face special problems negotiating and maintaining boundaries between the home and the outside world (Felstead and Jewson 2000). They must find an appropriate balance between closed boundaries—firm mental, symbolic, or physical lines that demarcate and insulate the “private” home realm from the “public” sphere—and open boundaries, which allow “easy and ready” contact with the outside world (Felstead and Jewson 2000:146). At-home workers must, of necessity, maintain contact with employers, coworkers, or clients, and closed boundaries can result in professional and social isolation. But at-home workers who make themselves readily accessible and are at home all day must deal not only with work-related calls at inconvenient hours, but also with interruptions by neighbors, door-to-door salespeople, telemarketers, extended family, and friends.

Problems of role conflict and work/family boundaries are especially acute for skilled white collar workers who work at home, and they are different than those facing clerical workers. Because they are viewed as “experts,” employers and clients often expect skilled white collar workers to put in long and irregular hours (Bailyn 1993), and skilled white collar workers are typically high in job involvement (Hall 1994). Coser (1974) termed roles like these “greedy institutions,” because they have a tendency to demand “exclusive and undivided loyalty...[attempting] to reduce the claims of competing roles and status positions” (Coser 1974:4). Such demands can lead to role overload and conflict and intrude into relationships with family, creating difficult boundary issues (Fried 1998).

The growing incidence of at-home work among skilled white collar workers and the theoretical and practical issues surrounding it suggest six specific topics for investigation in a study of such

workers: reasons for working at home, the creation and maintenance of home/work boundaries, distractions and temptations facing home workers, workaholism, problems of isolation, and gender differences. Literature about the first was reviewed above; in the following sections, we summarize existing theory and research about the others.

CREATING AND MAINTAINING BOUNDARIES BETWEEN HOME AND WORK

The home/work boundaries of most office workers approximate the dominant cultural pattern, segmentation, and the physical and mental “fences” that separate home and work are reinforced by the daily routine (Nippert-Eng 1996; Zerubavel 1991). Morning routines—dressing for work, saying goodbye to family, traveling to work, and greeting coworkers—accentuate the dichotomy and assist with the mental transition from the family to the work domain (Ashforth et al. 2000; Nippert-Eng 1996). At the end of the workday, other routines reverse the process. While at the office, office workers operate in a “clock-work environment,” in which activities occur at relatively predictable times and their surroundings focus their attention on work (Zerubavel 1981). Routines, such as arranging one's desk in the morning, chats with coworkers, meetings and appointments, and coffee and lunch breaks, structure the day (Gordon 1978; Harrington 1979; Zerubavel 1981).

For skilled white collar workers who work at home, these structural constraints and domain markers are absent. This allows them to opt for greater integration of home and work in hopes of reducing role conflict and overload. Yet the almost inevitable blurring of the home/work boundary that results can create its own problems. It can become harder to remain focused on work (Beach, 1989; Christensen, 1988; Hill, Hawkins, and Miller 1996; Huws, Korte, and Robinson 1990; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995), and working in the household environment can result in repeated collisions between work and home roles and obligations (Mirchandani 1999; Nippert-Eng 1996).

Depending on how “open” or “closed” the boundaries between home and the external world are, interruptions from outside the household can become problematic. Home workers’ efforts to “mark off” specific times for work are not always known or respected by others, so working at home can make one a target for interruptions by door-to-door salespeople, missionaries, telemarketers, neighbors who want to chat or ask for favors, and friends who call or stop by. Without secretaries to serve as gatekeepers, home workers must handle these interruptions themselves (Perry 1997; Schepp 1990). Yet efforts to completely exclude the outside world can also wall one off from desirable work contacts or from interruptions that serve as welcome antidotes to boredom or isolation (Gray, Hodson, and Gordon 1993; Toffler 1980).

Other intrusions on work time originate within the household (Edwards and Edwards 1994; Felstead and Jewson 2000; Huws et al. 1990; Langhoff 1996; Morris 1997; Rogak 1996). Pets, children, spouses, and elderly relatives do not necessarily understand the “mental fences” at-home workers use to separate work from family and leisure (Zerubavel 1997). Young

children, who make heavy time demands and cannot easily comprehend the boundaries pose particularly difficult problems, especially for women (Heck et al. 1995; Jurik 1998). Heck and colleagues (1995) found that hours available for work decreased considerably for home workers with children and that mothers' work hours and wages were more reduced than fathers'.

Unfortunately, there are many gaps in the research about the serious problem maintaining home/work boundaries for skilled white collar workers who work full time at home. Many studies (e.g., Ahrentzen 1987; Beach 1989; Christensen 1988; Felstead and Jewson 1996; Heck et al. 1995; Hill et al. 1996) include both full- and part-time workers, mix clerical, skilled white collar, and managerial workers, provide only anecdotal evidence, or look at only a few types of distractions. The most careful studies, Heck et al.'s (1995) study of home workers in nine states, Mirchandani's (1999) study of Canadian telecommuters and, Felstead and Jewson's (2000) research on British home workers find that at-home workers often go to great lengths to maintain home/work boundaries. Most of Heck et al.'s (1995) respondents worked almost entirely in designated areas. Mirchandani's (1999) interviewees often adhered to rigid work schedules and worked in rooms far from the rest of their household. Felstead and Jewson's (2000) interviewees trained others not to disturb them while they were working. Using such strategies, they usually learned to manage such problems, and maintaining boundaries became routinized (see also Ashforth et al. 2000).

Self-help books for at-home workers often suggest specific strategies at-home workers can use to manage home/work boundaries. Most are oriented toward maintaining rather strict segmentation. They include being assertive in explaining one's work schedule, screening calls, and even inventing imaginary work deadlines (Edwards and Edwards 1994; Gordon and Kelly 1986; Langhoff 1996; Schepp 1990). Recommended strategies for managing interruptions from children, pets, and spouses usually emphasize keeping sources of interruptions out of the work area during work time (Atkins 1999; Canton 1997; Edwards and Edwards 1994; Langhoff 1996). They include calling a family meeting to discuss rules for protecting work time, developing cues that signal times when the home worker cannot be disturbed (Edwards and Edwards 1994; Gordon and Kelly 1986; Gray et al. 1993; Kern and Wolfgram 1995), scheduling work when other family members are away (Edwards and Edwards 1994; Huws et al. 1990), and hiring outside help or relying on spouses or older children to monitor younger children during work time (Atkins 1994; Morris 1997). Strategies for integrating work and home tasks are less often described, although a few authors do suggest integrating work and child care (Syarto 1999; Edwards and Edwards 1994).

Only a few studies examine how often strategies for managing interruptions are used or how well they work. Ahrentzen (1987) reported that only 17 percent of the telecommuters she studied were solely responsible for childcare; the majority relied on babysitters and/or spouses while they were working, and most thought that work and childcare were not compatible. However, Beach (1989) found that women with children under age six were more likely to mix home and work; they worked while their children played nearby, interrupting work often to care for them.

DISTRACTIONS AND TEMPTATIONS

Without regular observation by border-keeping supervisors and coworkers, at-home workers risk falling prey to “bad habits,” behaviors that would be normal and appropriate during personal time at home but that interfere with work: snacking, sleeping late, procrastinating, personal phone conversations, TV watching, newspaper reading, or drinking. And with office and home only a few steps apart, it is harder to ignore laundry, cooking, or yard work (Berner 1996; Edwards and Edwards 1994; Langhoff 1996; Nippert-Eng 1996; Olson 1983; Schepp 1990).

