GETTING ON OR GETTING BY? EMPLOYEE FLEXIBILITY AND COPING STRATEGIES FOR HOME AND WORK [1]

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Introduction

Recent concerns about the changing nature of paid employment and speculation about its impact on domestic and family life have prompted considerable and concerted social research activity in which the workplace and household have figured prominently. Over the past five years, for example, major programmes have been commissioned by the ESRC and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on the *Future of Work* and *Work and Family Life* respectively. This debate has intensified following publication of Madeleine Bunting's recent book, *Willing Slaves*, and continuing discussion over the merits of different approaches to childcare (See eg EPPE 2003).

The present project derives from the *Future of Work* programme and examines employment in protoypical new sectors of the economy, namely call centres and software, which at the time of the study were enjoying spectacular growth. At the 2001 WES, held in Nottingham, we presented some preliminary findings from this project, subsequently published in Hyman et al. (2003), which served to examine the extent and nature of spillover from work to home reported in these sectors. The intention of the current paper is to extend these findings and explore the different ways in which employees in the two sectors attempt to deal with spillover and its effects.

The analysis indicates different employee coping strategies in the two sectors, largely driven by the contrasting labour processes, and suggests a more permeable and flexible work-life boundary in the case of software. Software workers, aided by more responsive organisational provision for family-friendly policies, enjoy some flexibility in managing potential work-family conflict, although negative work-life spillover is still detectable. With call centre operators driven more obviously by cost and volume imperatives, the burden of managing work-family conflict is placed on individual employees, but without the flexibility offered generally 'higher value' software workers. This appears to result in coping strategies which lead to a more segmented work-life boundary contrary to some expectations for new forms of work and associated policy rhetoric. In particular, our interests focus on those employees with caring and domestic responsibilities, for whom the effects of spillover into work-life balance may be of especial relevance.

The Nature of Work-to-life Spillover in New Forms of Work

The work-life boundary can be conceptualised either as a rigid separation between the two domains or a more permeable interface where flexibility is the key to managing potential overlap. The former tends to be associated with older traditional patterns of work. For instance, 'segmentation' of work from nonwork life implies little or no interaction and was associated primarily with blue-collar workers who were thought to 'disengage' from work during nonwork time (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Piotrkowski, 1979). Similarly, industrial male workers were thought to exemplify a 'compensation'

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approach, whereby involvement in one domain was increased to compensate for what was absent in the other (Staines, 1980).

Newer forms of work, such as that of software development and other professions, may by virtue of work design allow employees greater flexibility between work and life. More contemporary models (see for example Clark's (2000) work-family border theory) focus on this boundary flexibility and how individuals enact boundaries when given some control over its management. Accommodating employer family-friendly policies can be viewed as contributing to this personal control and are usually thought to have positive outcomes for employees. Thus, studies are concerned with minimising negative 'spillover' between domains (e.g., Crouter, 1984; Kirchmeyer, 1992) or, more instrumentally, identifying approaches where one sphere can lead to further benefits in the other; e.g., lifestyle/fitness benefits (Friedman, Christiansen, and DeGroot, 1998). Too much job flexibility, however, as in the case of tacit teleworking, may simply add to work-family conflict, and in such cases, separation between work and nonwork life may be desirable (Kossek, 2003).

Spillover in Call Centres and Software

The focus of the present paper is the degree of employee flexibility in two contrasting working environments which exemplify new forms of work and the extent to which this is used to cope with negative spillover from work to nonwork life. The call centre's integration of computer and telephonic technologies and the requirement to be engaged continuously in call-handling activities generates a unique work design. Most call centre operations prioritise call volumes, continuity of service, and measurement of operator performance, frequently combined with monitoring to ensure qualitative standards are maintained (Bain, et al., 2002; Taylor, et al., 2002). This environment has had identifiable effects on physical and psychological wellbeing (HELA, 2001; Taylor, et al., 2002), especially where the work becomes more repetitive and intense (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Rose, 2002). In general, lack of perceived control and high job demands have been shown to increase psychological strain (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). In call centres specifically, lower control and short call cycle times have been associated with higher anxiety and depression, lower job satisfaction, lower general mental health, and employee withdrawal (Deery, et al., 2002; Holman, 2002). Deery, et al. (2002) showed the generally negative effect of job and work setting on emotional exhaustion - the first stage of emotional burnout – linking emotional exhaustion with repetitive tasks, high workload and difficult customer interactions.

