



Chapter XV

**Researching Telework:
Past Concerns and
Future Directions**

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This chapter examines the state of the art in telework research. The author reviews the most central scholarly literature examining the phenomenon of telework (also called home-based work or telecommuting) and develops a framework for organizing this body of work. She organizes previous research on telework into six major thematic concerns relating to the definition, measurement, and scope of telework; management of teleworkers; travel-related impacts of telework; organizational culture and employee isolation; boundaries between “home” and “work” and the impact of telework on the individual and the family. Areas for future research are suggested.

The study of telework represents an important and exciting avenue for social science researchers and practitioners working in the next millennium. This area of inquiry draws on knowledge from several disciplines and methodologies, depending on whether the analysis is at the level of the individual, the organization, or the society. At each of these levels, the movement of paid work from a central location to the home or mobile workspace has had an important impact. Technological advances, economic pressures, and the shifting social landscape have influenced organizations in myriad ways, altering the structure and culture of work and affecting organizations, employees, and their families. Telework research will help us to understand the impact of these changes. In so doing, it also will increase our understanding of other related phenomena such as the effects of technology in the workplace and at home, the problems and benefits associated with new organizational forms (e.g., the “virtual organization”), and the changing structure of the American family.

This body of literature is, as a whole, fragmented. In this chapter, I review the most central scholarly literature examining the phenomenon of telework (also called home-based

work or telecommuting), develop a framework for organizing this body of work, and suggest areas for future research. For the purposes of this project, I use the term *telework* broadly to refer to work done outside a central office in which employees are co-located, and I use the term *work at home* specifically to refer to work done in the home, with or without the use of communication technologies. This discussion is not intended as a comprehensive review of literature from a wide range of practitioners and researchers in the fields of communication, sociology, management, architecture, transportation, urban studies, and technology. Rather, in reviewing this growing body of work, I have delineated the work that I feel is most relevant, engaging, and salient, particularly in regard to future research.¹

I organize previous research on telework into six major thematic concerns relating to

- Definition, measurement, and scope of telework;
- Management of teleworkers;
- Travel-related impacts of telework;
- Organizational culture and employee isolation;
- Boundaries between “home” and “work”; and
- Impact of telework on the individual and the family.

In reviewing literature on each of these topics, I cover research on both telework and work at home, although some topics are more pertinent to telework research and others focus more specifically on work at home. For example, issues of productivity, travel, and isolation are associated primarily with work that is removed from a location in which supervisors and coworkers are co-located, whereas research focused on role conflict and the impact of bringing paid work into the domestic sphere is more specific to work at home. In reviewing this literature, I move from general themes of telework research to work that specifically examines the impact of work in the home.

Within the telework literature, the eradication of “line of sight” management threatens established norms of supervision and often serves as a catalyst for rethinking traditional concepts such as trust and productivity. Much of the literature on telework, especially from the managerial perspective, examines the question of how to manage workers who are not visible in the workplace. Other telework research focuses on the travel/technology trade-off, examining the impacts of telework on urban areas, emissions, and travel behavior. A growing and fascinating body of work asks how organizational knowledge can be transmitted and organizational cultures maintained in a telecommuting environment in which workers might be profoundly isolated.

Within the research that focuses on the impact of bringing paid work into the private sphere of the home, I locate two foci. Literature on role construction and on the way in which telework blurs the boundaries between home and work, including the way in which telework is gendered, are summarized. Finally, I briefly discuss the body of literature that deals with the psychological impacts of telework on the individual and the family.

DEFINITION, MEASUREMENT, AND SCOPE OF TELEWORK

Telework research has shifted scope and focus over the past 30 years or so. In the United States, the popularity of telecommuting initially emerged during the gas shortages of the 1970s. The catalyst for the research of Jack Nilles, an authority on telework, was the

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