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The Manager and the Flexworker: An Interpretive Interactionist Perspective**

Contemporary work arrangements are undergoing a dramatic transformation with increasing diversity in how work is done, by whom and where. This paper focuses on flexwork as an increasingly common work arrangement which changes the physical and relational dynamics between managers and employees. Drawing on a qualitative study of 'flexworkers' in a large MNC in Canada, it explores their relationships with their managers and vice versa. Located within an interpretive interactionist perspective, it highlights the centrality of interaction, identity construction and significant others and their influence on manager-employer relationships. It also explores and theorizes the relationships between flexworkers and their office-based colleagues.

Key words: **flexworkers, teleworking, interpretive interactionism, management, qualitative**

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Changes in organizational processes and practices and technological innovation have given rise to a diverse menu of work arrangements which fall under the larger category of 'flexible work practices', e.g. flexitime, flexwork, a compressed work week, telecommuting and remote working (Johnson et al. 2007; Tietze 2005; Towers et al. 2006; Tremblay et al. 2006). These practices change relationships between managers and employees and between employees as well as creating a diverse use of organizational real estate such as 'hot desking' and teleconferencing. The extent to which this trend impacts on the practice of human resource management and management practices more generally is not yet known. Therefore, drawing on a qualitative study of a large hi-tech Multi-National Company (MNC) in Canada, this paper explores the dynamics of the manager-employee relationship in the context of a group of 'flexworkers', understood as employees who were working from home two or more days a week but who also had access to 'hot desks' or a permanent space in the main office.

The term 'flexwork' is adopted here because it was used by this organization to describe this particular work practice. Flexwork is one example of the broader category of 'telecommuting' practices comprising "any policies and practices, formal or informal, which permit people to vary when and where work is carried out" (Maxwell et al. 2007: 138). It is a situation where, like telecommuting, "workers are given (opportunities) to work from home rather than reporting to a centralized office location" on a daily basis (Shia/Monroe 2006: 456). The participants in this study regularly work from home two or more days a week and are, therefore, part of the growing number of employees who are conducting some portion of their work outside the traditional space of a designated office (Baruch 2001; Tietze 2002; Tietze/Musson 2003). Indeed, they form part of what Moos and Skaburskis describe as one of the most important trends in workplaces today (2007).

While an increasing number of employees are engaged in some form of teleworking, finding exact numbers has proven somewhat challenging because it can take many different forms, ranging from the work arrangement described in this paper to home-based 'piece work' and/or work done in satellite offices (Tremblay 2002; Tremblay et al. 2006). Definitional and quantification challenges notwithstanding, Moos and Skaburskis (2007) cite estimates of approximately ten per cent of the workforce in the US, Europe and Canada, with expectations of further increases, particularly among professional, technical and middle managers (Johnson et al. 2007; Moos/Skaburskis 2007). A recent study of three large Canadian cities (Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver) has reported that 3.9% of employed adults between 15 and 74 years old work at home for pay, representing 6% of the labour force in the respective cities (Moos/Skaburskis 2007). According to Moos and Skaburskis, in terms of industry sectors, "business and other services have the largest number of homeworkers followed by finance, insurance and real estate" (2007: 1788). According to Schweitzer and Duxbury, however, "research on Canadian teleworkers is particularly scarce" (2006: 116). Thus, this paper will address this gap by exploring the experiences of seventy six Canadian flexworkers. In addition it will attend to the call to "collect more qualitative data on these work arrangements" (Schweitzer/Duxbury 2006: 116).

Bailey and Kurland (2002) suggest that most of the early studies focused on individual experiences of teleworkers and that subsequent research tends to focus on themes relating to who engages in telework, why they do so and the professional and personal outcomes. Focusing on Canada as the ‘host’ country for this particular paper, there has been a growing interest in telework and alternative working arrangements amongst Canadian researchers and particularly their impact on work-life balance and work-family conflict (see, for example, Korabik et al. 2008; Lanoie et al. 2001; Schweitzer/Duxbury 2006; Tremblay 2002; Tremblay et al. 2006). Tremblay et al. (2006) have explored increases in working from home and whether motivations to do so are driven by family concerns and responsibilities. Other Canadian studies have explored individual experiences of telework, the perceived implications for men versus women and the ‘blurring’ of boundaries between work and home domains (see, for example, Johnson et al. 2007; Tremblay 2002). These foci reflect similar trends in the US and Europe. Thus, for example, Kelliher and Anderson (2008) have explored how teleworkers negotiate and manage their time, suggesting that they were likely to move fairly seamlessly between fulfilling the demands of home and work. Tietze (2002) has also explored teleworkers coping strategies ‘when work comes home’. Harris’s study of a ‘work from home initiative’ stressed the need to ensure perceived ‘mutual gain’ (Harris 2003: 232) and described how teleworkers (particularly men with young children) faced challenges in marking out the boundaries between work and home responsibilities because they had to renegotiate both their time and personal space. Harris’s (2003) study is one of the very few to explore management processes and the changes in management orientation required when teleworking was being introduced. Rather than continuing the well-researched theme of the positive and negative dimensions of flexwork, this paper will build on Harris’s (2003) study by exploring the management-employee relationship further. Extending that theme further, it will also explore relationships between flexworkers and their office-based counterparts. From a human resources perspective, this avenue of exploration reconnects the individual ‘back’ to the organization, emphasizing that he/she remains a part of organizational dynamics even while working from home.