Only Felstead and Jewson's (2000) study systematically examines how serious such problems are for skilled white collar workers. They found that home-based workers were not often bothered by distractions such as housework. Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate (2000) suggest that as at-home workers become accustomed to new routines, transitions between “realms” become automatic, reducing the problems, but this hypothesis has evidently not been tested.

Some popular press books and articles advise at-home workers to hold household distractions at bay by establishing very firm mental and physical boundaries for the home office (Edwards and Edwards 1994; Gordon and Kelly 1986) or describe cues workers can use to signal the beginning of work to themselves and others (Gordon and Kelley 1986; Roha, 1995). On the other hand, other authors recommend taking advantage of chances to save time by combining work and home tasks (Edwards and Edwards 1994; Rogak 1996; Schepp 1990). Only two studies systematically examine the actual use of such strategies. Ahrentzen (1987) found that the cues most often used to signal the beginning of work were outdoor physical exercise before work, dressing for work, drinking coffee, and reading the morning paper. Felstead and Jewson (2000) noted similar strategies for “switching” from one role to another, but they did not report which were most used.

WORKAHOLISM: WHEN WORK TAKES OVER LEISURE AND HOME TIME

Many skilled white collar workers experience pressure to work long hours and bring work home (Cosser 1974). But what happens when the “greedy institution,” work, takes up residence in one's home? Office workers can protect themselves from overwork by defining home as a place away from work, even if the job is an occasional intruder there. But when the office is just a few feet away, skilled white collar workers may have difficulty leaving work behind (Knowlton 2000; Koch 1998; Schepp 1990), especially if their earnings are not high or they face an unpredictable supply of jobs (Jurik 1998; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995). In Olson's (1989) survey of subscribers to two trade magazines, a third of telecommuters who worked at least some hours at home identified working too long as a problem. Almost one quarter of the sample in Owen and colleagues' (1995) study of at-home workers in 9 states felt that they could not “get away from work,” and another 11 percent indicated that work interfered with their family life. More than one-fourth of Phizacklea and Wolkowitz's (1995) British home workers

reported that long hours were a disadvantage of working at home, and Felstead and Jewson (2000) also found evidence of workaholism in their British sample.

Unfortunately, existing research (e.g., Jurik 1998; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995) provides relatively little information about strategies at-home workers use to cope with the problem. Felstead and Jewson (2000) suggested that overwork might be curbed by deliberate efforts to restrict one's workload. Advice manuals and journalistic interviews (Edwards and Edwards 1994; Langhoff 1996; Jones 1997; Schepp 1990) often suggest reducing the temptation by locating the work area in a separate room, and some studies confirm that workaholism thrives when there is no separate work area (Hill et al. 1996; Olson and Primps 1984). Also suggested are prescheduling breaks for coffee, doing dishes, or gardening. Some home workers report using cues, such as children coming home from school or spouses arriving home from work, to clearly mark the end of work time. Others close and lock the home office door, turn off the ringer of the business phone, or change clothes to mark the end of work time (Edwards and Edwards 1994).

ISOLATION

For office workers, colleagues provide social and professional support and reinforce work roles and identities. Interaction with coworkers provides opportunities to build professional and friendship networks, and common experiences and schedules build in-group solidarity (Zerubavel 1981). Skilled white collar workers who work full time at home lack these opportunities and therefore might suffer from lack of social contacts or chances to learn from coworkers (Salomon and Salomon 1984). On the other hand, due to their personalities and the nature of their work, many such workers may not feel isolated (Heilman 1988). Moreover, interruptions from colleagues can be troublesome, and coworkers and office politics can be annoying and distracting. Indeed it is to reduce just such problems that some office workers rely on voice mail or "gate-keeping" secretaries (Nippert-Eng 1996).

Existing research provides little information about the actual prevalence of such problems among skilled white collar at-home workers (Blanc 1988). Newspapers and popular or trade magazines sometimes publish interviews with lonely home workers and offer tips for coping with isolation (Bedin 1997; Beech and Gallop-Goodman 2000; Craumer and Marshall 1997), and some trade books (e.g., Edwards and Edwards 1994; Rogak 1996; Schepp 1990) mention the issue. Most of the more scholarly studies that touch on the topic (e.g. Ahrentzen 1987; Beach 1989; Christensen 1988; Mirchandani 1998, 1999; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995) include a mixture of job types or of part and full time workers or mention isolation only in passing. Olson (1989) found that one-third of the telecommuters she studied missed interaction with coworkers, and other researchers (Felstead and Jewson 1996; Huws et al. 1990) report similar results.

We were able to find only one systematic study of the strategies at-home workers use to avoid isolation. Felstead and Jewson (2000) reported that British home-based workers deliberately took breaks from work or interacted with clients, friends, or family to relieve isolation. Articles in

trade books and the popular press suggest additional strategies for opening contacts to the outside world, including involvement in community activities, running errands, adopting a pet, exercising outside, and meeting other home workers for lunch or coffee (Bedin 1997; Edwards and Edwards 1994; Langhoff 1996; Lynham 1999; Rogak 1996; Schepp 1990)—all of which involve seeking social contacts in “non-work” domains. However, a study by the Diebold (1981) Group found that such community activities did not do much to relieve feelings of isolation. Surprisingly, existing studies largely ignore family ties as a possible counterweight to social isolation.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Managing the difficulties involved in working full time at home is a potential problem for any skilled white collar worker, but men and women may experience the conflicts differently and seek different solutions. A great deal of previous research has explored women's experiences while working at home; less attention has been devoted to men's.

Probably the most extensively studied topic is differences between men and women's reasons for working at home. Congruent with cultural pressures on women to assume greater responsibility for the domestic sphere, numerous studies (Arai 2000; Beach 1989; Boden 1999; Carr 1996; Christensen 1988; Felstead and Jewson 2000; Jurik 1998; Owen et al. 1995) find that women are more apt to choose home-based work and self-employment. Cultural stereotypes equate going to work with masculinity, that is, with the independence, competence, and power of the breadwinner (Huws et al. 1990; Jurik 1998), so men who work at home may worry about losing status or gender identity and feel isolated from the “masculinity-confirming buddy-world of the workplace” (Huws et al. 1990:68). They also may resent having to assume additional childcare and household responsibilities, especially if they do not value these tasks (Edwards and Edwards 1994). In line with this hypothesis, Felstead and Jewson (2000) found that men more often complained that they missed work-related interactions with coworkers, while women more frequently mentioned general feelings of detachment. Male home workers also more often preferred work environments at home that were similar to “normal” office routines and were more successful in constructing them.

The demands of the traditional homemaker role can make it especially hard for women who work full time at home to focus on work. They may have a harder time convincing others that they are not to be interrupted (Beach 1989; Christensen 1988; Felstead and Jewson 2000; Jurik 1998; Mirchandani 1999; Schepp 1990) or find themselves locked into the “superwoman syndrome,” suffering from role overload as they attempt to meet both the demands of a full-time homemaker and a career (Edwards and Edwards 1994). Since many women choose home-based work precisely because they desire more integration of family and work responsibilities, it is not surprising that they report more distractions and interference while working. Men were more likely to have work spillover into their home lives, working longer and showing workaholic tendencies (Loscocco 1996; Pleck 1977).

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Our data come from lengthy interviews with 14 skilled white collar workers who work full time at home. We defined skilled white collar workers as workers who have occupations defined by the census as professional or technical. (Managers might theoretically be included as well, but the nature of managerial work generally makes full-time work at home impractical, and we encountered no such persons in the process of drawing our sample.)

