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Social support in the workplace between teleworkers, office-based colleagues and supervisors

Alison M. Collins, Donald Hislop and Susan Cartwright

This paper draws upon the findings of qualitative interviews carried out with teleworkers, their office-based colleagues and supervisory staff of a teleworking initiative introduced by a UK public sector local authority to explore workplace social support relationships. Our study found differences between office-based and permanent teleworking staff in terms of social support. For teleworkers relationships at work are complex, with social support networks being established prior to working at home. By working from home, teleworkers were able to develop greater social support relationships with some colleagues, predominantly other teleworkers, while at the same time allowing them to distance themselves from negative work relationships. Overall, a social disconnection developed between teleworkers and office-based staff. In contrast social support was more important for office-based workers, who valued co-worker relationships with other office-based staff.

Keywords: telework, social support relationships, flexible working, peer support, homeworking, supervisors, managers, office workers

Introduction

The workplace retains a central and important position in many people's lives. Within that realm the workplace relationships that individuals engage in with peers, subordinates, supervisors and customers are important factors shaping people's experience of work (e.g. Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008; Sias, 2009) and provide meaning to an individual's job. However, relatively little research has concentrated on social support relationships among teleworking colleagues, between teleworkers and their office-based co-workers or between teleworkers and their supervisors. For example in a comprehensive review of the telework literature by Tietze et al. (2009) teleworkers'

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relations with supervisors or peers were not discussed. This is an important area of study as teleworking can negatively impact upon work relationships with managers and colleagues, as well as leading to an 'us and them' cultural divide (Collins, 2005; Golden, 2006, 2007). Thus, this paper contributes to the social support literature by examining how teleworkers, their office-based colleagues and managers make sense of, and understand, the social support relations that exist between them. To clarify our terms, we used 'teleworker' in this study to describe clerical employees employed by a local authority on a full- and part-time basis, who worked exclusively from home on a permanent basis, and were reliant on information and communication technology (ICT) to carry out their role. Examining such a cohort contributes to previous research, which has focussed somewhat narrowly on professional and knowledge teleworkers (Tietze et al., 2009). In addition, while prior research has included high-intensity telework (2.5 days or more a week) (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007) it has neglected those who permanently work from home.

In the next section extant research on workplace social support is discussed. The case study approach adopted in this study is then outlined, and the findings from the qualitative interview data are analysed. We then consider the implications of the research in terms of both theory and organisational practice.

Social support within the workplace

Social support can be defined as 'verbal and nonverbal communication between receiver and provider that reduces uncertainty about a situation, one's self, another, or a relationship' (Sias, 2009:70). Social support may be emotional (someone provides sympathy, listens to a peer's problems or grievance and provides consolation), informational (someone provides advice and information) or instrumental (someone provides tangible help to get the job done) (Sias, 2009). The extent to which workers provide social support to each other in the workplace can have a significant impact upon people's experience of work (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). Thus, social support within the workplace may influence the psychological strain and well-being levels of an individual (Cooper et al., 2001). Furthermore, relationships within work are important because co-worker's share an understanding of the workplace that non-employees do not have, and can impart relevant organisational information and gossip (Sias, 2005).

Although much research emphasises the positive aspects of social support at work, the levels are likely to vary significantly given the extent to which employees get along is not constant (Winnubst and Schabracq, 1996). When positive, social relations can enrich jobs (May et al., 2004), provide job fulfilment (Hodson, 2004), and positively influence turnover as employees who experience support from colleagues are less likely to leave the organisation in the short term (Moynihan and Pandey, 2008). Moreover, supportive co-workers who provide help and clarification of tasks can reduce an individual's role ambiguity, role conflict and work load which may ultimately increase job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Chiaburu and Harrison, 2008). In contrast, negative workplace relations can cause stress and job dissatisfaction (Winnubst and Schabracq, 1996). This can have a detrimental effect upon an employee's emotional wellbeing (Labianca and Brass, 2006), to the extent that social relations at work which are disrespectful, distrustful and lack reciprocity are independent predictors of medically diagnosed depression (Oksanen et al., 2010).