In addition to the themes noted above, Bailey and Kurland have also called for more theory-building in research on teleworking. Indeed, they suggest that “empirical research to date has been largely unsuccessful in identifying and explaining what happens when people telework” (2002: 394). Earlier reviews of the literature on teleworking have also suggested a tendency towards description rather than theorizing (McCloskey/Igbarria 1998). Thus, in order to address this gap, this paper introduces interpretive interactionism as a ‘theoretical lens’ through which to theorize the management-flexworker relationship in the context of flexwork as an increasingly popular work arrangement.

The key principles of interpretive interactionism will be discussed next, including some of the related research questions which informed data analysis.

Interpretive Interactionism

Interpretive interactionism is best understood as a continually evolving and dynamic theory (Denzin 1989; Denzin 1992). Drawing heavily on Mead (1934) and permeated

by some of the key principles of symbolic interactionism, it focuses primarily on “the study and imputation of meaning, motive, intention, emotion, and feelings, as these mental and interactive states are experienced and organized by interacting individuals” (Denzin 1992: 129). Moreover, located in an interpretive ontology (Denzin 1989; Layder 1994) it is concerned with exploration, expression and interpretation of subjective experience (Denzin 1989) where the social world is an emergent process created by individuals. It understands social relationships as affairs “primarily of doing” (Dewey 1972: 329) based on each individual’s interpretations of their interactions with others and their respective social contexts. Adhering closely to the work of Blumer (1986), it suggests that the meanings attributed to experience derive in part from the relationships that emerge through interaction between individuals together with self-indication (Prus 1996). This individually focused perspective can be juxtaposed with structural perspectives that understand social behaviour as largely determined by structural factors such as economic and political institutions (Bryant/Jary 1990; Burrell/Morgan 1998) and relationships between managers and flexworkers as shaped by forces residing outside the individual. One implication of this assumption is that such relationships can be studied at the level of organizations, social structures and society as a whole.

Self and identity

Interpretive interactionism views both self and identity as fundamentally processual, ambiguous and interdependent (Denzin 1992). The potential connectivity between telework and identity construction has already been identified in a study of female teleworkers in a large Canadian financial-sector firm (Johnson et al. 2007). However, while that study focused specifically on gender identities and whether aspects of participants’ femininity influenced their response to home-based telework, this study focuses on the construction of identity with respect to relationships between managers and flexworkers and between flexworkers and their office-based peers.

Continuing the work of Mead, interpretive interactionism contends that individuals are able to “stand outside themselves” by taking on the role of the other and viewing themselves from that perspective (Layder 1994). Thus, the self is developed through role taking and interaction in the social world (Cuff et al. 1992). This notion of process is also underpinned by conceptions of “the looking glass self” (Cooley 1972) where individuals look “away from and out of” themselves in order understand both their identity and their relationships with others, which suggests that self and identity cannot be understood without reference to social interaction (Denzin 1991). In other words, one’s understanding of one’s self and identity is a “social location” (Stone 1962) influenced by one’s relationships and interactions with others such as colleagues, family, friends, and peers. Echoing Giddens’ (1991) understanding of self and identity as both robust and fragile, a key plank of interactionist thought is that identities are “socially bestowed, socially maintained, and socially transformed” (Berger 1963: 98) because though individuals may have an on-going sense of who they are, and may identify themselves as such to others, both self and identity are evolving and dynamic.

Significant others

Reflecting further synergy with symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934), interpretive interactionism retains a strong focus on the concept of ‘significant others’ understood as people who take on importance to the individual, and/or whom the individual desires to impress, whom he or she respects, wants acceptance from, fears, or identifies with (Charon 1998: 75). Conceptions of ‘significant others’ are permeated by individual selectivity, where more priority is given to one individual than another. In other words, that they “occupy a high rank on the ‘importance’ continuum for a given individual” (Stryker 1959: 115). Significant others also play a key role in the development of the self and identity because they are individuals with whom one is likely to have frequent and impactful interaction.

While maintaining a predominantly exploratory stance, this paper is closely informed by interpretive interactionism and was thus driven by the following questions:

1. Which themes do flexworkers draw on to understand their relationships with their managers and with each other?
2. Are those relationships on-going, dynamic and evolving?
3. Do individual perceptions of self and identity impact on those relationships?
4. Can interpretive interactionist conceptions of ‘significant others’ contribute to our understanding of those relationships?