The unavailability of a list of white collar home workers ruled out a probability sample, and practical constraints dictated a sample limited to one state. Respondents were located through informal networks, but we took several steps to increase its representativeness. To diminish the possibility of finding interviewees from similar walks of life, we used all of our networks and contacts (colleagues, friends, relatives, friends of friends, etc.). We also asked contacts to suggest names of potential respondents with a variety of demographic characteristics and occupations. To avoid the sample homogeneity that might result from snowball sampling, we used it in only one instance. Using this process, we identified 36 potential interviewees.

Potential interviewees were contacted by e-mail or phone, informed about the purpose of the study, and asked a series of questions to verify that they held a skilled white collar job, worked at least 35 hours a week at home, did not travel to a home office or visit clients more than once a week, and did not operate a home business involving a continuous flow of customers or clients. None of those who met our specifications did routine, repetitive work or were required to follow a rigid work schedule. Of 36 persons contacted, 15 met our specifications; all but 1 agreed to be interviewed.

The occupations included were diverse, though some types of skilled white collar work were better represented than others. Two interviewees were in sales, one was a freelance writer, two did a mixture of computer-related work—such as developing signs and logos and desktop publishing, five were consultants—most specializing in computer software or technology, one was a computer programmer, and three did their work primarily through databases and/or the Internet. All made significant use of computers and did work that at times required concentration and quiet. Most were self-employed, but three were telecommuters. Large corporations employed two of these; the third worked for a family business. In each case, the employer was located at least two hours away. There was considerable variation in how long interviewees had worked at home, ranging from 1 month to 16 years, with a mean of 5 years. For all but two, the present stint of at-home work was their first.

Eleven interviewees lived in the urbanized Piedmont crescent of North Carolina; the others resided in primarily rural areas. There was little racial/ethnic diversity; the sample included one Hispanic, but no African Americans. Most had attended college, and two had advanced degrees. The sample included 11 females and 3 males. Ages ranged from 25 to 61, with a mean of 43. Thirteen were married; one was divorced. One interviewee had a spouse who worked part time;

the other spouses worked full time. In two cases, we interviewed both members of couples who were partners in a home-based business. Another had a spouse who worked separately at home but was not interviewed. Three interviewees had children under five, three had children in elementary or middle school, and two had children in high school. Two were pregnant for the first time. A few also had grandchildren who visited regularly. The great majority had pets; cats and dogs were most common, but fish and birds were also present.

Due to lack of information about the population of skilled white collar workers who work full time at home, it is impossible to determine the extent of sample bias (Felstead and Jewson 2000). Our sample's demographics are, in most respects, similar to Heck et al.'s (1995) sample of home-based workers in nine U.S. states, which included seasonal workers and a broad range of occupations. Like their study, our sample includes majorities of interviewees who are married, self-employed, and parents. It differs in being predominantly female, but this may reflect our focus on skilled white collar workers. Our sample also includes no top-level professionals, but their absence is not surprising in view of the obstacles to working full time at home that people in most such occupations face and their small numbers in the population. In view of differences in occupations of Whites and minorities, it is also not surprising that minorities are underrepresented in this skilled white collar sample. The fact that the sample includes only one single mother may reflect not only the fact that married mothers considerably outnumber single mothers, but also the fact that single mothers average less education and are less likely to have skilled white collar occupations than married women.

The face-to-face, semistructured interviews that we conducted lasted one to two hours. All but two—conducted in a restaurant and a college library—took place at the respondent's home. All respondents agreed to tape recording of the interviews. The interview included 86 mainly open-ended questions, focusing on the problems the at-home workers encountered and how they managed them. This format allowed us to explore new topics that surfaced during the interviews and to follow up on especially interesting responses (Neuman 1994).

We transcribed the audio tapes and added additional information from notes made during the interviews, including information about the residence and neighborhood and about interviewees' facial expressions, voice tones, and body language. Before coding the data, we constructed a list of codes for relevant concepts and patterns. Some of these corresponded to key concepts that we had identified in the literature review; others designated patterns that emerged during the interviews. We used a qualitative data analysis program to attach codes to the text. After checking for coding consistency, we printed texts associated with each concept and checked the codes a second time to ensure reliability across and within interviews. Several descriptor codes were also assigned to the entire text of each interview. These included self-employed versus telecommuter, gender, age, number of years of working at home, whether the interviewee had worked at home before, and age of children. We then analyzed the coded segments using Boolean logic to identify significant patterns in the responses. We organize the discussion of our results around the six research questions identified above.

THE CHOICE TO WORK AT HOME

Interviewees had begun to work at home at different points in the life course. Some began when they were in their mid-thirties or forties with school-age children. A few were in their twenties and did not yet have children; others were nearing retirement. But, despite these variations, two themes emerged repeatedly in their responses: the “push” of labor market or job demands, and the “pull” of childcare and family responsibilities. Only one interviewee failed to fit one of these patterns. After a mid-life crisis, she decided to become self-employed rather than continue as a full-time homemaker.

Changes in the economy or their jobs like job restructuring or being laid off “pushed” four respondents to try working at home. For two, age was also a factor; they were in their fifties when they quit their jobs and felt that they were too old to re-enter the job market. The majority of the interviewees, however, cited family obligations as the main reason for working at home. Three wanted a more flexible work schedule to meet children's needs. For example, when asked why she had started to work at home, one mother of two replied, “Kids. It better accommodates my schedule. That's the primary reason.” Other interviewees cited the birth of a first child as the time when they decided they wanted to work at home. One explained, “It occurred to me that why did I have her in the first place if I was leaving her with someone else everyday.” For three women, events in their spouse's career precipitated the decision to work at home. All changed to at-home work when their husbands were relocated or quit their jobs.

There were clear gender differences in reasons for deciding to work at home. Paralleling findings from previous studies (Felstead; Jewson 2000 and Jurik 1998), all the men we interviewed said they had become at-home workers because of the demands of their own work. None mentioned family or childcare. In sharp contrast, no woman failed to mention family responsibilities as a key factor in the decision to work at home. The majority of women cited both family and economic reasons; they wanted to earn money, but do so in a way that would allow them to meet family needs. This finding is also consistent with previous research (Beach 1989; Christensen 1988; Jurik 1998), and hints that many of our female respondents may have had “adaptive” orientations, emphasizing both work and family and seeking out work and family arrangements to make this possible (Hakim 2000, 2002).

To further explore reasons for working at home, we also asked interviewees what they disliked about work in an office and liked about working at home. Most of their comments about the disadvantages of office jobs fell into two categories: office structure and office atmosphere. Those who disliked office structure mentioned having to dress up, commute to an office, follow a rigid time schedule, or answer to a boss. Working at home provided more freedom to structure the workday as they pleased. If they were ill or especially tired, they could adjust their work pace accordingly. Citing the advantages of more integration of home and work roles, one interviewee said, “I can go down [to my office] in my pajamas if I want. I can't do that in an office.... I can bring food downstairs and eat it, whereas that might not be acceptable in an office environment. I

can play the music as loud as I want. I can have the TV blaring in the background.” Another complained of scheduling inflexibility at the office, “There were lots of times when I had to be there, but I wasn't really doing anything because I had already finished what I was supposed to do.... When you're at work you have to play the game and sit there and pretend you're working, which I hated!” For this interviewee working at home had the potential to save time and reduce role overload. Complaints about the office atmosphere focused on obstacles to getting work done. Interviewees said that chatty coworkers, office politics, and personality conflicts wasted a lot of time and that they were more productive at home, where they did not have to contend with these distractions. The freedom from these annoyances achieved by working at home may thus have reduced stress and role overload.