Software workers, by contrast, are often depicted as the ideal type 'knowledge worker' (Ackroyd, et al., 2000; Barrett, 2001; Scarborough, 1999).

> [They] engage in knowledge exchange as the currency of trade and pursue intellectual and technical challenges. ……They also demand autonomy, abide by a set of ethics, expect to live up to professional standards set by collegial or occupational groups, and tend to have more invested in their skills, abilities and education than they do in their employment contract with their organisation. They prefer to identify with other high-tech professional workers who are engaged in similarly important, challenging tasks (von Glinow, 1988, p 15).

Although in reality software work can range from the routine to cutting edge (Barrett, 2001), it is generally conducted in a non-bureaucratic working environment with minimal direct supervision (Alvesson, 1995; Kunda, 1992). The 'new professional' status afforded software employees brings with it more flexibility to control working patterns (Lee, Hourquet and MacDermid, 2002), and in return, employees are prepared to work long hours and show high commitment to the job. This has been described in terms of a social exchange based on "mutuality and fairness" (Alvesson, 2000). Our own research (Scholarios & Marks, 2004) extended this concept of mutuality to the work-life boundary showing that a more accommodating approach to nonwork commitments of software employees had significant positive effects on attitudes toward the organization.

Software workers thus are offered greater control over their working lives than call centre operators, both in terms of the flexible working arrangements offered by employers, eager to hold on to valuable but highly marketable employees, and in terms of the responsible autonomy inherent in the software labour process (Barrett, forthcoming). This flexibility is a valuable vehicle for managing potential work-family conflict, and indeed high-tech knowledge workers who are more likely to have access to teleworking technologies, are often viewed as prototypical in terms of having the means to achieve work-life balance. On the other hand, the pressure to work after hours may act as a more insidious form of cultural control (Kunda, 1992; Perlow, 1998, 2001) resulting in the extension of the working day at home and greater difficulty in separating work and nonwork life (see for example Bentley & Yoong, 2000). The growth of tacit or informal teleworking (working unpaid overtime after formal working hours) has been found to increase work-family conflict rather than enhance work flexibility (Gray, et al. 1993; Duxbury, et al. 1992).

Our earlier paper (Hyman, et al. 2003) provided evidence of these differences between the labour process and pattern of spillover in the call centre and software sectors. For both sectors, we identified tangible and intangible dimensions of spillover from work to home life, but for call centre workers, tangible expressions of spillover into home life occurred largely through the complexities and subordinated uncertainties of the shift and rota systems in operation, combined with (mostly) unpaid overtime. Over one quarter of workers claimed to work frequently or always on night shifts and over a half at weekends. Nearly one-third was doing some unpaid overtime. These factors are linked with the less tangible intrusions into domestic life of high levels of occupationally induced stress, exhaustion, health worries and feelings of social isolation. About three-quarters of call centre operatives in the sample were women, a significantly greater proportion of whom in call centres had caring responsibilities. Managers and team leaders may face additional spillover through bringing work home and less visibly, through continuing to worry about work issues away from the workplace. Over a quarter of call centre respondents claimed to bring work home on an occasional basis (with another 4.2 percent frequently).

Our study also confirmed that software workers enjoy more autonomy at work and spillover is experienced differently than in call centres. Three quarters of software workers were men and the mobile nature of software work means they are more able and likely than call centre staff to bring work home, to work long and unsocial hours to complete assignments, to be on-call and to experience difficulty in "switching off" work problems away from the workplace. Very few software workers work shifts, but paid, and unpaid overtime especially, was common. Over two-thirds of software workers do unpaid overtime at least occasionally, with 15 percent of these doing at least an additional ten hours weekly. Over half take work home at least occasionally with 12.4 percent claiming to do so regularly.