Methodology

Organizational Context

Discussions with the Vice President of HR and the Assistant Vice President of HR provided what Cassell and Symon describe as a “general overview of the structure and functioning of the organization” (2004) and, in this particular case, organizational policy on flexworking. In the previous year, with the support of HR, senior management had initiated a program to introduce flexworking more widely in the organization. Thus, although it was a well established and mandatory practice for sales staff, it had been expanded to provide employees in other departments with opportunities to work from home two or more days a week, subject to their manager’s approval.

Data collection

This paper draws on only one part of the study – that which examined relationships between managers and flexworkers and between flexworkers. The study as a whole had a broader scope, exploring themes such as productivity, organizational commitment and the implications of flexwork for careers, amongst others. In addition to the interviews, demographic data was collected, recording participants’ age, marital status, number and ages of children, tenure with the organization, area of employment (e.g. sales, operations, marketing etc), whether they had a permanent office/desk and period of time they had been on a flexwork schedule. Focusing on the objectives of this particular paper, an agenda of themes with related open-ended questions supported in-depth exploration of participants’ relationships with their managers and with each other (Kvale 1996; Seidman 1998). These themes could be loosely divided into three groups: first those exploring participants’ relationships with their managers, including

questions about their relationship with their immediate manager and about the key or most important factors for creating a positive/productive manager-flexworker relationship. The second group of questions focused on relationships with flexworking peers. The third group of questions focused on family and non-work relationships and the extent to which they were implicated in work-relationships – particularly with management. In addition to these themes, participants were also encouraged to introduce further themes, if necessary. Thus, for example, the need to maintain visibility and a close connection with office-based colleagues as well as with other flexworkers was not part of the original interview agenda but it was introduced by many participants as an important dimension of flexworking.

Sampling

The sample comprised seventy six flex workers, who were working from home subject to their manager's approval, two or more days per week. They had all been provided with a laptop and IT services which enabled them to work from home, or elsewhere, and to communicate with their manager, colleagues and customers. The sample was self-selected where an invitation to participate in the study was circulated by the employer throughout the head office (just under three thousand people are based in this office). Participants were invited to contact the researcher directly to set up a time for interview, or to clarify further details about the study. One hundred and thirty eight employees volunteered to take part. Due to time and financial restrictions, seventy six interviews were conducted each lasting roughly 45 minutes to one hour.

Demographic details of the sample are presented in Appendix 1. In order to provide a general overview a few features of the sample will be noted here. First, interviewees are distributed widely across the organization, which provides a broader range of perspectives and experiences. Fifty participants used 'hot desks' as they did not have a permanent desk in the organization. The sample reflects a broad range of tenure at the organization, from less than one year through to over ten years, thus providing views from those with extensive 'corporate memory' versus more recent employees. Over half of interviewees do not have a managerial or leadership role whereas 27 do. The 49 employees without managerial responsibility provide an insight into the flexworkers' perspective of his/her relationship with their manager. Those with management/leadership roles were also flexworkers themselves and provided information about their relationships with their own managers as well as about their relationships with their flexworking subordinates. Participants were spread across all age groups: from 20-25 to 56+, although a majority was in the 36-50 age range. A majority also had one or more children currently living at home.

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and 'coded' according to the principles of template analysis (King 2004) using the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. This involved creating lists of 'nodes' representing themes contained in the data. Some of the themes such as isolation from colleagues, mechanisms for managing working from home and trust were identified a priori from the literature on flexible work practices and teleworking. While these nodes presented a useful starting point, it was important that the a priori themes did not become a 'conceptual grid' (At-

kinson 1992: 459). Therefore, others such as achieving a balance between autonomy and maintaining close relationships, identification of significant others and maintaining 'visibility' emerged from the data. Parallel coding captured the overlap and connections between themes and thus enhanced validity. Once analysis was complete, the final list of nodes was entirely data driven. As analysis progressed it was possible to identify dominant and subsidiary themes – thus, for example, whereas 'family' could be considered a dominant theme because it was mentioned extensively by all participants, it could be broken down into further subsidiary themes such as 'managing relationships with children', 'managing relationships with spouse/partner', 'manager-family dynamics', 'negative themes', 'positive themes'. Coding reports identified which participants managerial/non-managerial etc had 'contributed' most (or least) to specific nodes.

Limitations

Although self-selection may attract individuals who have an agenda of complaints or praise, analysis of the findings suggests that this was not the case here. Indeed, most accounts had both positive and negative themes. Whereas focusing on one particular company allows an in-depth insight and is instructive as a case study, the findings may not be generalizable to other organizations/flexworkers. First, they may not be applicable to smaller organizations or organizations in other countries because empirical studies have found significant cross cultural differences in managers' support for telework (Peters/Den Dulk 2003). Second, while the study is based in Canada, it does not necessarily reflect the experiences of other Canadian flexworkers because policies and procedures for managing flexworkers in this particular organization may be very different to those used in other organizations in Canada. Indeed, the VP and AVP of HR said that the organization had developed their own approach to flexworking according to their specific organizational culture. Third, the organization at the centre of this study is technology-based and has extensive expertise to support flexworking. Indeed, that it is able to support teams of flexworkers sets it apart from other organizations which tend to use more individualized teleworking arrangements (Tremblay 2002).

