What does telework mean in the 21st century? Face to face with Jon Messenger (*)

Interview by Emanuele Dagnino

In today's world of work, new ICTs are enabling more and more people to work anywhere, anytime and using any device. What are in your opinion the main effects of this transformation of the organization of work?

The key thing is what is in your question: the virtualization of work, that is that people can work anytime, anywhere and using any device. If you work in a job that is enabled by ICTs, you can really work wherever and whenever you want, beyond the constraints of the organization as well as scheduling constraints. This virtualization of office work –in a recent paper, I called it "*the third generation of telework*" – is really the ability of using these new ICTs (like smartphones and tablet computers) which, because they are so powerful, enable you to work anytime and anywhere. Now, this is the powerful thing about this tools: they enable you to work not only at your office or at your home (or other traditional places), but also in pretty much any other place you can imagine. And, of course, this is positive in the sense that it allows you to work whenever and wherever you want, but it also has some natural downsides as well, because it means that you can also work every time and everywhere! In fact, that is one of the things that I am concerned about: it can lead to the blurring of work-life boundaries. In the literature, they call it "spillover": work can spillover, it can have an impact on personal life, on your personal time and space. And personal life can do the same: it can bleed into and affect your working life. So it can go both ways. The key challenge is going to be how you can work with it, understanding the blurring, recognizing there is overlapping more than ever before between paid work and personal life, and figuring out how to adapt to this situation.

Looking back - 40 years after telecommuting (Nilles, 1973): more novelty or more continuity in the new world of work? Is telework a still useful concept?

A lot has been written about the fact that telework is passé: it is an old term, and it sounds old-fashioned. Many people still think that it is just about working from home. You have work in the office, and you have work from home, and this second kind of work is telework. Because people now can work anytime and anywhere, they tend to think that telework is passé. I would argue differently. In the paper I was talking about, which I have written with a former colleague, I argue that telework has evolved over the past 40 years as well. Since the term was coined, originally as telecommuting and then as telework, by Jack Nilles in California in 1973, telework has evolved over time in subsequent "generations".
We can see three generations of telework.

(*) Jon Messenger is Team Leader for the Working Conditions Group at the ILO. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the contributor and do not reflect any official policy or position of the ILO.

The first generation, which we call *the home office*, which occurred during the 1970s and 1980s, was stationary and was powered by so called "old ICTs", like desktop computers and fixed telephones in the workers' homes. It was supposed to be a complete substitute for work in the office. It was called "telecommuting", which is commuting by means of telecommunications.

That was the original idea. Then telework evolved into the second generation, which we call *the mobile office*. Telework could then be done in many different places (cafes, airports, etc.…). Workers were enabled to work in many different places in addition to just the office and home. These places are called "third spaces". Telework at this stage was only partly substituting for work in the office.

Now we face the third generation of telework, which we call the *virtual office*. New ICTs enable people to work anytime and anywhere, as we discussed, including intermediate spaces. By that we mean you can walk down the street on the sidewalk and be teleworking, such as checking e-mails. You can be sitting on the beach and be teleworking. You can be climbing a mountain and be teleworking. And it can often also be very occasional: this is an important feature of telework today. This is leading people to think that work with these new ICTs is not telework anymore, but rather something different and "new". There are a lot of exotic terms coined to say what this is: for example, e-work, e-nomads, new ways of working, job 2.0 and this kind of sexy terminology. But, in fact, it's the same "animal": in my opinion, telework has just evolved over these three generations.

I think a good example of that similarity in the European context is the definition of telework in the European Framework Agreement on Telework. It is actually flexible enough to cover both the traditional forms of telework, as well as these new and emerging forms of telework. The definition is this: "*Telework is a form of organising and/or performing work, using information technology, in the context of an employment contract/ relationship, where work, which could also be performed at the employer's premises, is carried out away from those premises on a regular basis*". This definition is from back in 2002; we are now in 2016 and this definition still sounds appropriate. If we apply it to telework in its different forms from the 1970s to today, it covers pretty much anything you can imagine, including telework with new ICTs. So I think, in fact, that telework is still a useful concept if we recognize that this evolution has resulted in a revolution in how work is performed today.

What are the features of telework today?

The key feature of telework today is, as we have discussed above, that people can work anytime and anywhere. Telework is not just work at home. Thinking that's all it is creates confusion when we are talking about this topic. All these 21st century buzzwords just create confusion in understanding the phenomenon. Another key feature, which I mentioned above, is that telework is often occasional and is done on a partial basis. It might be part-time, even in just part of the day. It might be in one place or another, at one time or another, but it tends not to be full-time and it tends not to be a permanent or complete substitute for work in the office. The most important point, which we can understand from research we are doing right now, is about the effects of this third generation telework on working time and work-life balance, among others. These effects depend in part on whether telework is supplemental or substitutional – that is, whether it supplements or substitutes for work in the office. One of the topics under focus – it was discussed in a presentation at a conference I recently attended – is that it seems that much of the telework occurring in the US is just supplemental to work in the office. This makes a great difference compared to when you work outside the office during normal working hours or during a schedule you have set on your own, substituting the hours in the office with work from your home or another place. Supplemental telework, in fact, is often just unpaid overtime work.

The challenges and promises of this ongoing transformation are directly related to what I was talking about. The key thing is to try to ensure – and this is not easy – that working hours are limited in some way and that individuals are guaranteed some minimum rest periods. In a study that I'm working on with the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (EUROFOUND), it has emerged that this is a really critical point. People need to be able to disconnect: it is called the "right to disconnect" as it is being discussed in France. Similar policies have been adopted by some companies in Germany as well.

It's not easy to say if this is enough: what we know is that we need to ensure by public policies that people have time for their personal lives—for their families and for other things they want to do in life. For example, the international labour standards on working hours and rest were designed for a totally different world: A world in which was much easier to calculate working hours; to calculate rest periods; and in which the boundaries between paid work and personal life were very solid. That is not to say that people did not take work home: certainly some workers did take work home even many years ago. The point is that there were still clear boundaries and people knew where those boundaries were. Now you can be contacted anytime and anywhere, possibly during the weekends and even during your holidays. Therefore, in my opinion there is a need to ensure some limits, not only to preserve the principles behind international working time standards, the EU working time directive and national regulations on working hours, but also to ensure that we have a work-life balance for workers and give them the ability to disconnect from work. This has also an important impact on their productivity and their individual performance: otherwise there is a risk of overworking. The effects are the same as they were sixty years ago: if you work too much, you get fatigued, you are more likely to make errors and your performance declines. So there is also a negative impact on companies and organizations. In the interest of everybody, I think it is crucial that we make use of the promise of these technologies and that we harness them for all the benefits they can give, for example the flexibility they can give to workers. They can give workers the ability to adapt their work schedules and their place of work to their personal needs, including their family situations. This is what some workers are already doing with telework.

So we need to make the most of the potential of new ICTs, but at the same time we have to recognize that there are some negatives and set some boundaries—whether it be at the international or the national level, as well as at the organizational level and also at a personal level. Individual boundary management strategies are really crucial and a lot of the literature I recently read about this issue seems to indicate that the way boundaries are managed by organizations and individuals makes a big difference in determining what the effects of 21st century telework are likely to be.

Emanuele Dagnino
@EmanueleDagnino
International Doctoral School in Human Capital Formation and Labour Relations
ADAPT
University of Bergamo