

The re-regulation of work-life balance and its impacts on the centrality of work in the context of the (post-)covid hybrid work.

Michel AJZEN¹, Stéphanie COSTER, Laurent TASKIN and Laurianne TERLINDEN

(UCLouvain – LouRIM, Belgium)

The generalization of fulltime telework and later on hybrid work from the Covid-19 crisis onwards deeply challenges our understanding of work-life balance arguments associated to telework. In this context, the present contribution shows how work-life balance is the result of a continuous re-regulation process of private and professional norms, going beyond the concrete level of re-regulated spaces, activities, roles and times. Using a longitudinal qualitative method made of interviews and self-reported diaries of 13 employees and managers on a one-year period, we seek to understand how this re-regulation may also be understood as part of a resistance process aiming to accommodate work and private duties and concerns “at the right place” and often “at the right distance”. To do so, we analyze the making of these re-regulations, addressing two main questions: (a) how work-life balance is shaped and re-regulated in the covid-19 work context (including micro-politics of the workplace – *home* - and of working times)? and (b) how it questions the centrality of work, for employees?

Flexible work has strongly developed the last decades, gathering a wide array of practices, ranging from work schedule flexibility to teleworking from different places (home, satellite offices, co-working spaces, third places...) but also including office designs (De Menezes and Kelliher, 2011; Kingma, 2018). This spatiotemporal flexibility is often depicted as challenging the traditional vision of a work performed at the office during business hours, offering new opportunities to manage both working and domestic activities from a large range of times and places (Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Weathley, 2012; Eurofound, 2018). Parallel to the positive outcomes linked to this flexibility, such as better concentration, motivation, satisfaction, time saving, productivity or a feeling of accomplishment (see in particular Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Martinez-Sanchez *et al.*, 2007; Pyöriä, 2011), studies have highlighted the pitfalls in terms of work-life balance, including e.g. the increase of domestic-related stress (Tremblay and Thomsin, 2012; Weathley, 2012) and family conflicts (Cavazotte *et al.*, 2014; Adisa *et al.*, 2017; Eurofound and ILO, 2017) or the extension of working hours (Eurofound, 2016; Smith, 2016). Furthermore, new working pathologies emerge from the intensification of connectivity such as forms of *workaholism* (Felstead *et al.*, 2005; Barley *et al.*, 2011), *infomania* (McLennan, 2008), over-presenteeism (Scaillerez and Tremblay, 2016) or *zoom fatigue* (Waizenegger *et al.*, 2020). Still, some studies (see e.g. Méda, 2016) also reveal that family is the most important dimension for workers, questioning the impact of work-life balance shaping on the centrality of work.

The work-life balance issue is at the crossroads of the multiple possible combination of times and spaces to perform both work and non-work activities (Delanoije *et al.*, 2019). Previous research on telework have shown how both private and working spheres cross each other while

¹ Corresponding author: Michel.ajzen@uclouvain.be

working from home, and how workers make use of *rites of passage* to move from one to another, taking on the specific role associated to each sphere (Fonner and Stache, 2012). Different strategies are used to (re)build – sometimes temporarily – boundaries between spheres, such as dedicated workspace at home, time markers to separate activities, ICTs to manage efficiently work and non-work activities in times and spaces. Although this suggests a segmentation of activities over time (Steward, 2000), Wajcman (2018) shows how the increasing commodification of time in our Society leads to a temporal density materialized by multi-tasking activities. Time would be more polychronic than monochronic involving to *juggle* to combine both spheres (Wajcman, 2015), with a strong gender dimension in this regard (see e.g. Hilbrecht *et al.*, 2008; 2013; Weathley, 2014). However, teleworking may also be used as a resistance tool against a patriarchal hegemonic model of work and non-work activities distribution (Galvez *et al.*, 2018).

Most research carried out before the covid-19 crisis thus approaches work-life balance issues in a context of a limited number of teleworking days – ranging from one to two days a week in average– and mostly focusing on work-to-home or home-to-work conflicts. However, little has been said about both the shaping and the evolution of balance between working and private spheres. The recent Covid-19 crisis has indeed brought a new form of telework for many workers: full-time and mandatory. Besides the already studied opportunities and challenges offered by spatiotemporal flexibility, this extreme form of flexibility associated with an extreme form of rigidity (inflexibility) of the context in which it takes place (confined spaces, shared spaces, colleagues' availability, children at home...) also bring new challenges for workers. Our results show the way workers re-regulate roles, spaces and temporalities of the theoretical balance between work and non-work and the new norms which appear in this regard.

To do so, the paper is organized as follows: we first begin by outlining the theoretical background of our study in expanding the notions of flexwork and work-life balance. Subsequently, the methodology is introduced. The study is based on a qualitative longitudinal research – based on self-reported diaries and semi-structured interviews – conducted throughout the Covid-19 crisis, from May 2020 to June 2021. The participants were asked to record their experience and feelings about their professional activities and work-life balance on a fortnightly basis. Start and follow up interviews were also conducted with the view to clarifying and discussing the items reported in the diary and to uncover the meaning of what has been recorded (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977, Radcliffe, 2013, 2018). We then analyze how these both extremes flexibility and rigidity of times and spaces re-regulate prior work-life balance. Finally, we discuss how this impacts the centrality of work.