The paper is also limited by its location within an interpretive interactionist framework. Like most other theories, interpretive interactionism has both strengths and weaknesses. While it draws attention to the centrality of individual action and interaction, very much like its predecessor symbolic interactionism, it has been heavily criticized for failing to incorporate conceptions of social structure (Layder 1994). Although these criticisms do have some value, they are mediated by the growing trend within contemporary branches of symbolic interactionism (including interpretive interactionism) to directly address structural issues (Denzin 1989; Denzin 1992; Fine 1993; Hall 1987; Musolf 1992). Rather than ignoring social structures, interpretive interactionism acknowledges that they "interact in concrete interactional sites and locales to produce specific forms of subjectivity, emotionality, and lived experience" (Denzin 1992: 62). Thus, social structures are viewed as "bare outlines of lived experience" (Denzin 1992). However, the charges of a structural bias are justified if understood as a question of priority rather than omission.

Findings

Four dominant themes emerged in participants' accounts of their relationships with managers, other flexworkers and office-based colleagues: trust, communication, cohesion and the impact of relationships with family members.

Trust

Trust was as a dominant theme in participants' reflections on their relationship with their managers. Indeed, it was the first theme that most drew on to describe that relationship. Thirty participants suggested that trust was more important than when they were working in the office on a permanent basis. This finding reflects other studies which have identified trust as an important theme in the dynamics of teleworking (see, for example, Bailey/Kurland 2002; Whitehouse et al. 2002). Participants such as Semih and Sean, who both had management responsibility, talked about the value of being trusted to work from home and how it impacted on their relationship with their own manager as well as impacting on their relationships with their subordinates (who were also flexworkers).

Because I'm trusted – but again I am a professional – I am also a high-achiever in the company too, you know. I think that trust in any kind of relationship, it's like a personal relationship, it's like a marriage – if someone trusts you then you give back to them. (Sean)

Absolutely 'trust' is the right word. My manager trusts me completely; again, as I said, there is no asking or checking up on me. (Semih)

It is interesting to note how these accounts infer a sense of privilege. Indeed, several participants specifically used the term to describe their feelings about being able to flexwork. This finding echoes another Canadian study which reported that some home-based workers feel that they are “privileged to have this work option” (Johnson et al. 2007: 142).

Ten participants who were in non-managerial/leadership roles also connected being trusted by their manager with their willingness to engage in organizational citizenship behaviours such as working irregular/longer hours and/or taking part in activities outside regular work expectations. Engaging in these activities was widely described as a way of “paying back” the company or the respective manager and demonstrating that the trust was well placed.

You want to be trusted, right? You work hard, you do your job, you do it well, and you've earned a level of trust ... as far as I'm concerned that keeps that relationship between you and your immediate boss and your manager and your boss's boss a healthy one. (Nathan)

I volunteer at my daughter's kindergarten class. I feel lucky to be able to do that so I feel indebted in some ways to my employer for allowing me that flexibility.... I still feel that it's a privilege because I'm trusted by my manager to work from home. (Vita)

Conversely, several other non-managerial participants suggested that not being trusted by a manager would impact on their relationship with him/her and that they would be less willing to engage in activities outside general work expectations and responsibilities. Indeed, most participants, but particularly those without managerial responsibility, held strong views about problems that can arise through a perceived lack of trust and the implications for morale. This finding further reflects the connection between

interaction and interpretation where participants such as Carmella and Lenita explicitly interpreted being “checked up on” or limited as to how many days a week they, or others, could work from home as reflecting a lack of trust.

I’ve seen people who are sort of being checked up on by their manager all the time and it’s demoralizing because you feel you can’t do anything without being watched. (Carmella)

I don’t know if there are managers that really want to let us work at home. I think (my manager) doesn’t trust us. So s/he wants to see people are ‘really’ working and s/he doesn’t trust that people will be working if they’re home and nobody’s watching them. (Lenita)

Drawing on their experience of managing flexworkers, participants with managerial responsibility, such as Joe and Leora, also highlighted the connectivity between subordinates’ perceptions of being trusted and their overall organizational commitment:

They give you more than 100% and there are times once in a while as a manager, I get a call from our folks saying “hey, do you know where so-and-so is?” but I know that if necessary that person will also be working at 2 o’ clock in the morning to put in extra work if necessary. (Joe)

Yes, absolutely you have to be a manager that believes in trusting your employees – giving them rope; letting them control their lives because it does pay off in the end. (Leora)