Social support in the context of teleworking

Teleworking allows people to work outside of the traditional workplace and is likely to change the way individuals perceive work by influencing the nature, number and depth of social support interactions that teleworkers have with each other, with office-based colleagues, and with supervisors (Gephart, 2002; Golden, 2007; Rosso et al.,

2010). For some, teleworking may result in professional or social isolation which can negatively impact upon job performance, especially for those who frequently telework (Golden et al., 2008). Professional isolation can be defined as reduced opportunities for promotion, reward or personal development, whereas social isolation may occur because employees have less interaction with co-workers (Cooper and Kurland, 2002). Morganson et al. (2010) examined workplace inclusion, defined as an individual's sense of belonging, a perception that they are able to participate and that their opinions matter within the organisation, which they argued was a similar concept to professional isolation. They found that whilst teleworkers enjoyed greater flexibility and autonomy when compared to employees working at the main employer office, they reported less workplace inclusion and thus experienced greater levels of professional isolation. Adopting informal communication methods to keep in contact with colleagues may reduce teleworkers' feelings of isolation (Fay, 2011). However, high-intensity teleworking is likely to result in a greater reliance on ICT's for communication with colleagues and less face-to-face interaction (Lal and Dwivedi, 2009). Whilst ICT's may enable interaction and collaboration with colleagues, they lack the warmth of face-to-face interactions which are seen as vital for developing closer social relationships (Vayre and Pignault, 2014). Thus, teleworkers may also try to counteract feelings of isolation by actively seeking out face-to-face interactions with co-workers (Golden et al., 2008).

When teleworkers experience constructive informal communication with co-workers it may positively influence organisational commitment and job satisfaction (Fay and Kline, 2011). Furthermore, teleworking may provide a welcome escape from office-based colleagues. For example Fonner and Roloff (2010) found that teleworkers regarded fewer interactions with colleagues as a desirable consequence of teleworking, which allowed individuals to work without interruptions and preserve a reasonable work-life balance. Indeed, employees may work at home to avoid the more negative aspects of organisational life such as constant supervision (Costello, 1988), office politics, harassment (Mirchandani, 1998), workplace sexism, as well as the hierarchy that can be part of the office environment (Huws, 1993). Finally, teleworking can make exchanges between staff more intimate and personal than in the office, as people interact without being observed by colleagues (Halford, 2005).

The perceived benefits of teleworking may lead to resentment from office-based colleagues (Collins, 2005; Lautsch et al., 2009) especially if they have to take on extra office tasks for teleworking colleagues when they work from home. As a result teleworkers may be reluctant to refer their queries to office-based co-workers leading to a 'them and us' perception, with teleworkers preferring to contact other teleworkers (Tietze and Nadin, 2011). Golden (2007) found that the relationship between office-based staff and teleworkers was negatively related to the extent of telework within the workplace. Furthermore, this relationship was affected by the amount of time people worked at home and the extent to which they were able to have face-to-face interactions (Golden, 2007). In contrast, Halford's (2005) qualitative study found that teleworking did not adversely affect the relationship between part-time teleworkers and their office-based colleagues because people had developed strong friendships prior to working at home and were able to move this relationship into virtual space.

Employees may move work relationships into the virtual environment, and connect with co-workers via telephone, email (e.g. Halford, 2005; Vayre and Pignault, 2014), conferencing technology (e.g. Barnes, 2012) or instant messaging (e.g. Fonner and Roloff, 2010). One study found that teleworkers used mobile phones to maintain work social relationships, exchanging information about co-workers and organisational developments as well as discussing work tasks (Lal and Dwivedi, 2009). In addition, teleworkers' adapted the way they communicated depending on the work context. For example while email was commonly used to communicate with colleagues, the telephone was used when more detailed understanding was required and face-to-face meetings were utilised for more important conversations (Vayre and Pignault, 2014). Thus, teleworkers can successfully use Information and Communication Technologies

(ICT's) to form and/or maintain social relationships with colleagues as employees learn how to connect virtually over time (Leonardi et al., 2010). According to Coenen and Kok (2014) electronic communication between colleagues takes place once personal relationships between team members had been formed and trust established. However, it can be hard for new employees who telework to establish relationships at work or to build up an identity with the organisation because technology interactions are shorter, less intense, have a reduced social focus and do not have the richness of face-to-face contacts (Bartel et al., 2007; Golden et al., 2008). This may lead to a weakened interpersonal relationship between teleworkers and their colleagues or supervisors, the consequences of which may be more negative for those who work remotely from the office on a permanent basis than those who do so for only part of the week (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007).