Interviewees' responses to the question about things they liked about working at home were consistent with their answers to the earlier question about reasons for deciding to work at home. By far, the most commonly cited advantage was the chance to fulfill role obligations at home and gain personal satisfaction by spending more time with children or grandchildren. Most said that, working at home, they felt closer to their children or grandchildren, and many had chosen to work at home precisely for this reason. Several expressed themselves with poignancy and emotion on this topic. One said, “Being there when the kids get home from school is really one of the things.... There's this little window there when they first come home from school. They will tell you things about their day, and after about 30 minutes of being home, the window just shuts, and you will not hear it.” More generally, interviewees said that working at home allowed a better balance of family and work responsibilities. Many said that, freed from the constraints of the office, they had more time for friends and family, for golf, exercise, gardening, and cooking, for volunteer work, and for housework or errands. Six said that, by combining work and household tasks during the day, they were able to save time and free up weekends and evenings for visiting family and friends.

We did not directly ask the interviewees for an overall assessment of working at home versus work at the office, but almost all volunteered that the advantages of working at home far outweighed the disadvantages. Several expressed gratitude for the chance to work at home, and no one wanted to go back to an office. As one interviewee who worked at home with her spouse put it, “I can't think of something that would be so negative that we wouldn't do this.” In part, these overall positive assessments may reflect self-selection of this home work by those most likely to adapt well to it. That is, employees who are dissatisfied working in an office setting and believe working at home might yield greater advantages may be more likely to choose to work at home, and those who are happy working at home may be more likely to continue.

Work at home did, however, carry with it potential difficulties, including problems maintaining work and home boundaries, tendencies toward workaholism, temptations and distractions that interfered with work, and isolation. We discuss these in the next four sections.

HOME AND WORK BOUNDARIES: SEGMENTATION AND INTEGRATION

As existing literature had suggested, managing the boundaries between home and work was an issue for many interviewees; however, almost all were able to cope. They used a range of strategies, ranging from segmentation, the complete separation of work time and tasks from home and family, to integration, a complete interpenetration of the two in which the work role is flexible and permeable. The degree of segmentation manifested itself most clearly in four areas: office location and privacy, work scheduling, work breaks and household tasks, and use of markers to start and end the work day.

Office Location and Office Privacy

Most interviewees did the majority of their work in a separate room with a door. For many, a spare room had become the office, and a few had turned a basement into a work space. One used a loft overlooking the living room. Three had carved out a nook near the kitchen or living room for a workspace. Although their work areas were located in rooms that had another use, all of them had a separate desk for work. A few interviewees said they had tried working in common areas, such as the kitchen, but this made work too permeable to interruptions. One explained, “When I first started, I had my computer downstairs in the island of the kitchen, and it was just always present. I couldn't differentiate between work time and personal time, so I moved everything out of the kitchen, and now it's much better.” When asked whether she needed that distinction between home and work, she replied: “Absolutely! Mentally it's hard enough! Once I changed it physically it really helped.” Interviewees who did most of their work in separate office spaces with a closeable door also generally scheduled their work for times when children or spouses could not interrupt or disturb them, establishing relatively inflexible boundaries in terms of both space and time.

Like Heck et al.'s (1995) subjects, most of our interviewees had established a separate office space and did most of their work there. Few of Heck et al.'s respondents took work into non-work areas, but almost half of our respondents at times did so. Such efforts to achieve more integration did not always work out. One interviewee described the results as follows: “I tried doing it one time. I took my laptop in the bed and just was totally unproductive. It just did not work. So, I told my wife, “Sorry, but I'll be working downstairs for the rest of my life.”

Although interviewees with children preferred not to work when children were awake or present, most sometimes had to do so, especially during weekends or early evenings. At these times, most allowed more permeable boundaries. They let young children play in or near the work area and chose easy tasks that required little concentration. One explained that she allowed her children “upstairs [in my work area] if I'm sending or expecting a fax or I have to do something easy. There's a whole toy area up there for them, so they can play while I'm working.”

More permeable boundaries were set for pets. Almost all of the 11 interviewees with pets were glad to have them around for companionship, and pets that did not interfere with work were most appreciated. One woman said about her dog, “She's always here. It used to be the case when she

was younger that she would get into stuff, but she's such a good dog now.... She's a great companion.” Unlike children, pets could simply be ejected from the office if they became bothersome. Only two interviewees did not regularly allow their pet in their work space. Both had cats that were too vocal, meowing when they were on the phone, which they believed sounded unprofessional.

Work Schedules

Interviewees' generally tried to develop work schedules that would reduce role conflict and overload. All interviewees worked at least 35 hours a week, and almost half put in over 40 hours. All showed a preference for relatively inflexible temporal segmentation, preferring to keep work time separate from family time. Not everyone worked standard shifts, but even when their hours were unconventional, all were able to describe a daily and weekly pattern. About half worked Monday through Friday from 8:00 or 9:00 am until 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening. The remainder scheduled work time to avoid interruptions, usually when the household was empty or everyone else was asleep.

Interviewees with spouses who worked outside the home usually stopped working immediately before their spouses came home from work. For those with children, the ages of the children strongly influenced work schedules. The three women with children under five had developed different ways of scheduling work to protect their work time. One put her daughter in daycare full time and stopped working when it was time to pick her up. A second was more flexible in her scheduling, fitting in work time when the children were asleep or napping. The third, who had her children in daycare part time, worked when relatives came over to watch her children, when the children were at daycare, or when they were asleep. The five interviewees with school-age children, four women and one man, worked mainly when the children were at school. They usually ended work earlier than other interviewees and either ended work or took breaks when children returned. Those who no longer had children at home often ended work at dinner time, when grown children or relatives often dropped by. These patterns suggest that these interviewees were choosing work times when role conflicts or difficulties in maintaining segmentation would be least likely to arise. Contrary to Beach's (1989) findings about home-based workers, our interviewees with children usually worked when the children were around or awake only when absolutely necessary.

Most interviewees also tried to protect non-work time from work. Only two worked regularly on weekends. The rest either never worked weekends or did so only when they had a deadline or especially heavy workload. When they did work on a weekend, most worked only a few hours to catch up on projects that were due the next week, check e-mail, gather supplies, return phone calls, or make up for time taken off the previous week. Similarly, many of those who normally worked during the day worked in the evening only if they had an especially heavy work week or deadline.

Work Breaks and Household Tasks

Lacking the variety in surroundings and activities provided at the office by lunch away from the workplace, meetings, and trips to the copy machine, at-home workers had to create their own breaks. The timing of these breaks and the activities performed during them also reflected our interviewees' efforts to deal with role overload and conflict and their use of segmentation or integration strategies.

Many of the interviewees said that breaks were important for maintaining work focus, providing time to think about work problems or a chance to rest their eyes from computer screens. Afterwards, they could return to work with renewed energy. As one explained, "If I have a particular problem that I run into, I'll just drop it and go out in the yard for a while and think about it and then come back in and work some more." Another had her own unique way of breaking the routine. "Sometimes, I'll get up, and I'll dance right here. I was telling a friend of mine that, 'Gosh I don't think I could ever go back to work because in the middle of the day I like to put on Aretha Franklin and dance real crazy in the room.' You kind of need that to just break it all up—all the papers and computer stuff."