This finding clearly reflects interpretive interactionist conceptions of how individuals draw on their interactions with others to inform subsequent behaviour. Thus, for example, interpreting being allowed to go on a flexwork schedule and being accorded autonomy as a sign of trust, they are willing to engage in organizational citizenship behaviours and express increased commitment to their manager and organization as a whole. It also echoes the findings of a study on the impact of collective felt trust on organizational performance which suggests that when employees feel that they are trusted it has a positive impact on sales performance and customer service performance (Deutsch-Salamon/Robinson 2008). Yet, wide-spread perceptions of trust notwithstanding, the majority of managers also stressed the need to establish appropriate procedures to ensure that performance could be monitored, targets met and discrepancies addressed as quickly as possible. From a managerial perspective these procedures were widely understood as necessary to avoid under performance. The discussions with the VP and AVP of HR also indicated that in as much as the flexwork initiative provided for increased autonomy, HR played a pivotal role in ensuring its success – primarily by ensuring that appropriate processes were maintained and adhered to to support and enhance employee autonomy. Tina, for example, said that while she trusted her subordinates to “do the right thing” she counterbalanced their autonomy with clear structures and procedures which, while different from those she used for office-based subordinates, were geared towards ensuring similar levels of performance and productivity. Ensuring that subordinates operated according to those procedures was understood as an integral part of manager-flexworker relationships.

Echoing interpretive interactionist notions of relationships as on-going, dynamic and evolving, the managers in this study also described how their relationships with their subordinates were consistently changing according to the different targets and structures of their particular area of business. The dynamism of these relationships

was widely understood as one of the most challenging dimensions of managing flexworkers. Participants with managerial responsibility captured this sense of change and fluidity when they spoke of a distinct “learning curve”, particularly during the initial period of managing flexworkers when there may be some “trial and error”. Joe, for example, had over twelve years’ experience managing teams of flexworkers but described how during the initial period because he had only ever managed office-based employees he had “trusted people upfront” and had been “wrong” on a number of occasions, which had resulted in underperformance. He described his relationships with his subordinates as “evolving” because he would start off with more structures and less autonomy until he felt confident enough to “relax” and “let go a little”. This finding reflects further how individuals draw on their interaction with others (in this case his interpretation of his subordinates’ behaviour) to inform and guide their subsequent behaviour (the level of autonomy he is willing to allow).

Communication

Twenty participants with managerial responsibility stressed the importance of maintaining open and consistent communication with their subordinates. Indeed, the majority indicated that it was more important for managing flexworkers than for office-based subordinates. The following excerpt, from Dale, provides a useful exemplar of this theme:

You need to establish regular structured interactions – one-on-one for the team and we do that through a weekly meeting. Some of my managers have a weekly meeting, some have a bi-weekly meeting, so I have a weekly meeting with the bigger team and a bi-weekly team with my direct team and then we have quarterly meetings to do a business update. (Dale)

The overall impression was that because flexworking managers and employees have only limited face-to-face contact, managers must draw on other forms of communication. Yet face-to-face interaction was seen as important and could not be entirely replaced by other forms of communication. Judy, a flexworker with managerial responsibility for other flexworkers, provided a useful exemplar of this theme:

If there is some sort of coaching that needs to be done, or there needs to be some sort of conversation that needs to be done in regards to their work or their work-habits or in areas of improvement I like to do that in person as opposed to over the phone. You just get more of a connection going, you can see the body language, and you can see the reaction. (Judy)

Thus, while recognizing the potential of flexworking to reduce communication between managers and subordinates, the participants in this study emphasized the need for more and different forms of communication. Indeed while Collette, for example, lamented the limited contact she had with her manager; Bella praised her manager for her willingness to communicate outside of regular business hours:

Because my manager is very high-level hands-off, I think he should be more supportive but I do get the sense that he is there if you need to reach-out and have an issue he will be there for you. But he’s pretty much just as untouchable as everybody else, too busy, lots of meetings, not around now. (Collette)

I know that later in the evening or anytime if I have a question or a concern I can go online and reach out to my manager and she’s there. If it’s an issue we can’t solve online we

pick up the phone it's like I have a 24/7 with her and that has set a real comfort level that I have. (Bella)

The centrality of interaction (either face-to-face or otherwise) comes through very clearly here and, in particular, reflects interpretive interactionist conceptions of relationships as 'affairs of doing' where managers are maintaining their relationships with subordinates (and vice-versa) by ensuring consistent communication and interaction. In other words, they are constantly "doing" their relationships.

Managers maintaining cohesion among team members

The majority of participants (and notably all of those with managerial responsibility) emphasized the need for close relationships between managers and individual flexworkers and between flexworkers, particularly members of flexworking teams, as suggested by Bella, below:

From what I've seen that works best (is) when some of the managers have one-on-one meetings plus a weekly call of probably an hour when you have time together. It's about pulling everybody in together whether it's every other month or a breakfast meeting or whatever the case may be. (Bella)

Although, Tremblay (2002) has suggested that telework is unlikely to evolve as a team-based work arrangement the majority of participants in this study were members of flexworking teams. This finding, however, may well reflect the specific nature of the host organization and its direct access to technology that supports flexworking and teleworking teams.