Both sets of workers reported high levels of fatigue with about 40 percent of both expressing regular after–work exhaustion. Experienced stress was higher among call centre employees with about 45 percent claiming to be stressed, compared with a third of software respondents. Perceived levels of influence by workers over family-friendly work arrangements was not high in either call centres or software despite the greater levels of autonomy enjoyed by workers in the latter sector.

Table 1, drawn from Hyman et al. (2003), summarises the degree of influence and work-life spillover for the same sample of call centre and software workers and confirms the generally lower degrees of control over work-life issues (e.g., hours and shifts, company support for personal demands), and higher frequency of time-based spillover and stress experienced in call centres. The only reversal in this pattern was that software workers were significantly more likely to think about their jobs after they left work. The analysis also showed that these feelings of stress and exhaustion were related to work demands for both groups of workers, especially managers and those with dependents. In call centres, increased weekend working was a significant predictor of adverse effects on health (item 6); the need to take work home, which was highest amongst team leaders and managers, was related to stress and exhaustion. For software workers, unpaid overtime and taking work home consistently lead to greater negative spillover on all variables.

Insert Table 1 here

Resolving Work-Life Tensions

With growing diversity in the work-force, expressed specifically in growing numbers of economically active women with caring responsibilities, these findings point to considerable potential tensions between home and work. These can lead to problems of economic competitiveness for companies and of domestic disruption for employees and their families (Dex 1999; Dex and Smith 2002). At the time of the field-work, belated recognition of these issues by the British government found expression in the Employment Relations Act 1999, which offered marginally improved maternity rights and for the first time, voluntary though unpaid rights to parental leave and time off for dependents. The Government also encouraged (though not required) employers to offer greater flexibility to employees. In consequence, time flexible prescriptions (eg flexi-time; part-time working) have been offered by employers as the most common prescriptive approach to provide balance between work and life for their employees (Cully et al 1999; Hogarth et al 2000; Dex and Smith 2002).

However, problems of coping with work and domestic responsibilities remain especially acute for employees with caring responsibilities and especially women. Some studies have found parental demands to mean less time and energy to devote to the organisation and time-based work-family conflict and its consequences are believed to be most salient for women (see for example Major, Klein and Ehrhart, 2002). Full-time female employees are still found to have greater concerns about childcare and housework (Schwartz & Scott, 2000) and the greatest desire for flexible scheduling (Collins, 1993). Work-family conflict for women is also likely to be more acute given the tendency towards segregation of women into low skill, low paid jobs – a feature which has been observed in both the employment sectors which are the focus of this paper (see Belt (2002) on call centres and Grey and Healy (2004) on female IT contractors).

Employers' concern with employee recruitment and retention and government initiatives to attract (single) mothers into paid employment ensure that these issues are regularly debated in both management and policy circles where there is some satisfaction that the common-sense and essentially voluntaristic approaches of responsible employers sensitive to the "business case" for organisational flexibility combined with progressive family-care polices adopted by the government are successfully confronting the problems. Employers have little enthusiasm for calls for greater codification of employee policies which restrict working time, putting emphasis on liberal doctrines of employee choice (to work long hours) and market freedom (eg Reeves 2001). Nevertheless, as noted by Lambert in an early paper, the "number and timing of hours worked ... is particularly important in determining the extent to which workers are able to participate in and enjoy the family" (1990:240).

Under concerted employment and domestic pressures, compounded by high-cost institutional child and family-care, employees and households face the need to develop strategies to manage the two domains of work and home. Despite the depth of research conducted into work and domesticity, there has been little recent attempt to examine the ways in which household or family strategies for managing work-life boundaries are developed, negotiated and sustained in the contemporary workplace. There is some evidence that effective coping responses to work-family conflict can eliminate or reduce both job-related and home distress (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). A useful categorisation of coping strategies at the level of individual employees is provided by Rotondo et al (2003) who distinguish between behavioral or cognitive responses and between social and solitary strategies. Thus, direct action, proactive help-seeking from others, positive thinking and avoidance or resignation have all been identified as possible coping responses of individuals to work-life conflict. Another approach has been to examine the boundary between work and home life in terms of the social processes used to negotiate sharing and reallocation of time (Thorne 2001). Coping strategies, therefore, depend on changing divisions of domestic labour, trade offs between time and economic stability, and patterns of reciprocity and obligation at work and home (Lewis and Cooper 1999).