Except for lunch, most did not schedule breaks; instead they took short breaks when they felt like it. Those who took the shortest and fewest breaks—allowing the least intrusion of personal time into work time during their work hours—were women with children under age five. They felt under pressure to reduce role overload by accomplishing as much as possible during the time set aside for work. Those with school-aged children who did not end work when the children came home took breaks to spend time with them. Most of those with dogs took occasional short breaks to play with or walk their pets, with the timing determined mainly by the dogs' needs. The only interviewee who did not regularly take breaks was a man who allocated a block of afternoon time for golf.

When asked what they usually did during breaks, eight interviewees said they did home-related tasks, indicating some integration of home and work. Most often mentioned were yard work, making beds, laundry, walking the dog, and checking mail. Several interviewees, mostly women, noted the benefits of having a flexible schedule that let them take care of such tasks during the day. One explained, "The wonderful thing about working at home is that you can do different things; for instance, I can jump up and put in a load of laundry and come back and work some more. Or, I can jump up and go pick up my daughter from school and come back and work some more." Using break time for household tasks or children's needs let them meet these obligations using time they might otherwise have wasted. However, it also opened the possibility that household tasks might distract from work.

Perhaps for this reason, over a third of our interviewees preferred not to do home-related tasks during breaks, showing a preference for segmentation of work and home tasks. All said that switching between tasks was distracting. Both of the respondents with young children not in

daycare full time fell into this category, as did two of the three men and one woman with a grown child. The two mothers of young children had such limited time for working without interruption that they were not tempted to use breaks for household tasks. An interviewee with an infant and a three year old explained, "I try to get housework done during the day so that I don't have to do that stuff at night. Then I can get work done quicker at night because I'm sticking to it the whole time.... It's just easier to do it that way."

Replacing the Commute: Starting and Ending the Workday

Interviewees who wanted to separate work and home roles temporally often relied on cues and activities associated with beginning and ending work to help them do so. Cues told them when it was time to start or end work; activities helped make the transition from one to the other clearer. These transitional events were rich with symbolic meaning, prompting respondents to say that they signaled crossing over from one role to another. Their use indicates that maintaining the distinction between work and home spheres was a challenging assignment that many interviewees had to work hard at.

Two types of cues were used to determine when it was time to begin work. The six respondents with no children at home all relied on the clock. "To me," one said, "eight o'clock is the magic time. That's when I'll start answering the phone if it rings." None of those with children at home relied on the clock; all waited until their children were at school or—in the case of the two interviewees who worked at night—until their children were asleep to begin work.

Cues told the at-home workers when to start work, but many also used specific activities like those identified by Ahrentzen (1987) and in popular press articles to symbolize the beginning of the work day: drinking coffee or tea, showering and dressing, walking to the work area, and turning on the computer and lights. Several interviewees noted the psychological meaning of such acts. One, whose spouse also worked at home, said that her husband "refers to the staircase as 'the commute.' For us, it's just a psychological thing. Once you come up those stairs and into that [work] area, you are in the office."

Cues also signaled the end of work. Interviewees without children often relied on hunger to remind them it was time to quit, while those with children relied on their arrival home from school or waking up from naps. Some of those who worked longer hours or at night said that fatigue played a role. Only a few interviewees, who had recently begun working at home, relied on a clock to signal the end of work time. They were still accustomed to a traditional work schedule, and two were telecommuters with supervisors who expected them to stick to the company time schedule.

Many interviewees also mentioned activities used to mark the end of work. Like the office workers in Nippert-Eng's (1996) study, they straightened their desks, made to-do lists for the next day, closed the office door, or simply left the work space. These actions helped to put work out of their minds and distance them from work roles. As one interviewee explained about her

office door, “We really have to keep the door shut, because it's a constant reminder when you're on your own time.”

WORKAHOLISM

The literature review suggested that working at home can create structural conditions—such as visible reminders of incomplete jobs and the ready accessibility of the work space and tools—that might tempt skilled white collar workers, who often identify with and enjoy their jobs, to work more hours than they would have worked in an office job or longer hours than they or their families would wish. The emphasis many of our interviewees placed on strategies to maintain work/home boundaries suggests that this was indeed a potential problem, and when asked a direct question, all said that they sometimes faced temptations toward working too many hours. Many also indicated that they had difficulty keeping their thoughts from straying to work during free time. To the extent that they yielded to the temptation to work long hours, the likely result would be more role conflict and overload, not the reduction of these problems that many had hoped for when choosing to work at home.

Workaholic tendencies were more evident in some interviewees than others. In this respect, the interviewees fell into two groups. One group—comprised of five self-employed persons, all 45 years old or older and with few childcare responsibilities or no children at home—worked 50 to 60 hours a week. All three men were in this category. The other nine interviewees worked 35 to 40 hours a week. All were women, and six were primary caregivers for children at home. In general, these interviewees said they liked their work but did want it to take over their free time. Most had other activities that they also wanted to spend time on. When one such interviewee was asked whether it was ever hard to stop working, she responded, “Absolutely, but only because of a deadline or a client, not because I have a desire to keep working. My workaholic tendencies only come out when someone needs something I'm doing for them. Otherwise, I'd rather be doing other things.”

When asked if they worked more hours at home than they had in previous office jobs, three reported that they worked fewer hours. They said that they accomplished about as much as they had when working in an office, but were more efficient. There were fewer distractions, and when finished, they were not required to remain until the standard workday ended. Five interviewees said they worked more hours, while four reported that they worked about the same amount. The other two had switched jobs when they started working at home and were unwilling to make a comparison.

Inducements and Barriers to Workaholism

Popular press sources suggest various factors that make workaholism less likely, including separation of work and non-work areas, a closeable office door, having outside interests, and the use of outside cues, such as the return of children from school, as signals to end work (Canton 1997; Edwards and Edwards 1994; Fryer 1997; Langhoff, 1996). In our study, five factors

emerged as clear predictors of working long hours: high interest in the job, fear of failure, lack of a separate office, not being a primary caregiver for children, and lack of outside interests. These factors were, in turn, associated with gender, self-employment, and age.

Four interviewees said that approaching deadlines often prompted them to put in extra hours, and three said that they simply loved doing their work and had a difficult time ending the workday; work was their hobby as well as their livelihood. As one explained, "I'm extremely fortunate to like what I do. Laying out pages on the computer... I don't know if I'll ever get completely sick of it ... It's like playing most of the time." Like Jurik's (1998) study, our research also suggests that fear of losing one's livelihood could also lead to workaholism, especially among the self-employed. Many of them said that, when they first began working at home, they had feared that their business would go under. Most cut back their work hours after they thought the business was on a firmer footing, but for five, fear of failure did not go away. Instead, it drove them to accept additional projects and work extra hours. None of the telecommuters saw themselves as at risk of losing their jobs, perhaps because telecommuters are often highly-valued employees to begin with.

Most interviewees did have a separate work space, which helped reinforce the boundary between home and work time. Without such a firm physical and mental boundary, there might have been more tendency to work long hours. One of the few interviewees without a separate office directly noted the connection between lack of a separate work space and workaholism. She said, "If I saw something that was laying out that I was working on, then I'd start thinking about it again. Even if you don't actually do real work, your brain is still... I have a hard time letting go of it."

Heavy family obligations and hobbies limited workaholic tendencies. Many interviewees were under pressure to stop working when their spouses or children arrived home in the afternoon. Their family members acted as border-keepers, monitoring their work hours and complaining when they worked too long. Such constraints were especially strong for primary caregivers for young children. Helping children with homework, driving them to after-school activities, cooking dinner, and putting the children to bed preempted any chance to put in extra hours. The fact that all three of the men, including one who had children at home, tended to work long hours is probably most directly explained by lack of childcare responsibilities. This factor may also help to explain the longer work hours typical of older interviewees. Finally, some interviewees had other activities and hobbies that they enjoyed, such as gardening, dancing, and meditation; they too were less tempted to work long hours.