Just under half of the participants without managerial responsibility also emphasized the importance of maintaining close relationships with their other flexworkers. A key theme in these discussions was the impact of those relationships on work performance, career opportunities and/or social networks, which clearly identifies other flexworkers as 'significant others' in the sense that they are individuals whom participants respect, want acceptance from or identify with. Just over half of participants also noted the need to maintain contact with colleagues who were entirely office-based. Echoing another study of teleworkers in Canada (Tremblay, 2002), which suggested that for individuals with 'career aspirations' maintaining visibility in the office is important, fifteen participants in this study said they went into the office specifically in order to maintain "visibility" for career development. Maintaining "visibility" involved ensuring that they were seen by office-based managers, which reflects those managers' potential impact as 'significant others' whom participants wanted to impress or at least gain acceptance from, as suggested by Tina, below:

It's the informal meetings where you talk and, you know, have a coffee with somebody. I just had a coffee with my VP of sales, today and he says "I don't really know you very well" and I thought – "mmm, not a good sign!"

Other participants, such as Rob and Michael, echoed similar themes emphasizing the importance of face-to-face contact with office-based and flexworking peers as well as with senior management:

Another advantage of being in the office versus working from home from time to time is to be able to walk in and check in with people and to put yourself into those social situations within the corporate community and take advantage of that. If you're working from

home 100% of the time you've just removed yourself from that part of the equation. (Rob)

For me, it's important to have face-time with my manager, face-time with my peers and, in fact, sometimes maybe meet up socially when you're done. You can walk next door to somebody's office, you know, you can get a five minute coffee, talk about business and so forth. So when you have a local office versus when you are away from the office you have to find time to build that relational piece in with customers and your peers. (Michael)

These mechanisms for ensuring "visibility" also reflect interpretive interactionist conceptions of identity construction where participants in this study were able to "stand outside themselves" by taking on the role of the other (in this case senior managers or other 'significant others' in the office) to develop what they believed was a more career-enhancing identity. They also reflect Cooley's notion (1972) of the 'looking-glass self' where participants looked "away from and out of" themselves to understand their own identity and relationships with others, which further impacted on their desire to engage in social interactions with office-based managers and colleagues. Reflecting the findings of other studies, a more general concern for the majority of participants was the desire to avoid being isolated from colleagues and the organization more generally (Bailey/Kurland 2002; Baruch 2001; Crandall/Gao 2005; Harris 2003; Whitehouse et al. 2002).

The need to maintain a professional identity arose in many discussions about participants' relationships with family members and neighbours/friends. Just over half of participants expressed concerns that flexworking could have an adverse effect on their professional identity, particularly how they were viewed by family members and colleagues. Thus, we observe here how such individuals are 'significant others' because they are those whose opinions are important and, in some cases, whom participants wanted to impress and gain acceptance from and as a result were concerned to be seen by them as professionals. Linda, for example, said that when she started flexworking her husband assumed that because she was home all day then childcare would no longer be necessary so she took deliberate steps to maintain a professional identity by emphasizing to him that she stayed home to meet work rather than family responsibilities. This finding reflects how participants' interpretations of family members' behaviour encouraged some of the interviewees in this study like Linda and Len, below, to take specific actions in order to preserve their sense of professional identity:

My family and friends who don't have a work from home option, they don't really understand the fact that I'm actually working and people might stop by in the afternoon. Like even my dad will stop by on occasion and I'll be on a conference call for two hours and I'll have to say "look, I can't talk for two hours ... Just because I'm home, it doesn't mean that I'm accessible or have time or am working less". (Len)

The need to maintain a professional identity whilst working from home was as important to the men as to the women who took part in this study, which challenges Johnson et al.'s contention that it is the "gendered nature of work/home space" (2007: 155) that requires individuals working from home to constantly reinforce the boundaries between work and home.

As a final point on this theme, echoing further the centrality of interaction and its role in forming relationships with others, over half of participants said that the risk of

becoming isolated from colleagues is particularly acute for new employees with limited organizational connections and networks. Reflecting the findings of other studies (Whitehouse et al. 2002), all participants who raised this issue said that new employees should not be permitted to flexwork (or at least not more than one day per week) precisely because it would limit their ability to become acculturated into the organization. Collette, for example, was the only participant who had been flexworking ever since she started working for the organization – although she had been office-based in her previous position. Although she had deliberately come to the office and occupied one of the ‘hot desks’, because those desks were used by different people every day there was no opportunity to develop close relationships with her new colleagues:

Having been in the office for some length of time you understand how things work – it’s about having that comfort level and, again, that sense of belonging and talking to people. You can then move to a work-from-home environmentbut I think for me, in particular, I would’ve had a better time to begin with if I hadn’t gone straight to working from home. (Collette)