Supervisors and social support

Social support between office-based workers and teleworkers and their supervisor is also important as positive relationships may lead to greater job satisfaction, greater organisational commitment, increased job performance, lower intentions to leave the organisation and career progression (Sias, 2009). The quality of social support provided by supervisors varies and it has been argued that supervisors provide greater depth, breadth and quality communication to those employees who are part of an 'in-group' in comparison to 'out-group' employees (Sias, 2005). A meta-analysis of teleworking research found that teleworking was associated with positive relationships with supervisors (Gajendran and Harrison, 2007). It was suggested that this may be due to supervisors allowing people they personally trust to work at home or that teleworkers purposefully fostered relationships with supervisors. In contrast, research by Golden (2006) suggests that teleworkers who have little face-to-face interaction with supervisory staff are likely to have lower quality leader-member exchanges and ultimately a lack of face-to-face interaction can negatively impact upon the affective element of the relationship.

Teleworking results in new boundaries between work and home and supervisory staff may be wary of crossing boundaries into a teleworker's personal life which might be perceived as an invasion of privacy (Harris, 2003). Alternatively, the use of ICT's to enable the geographical relocation of work into the home environment may lead managers to develop more interpersonal relationships with teleworkers as a way of monitoring them (Halford, 2005). For supervisory staff who manage both teleworkers and office-based workers, research suggests they need to be equitable in their treatment as office-based staff can be sensitive to how teleworkers are treated and may attribute changes in supervisory behaviour to teleworkers being allowed extra benefits (Lautsch et al., 2009).

Extant research on teleworking tends to focus on the teleworkers themselves, neglecting the experiences of their office-based colleagues who are affected by the arrangement (Fogarty et al., 2011). Thus, the aim of this paper was to explore social support relationships that exist between permanent teleworkers and their office-based colleagues and supervisors through presenting the findings of a qualitative case study.

Study methodology and sample

This research adopted a qualitative case study approach within a large English local authority, which had implemented a voluntary full-time teleworking initiative four years prior to data collection. Teleworking had been introduced as part of a number of work-life balance strategies, including compressed and flexible working, to improve working conditions and thereby retain experienced staff and enhance service delivery. Three departments were involved in the research: council

Table 1: Supervisory staff and the teleworking and office-based staff they manage

		Teleworkers	Length of time worked from home (in months)
Section 1			
Peter	Manager	Amy	10
Jennifer	Team leader	Hannah	12
Mary	Team leader	Katherine	10
Sam	Supervisor (who teleworks)	Laura	24
		Louise	48
		Sophie	48
		Office workers	
		Lorraine	
		Sara	
		Jo	
		Eva	
		Phillipa	
Section 2			
Supervisory staff		Teleworkers	
Robert	Team leader	Charlotte	36
Heather	Supervisor	Gillian	36
		Emily	18
		Office workers	
		Angela	
		Jane	
		Kate	
		Anita	
Supervisor		Teleworkers	
Debbie	Team leader	Amanda	22
		Gail	20
		Nicola	30
Section 3			
Supervisory Staff		Teleworkers	
Rebecca	Manager	Erin	18

N.B These names are all pseudonyms.

tax, benefits and community services development. The council tax department administers a household tax levied by local authorities across the UK which is based on the relative value of the property and the number of occupants. The department had recently gone through a structural change that involved amalgamating with other sections dealing with authority revenues, including business rates and debt recovery. The benefits section deals with claims for financial support, known as housing benefit, from people with low incomes.

In general, the office-based staff either tended to deal with telephone inquiries from the public or concentrated on processing forms and other administrative tasks. The teleworkers mainly processed forms relating to either housing benefit (e.g. applications for benefits) or council tax (e.g. processing changes in house ownership or owner circumstances) or provided clerical support. Team leaders relied on technology to monitor the work of clerical staff in real time. From their desk team leaders could monitor if office-based staff were on the phone and for how long. In the same way teleworkers could be monitored to see if they were logged on to the system, when

they signed on and off the system, the number of claims processed and the number of letters they sent to be printed out at the office. Team leaders' relied primarily on telephone and email to communicate with teleworking staff.

In all, 33 employees took part in this study, including six supervisors and two managers; 12 office-based clerical staff and 13 clerical teleworkers, 11 of which worked full-time and two worked part-time. All the teleworkers worked from home on a permanent basis. To work from home the majority had agreed to a demotion or had given up the prospect of promotion to remain as a clerical processor. All participants were interviewed individually at their place of work, which was either the office or their home. Interviews lasted on average one hour. Participants were informed of the research aims and all agreed to having their interviews taped which were transcribed verbatim.