Like the earlier findings of Phizacklea and Wolkowitz (1995) and Jurik (1998), our research suggests that differences in real or perceived economic pressure may have played a role in who worked the longest hours. All three males worked long hours, all of those who reported the longest workdays were self-employed, and the workaholics were more likely to worry about their businesses failing. These interviewees may have experienced or perceived more pressure to produce income and chosen long hours partly for this reason. Those with shorter work hours

tended to be married women with husbands who worked full time. It is possible that some of them may have experienced or perceived less pressure to contribute the majority of their family's economic support.

DISTRACTIONS AND TEMPTATIONS

Workaholism results when the presence of reminders of work obligations in the household tempt at-home workers to devote increasing amounts of time to work. However, popular press articles and previous studies of at-home workers also suggest that the presence of reminders of home obligations or leisure activities can have the reverse effect, interfering with workers' ability to remain focused on work (Felstead and Jewson 2000; Hill et al. 1996; Huws et al. 1990; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz 1995). The effort many of our interviewees put into maintaining work/home boundaries suggests that screening out distractions was also an issue for them. This suspicion was confirmed by their responses to our direct questions about distractions; nevertheless, not every interviewee found distractions to be a major difficulty, and most were able to manage the problem.

None of the interviewees had clients or supervisors who came to their home; however, all but one said that they had to deal with distractions that originated outside the home. Many routinely had deliveries from FedEx, and a few reported that missionaries, solicitors, or even unexpected visits from family members interrupted them. One was also bothered in the summer by her neighbor's barking dog. A few interviewees were occasionally asked to do small tasks to help their neighbors, but most enjoyed doing these favors and did not find them problematic.

More often, distractions from outside arrived not at the front door, but by telephone; friends, neighbors, and—especially—family members and telemarketers, interrupted the interviewees' work. Fully half of the interviewees complained about telemarketers, and most tried to maintain “closed” boundaries against them. Some simply hung up, while others screened all their incoming calls and did not answer those from telemarketers. When family members called, the interviewees' responses were, of necessity, politer. Some tried to screen out these calls and let their answering machine answer. Others answered, but limited the conversation to a minute or two.

Almost every interviewee tried to separate work calls from family and personal calls, though some went to greater lengths than others. Most had separate home, business, and computer phone lines, usually two, but sometimes three. The four respondents with only a single line tended to have few business calls and use the Internet for only short periods of time or late at night. Interviewees who preferred to segment home and work time tended to establish temporal boundaries for calls. They did not answer evening calls on the business line, allowing the answering machine to record a message.

Women suffered more than men from interruptions. Many complained that friends, relatives, and neighbors did not understand that, even though they were at home during the day, they were not

free to chitchat, babysit, or run errands. One interviewee explained, “A lot of times, people just don't understand the fact that if you are at home, you're working. They think you are just a housewife or just hanging around not doing anything.” None of the men mentioned this problem, suggesting that sex role stereotypes may have undermined women's claims to be working while at home.

Because the number of interruptions was not large, and the strategies for maintaining boundaries were generally effective, most respondents did not find distractions from knocks at the door or telephone calls to be especially problematic. As one put it, “When I compare it to the distractions at the office, there's fewer distractions here. Even if it is like FedEx coming to the door, or a momentary telephone call, I don't consider them distractions.”

More serious distractions came from within the household. In our study, children and pets were the most frequently mentioned distractions. All of the interviewees with children tried to schedule work during times when their children were asleep or out of the house. When children were awake and in the house while interviewees were working, they relied on informal rules such as, “when I'm talking on the phone, be quiet,” and “do not disturb me right now. I'm doing billing.” When pets became demanding or noisy, respondents moved to another room or shut out the pet.

Of course, even when there are no intrusive distractions, at-home workers can generate their own. Like subjects in previous studies, our interviewees reported being tempted to get food or drinks, do housework or gardening, watch TV, and talk to others through e-mail or telephone. But like the other distractions, these were not usually regarded as major problems.

Some types of respondents found some specific household distractions and temptations harder to resist than others. Interviewees who frequently worked over 40 hours a week, often those who enjoyed their work or felt that their businesses were at risk, less often reported that temptations like hobbies or snacking distracted them when they were working hard. There was some evidence that women with young children were more bothered by housework that needed doing, even though the need to stay focused on work usually made them ignore the temptation. All four of the respondents who said they had difficulty ignoring housework were women, and three of them had children age 12 or younger. It may be that in households with younger children there were simply more household chores to do and that these fell to the women.

Our interviewees had developed strategies for managing distractions similar to those suggested in popular press and “how-to” manuals on working at home (Canton 1997; Edwards and Edwards 1994; Langhoff 1996): screening incoming calls, having separate phone lines, and scheduling work for times when distractions were less likely. They also developed cues, such as training a dog to stop barking on command and telling children to not disturb them while they were on the phone, to signal to others when they needed quiet. Some learned to simply ignore

some distractions and temptations while working or to schedule specific times for potentially distracting activities like laundry or housework.

Another explanation for interviewees' success in coping with interruptions and distractions was that most had strong self-discipline or motivation. Several reported that they felt guilty when they found themselves doing activities that were not work related during their work hours. Others said that their self-discipline came not so much from guilt, as from the desire to be successful as home workers. To be successful, they had to learn how to ignore or effectively handle distractions and temptations around the house. As one interviewee put it, "It's not like self-discipline. It's like 'how am I going to pay the mortgage?' It's really the same with the food. If I'm going to make this work, then I really can't be eating all the time." Their strong motivation to keep their clients or job and continue working at home were powerful incentives that encouraged them to remain focused on work. Here again self-selection may have been a factor. All of our interviewees had chosen to work at home and wanted to make this arrangement work. Those with less motivation would be presumably less likely to choose this option and more likely to find it unworkable and return to office work.

ISOLATION

Contrary to suggestions in the literature, isolation was not a major problem for most of our interviewees, although it did cause problems for some. Four interviewees said that they never had problems with isolation because they preferred working alone. Four others, including interviewees who had recently moved, did not have children living with them, or did not have much face-to-face contact or many telephone conversations with others, struggled more often with isolation; yet, for the most part, even they did not see it as a major issue. Only one of them, who had recently moved from another state and just begun telecommuting, experienced isolation as a major problem.

Many of the interviewees told us that feelings of isolation had been more intense when they first began working at home, but had lessened after a few months. Although they still felt lonely at times, they had found ways to cope. Indeed, after only a month of working at home, even the newly relocated and lonely interviewee mentioned above was beginning to adjust. She took walks with her dog, joined a church choir, and went to the library to check out books. Contrary to Felstead and Jewson's (2000) findings, we did not find any evidence that women complained more about feelings of general detachment or that men more often missed work-related interactions with coworkers.

In general, interviewees who had children at home or frequent visits from relatives or friends felt less isolated. Indeed, many of the women, especially those with small children or grandchildren, mentioned that they had so much contact with family members and friends they were glad to have time to work alone. One explained, "We have a lot of family members in the area. I don't think there's a day that goes by that we don't see one of our own children or family members...."

There's always something, and on the weekend there's always friends and family and church. You almost welcome the days when you have no one come by and the day is yours." None of the men made comments of this type.