Manager-teleworker relationships and family responsibilities

All participants said that relationships with family had an important impact on relationships between managers and flexworkers. Just under half said that family members and domestic arrangements are potentially more influential in relationships between managers and flexworkers than in relationships between managers and office-based employees. This finding suggests that the ‘significance’ of family increases, at least regarding their impact on manager-subordinate relationships, in the context of flexworking. It also echoes Johnson et al.’s notion of the “leakage of home and household into the work domain” (2007: 152) where hitherto separate groups of ‘significant others’ – i.e. families, colleagues and managers – operate in closer proximity. Participants with and without managerial responsibility, and particularly those with young children and/or spouses who did not work, said they incorporate their domestic arrangements into their relationship with their managers and vice-versa. However, this “leakage” (Johnson et al., 2007) left many feeling caught between satisfying responsibilities to family members and managers. Joy, for example complained about how her husband (who was also a flexworker) managed his relationship with his manager:

He was on the phone, last night at 8:30 pm to his manager, we were waiting for him to come have dinner with us and he was talking about the deal that they were working on and that was really upsetting for me. (Joy)

Conversely, Melanie had created very specific and strict rules for her son so that he did not adversely affect her ability to communicate with her manager. Yet, the need to compromise and/or adhere to such self-imposed rules created some tension for several participants such as Tina, who described sitting watching “rubbish on TV” to “keep in my husband’s good books” instead of focusing on work-related activities to foster better relationships with her manager. This theme supports Tietze’s notion of “doing deals” (2002) as a mechanism for organizing telework and further reflects interpretive interactionist conceptions about individuals creating their own experiences by acting on things according to the meanings that those things have for them. Thus, for example, participants were trying to identify and then accommodate the needs of family members and managers and then adjusting their own behaviour in the home.

Accounts of family relationships and responsibilities echo and extend the findings of an earlier study of Canadian teleworkers based on data from the Work Employee Survey (WES) which found that individuals may not work at home in order to achieve work-family balance but “because of work obligations themselves” (Tremblay et al. 2006). The majority of participants in this study said that they could work more effectively and efficiently at home and thus enhance their productivity and overall performance. Therefore it is perhaps not surprising that 50 participants described how they took deliberate steps to “protect” their productivity from interference by family members specifically in order to maintain positive relationships with their manager. Thus, as noted earlier, the majority of participants (and particularly those with young children) introduced specific rules so that family members didn’t interfere with their productivity and professional identity. Michael, for example, described how he specifically and intentionally managed his family’s expectations in order to maintain positive relationships with his manager:

My kids and wife would think that I’m working from home so it’s like “let’s go shopping!” I had to make a point of saying – you know, this is work time and this is personal time. (Michael)

Speaking from a managerial perspective, Melanie provided justification for Michael’s strategy, describing feeling frustrated when her subordinates and colleagues are unable to make those distinctions and how it had a negative impact on her perception and relationships with them:

It is quiet distracting and unacceptable if I’m on a conference call with colleagues or my team and somebody was hosting the conference call has to run to the door or their child has just come home from school and they say "can you just give me a minute?" (Melanie)

This finding reflects the ‘unwanted intrusions’ (Tremblay et al. 2006) which have been found to characterize telework more generally. In particular, we observe how both Melanie and Michael resent the intrusion of home-life into their work. Conversely, however, earlier in this paper we also observed above how Joy also resented the intrusion of her husband’s relationships with his manager into her home life.

Discussion

This paper has examined relationships between managers, flexworkers and their office-based counterparts through the theoretical lens of interpretive interactionism and with a particular focus on trust, communication, cohesion and relationships with family. It has signaled the pivotal role of the manager-flexworker relationship and pointed to its impact on participants’ experience of flexworking. Thus, whereas flexworking marks a change in manager-subordinate and employer-employee relationships more generally, the paper suggests that rather than marking the ‘end of personnel’ flexwork has introduced another dimension to it. Indeed, HR played a pivotal role in both introducing flexwork and supporting managers and employers on flexwork programs. Although some had more experience as flexworkers than others, all of the participants had some experience of office-based work and drew on that experience to substantiate their view that flexwork changes relationships between managers, flexworkers and office-based employees. That they drew on their earlier office-based experience emphasizes how past experience and interactions inform interpretations of the present. Man-

agers with experience of managing office-based employees also indicated that they managed their relationships with flexworkers in a different way to how they had managed office-based employees, particularly emphasizing the need for more diversity in methods of communication. Similarly, managers who were currently managing both office-based employees and flexworkers described how they adopted a different approach for each. This perception was substantiated by those without managerial responsibility who felt that they had been managed quite differently when they were office-based compared to how they were managed on their current flexwork schedules.