References

- Adisa, T.A., Gbadamosi, G. et Osabutey, E. (2017). What happened to the border ? The role of mobile information technology devices on employees' work-life balance", *Personnel Review*, 46(8), 1651-1671.
- Bailey E. et Kurland N. (2002). A review of telework research : findings, new directions, and lessons for the study of modern work. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 23, 383-400.
- Barley, S.R., Meyerson, D.E. et Grodal, S. (2011). E-mail as a source and symbol of stress. *Organization Science*, 22(4), 887–906
- Cavazotte, F., Heloisa Lemos, A. et Villadsen, K. (2014), Professionals in escalating work connectivity. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 29(1), 72-87.

- De Menezes, L-M. & Kelliher, C. (2011). Flexible working and Performance: A systematic review of the evidence for a business case. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 13(4): 452-474.
- Delanoëje, J., Verbruggen, M. & Germeys, L. (2019). Boundary role transitions: A day-to-day approach to explain the effects of home-based telework on work-to-home conflict and home-to-work conflict, *Human Relations*, 72(12), 1843–1868.
- Eurofound (2016), *Foundation Seminar Series 2016 : The impact of digitalisation on work*, Eurofound, Dublin.
- Eurofound (2018), *Striking a balance : Reconciling work and life in the EU*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.
- Eurofound And The International Labour Office (2017), *Working anytime, anywhere: The effects on the world of work*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, and the International Labour Office, Geneva.
- Felstead A., Jewson N. et Walters S. (2005). *Changing places of work*. New-York : Palgrave-MacMillan.
- Fonner, K.L. et Stache, L.C. (2012) All in a day's work, at home : teleworkers' management of micro role transitions and the work-home boundary, *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 27(3), 242-257.
- Gálvez, A., Tirado, F. et Alcaráz, J. M. (2018). Resisting long working hours: The case of Spanish female teleworkers. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(3-4), 195–216.
- Hilbrecht, M., Shaw, S. et Johnson, L. (2008) 'I'm home for the kids' : Contradictory implications for work-life balance of teleworking mothers. *Gender, Work & Organization* 15(5), 545–476.
- Hilbrecht, M., Shaw, S.M., Johnson, L.C. et Andrey, J. (2013). Remixing work, family and leisure : teleworkers' experiences of everyday life. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 28(2), 130-144.
- Kingma, S. (2018): New ways of working (NWW): work space and cultural change in virtualizing organizations. *Culture and Organization*, 25:1-24
- Martinez-Sanchez, A., Perez-Perez, M., Vela-Jimenez, M-J. & De Luis-Carnicer, P. (2007). Teleworking and work Flexibility: a study of impact on firm performance. *Personnal Review*. 36(1): 42-64.
- McLennan, K.J. (2008). *The Virtual World of Work : How to Gain Competitive Advantage Through the Virtual Workplace*. USA : Information Age Publishing.
- Meda, D. (2016) The future of work : The meaning and value of work in Europe, ILO Research Paper N° 18, *International Labour Office* : Geneva, p.43.
- Pyöriä, P. (2011). Managing telework: risks, fears and rules. *Management Research Review*, 34(4), 386-399.
- Radcliffe, L. (2013). Qualitative diaries: uncovering the complexities of work-life decision-making. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*. 8.
- Radcliffe, L. (2018), Chapter 12: Capturing the complexity of daily workplace experiences using qualitative diaries, in Cassell, C., Cunliffe A.L, Grandy G., *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Business and Management Research Methods VOL2*
- Richardson, J. & McKenna, S. (2014). Reordering Spatial and Social Relations: A Case Study of Professional and Managerial Flexworkers, *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 25, 724–736
- Scaillerez, A. et Tremblay, D-G. (2016). Le télétravail, comme nouveau mode de régulation de la flexibilisation et de l'organisation du travail : analyse et impact du cadre légal européen et Nord-Américain, *Revue de l'organisation responsable*, 11(1), 21-31.
- Smith, A. (2016), 'The Magnificent 7[AM] ?' Work-Life Articulation Beyond the 9[AM] to 5[PM] 'Norm'. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 31(3), 209-222.
- Steward, B. (2000). *Changing Times : The Meaning, Measurement and use of Time in Teleworking*. *Time et Society*, 9(1), 57–74.
- Tremblay, D.-G. et Thomsin, L. (2011). Telework and mobile working: analysis of its benefits and drawbacks. *International Journal of Work Innovation*, 1(1), 100-113.
- Wajcman, J. (2015) *Pressed for Time. The Acceleration of life in digital capitalism*, The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, p. 227.
- Wajcman, J. (2018) Digital technology, work extension and acceleration society. *German Journal of Human Resource Management*, 32(3-4) 168–176
- Waizenegger, L., McKenna, B., Cai, W., & Bendz, T. (2020). An affordance perspective of team collaboration and enforced working from home during COVID-19. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 29(4), 429-442.
- Wheatley, D. (2012). Good to be home ? Time-use and satisfaction levels among home-based teleworkers. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 27(3), 224-241.
- Wheatley, D. (2014), *Travel-to-Work and Subjective Well-Being: A Study of UK Dual Career Households*, *Journal of Transport Geography*, 39, 187–196.
- Zimmerman, D. & Wieder L. (1977). *The Diary: "Diary-Interview Method"*. *Urban Life*; 5(4), Sage Publications