A qualitative case study approach focussing on one organisation was utilised to enable the organisational context of the interviewees' accounts to be explored. We used semi-structured interviews to access the participants' interpretations, perceptions and experiences in order gain an understanding of the participants' world. An interview schedule was used but the process was flexible and allowed the participants to introduce issues they felt were important. Table 1 shows the office-based and teleworking staff and who they were managed by.

Initial data analysis was done using template analysis (King, 2004) which is an approach that categorises and codes textual data according to identified themes. Questions centred upon the teleworking initiative; for example teleworkers were asked why they became teleworkers, the advantages and disadvantages of working at home, what they expected from the organisation and their colleagues, and whether these expectations had been met. Office-based staff were asked if they had ever considered becoming a teleworker, how the initiative had affected them in their work, what they expected from the organisation and their colleagues and whether these expectations had been met. Initial themes were generated from the research questions a priori. The initial template was applied to the transcripts. Development of the template was an iterative process as codes were revised and refined as the template was applied to the subsequent transcripts until all the data had been coded. Data were categorised into key themes and then further refined into sub themes. The final version of the template was then applied to all transcripts. The original focus of the research used the psychological contract as a framework to explore the employment relationship: that is the expectations that teleworkers and their office-based colleagues have of each other and the expectations they have of their supervisors and their supervisors have of them. However, the importance of work and social relationships in the workplace emerged from the data and forms the focus of this paper.

Analysing social support relationships

This section explores social support relationships between teleworkers, their office-based co-workers and their supervisors. Four key themes emerged from the data relating to social relationships in the workplace, namely social support relationships of teleworkers, social support relationships of office-based workers, social support from supervisors, and different attitudes to office life and this section is organised according to those themes.

Social support relationships of teleworkers

A key feature raised by teleworkers was that social support from office-based colleagues tended to lessen over time. Although all of the teleworkers had

worked in the office prior to working at home, staff turnover, an office restructuring and infrequent visits to the office meant that over time the contact with office-based friends and colleagues gradually diminished. As one teleworker explained:

When I go in, they're friendly enough, it's not like they exclude you, but obviously the more new people come into the office then they don't know me as a person I'm just a name on the computer. Whereas the ones that I have worked with previously, when you go in you tend to make a beeline to them, because they know who you are (Amanda, teleworker)

Social relationships with other teleworkers did not tend to develop without prior face-to-face contact and teleworkers typically did not call upon fellow teleworkers for support unless they already knew them. Thus, when in need of social support teleworkers relied on contacts and friendships made prior to their working at home. As one of the team leaders noted, if teleworkers were not brought into the office and introduced to new starters then they tended to become increasingly more isolated from office-based colleagues:

The longer they're working at home the more removed they are from the office. [...] We had an instance where one of our homeworkers came in, I don't know about six months or so ago, and she'd looked round the office and she said that she 'couldn't see anybody that I knew' (Rebecca, teamleader)

The organisation had set up an information system to enable the processing work to be carried out by teleworkers. Work was either allocated to teleworkers by supervisors via a central work 'tray' or teleworkers would access this electronically from home. Work was done independently by each teleworker, and there was a perception among managers that there was no need to collaborate with colleagues to complete work tasks. Therefore, the organisation had not incorporated any social networking functionality to encourage staff to communicate with each other because it was deemed unnecessary. In the case of queries, teleworkers were encouraged to contact their team leader or supervisor rather than fellow teleworkers. However, the majority of teleworkers ignored this; instead they used work phones, personal phones and email to contact other teleworkers, highlighting the importance of peer support for this group. As teleworkers pointed out, standard practice in the office is based on seeking informational support and obtaining the opinions of colleagues.

If it's something quite minor or something we might have misunderstood then yes we contact each other, either by email or by phone. So yes you tend to have your own [teleworking] buddies I suppose, that you contact more than others (Amanda, teleworker)

The nature of the work carried out by teleworkers encouraged individualism, in that whilst the teleworkers were expected to complete as much work as possible, they did not rely on each other to achieve their work objectives. Nevertheless, teleworkers managed to develop a sense of collective identity and saw themselves as a distinct group, working together to raise teleworking-related issues:

We might have certain issues that wouldn't affect somebody in the office and we do actually speak together a lot, like if anybody has got an issue with something we all ring each other and discuss it with each other, before we take it any further (Amy, teleworker)

Thus while teleworkers may experience a greater sense of individualism than their office-based colleagues, they retained a significant amount of collegiality and sense of shared identity with other teleworkers.