Drawing on interpretive interactionism, the paper has offered a theoretical explanation for the dynamics of the relationships between managers, flexworkers and office-based employees. The interactional and interpersonal nature of flexwork permeated the paper's key themes: trust, communication, cohesion and relationships with family members. These themes are closely connected to interaction, identity and significant others as central themes in interpretive interactionist thought. In particular, the paper has suggested that managing flexworkers is "an affair primarily of doing" (Dewey, 1972: 329) where flexworking managers and subordinates were constantly evaluating and interpreting their relationships, making adjustments and behaving according to how those relationships were evolving. In this regard, the paper adds to other Canadian studies that have examined the impact of telework on work organization (see, for example, Johnson et al. 2007; Towers et al. 2006; Tremblay 2002; Tremblay 2003; Tremblay et al. 2006), albeit with the additional and specific focus on how managers and flexworkers manage their relationships with each other and their office-based colleagues.

Whereas Johnson et al. (2007) identify the extent to which family and friends might impact on home-based work performance (and vice versa) this paper has theorized that impact through the lens of 'significant others'. In particular, it has suggested that management-flexworker relationships are a key locale within which responsibilities to different 'significant others' are played out. The paper has also challenged Johnson et al.'s contention that it is the gendered nature of the work/home space that requires women to "continually renegotiate and reinforce" (2007: 155) boundaries between family members and others when they are working from home because it has shown that the same applied to men.

The paper has also addressed Bailey and Kurland's (2002) call to understand how relationships develop in this particular type of work practice. Having identified manager-subordinate relationships as "primarily an affair of doing", the paper has reported how managers were constantly trying to achieve what they saw as the "right balance" between maintaining close communications with subordinates yet avoiding "micro-management". Thus, they were constantly interpreting their subordinate's behaviour and then adjusting their own behaviour in accordance with that interpretation. Similarly, many participants reported making a specific effort to remain "visible" by ensuring that they interacted with their own managers as well as with other flexworkers and office-based colleagues. A key theme in this regard was deliberately creating or constructing 'career-friendly' identities – that is to say, identities which would support an upward career trajectory. This strategy was also connected to the need to avoid feeling or being isolated from the work environment more generally. A key theme here, there-

fore, is the centrality of maintaining some form of interaction (particularly face-to-face) with management and peers as ‘significant others’.

Tremblay’s (2002) study of teleworkers in Canada reported some dissatisfaction with supervision and training. Assuming that ‘supervision’ reflects concerns about relationships with managers, this paper elaborates further on this theme by identifying the specific nature of those concerns. In particular, it has suggested that from a human resource perspective, relationships between managers and flexworking employees are qualitatively different from office-based employees. However, extending the theme further it has also shown that relationships between flexworking employees and their managers and between flexworking employees and their office-based colleagues may also require a different managerial style. Thus, for example, it has reported concerns about the need for a balance between autonomy and micromanagement and mechanisms to ensure consistent communication and cohesion.

Returning again to the concept of ‘significant others’ as a theoretical lens through which to understand manager-flexworker relationships, the paper has suggested that perceived loyalties to different groups of ‘significant others’ (in this case work colleagues, managers and family members) must be very carefully managed where, for example, participants reported feeling torn between maintaining positive relationships with managers but also with family members (particularly spouses and children). This notion of multiple allegiances might be usefully factored into HR principles – particularly with regard to training and development of both managers and subordinates. The need to maintain positive relationships with significant others also connects to perceptions of self and identity. Indeed, the participants who took part in this study drew on their positive relationships with their managers and subordinates or colleagues to signal their own sense of identity as successful flexworkers.

Tremblay has noted a preoccupation with the management of teleworkers, and an extensive body of literature on “how to manage telework and teleworkers” (2002: 157). While this paper continues the focus on the management of teleworkers its specific contribution is that it explores the relationships between managers and teleworkers and teleworking and office-based peers through the lens of interpretive interactionism. In this regard, it moves away from the normative management literature by seeking to theorize the dynamics of those relationships rather than prescribing what or how they should be constructed. Yet, the findings reported here have a number of implications for human resource management practice. First, they suggest that those with responsibility for introducing flexible work arrangements, those with responsibility for managing flexworkers and those individuals considering embarking on a flexwork schedule should be especially sensitive to the evolving and essentially dynamic dimensions of the relationships between managers, flexworkers and office-based employees. Methods for achieving appropriate levels of communication and cohesion, addressing and balancing responsibilities to different groups of ‘significant others’ might also be incorporated into management training initiatives.

Given that flexwork represents only one form of flexible work practice, further research might draw on interpretive interactionism to understand relationships between other types of flexworkers such as those engaging in job-shares and compressed work weeks. Indeed, it has already been applied to other groups of workers such as in-

ternational faculty, with a specific focus on family (in the home and host country) as ‘significant others’ (Richardson 2007). It might also be used to understand individual experiences of other flexible work arrangements more generally by, for example, identifying the ‘significant others’ in a job-share arrangement and their respective impact on themes such as work-life balance, productivity and organizational commitment. If, for example, the notion of ‘significant others’ reflects individual selectivity, where more priority is given to one individual than another, researchers in the field of work-life balance might consider why or how individuals in the work domain are accorded more (or less) importance than those in the non-work domain.

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Appendix

