

Gender and “Virtual Work”: How New Technologies Influence Work Practices and Gender Equity

A whole new set of work practices is changing organizations under our very eyes – and fingertips. “Virtual work” – work accomplished with new information technologies, without traditional regard to time, place, or organizational boundaries – is a reality in most workplaces. Now, employees can use their laptops to stay connected on vacation or work together on a project team while in different time zones, offices, or even companies. We have learned that work policies and practices have subtle but far-reaching effects on gender equity.¹ What might the implications of virtual work be for women and men in today’s organizations? For example, will email make work and life integration easier or harder? Email, as well as the Internet and other “online collaboration tools” that enable workgroups to follow discussions or work on shared documents, make these new ways of working possible. But new technologies don’t determine one outcome or another; it is the users of technology who forge and negotiate the impacts over time.² What are some possible outcomes and what do women see happening so far?

We explore the impact of virtual work in three areas: opportunities; productivity and creativity; and work and life integration. For each of these three areas, we present some competing predictions about the impact of virtual work on gender equity and report findings from a survey of women professionals.³

Background: The Survey

The web-based survey, supported and administered by Compaq Computer Corporation, explored these areas with women who attended the Simmons Graduate School of Management’s 22nd Annual Leadership Conference for Women, held in Boston on May 5, 2001.⁴ We received responses from 675 women, of whom 98% use email in their work and 61% use other kinds of online collaboration tools – an indication of how prevalent virtual work has become. These women work in a range of conditions that promote virtual work:

- 75% work for companies that have policies that encourage the use of email;
- 61% work with a group of people that is geographically dispersed;
- 53% work with colleagues who travel for a significant portion of their work;
- 43% telecommute from home some or all of the time;
- 37% work for companies that have policies that encourage the use of online collaboration tools;
- 17% travel for a significant portion of their work.

The women work in a wide range of industries, including technology, finance, telecommunications, and health

care. Their demographic profile shows:

They are mostly middle to senior managers between the ages of 30 and 59; 62% earn more than \$75,000 per year; 41% have one or more children at home; 17% are women of color. Almost half work in organizations of 20,000 or more employees. This group had some intriguing perceptions of virtual work and its effects.

Opportunities

Many women have long known that visibility and recognition are important for getting ahead but have found them out of reach. Women often report the experience of being interrupted at meetings or watching their ideas later attributed to someone else. Women’s work contributions are often rendered “invisible,” particularly when they do “relational work” that might be the glue that holds a project team together but is not regarded as real work.⁵ With more workplace communication happening online, is it any easier for women to be heard and recognized?

Possibility 1: Gender equity is enhanced. One vision holds that online work will alleviate gender biases. The reasoning is that “gender strategies that benefit men are disrupted by asynchronous communication,”⁶ when the turn-taking in the back-and-forth of email messages mitigates interruptions and mis-attributions of ideas. Virtual work creates a trail of who made what contributions. Anyone who posts a

message can get a place in the conversation without having to master one dominant style of assertiveness. In addition, the Internet has introduced the ideal of the “faceless” contributor, no longer dismissed because of biases triggered by gender, racial, or other identities that are readily apparent in person. As one researcher noted, “A recent television advertisement for MCI heralds the new utopia of the Internet. ‘There is no age,’ the ad asserts, in a child’s voice; ‘there is no race’ (spoken by an adult with Asian features); ‘there are no genders’ (spoken by a woman); ‘there are no infirmities’ (signed in American Sign Language); ‘there are only minds.’”⁷

Probing a level deeper, some feminist scholars⁸ say that one beauty of the Internet is not the facelessness of the contributors but precisely the opposite: people can find some time and safety to ask questions and get to know one another’s particulars, breaking down identity barriers by increasing encounters across differences. Gender and other identities are more than physical features ascertained in face-to-face encounters; they are identities that carry cultural experiences and perspectives and these can, and inevitably will, come across in online communication style and content. Moreover, in a peculiar way, the distance of online communication might facilitate more intimate exchange that diminishes prejudices. In either case, whether the Internet is faceless or brings new faces more clearly into view, a person’s gender and other identities should not be obstacles to inclusion and respect when work is done virtually, according to this vision. The result should be that more voices are heard and the quality of work is thereby improved.

Possibility 2: Gender equity is compromised. A competing account holds that virtual work will exacerbate gen-

der and other biases. Women have just begun to master the rules of the game for participating effectively in the workplace, and now the rules are being rewritten. Some worry that subtle assumptions about gendered communication will creep back into this medium over time, or already have. An article in the *New York Times*, entitled “He-Mails, She-Mails: Where Sender Meets Gender,”⁹ laid out some of the stereotypical differences. For example, women are thought to send longer, more rambling, and personal emails while men are more terse and to the point. Already, such framing of the differences suggests that women’s style is less valued than men’s for doing business. The concern is that, because of their style, women may get less positive response to their electronic contributions, thereby simply replicating the traditional problems of visibility and recognition in a new medium. In addition, some rules of politeness governing face-to-face communication are abridged, allowing more “flaming,” sarcasm, or simple deletion of messages altogether – practices that could deter women (and men) not comfortable with this style from participating fully and worsen prospects for gender equity.¹⁰

Survey findings and implications.