Evidence from the present study suggests that spillover problems are more resilient and potential coping resolutions rather more complex than suggested by the naive business-defined resolutions of

temporal adjustments to working conditions. Based on surveys and case studies conducted in four call centres and five software houses, the paper examines the following research questions:

(i) The extent to which and ways that different kinds of organisation can help or hinder employees to balance their work and domestic lives
(ii) In situations where employer expectations for employee flexibility are high or organisational provision is low, to understand the different strategies employees adopt in order to meet multiple demands and uncertainties placed upon them.
(iii) A comparison of coping strategies adopted between two sets of employees with distinctive patterns of labour process.

Method

Case studies

The data on which this study is based was drawn from four Scottish call centres and five software companies collected between May 1999 and December 2001 (see Table 2). The selection of case studies was intended to be representative of the profile of each sector in Scotland taking into account city/non-city location, establishment/workplace size and product/service. The call centre sample focused on large workplaces (200 or more) representing four industries – financial services (M), outsourced business services (T), telecomms/entertainment (E) and tourism and leisure (H). Two workplaces were located in the city centre (M and T) and two in non-city locations (E and H).

The software houses were substantially smaller workplaces, consisting of one medium-sized Scottish-owned company (Omega), three small Scottish-owned independent concerns (Pi, Lamda and Gamma), and a software centre which was part of a large national (UK) telecommunications company (Beta). Each company operated within different primary business markets, from servicing internal clients in a telecommunications company, to providing software products for public sector clients, legal firms, or insurance companies, and represented a range of employment contexts, including applications development, database integration, resourcing, testing, and client support (e.g. training, maintenance).

Insert Table 2 here

Data collection

Background data on company history, operating procedures, employment policies and staff characteristics was gathered as part of an intensive process of case study analysis and observation involving teams of researchers in each company for approximately four months. This was followed by the distribution of an employee attitude questionnaire and interviews.

Questionnaire

Distribution and collection of the questionnaire was conducted over several weeks to account for different shifts, sick/holiday leave, and variable work patterns. A total of 1476 questionnaires were distributed across the four call centres and 491 across the five software companies. The response rates were 60% and 69% for call centres and software firms, respectively, although one software firm Gamma had an unusually low response rate of 25% because a significant proportion of employees worked on clients' premises and were harder to contact. Of the total 1183 surveys returned, the present study used 1131, excluding those who reported that they were in a support role within either the call centres or software organisations.

The questionnaire (also described in Hyman, et al., 2003) provided measures of several employee characteristics and home demands, including gender; age (represented by an ordinal scale where 1='16-20', 2='21-30', 3='31-40', 4='41-50', 5='over 50'); living arrangements (alone, with partner

and/or children, parents or flatmates); dependents or care responsibilities; primary responsibility for care (others, shared or self); care provision (parents, relatives, neighbours, friends, local authority or private provision); whether the employee was on a permanent or temporary contract; and whether the employee was a manager/team leader. Five items relating to degree of responsibility for cooking; shopping; cleaning; washing/ironing; and looking after small children/sick relative also were included, scaled from '1' always someone else's responsibility' to 5 'always my responsibility'. Finally, employees were asked to indicate their contribution to household income based on five categories ranging from 'none or almost none' to 'all or almost all'.

As discussed in Hyman, et al. (2003), the majority of the call centre respondent sample was female (70%). The vast majority described themselves as customer service agents with no management responsibility; 13% overall and a slightly greater and significant proportion of men (18%) were team leaders or managers ($?^2(1)=6.73$, $p<.01$). Of all call centre workers, 236 (29%) claimed that they had dependents and 209 (26%) that they had care responsibilities.

The gender, age and responsibility profile of software workers was significantly different to that of call centre employees. Males were the majority across these software firms (74%) and the age profile was older, with half the sample over 30. Consistent with the more balanced age profile in software firms, a slightly higher percentage in these companies (32%) had care responsibilities, although as indicated in Table 3, this burden was significantly more likely to be found amongst the female software workers ($?^2(1)=6.13$, $p<.05$). A higher proportion in the software companies described themselves as having a management role, either team leader, project manager or senior management, which is reflective of the nature of the work. Only 12% described themselves as contractors.

