

Chapter 4

Thinking Outside the Office: The Impact of Virtual Work on Creative Workers' Attitudes¹

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on labor process theory and builds on a previous paper by Spivack and Rubin (2011) that explored workplace factors that might diminish the autonomy of creative knowledge workers. Using data from the National Study of the Changing Workforce, this chapter tests hypotheses linking creative workers' ability to work virtually, control their task and temporal autonomy to their well-being, job satisfaction, and commitment. The authors find that creative workers that have spatial autonomy have more positive work attitudes and better mental health. Further, they show that along with task and temporal autonomy, the conditions of the new workplace make spatial autonomy an important consideration. These findings contribute both to literature about the changing workplace and to practitioners concerned with maximizing the well-being of creative knowledge workers.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary workplace differs dramatically from the industrial workplace of the 20th century. While always international, now it is global; while always employing technologies, now technolo-

gies mediate production in ways unthinkable in previous eras. Likewise, while large bureaucracies still exist, new organizational forms proliferate as do new ways of organizing the productive activity of employees. In addition, where the core of the industrial economy was the manufacture of goods, now, the production of ideas, knowledge and other creative output are the drivers. Finally,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-0963-1.ch004

where stability and size were associated with organizational success, now it is just as likely that flexibility and networks are so associated (Rubin, 1995). Moreover, the new economy no longer operates within the standardized temporalities of the industrial economy and instead, as a reality of a globalized network of economic transactions, operates 24/7. As many scholars have observed, the global economy is characterized by time-space compression resulting in temporal and spatial restructuring of work.

These characteristics of the contemporary economy require a rethinking of what it means for an employee to *go to work*. The shift from manufacturing to knowledge and creative work for many workers means that productive activity is no longer fixed to a factory floor or office building but can occur anywhere. Not only does the type of work activity in which many workers engage unmoor workers from a workplace, but so too do information technologies that allow workers to “carry” the contents of an entire office with them, remain in communication from almost any locale and otherwise be spatially autonomous.

Contributing to the mobility of work activity is the plethora of “work extending technologies” (Duxbury, Towers, Higgins, & Thomas, 2006; Bittman, Brown, & Wajcman, 2009). These technological innovations allow workers to easily shift the locale in which they work. For knowledge and creative workers, this *untethering* should contribute to greater productivity, satisfaction and well-being. Autonomy is a key criterion to producing creative work as well, so limits to autonomy, spatial, temporal or otherwise, are especially troubling for creative knowledge workers tasked with generating creative solutions—an increasingly important output to organizations given the turbulent environment.

This chapter draws on labor process theory and builds on a previous paper by Spivack and Rubin (2011) that explored workplace factors that might diminish the autonomy of creative knowl-

edge workers. The objective of this chapter is to test hypotheses linking creative workers’ ability to work virtually and control their task and temporal autonomy to their well-being, satisfaction and commitment. We use data from the 2008 *National Study of the Changing Workforce* (Work and Families Institute, 2010). Our expectation is that those workers who are required to be creative on their jobs who are able to work virtually are happier, more satisfied and mentally healthy than those who are not.

BACKGROUND

The shift from manufacturing to service and knowledge production in the past several decades has transformed the type of worker that is increasingly important to the contemporary economy. Rather than brawn and physical prowess, high levels of human capital (education, training, and skills) and new kinds of skills prevail (Stewart, 1997). Increasingly, whether in high performance blue collar work (Applebaum & Batt, 1994) or white collar service and knowledge work, employees with “soft skills” and creativity are central to organizational success (Moss & Tilly, 1996; Mumford, 2000).

Additionally, the composition of the workforce has also become increasingly feminized. While women have always been involved in the paid labor force, the percentage of women workers with young children (under the age of 6) has risen from 39% to 64% over the past 40 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). Because parenting is still primarily a responsibility of women, this shift has created new pressures on employers to assist their employees, certainly their knowledge and creative workforce, in their efforts to balance the dual demands of employment and family. This pressure on employers has only increased as the evidence of the negative outcomes related to a failure to institute work-life balance initiatives

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