About two-thirds of the women surveyed are experiencing the first possibility: they receive greater visibility and recognition when doing virtual work. Specifically, when using online communication:

- 66% said their colleagues are more responsive;
- 65% said their ideas are more likely to be heard;
- 60% said it is easier to get a meaningful place in workplace discussions;
- and 52% said their work is more likely to be appreciated.

Overall, 58% said that their gender matters less when they use email or online collaboration tools, compared to working in traditional face-to-face settings. These perceptions should interest managers who want to maximize the contributions and realize the talents of every employee.

Productivity and Creativity

Does working virtually enhance productivity and creativity? In many organizations, one can hear ambivalence: email saves time by making it easy to stay in touch and enhances learning by allowing more people to exchange information quickly, but it also gobbles up time and diverts attention from other projects as employees handle a large daily volume of email. Interestingly, some of the factors that may influence the effectiveness of virtual work are also those that affect gender equity.

Possibility 1: Gender equity is enhanced. Enthusiastic accounts of virtual work assert that it both mitigates factors that impede productivity and reinforces factors that enhance creativity. Productivity can be impeded by pressure to put in “face time” at the office and by frequent interruptions. Virtual work gives all employees more control over when and how they work, enabling greater focus. Contributions are documented in shared online workspaces and the emphasis is on results. Spontaneous “dropping by” that interrupted concentration is replaced by sending email, even to co-workers two doors down. Managing face time and interruptions are particular burdens for women with commitments outside of work,¹¹ so lessening these demands could enhance productivity in a way that is immediately and obviously beneficial to women and ultimately to all employees and the organization.

In terms of creativity, virtual work allows a wider range of people to bring their ideas to the table. Greater time for deliberation and reflection before sharing an idea online might breed fresher and sharper ideas, allow a group to follow more threads, reduce “group think” and the tendency to leap to consensus, and thereby enhance creativity. These same factors may ease contributions from a diverse group of employees. Women and men who are uncomfortable breaking into fast-paced or aggressive discussions need no longer strain to find an opening for sharing their input.

Possibility 2: Gender equity is compromised. Less sanguine predictions about virtual work raise concerns for productivity and creativity and also suggest that the costs in these areas may be borne by women.

In some research, women have been found to refer to the content of others’ previous email messages more extensively and to answer questions more exhaustively.¹² While these practices could benefit the work group, they might re-enact, in a new medium, women doing undervalued and time-consuming relationship-building work that can hamper their sense of being productive, even if it adds value. Time-consuming emails might distract from other more central, rewarding, and creative tasks.

Survey findings and implications. A striking 84% of the women surveyed agreed that they are more productive using email and online collaboration tools, and 75% say they can do more work in less time. And are they doing creative work? Here, the survey responses diverge: 40% say they have less time for creative work, while 37% thought time for creative work was not lessened; 64% say they are more creative when using email and online collaboration tools, but 24% say they are not. Virtual work as prac-

ticed thus far may provide the *tools* for creativity but may put strains on the *time* for creativity. This distinction is essential, as indicated by other research done at the Center for Gender in Organizations.¹³ This research showed that it is time that makes the difference in creative work: time for contemplation and focused thinking, time without interruptions and unexpected demands. Furthermore, achieving these conditions of work not only enhances innovation in organizations; it helps promote work and life integration.

Work and Life Integration

Many advertisements for high technology products show workers in slippers at home checking their email while feeding the baby. But has information technology eased the balancing of work and family commitments?

Possibility 1: Gender equity is enhanced. Decoupling work from the rigid constraints of time and place may give employees – both women and men – greater flexibility in creating a life that integrates work, family, and civic commitments.¹⁴ This perspective envisions more employees telecommuting at least part of the time, as 43% of the women in our survey do. They may use virtual work to coordinate with others who also telecommute, creating a network of people with varied life commitments who are better enabled to stay in touch. In addition, the flexibility afforded by new technologies may reduce stress by allowing more seamless movement between work and home and generating greater feelings of being in control.

Possibility 2: Gender equity is compromised. An alternative view holds that the blurring of the boundaries between work and home may create greater stress. The employee who returns phone calls before breakfast, af-

ter dinner, and during commutes might be managing her workload while spending time with her family. But this balancing act may come at a cost: when work can be done any time and anywhere, it can invade all aspects of life. Many people are on the fence about this issue. They say in one breath that online work reduces stress: at least they can look at that report at midnight after the kids are asleep. But in the next breath they say that it increases stress, because of heightened expectations: they would rather not have to look at the report at midnight, but if colleagues know that they can, they will be held accountable the next morning.