Teleworkers also turned to each other for emotional support, rather than office-based colleagues. Teleworkers had been provided with work phones to keep in contact with the organisation, and email was also available. However, teleworkers typically

used their personal phones to contact each other for emotional support, which centred upon contacting teleworking colleagues to 'moan' with a colleague about a work situation or catch up with personal news, as the example illustrates:

...because you don't have somebody to go to so we're quite good at picking up the phone – not the work phone I hasten to add – just have a quick moan (Louise, teleworker)

In terms of social support only half of the teleworkers mentioned contacting teleworking colleagues for social support. This may have been due to a reluctance to suggest that they are socialising during working time, but it may also indicate the sense of individualisation people develop when they become permanent teleworkers.

Social support relationships of office workers

An office restructure and ongoing staff turnover levels typically meant that social interaction and support between the teleworking and office-based staff was minimal, with many office workers responding that they did not know the teleworkers personally. As one office worker said 'if you don't know them how can you form a relationship?' (Sandra, office-based worker). Thus, in general office workers looked for social support from other office workers. The majority of office-based interviewees made reference to working as a team and providing peer support. In addition, the social aspect of the office was emphasised and there was an expectation that office-based colleagues were friendly. This was perceived as a positive aspect of working in the office, as summed up by one interviewee:

I wouldn't want to be detached like from my colleagues. I know nobody particularly likes going to work and everything, but I mean you do get to know and make friends and everything, so it has got its benefits (Jane, office worker)

Team leaders recognised the importance of social support and social events at lunchtime and after work were encouraged. Mary, a team leader, pointed out that socialising was part of the 'camaraderie' amongst staff. Office workers appeared to enjoy the sociality of the office, making positive reference to going for lunch with colleagues from the same team. In addition, a certain degree of socialising during working hours was encouraged. One office worker explained how the team leader had reorganised the seating plan of an office to encourage staff to talk to each other or discuss work-related questions:

Nobody talked at all and he said 'it's not healthy not to talk at all', they just all sat there and got on with their work and so he split us all up (Helen, office worker)

Generally there was a sense of team spirit and teamworking amongst office-based staff, and an expectation that office-based colleagues would provide informational support by advising on work issues.

...when I'm on the telephone [] there's often things that I'm not quite sure what they're talking about or don't understand something. So I always refer it to [a work colleague], which I see as my support (Lorraine, office worker)

Office workers also provided instrumental support for colleagues, by providing tangible help with work tasks and looking out for each other in terms of workload. As outlined, supervisors allocated pieces of work to office workers and teleworkers via an electronic work tray. Office-based colleagues would typically help out any other office-based colleague who was having difficulties and reduce their workload for that day:

...they'd see that something wasn't quite right and you go in your work tray [and] they'd have maybe split it up between them and it was really, really, nice (Sara, office worker)

In contrast to teleworkers, office workers sometimes had to contend with difficult telephone calls from the public. Emotional support from colleagues was perceived as a positive aspect of working in the office during stressful times.

We're there if someone's had a bad call and they're upset. They're always there to make you a cup of tea and talk to you (Sandra, office worker)

Social support from supervisors

In relation to supervisory support, teleworking and office-based staff interacted with the team leader. In general, employees tended to have little interaction with more senior managers' and so relationships with the team leader shaped their perceptions of the office environment, as summarised by one interviewee:

Since we've changed team leaders it's totally changed the whole ethos of the office, to me it's a lot more relaxed. [] It's difficult to explain, how the difference in a team leader and the attitudes that they have can change the whole [atmosphere] in the office (Sandra, office worker)

Supervisory staff highlighted the social side of their role. For example one team leader described how she started each working day by walking around the office to check on staff:

[I] can tell what moods certain staff are in. I know a lot of their personal lives, backgrounds, if they've had problems I can see if somebody's a bit more cheerful than the day before (Mary, office-based team leader)

This is in direct contrast to teleworkers, who lacked regular social contact with team leaders. Although, one team leader tried to ensure that teleworkers were visited on a monthly basis either to ensure they understood any changes to the way work was carried out or for a social visit.