With the exception of less television watching and more reliance on contacts with friends and family, the strategies for combating isolation used by our interviewees proved similar to those noted in existing literature. Three said that having a pet helped to relieve isolation. Two found themselves talking out loud. As one said, "Because there are no interruptions, because there's no one to whom I can say 'this is really crazy!' I'll walk into the kitchen and say 'Oh, this is crazy!'" Over one-half of the interviewees said they needed to talk to people on the phone or have at least one meeting outside the home daily to satisfy needs for human contact. Displaying a preference for open boundaries, six interviewees sometimes called friends and family, and two set up their computers to instantly display incoming e-mail. One explained, "I...switched my computer so that when I get an e-mail it immediately pops up...primarily for the communication piece because I missed having people to talk to. Normally in the office I wouldn't do that." Six said that they found themselves participating more in hobbies, such as golf and gardening, and one joined a support group for mothers who chose to stay home. Many interviewees sometimes left the house to run errands and visit clients; others simply went to another room when they felt lonely. Surprisingly, only one mentioned turning on the television during lunch to feel connected.

The three telecommuters also tried stay connected to office friends through e-mail or telephone calls. Two communicated with office friends at least weekly but complained that telecommuting had made them less accessible, as they were no longer able to meet and go places together. The other telecommuter worked for her father and chatted online with family members several times a week.

The four women with school-aged children were the most involved in community volunteer work, which provided them both with the opportunity to make social contacts and to spend time with their children. Sometimes they were not sure whether they started volunteering because of their children or to relieve isolation; often the two went together. As one explained, "I know I'm involved in all these volunteer things, but I can't really say if that's because I have kids now and I'm interested in these things now, or if it's because I feel isolated and need some sort of outlet." Contrary to the Diebold (1981) Group study, which found that participating in community activities did not relieve isolation, some of our interviewees found this to be a useful strategy.

Isolation, Professional Networks, and Job Skills

Another aspect of isolation is isolation from professional networks and colleagues with similar jobs. Such interaction not only meets social needs, but also provides on-the-job learning opportunities (Salomon and Salomon 1984). Surprisingly, only two interviewees said that working at home made it hard to keep their skills current. Both were in fast-paced, technical

computer fields, which required keeping up with new developments. The other 12 said that working at home either had no effect on keeping up job skills or actually made it easier. They cited several reasons. First, although most worked alone, almost all had help with staying up-to-date. Similar to Owen et al.'s (1995) and Jurik's (1998) findings that spouses often helped out with family businesses, our interviewees relied on husbands, friends, or business partners to help them select and maintain software, stay current on new developments, and advise them in areas where they were weak. The two telecommuters employed by large corporations said that their bosses kept them informed of recent developments. In addition, many of the interviewees received journals or industry publications and belonged to trade organizations; others regularly attended workshops, seminars, or conferences, and five used the Internet to search for new developments. Consequently, keeping up-to-date was rarely a problem.

Somewhat surprisingly, none of the 11 self-employed interviewees believed working at home had affected their professional networks. All were able to meet others in their fields and maintain a steady flow of jobs. Several mentioned that they received so many referrals that they actually had too much work. Many of the self-employed interviewees were in highly-specialized fields, which may have made maintaining networks easier. As one of these pointed out, "Project management is a small family. I run into people all the time that I've worked with before... When you make a success of bridging two pieces of software together, it spreads. So, I haven't really found that working at home has affected me..." We were not able to judge how working at home affected the job networks of the three telecommuters; one had only been working at home a month, another worked only for her family, and the other had changed jobs when she began telecommuting.

GENDER DIFFERENCES

Both the results reported above and past research suggests that men's and women's experiences working at home are far from identical. For example, both Pleck (1977) and Loscocco (1996) found that men had more difficulty with work obligations spilling over into home time, while women experienced the opposite problem: home tasks and responsibilities that spilled over into work time. Even though our sample contains few men, our data tentatively support this hypothesis. The three men reported mainly problems with work taking over their home time. All worked long hours, but none complained much about pressures like housework or other family members distracting them. On the other hand, most of the women, especially those with small children, reported the opposite problem. As Christensen (1988: XV) found, women's experiences working at home are complicated and mediated by "implicit expectations they have about who they are and what they are supposed to be."

Like the findings of Heck and her colleagues (1995), our results also suggest that, for women, the presence and age of children is an important influence on conflict between work and home obligations. The two women who were pregnant and all five of the women who had children in middle school or younger worked an average of 35 to 40 hours per week. Most of those with

younger children at home reported that childcare responsibilities and housework often distracted them from their work. One of the two women with children in high school worked 50 to 60 hours a week, while the other averaged about 35 hours. The women who had no children living at home usually worked 50 to 60 hours per week. It appears then, that skilled white collar women who work at home experience greater role conflict and have a harder time keeping distractions around the house from diverting their time and attention from work when they have young children.

Working at home could also mean more household responsibilities, but men's and women's experiences in this area were somewhat different. Eleven of the 13 married respondents, including two of the three men, reported that they had taken on a larger share of household tasks when they began working at home. The men said that they did more housework and childcare; the women reported doing more housework, paying bills, and running errands. The two interviewees who did not fit the pattern were a married couple who worked at home together and had always divided tasks evenly. A few of the women complained that their spouses', relatives', and friends' expectations were unrealistic. Even though they worked full time, their husbands expected the house to be immaculate and dinner always to be ready. One woman explained, "My husband thinks that I'm home and at his beck and call. He'll come home and say 'well, you're home all day.' I'll tell him that I'm working. He expects dinner to be done and the house to be clean and everything to be done. I'm not doing all that until 4:30 pm. Then I stop working." Almost one-half of the women also said that friends and relatives often assumed that they had a great deal of free time. None of the men mentioned this problem.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to the literature by offering a careful look at an especially interesting and growing group of at-home workers: skilled white collar workers who work full time at home. Combining insights from role theory, boundary theory, and literature about gender roles and the life cycle, our study helps to refine and expand theory in this area and provides information about the challenges such workers face and their strategies for successfully coping with them.

As a study of a relatively small number of workers in one state, this research cannot claim to represent the entire population of skilled white collar workers who work full time at home, but it does provide a useful counterpoint to journalistic descriptions of high-powered urban professionals (e.g., Fryer 1997; Morris 1997) and to practical advice manuals that tend to exaggerate the problems. Our interviewees performed skilled, well-compensated work, but none could be termed high powered professionals. They were mostly married persons with children, who lived in middle or upper-middle class neighborhoods in medium size cities or rural areas, not in New York lofts or beachfront cottages. They had sought flexible work arrangements for mundane reasons, to balance work and family or as an adaptation to ageism in the workplace or economic dislocations. Most were women. And most importantly, each had made a successful

adaptation to working at home. Such workers may well be more typical of this population than those portrayed in journalistic accounts.

Unlike most more academic studies, this research focuses on only a single type of worker. Previous studies with samples that mix seasonal, part-time, and full-time workers or respondents from a wide variety of occupations have the advantage of breadth; however, the very heterogeneity of the samples makes it difficult to determine how specific types of workers experience working at home and how they cope. There is good reason to think that the needs and experiences of skilled white collar workers who work full time at home are different than those of part-time workers or of clerical workers or craftspersons. By conducting detailed interviews with a sample limited to such workers, we were able to shed more light on how this important category of workers adapts.