Survey findings and implications.

The survey found that 68% of the women agreed that working virtually enables them to manage the boundaries between work and personal life. At the same time, 58% say that using email or online collaboration tools requires them to spend more time at their desk.

To get at the complexity of feelings on this issue, we used two separate questions, one about whether virtual work makes life more stressful, and another about whether it makes life less stressful. By separating the two questions, we allowed respondents to express diverging or ambivalent perceptions. The results were that 61% feel that working virtually makes life less stressful, and 47% feel that it makes life more stressful (including some who responded that it makes life less stressful). The 61% figure points toward a general feeling that virtual work makes life less stressful, but the overlap of responses shows that the jury is still out about the ultimate effects.

An implication for work groups that rely on virtual work is that members will have different feelings about the usefulness of these tools and about the

costs and benefits of greater reliance on email and online collaboration tools. Sensitivity to diversity and inclusiveness may require not only norms governing how people participate in any one medium but norms that allow employees to choose among different media and ways of participating, to minimize stress and enhance work and life.

Shaping Work Practices and Gender Equity

The challenge still remains: how can managers and employees create workplace practices and norms that use virtual work to enhance how the work gets done and who is included, inspired, and enabled by this way of working? We have focused on the impact of virtual work on gender equity, but this exploration suggests that gender equity – and the kinds of steps taken to achieve it – will in turn increase the effectiveness of virtual work. The canon of the Independent Committee on Women and Global Knowledge proclaims that, “Gender equity must be embraced in all facets of engineering, design, development and delivery if the new information technologies are to be fully effective.”¹⁵ A hallmark of the CGO approach to understanding gender issues in the workplace is to look at how the work itself gets done (in contrast to looking at gender-specific policies and benefits) and how changes in work practices can influence, and be influenced by, gender equity. Inclusive communication norms, managing information overload, and respecting the need to be “offline” sometimes to recharge are some examples of prac-

tices that will enhance gender equity and inspire excellence in virtual work.

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Endnotes

¹ Meyerson D. and Fletcher J.K. 2000. A Modest Manifesto for Shattering the Glass Ceiling. *Harvard Business Review*, January/February: 127-136.

² Orlikowski, W. 1992. The duality of technology: Rethinking the concept of technology in organizations. *Organization Science* (3), 3: 398-427.

³ The focus here is on gender, recognizing that gender always intersects with other identities, such as race, class, and sexual identity; though not explored explicitly in this brief piece, the implications for equity on these identity dimensions may be similar.

⁴ The survey was designed by Natalie Matus, Deborah Merrill-Sands, and Maureen Scully. We are grateful to Burt Parcels of Compaq Computer Corporation for programming the survey and tabulating the results.

⁵ Fletcher, J.K. 1999. *Disappearing Acts: Gender, Power, and Relational Practice at Work*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁶ Michaelson, G. and Pohl, M. 2001. Email-based cooperative problem-solving. In Eileen Green and Alison Adam, Eds., *Virtual gender: Technology, consumption and identity*: 28-44. New York: Routledge.

⁷ Warhol, R. 1999. The inevitable virtuality of gender: Performing femininity on an electronic bulletin board for soap opera fans.

In Mary Ann O’Farrell and Lynne Vallone, Eds., *Virtual gender: Fantasies of subjectivity and embodiment*: 91-107. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

⁸ *Ibid*.

⁹ Cohen, J. 2001. He-mails, she-mails: Where sender meets gender. *The New York Times*. May 17.

¹⁰ Susan Herring. 1996. Two variants of an electronic message schema. In Susan Herring, Ed., *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social, and cross-cultural perspectives*: 81-106. Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing. (cited in Michaelson and Pohl, op. cit.).

¹¹ Rapoport, R., Bailyn, L., Kolb, D., Fletcher, J.K. 1998. *Relinking Life & Work: Toward a Better Future*. Waltham, MA: Pegasus Communications: Special Topics, Innovations in Management Series.

¹² Michaelson and Pohl, op. cit., p. 38.

¹³ Kellogg, K. 2002. *When less is more: Exploring the relationship between employee workload and innovation potential*. CGO Insights, No. 11. Boston: Center for Gender in Organizations, Simmons School of Management.

¹⁴ Such flexibility in work conditions continues to be a privilege of middle and upper class jobs, not enjoyed by the many workers in most service sector and manufacturing jobs.

¹⁵ White, K., Regan Shade, L. and Brayton, J. 2001. Lives and livelihoods in the technological age. In Green and Adam, op. cit., p. 45.

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