Whilst supervisory staff aimed to provide social support to both teleworking and office-based employees, interviewees varied in their levels of commitment to their supervisor. Overall, there appeared to be little personal involvement between office-based staff and their team leader/manager and commitment tended to be transactional, centring on the job. One office-based worker stated that she was committed to meeting the team leader's expectations, but this was because she was being paid to work: 'At the end of the day they're paying me for it' (Angela, office-based). Another joked she didn't have a choice but to be committed to fulfilling her team leader's expectations, because he frequently came in to the office to check that staff were carrying out the work.

Similarly, several teleworkers said that they felt committed to fulfilling their supervisor's expectations because of the potential consequences of failing to do so. For example teleworkers were concerned that they may be recalled back in to the office if they were perceived to be underperforming. In contrast, just over half of the teleworkers had a more personal relationship with their team leader, who provided emotional support, that was based on commitment and involved emotional investment by the employee and the team leader. For example one teleworker felt committed to her team leader because of the support she receives from her, for example in allowing her to be flexible in terms of work to meet family commitments.

By working from home, teleworkers did miss out on face-to-face support and so it was sometimes appreciated when managers visited them at home. For example one teleworker described how the section manager visited her after a poor performance review:

...and he just popped round to see how I was. He said, oh I'm not interested about your work, I wanted to find out how you are (Louise, teleworker)

Our findings suggest that supervision of teleworkers can require a greater emotional involvement than with office-based staff as supervisors are drawn into the home domain. When teleworkers have personal issues it can be difficult for supervisors to manage remotely. As the amount of work completed by teleworkers is monitored remotely, any decreases in output require explanation. For example one homeworker could not complete her set hours because of personal crises, and she informed the supervisor of her situation:

...as I say there's a lot of emotional involvement there's a lot of effort from both sides really, but as a manager it's more difficult to manage people [who telework]. I know it's not supposed to be in theory, but it is, because they're not there, you don't have them sat next to you. (Rebecca, manager)

Different attitudes to office life

A stark contrast existed between office and teleworking staff with regard to the negative aspects of interactions with colleagues. In general, office-based staff viewed the social side of the organisation positively with only one office-based worker (Lorraine) stating she was not sure whether she would remain in the organisation because 'she felt excluded from the social side of work'. In contrast, the experiences of teleworkers were quite different. Almost half of the teleworkers made reference to how working at home allowed them to avoid the negative aspects of working at the office. Thus, one teleworker described the office atmosphere very negatively with a great deal of 'backbiting' and 'bitching' (Emily, teleworker). One teleworker blamed the negative atmosphere of the head office on her female colleagues:

I don't like being in an office. I find offices full of, typically, large groups of women who are very, very catty (Amanda, teleworker)

Overall, the teleworkers appeared content with the work, but were dissatisfied with the office environment. Consequently, working at home allowed teleworkers to avoid the negative atmosphere of the office environment while keeping in touch with particular office colleagues with whom they were friendly. Some of the teleworkers openly admitted to the organisation that their dislike of the office environment lay behind their request to work from home. One interviewee presented this as an ultimatum to their line manager:

It was a choice of going homeworking or get a different job. And I told that to my boss and with that suddenly he came out with this offer of being able to work from home (Gillian, teleworker)

If working at home became no longer available then some employees may opt to leave the organisation. Several teleworkers maintained that if the teleworking initiative terminated they would not wish to return to working in the office due to the negative atmosphere.

From an organisational perspective, teleworking also allowed the local authority to retain trained staff that did not like working in the offices, or who did not fit into the office environment. A favourable working atmosphere was also valued by supervisor staff who made reference to the importance of positive social interactions at work. Two of the supervisory staff interviewed raised the issue of having to deal with employees who were 'disruptive' within the workplace or who were generally underperforming:

I think it's more frustrating when you're actually sat in the same office as somebody like that because you can physically see them and you feel as though you've got to be on their

case all the time. [...] It gets to the point where you think, oh no not again, and you've got to have them in the office all the time (Rebecca, Manager)

From the perspective of supervisors, teleworking was one way of dealing with difficult staff. Some requests to work at home had been agreed despite questions being raised about suitability. One supervisor commented:

They're trying to send somebody from [the office] to work at home because they're a disruptive influence in the office. Which is one of the worst possible reasons I can think of, but we are, and I'm sure all organisations do it to a degree if they do homeworking, is get the person who upsets your team members out of the team (Robert, team leader)

As noted, remotely managing such staff can become more problematic and may affect the supervisor's willingness to visit teleworkers.

