

Crafting careers in a technology-enabled flexible work environment

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Abstract

In the past decade, adoption of mobile communication devices has exploded, permitting greater connections between users but also permitting work to expand into the home. Many employers offer flexible working arrangements to employees, to maximise productivity and to support better work–life balance. Knowledge workers in the digital economy face challenges to balance work and home, with technology-enabled flexible work practices. Knowledge workers' expectations of where and when work is done are changing, as are notions of career success and career progression. Instead of traditional career paths, contemporary careers are more fluid and flexible.

In the information technology sector in Australia, there is little research about how flexible knowledge workers shape work–home boundaries. There is scant evidence explaining the influence of masculine-dominated organisational culture on flexible workers, and the drivers and consequences of flexibility stigma. There is a lack of research on the strategies that knowledge workers use to navigate their careers in a flexible work environment.

This thesis reports the results of an exploratory case study of a single multi-national company in the IT sector in Australia. I interviewed 54 employees that were using flexible working arrangements and I collected policy documents and corporate reports. I analysed the data using qualitative thematic text analysis.

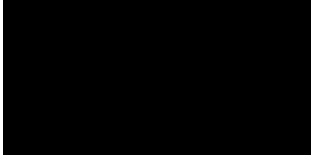
The findings show that most participants preferred work–home integration over segmentation. Organisational culture was dominated by an atmosphere of urgency and crisis, leading to norms of constant availability, getting the job done, doing long hours (though weakened), and being measured by output. Participants carefully crafted work–home boundaries, using high flexibility and high permeability, making seamless micro-transitions between work and home. Sometimes, they cloaked their actual work location, or crafted micro-invisibilities to attend to home or family demands, then returned to work later in the day. Ultimately, they used technology-enabled flexible work practices to craft a reputation of high availability. Career outcomes differed between cohorts: part-time women suffered career penalties; participants who worked from home had neutral career outcomes; and men who took a leave of absence enjoyed career premiums.

The study contributes to knowledge by reworking boundary theory for flexible knowledge workers. Boundaries are now easily dissolved, with mobile devices acting as vectors for cross-boundary penetration. Another contribution is the finding about different career outcomes for different modes of flexible working. Not all men are penalised for flexible working; while women still experience flexibility stigma. A novel contribution is that careers are bounded while the work–home interface is now boundaryless, for flexible knowledge workers in the IT sector. Finally, this study contributes a new model of the behaviours and capabilities required for career development of knowledge workers. This new career model has six components: individual agency, smart output, visibility, collaboration, networking and manager support.

Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis, and all the sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Justin Field

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