Our results also suggest that a combination of role theory and boundary theory, supplemented by perspectives from research about gender and the life course, offers promising insights about the microlevel dynamics of enacting home and work roles under one roof. Some previous studies (Ahrentzen 1987; Heck et al. 1995; Felstead and Jewson 2000) have examined the boundaries between home and work roles that at-home workers create or the strategies that they use to move between roles. Our findings add to this literature by more closely examining the intricate tradeoffs that skilled white collar workers who work at home face as they try to cope simultaneously with role conflict and overload and with setting such boundaries. Many of our interviewees, especially women with heavier family obligations, saw working at home as an opportunity to reduce the role overload and role conflicts associated with office work. Working at home not only reduced travel time, but eliminated time wasted on office politics and interruptions and the “down time” at the office when there was little to do. Some interviewees were also able to combine work and home tasks in ways that saved time, such as using work breaks to take care of household tasks. Many also found that increased scheduling flexibility let them reduce direct collisions between work and home roles. They could schedule work for times when family obligations were minimal or interrupt work to deal with home and family obligations.

But for skilled white collar workers, with interesting and involving work and the freedom to set their own schedules, working at home also produced boundary maintenance problems. If not managed skillfully, these problems could cancel the gains from working at home. Interruptions from telemarketers, phone calls from relatives, and children's and pets' demands for attention were more problematic than at the office, and responding to them could consume time, reduce work efficiency, and increase stress. Being physically present at home, increased temptations to fritter away time or interrupt work to perform household tasks or take care of family members' needs. Others found that worries about keeping a business afloat and intrinsic interest in work, in combination with having work just a few steps away, could tempt them to work long hours. If interviewees yielded to either or both temptations, role overload and role conflict simply

reappeared in new forms. Worse still, efforts to reduce conflict by rigidly segmenting work and home tasks could undermine their gains from flexibility.

Making a success of working at home was thus a challenging task. But each of our interviewees had found ways to cope. In historical perspective, this should be no surprise. Before the Industrial Revolution, most workers worked contentedly at home. The cultural dominance of role expectations developed for office work and the need to align work routines with those of the conventional working world probably makes working at home more challenging today than it was in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, working at home, if skillfully managed, evidently offered our interviewees a way to reduce role conflict and overload, providing more time and flexibility for hobbies, friends, and family.

Defining and maintaining workable temporal and spatial boundaries between the work and home spheres was a more challenging task for our interviewees than for office workers: They had to find the right balance between openness to the outside world and exclusion of distractions. The degree of segmentation they chose varied with life circumstances and personal taste. Nevertheless, by using strategies such as having a separate office area, working mainly when children and other family members were not present, maintaining a relatively fixed work schedule, and using cues to signal where to start and stop work and activities to mark these transitions, most were able to maintain the degree of segmentation they desired. Those who preferred somewhat more integration usually managed this without undue difficulty, taking breaks when children came home, often doing less demanding tasks when children were around, and taking care of home chores during breaks.

The presence of reminders of work obligation in the home did tempt our interviewees to expand the time allocated to work or trespass the temporal boundaries they had erected to separate work from home. Nevertheless, working unusually long hours was a serious problem for only about one-third, mostly men or older workers. The majority worked no more than a normal work week and had problems ending work only occasionally. Some of these—all women—were primary caregivers for small children. They faced strong pressure from competing time demands and usually succeeded in scheduling work for periods when family demands were lower. For some, family members acted as border-keepers, monitoring how long they worked and letting them know when it was time to stop for the day. Some may have defined their role as that of secondary breadwinner, and most did not feel driven to work long hours; they wanted to balance work and family and pursue other interests. Some volunteered, some had hobbies that were important sources of satisfaction, and many spent much time with their families. They were married, middle-class people, whose jobs were interesting and challenging, but not the sole focus of life.

Difficulties with maintaining focus on work due to interruptions and distractions at home, though far from nonexistent, also proved to be manageable problems. Children were the most common source of interruptions for our interviewees, but most had adapted by careful scheduling of work

and reserving less demanding work tasks for times when children were around. Because most did not wish to work long hours, this solution usually worked acceptably. Indeed, consistent with the family-oriented sample, many interviewees regarded occasional time spent with children and pets as welcome breaks. Interviewees also learned to be their own gatekeepers—limiting the hours when they would take business calls, screening calls, informing friends, neighbors, and clients when it was acceptable to call, and moving pets out of the room when they interfered. Perhaps even more important was the high degree of motivation and self-discipline among these interviewees. To work at home successfully, they had to be able to ignore temptations and cope with distractions, and they did.

Working at home, coupled with the necessity to erect barriers to limit distractions from outside the household, also raises the spectre of social and professional isolation. Many of our interviewees did experience such feelings, but this was rarely a major problem. Unlike subjects in some previous studies, most of our interviewees had a strong network of community and family connections. Indeed, for some, the major problem was finding private time for work. Interviewees successfully employed strategies to reduce isolation similar to those cited by popular press sources, including meeting friends for lunch, volunteer work, and phoning and e-mailing friends and colleagues. Maintaining peer networks and job skills also proved less problematic than some past literature had suggested. In part, this may be because the work our interviewees performed, though skilled, could not usually be described as cutting edge. But there were other reasons. Many of our interviewees relied on friends or spouses to keep them up-to-date and to help with technical problems. Some subscribed to trade journals and Internet list serves or attended training sessions. Most worked in specialized fields where it was easy to stay in touch and obtain referrals, so finding work was rarely problematic.

In short, for our interviewees, working at home posed significant but far from insurmountable problems. This is not to say that every skilled white collar worker could adapt to working at home. Many of those least likely to succeed may never choose to try, and some who experiment with the home work may quickly discover that it is not for them and return to office work. In this sense, our sample may be biased toward success. The fact that several of our interviewees who had been working at home for relatively short periods were adapting successfully does not suggest a high failure rate, but this topic clearly needs more research.

Finally, our results suggest that a *combination* of gender and stage in the life course, not just gender alone, condition the experiences of skilled white collar workers who work at home. Previous studies have noted gender differences, but only a few (Beach 1989; Heck et al. 1995; Jurik 1998) have explored life cycle effects.

Our findings about gender are generally in line with findings from previous research, although, since there were few men in our sample, they cannot be definitive. The men in our sample were more likely to cite “push” factors from their careers as reasons for working at home. Like Christensen (1988), we found that women were more likely than men to be attracted to

working at home by the flexibility it offered for balancing work and family, although they clearly made the decision against the backdrop of cultural norms and social pressures to take more responsibility for children and household tasks (Crompton and Harris 1998a, 1998b; Rogers 2002; Roth 2002). The women also had more problems convincing others that they were indeed working while at home. And, like previous researchers, we found that men had more difficulty with work spilling over into home time, while women tended to face the opposite problem. Gender thus clearly conditioned the experience of working at home.

However, our data also suggest that, especially for women, stage in the life cycle is a factor in how work at home is experienced and managed. Voyandoff (1987) suggests that women in two-income families may be able to emphasize their parental role when their children are young and then reverse the priorities as their children grow older. Our findings show that this generalization fits the situation of skilled white collar women who work at home well, but they also indicate that the boundaries separating the home and work domains may also be adjusted as workers pass through different life cycle phases. Like Heck et al. (1995), Jurik (1998), and Beach (1989), we found that our female interviewees with young children arranged their work schedules around the children's comings and goings, while women with children in high school were more likely to strictly separate work and family and less likely to mix home and work tasks or work on weekends. Freed from some of their child rearing responsibilities, they also had extra time to devote to other activities. Some, who regarded work as both a hobby and a job, spent the newfound time working. Women with no children at home were similar to those with children in high school except that they no longer relied on children to set their work schedule, relying instead on a clock or cues such as hunger or physical exhaustion. The "mental" fences that at-home workers create to separate home and work and the cues and activities workers use to separate domains thus shifted as the women moved through the life course.

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