Discussion

Before analysing in detail the findings regarding social support, it is useful to highlight a couple of general ways in which the analysis being undertaken contributes to research on teleworking. It is generally acknowledged that teleworking is highly diverse, in terms of the occupations of those who telework, and the extent to which people telework (Felstead et al., 2001; Tietze et al., 2009). Thus, teleworkers include those carrying out routine clerical work, and also highly autonomous managerial and professional workers, and includes those who telework from home one day per week, to those who telework permanently. Despite this, the vast majority of academic studies of telework focus somewhat narrowly on managerial/professional workers who telework part-time. Thus, in examining clerical/administrative workers who telework full-time, we make a contribution to knowledge by examining the experiences of a neglected sub-group of the teleworker population. Further, it will be shown that the occupation of the teleworkers, and the extent to which they worked from home, not only had a significant impact on their experience of teleworking, but also their need for, and experience of, social support.

Moynihan and Pandey (2008) argue that employees are part of intra-organisational social networks which are important as they influence staff attitudes and behaviour. In examining the experiences of teleworkers it is important to acknowledge and take account of the full range of people involved in such networks. Given the majority of research exploring teleworking tends to focus narrowly on teleworkers, our study adds to knowledge in this domain by also taking into account the perspective and experiences of their managers and office-based colleagues. This multi-perspective approach enables us to highlight how the experience of teleworking is significantly influenced by the complex and dynamic social interaction that results from how individual teleworkers interact with other teleworkers, as well as with their managers and office-based peers.

A key factor shaping social relations between teleworkers and their office-based colleagues was the teleworker's reasons for teleworking. Fundamentally, teleworking provided an escape route for those employees who disliked the office social environment. Our study found that permanent teleworking allowed people to distance themselves from negative or non-essential work relationships whilst developing positive ones, predominantly with other teleworkers (Golden, 2006; Tietze and Nadin, 2011). Teleworking thus allowed people to avoid groups that they do not identify with and strengthen relations with those they saw as valuable and identified closely with. In effect teleworkers were able to preserve positive social relationships with selected co-workers on their own terms and avoid the negative aspects of office life they did not like.

As a consequence of this the teleworkers typically sought work and social support from other teleworkers, rather than from office-based colleagues, often

discussing work-related issues with each other before raising them with their managers or office-based colleagues. As with Halford (2005) the teleworkers in this study thus maintained and developed more personal relationships with particular teleworkers who they could turn to for both informational and emotional support. Furthermore, teleworkers relied on other teleworkers for instrumental and informational job-related support despite the organisation emphasising that teleworkers should contact team leaders or supervisors if they needed help with their work.

A number of researchers suggest that the proportion of time people telework is crucial in terms of the impact upon the relationships with co-workers, and the extent to which social isolation may be experienced (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Golden, 2007). Our analysis indicated that this was a crucially important factor shaping the nature of relationships between teleworking and office-based staff. In our study, permanent teleworkers developed a sense of individualisation and a strong level of social disconnect developed between office-based and teleworking staff, largely due to the fact that opportunities for regular interaction between teleworkers and their office-based colleagues were virtually non-existent. This provides a significant contrast with the part-time teleworkers studied by Halford (2005), who were able to retain good work and social relations with office-based colleagues. Thus, when teleworkers regularly visit their offices it provides a mechanism which helps sustain their relations with office-based colleagues, which is not something that permanent teleworkers are able to do.

Furthermore, our analysis highlights the importance of another, potentially important temporal dimension, the amount of time people have been teleworking (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Our findings suggest that the longer that people telework, the greater the relational distance between teleworkers and office-based staff. Over time this is likely to result in a bifurcation between office-based and teleworking staff, with the potential for a 'them versus us' mentality to develop which is likely to weaken any sense of collective identity between office-based and teleworking staff, even if they are carrying out similar work (Felstead et al., 2003).

Our findings suggest that social relations between teleworkers may also evolve over time, with the potential that teleworkers become more socially isolated the longer they work as full-time teleworkers. It was noticeable from our findings that the teleworkers' social support networks were with people who were known prior to them working at home. Furthermore, teleworkers seemed unwilling or unable to forge relationships with people they did not have a pre-existing relationship with prior to them teleworking. Thus, our findings support Bartel et al. (2007) suggestion that it is important for teleworkers to establish social support networks prior to working remotely. However, our data highlight that for permanent teleworkers, the initial establishment of social support networks before commencing telework may not be enough. For example in this study staff turnover, an office re-organisation, coupled with infrequent visits to the office undermined the social support networks of permanent teleworkers over time. Thus, people who telework permanently for long periods may find that their social support networks diminish over time, and are difficult to sustain. Overall therefore, in understanding the extent to which teleworkers experience social isolation, and how they manage social relations with colleagues, it is important to take account not only of the extent to which they telework, but also how long they have been teleworking.

The sense of social disconnect that the teleworker felt in relation to office-based colleagues was also facilitated by their employer's approach to the use of information technology to manage teleworkers. In our case, the use of IT for teleworkers was implemented for the specific purpose of allowing them to carry out clerical work remotely, rather than to encourage virtual team working or social support. Teleworkers did not need to contact each other to carry out their work. In addition, the authority encouraged teleworkers to contact supervisory staff, rather than colleagues, with queries. Arguably, taking account of the teleworkers

occupation is crucial in understanding the approach to IT support, and management that was utilised. Fundamentally, as the teleworkers examined were undertaking relatively routine clerical/administrative work, they were granted limited levels of autonomy (see also Dimitrova, 2003). The use of IT was reflective of this, where IT systems were utilised as a work-support, and managerial control device, more than a mechanism to facilitate social interaction and collaboration between teleworkers (Felstead et al., 2003).

While ICT's which may have encouraged communication between teleworkers, and teleworkers and office staff were not provided by the employer, our findings suggest that teleworkers were still proactive in finding ways to use whatever ICT's were available, even using their personal phones, to keep in contact with selected colleagues and draw upon them for work-related social support. Thus, our findings provide some support for Lal and Dwivedi's (2009:269) assertion that teleworkers 'are not passive bystanders when experiencing feelings of social isolation'.

Finally, it is useful to consider the extent to which the relationship between teleworkers and their managers provided teleworkers with a means of social and work-related support. Previous research has highlighted the way in which teleworking can change the relationship between teleworkers and managers as supervisors manage from a distance (e.g. Felstead et al., 2003; Harris, 2003; Golden, 2006; Richardson, 2010). In addition, teleworking initiatives often present supervisors with the challenge of managing both office-based and teleworking staff (Lautsch et al., 2009). The results of this study found significant differences in the relationships between supervisors and their staff with some having a more relational connection, based on support and commitment, than others. Although teleworkers did not always approach supervisors for help with queries, preferring to consult other teleworkers, just over half of the teleworkers had a more personal relationship with their team leader, who provided emotional support. Such relationships also involved emotional investment from both employee and the team leader, perhaps because as Harris (2003) points out the management of teleworkers involves crossing the boundary of work and home and visiting people in their personal arena. This can lead to supervisors forming more personal relationships with employees. It can also provide a greater insight into a teleworkers' family situation, as shown by the supervisors in this study who appeared to know a great deal about the personal lives of the teleworkers. Our findings suggest that supervision of teleworkers can require a greater emotional involvement from managers.

Overall therefore, this study has provided insights into how a neglected type of teleworker, those who telework full-time undertaking relatively routine clerical work, find ways of organising the work and social support they need to carry out their jobs. The fact that they telework full-time was found to be a crucial factor in shaping the relationship between teleworkers and office-based colleagues, where over time a sense of social disconnect developed. Fundamentally, this study has shown that to fully understand the way in which teleworkers carry out their work, and organise their social support mechanisms, it is necessary to take account of the complex, dynamic and evolving relationship between teleworkers, their managers and office-based colleagues.

This qualitative study drew upon the findings of one public sector organisation and provides valuable insights into social support between permanent teleworkers, office-based staff, and supervisors. However, the results of this one case study cannot be used to make generalisations around the social support between teleworkers and office-based staff more broadly. As more workers work from home further research is needed that explores the complex relationships between teleworkers, their office-based co-workers, and supervisors. As this research shows teleworking may lead to more personal, intense work relationships and further research is also needed to explore how this impacts upon other household members of the teleworker.

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