Interviews

Exploratory interviews took the form of work observation and focussed discussions with key groups of informants (management, inductees, trade union representatives) and provided initial discussion of the relationship between work and non-work life. Between 17 and 26 semi-structured interviews in each company also were conducted with a representative group of employees selected according to gender, age, job type and job/organisational level. These interviews (coded I in the data analysis) explored three themes in greater depth: (a) previous work and educational history and how it led to their present job (b) experiences of working in the present company (content and control of work, commitment to company/peers/job, customer service, social relations) and (c) work-life linkages and the future (perceptions of job risk/uncertainty, relative importance of work, perceptions of society/class/status). A subset of these employees in four case studies (M, E, Beta and Gamma) was contacted again for home-based interviews which explored work-life linkages in greater depth. These are indicated by the code HI in the data analysis.

In the call centre case studies, a total of 251 exploratory interviews or observation notes were conducted or produced; 77 semi-structured in-depth workplace interviews; 14 semi-structured in-depth home-based interviews; and three union interviews. In the software case studies, the research produced 84 exploratory interviews; 75 workplace interviews; and 17 home-based interviews.

Findings

(1) Organisational Provision

In terms of working hours and provision of organisational flexibility, there were notable differences between the call centres and software houses.

Call Centres

Employer provision for flexible working in the four call centres was perceived to be more of an obstacle to employees in organising their domestic affairs than a help. Though practice varied in the formal terms and provisions of working hours for their employees, a common characteristic was expansion of working time and a management expectation that operatives should be flexible in order to staff required shifts. Hence at M, during the research period, staff core hours were expanded from 8 am to 9pm to 7am to 11 pm for new staff. Saturdays were included as regular shifts. Existing staff worked 140 hours over a four-week period, with maximum eight-hour shifts, though shifts could be adjusted either way by a maximum of two hours to "meet business needs". New staff had revised contracts with maximum ten hour shifts and management had discretion to vary start and finish times by up to two hours with 48 hours' notice. For all staff, there was a requirement to work additional hours, again in accordance with "business needs".

Shifts at the outsourcing company T varied according to requirements of individual accounts, so that hours could fluctuate according to which account an employee was located and transfer between accounts was both expected and practiced. At E contracts stated that staff were required to work a flexible 24-hour shift pattern over a seven day period and that shifts could be changed by management with "reasonable notice". Shift patterns at this company could be complex. Employees were hired at H on the basis of a 37.5 hour week over a five day period which "may contain a provision for Sunday working". In addition, in some areas of the call centre, a continuous four days on – four days off 12-hour shift system was implemented.

In all four call centres intrusive effects of shift systems were reported. An operative at E, with hopes of becoming a social worker, complained that:

'Since I've moved up here [to E], I would like to go back to night school, but the shifts do have an impact on that, definitely, and it makes it very difficult ... the shifts at work would make it almost impossible to do any sort of academic studies'. [E-HI-03]

In M, one operative complained that:

'I hate getting up in the morning to come to work, I really do, because I just think "you are coming in and you are going to get hit with something else that's changed and you are expected to...". They leave you messages on the phones saying "next week on Monday we are doing 8-5 shift, we are getting our lunch at 11 o'clock in the morning. This is a new thing they are doing, sending you to lunch at 11. Canteen isn't even open at 11... They have sent a message can we stay and do overtime and take half an hour for our lunch. Just leave a bit of paper on your desk...They want you to take half an hour for your lunch and stay and do a couple of hours overtime. That would be a 12 hour day... They want us to be 100% flexible but they are not flexible in return'. [M-I-13]

Shortness of notice was also a problem at H:

'We get our shifts out once a month and you usually get it like two days before they are about to start the next month which is pretty annoying ... because you don't know what shift you are working. That's the only downside of day shift. You can't sort of plan your life, you know'. [H-I-23]

Family concerns were expressed by more than one employee. So, for example at E one operator complained:

'I agreed to work constant backshift, why I've no idea, but I've been on secondment for two months to do this constant backshift ... and they pay me quite a lot more money to do it but the money's not enough, because my son was saying to me the other day, a couple of weeks ago, Daddy, I don't like these shifts you are working because I never see you...' [E-I-04]

Interference with family life was also expressed by another employee at M:

'[the shift pattern] gets in the way quite a lot. It's not very flexible at the moment. Just really because I've moved into the new team and find I'm doing an awful lot of late shifts like 1-9. Which really I don't find it very convenient because I get the bus now and I don't get home until after 10 at night ... I don't like my mum to be alone until that time herself ... I would just rather work 9-5 but you can't always have that and working the weekends is a bit inconvenient as well'. [M-HI-3]

From the above narratives we can see that formally at least, the company work regimes which combine different shifts, evening and weekend working coupled with lack of notice of changes owing to holidays, staff absence and high labour turnover, can present practical and emotional problems for call centre staff with caring responsibilities.

Expectations of unpaid overtime was also pervasive in call centres and though not mentioned as being as disruptive as shifts, can still lead to problems for staff. When asked for confirmation whether people working beyond their contractual working time cannot claim time back in lieu, one respondent replied:

'That's right. Sometimes I have been an hour and a half over my time. I have still to get home. I have kids to look after'. [H-I-29]

Software

In the three software houses, there was evidence of considerably more variability and reciprocal flexibility in work arrangements. This possibly reflected both the heavy demand and limited supply for software specialists at the time of the research and the nature of the work, typified by project deadlines and speedy responses to client system emergencies. At Omega, actual working hours operated in a "peaks and troughs" system, with longer hours expected to meet project deadlines or to iron out operating problems. Part-time working to conform with family demands was encouraged, and a number of women voluntarily worked on a part-time basis. Opportunities for buying and selling holidays, again aimed at working parents, but open to all staff, was also introduced in the company. Beta operated a more formalised standard 42 hour week, inclusive of meal breaks. Together with the union the company had agreed formal flexitime systems, parental and dependant leave. Workshops on managing work and family were provided and the company was supportive toward teleworking arrangements. A system of shift and unsocial hours allowances was also in operation. Pi employed staff on a standard five day 37.5 hour contractual basis, though flexibility was expected when required. A flexitime system had been introduced following a staff survey. No overtime was paid, but an "on-call" allowance was payable. About four-fifths of software survey respondents reported that they were either moderately or extremely satisfied with intrinsic aspects of the job and hours of work and shifts.

From interviews with software workers at the three companies, the main distinguishing disruptive features were the long or uneven hours; expectation to undertake work when necessary; and the need to be on call for at least some engineers. One Beta newcomer pointed out that while electrical engineers tended to be nine-to five people, software engineers seemed to be working all the time. Initially she felt embarrassed and irritated when, at about 5pm, she was the only one who wanted to leave the office (B-2000-06-12-CB-1). A Pi engineer commented that "he certainly has no 9-5 job"

and often has to travel to client sites, leaving for an early morning flight and returning late. Customer support requires "24-hours a day, seven days a week and 365 days a year" operation at Beta and support services are guaranteed around the clock, using a rota system of on-calls. There may be as many as 20-40 call-outs per month. Employees usually take laptops and pagers home with them for use on call-outs and emergencies.

When asked whether work interferes with private life, a Beta engineer pointed out that:

'Probably the only time it does is at the moment. I'm on call 24 hours, so I can get paged in the middle of the night and I have to get up and work ... but that will finish in June which is just nice timing for us with our family starting ... [B-HI-04].

Another engineer at Beta recalled the disruptive effect of call outs on his marriage:

'I was married for a brief period, eleven months it lasted, and yes, it (call-out) had a fairly notable effect on the marriage at the time' [B-HI-10].

More positively, in all software houses, part-time working was readily accommodated and staff often had discretion, within the parameters of their projects, to work informal flexible hours or if practicable to work at home:

'I think Beta are actually quite good at being flexible and allowing people to work part-time if they want to. I know it's certainly not a problem for returning mothers to actually dictate pretty much the hours they want to work'. [B-HI-08].

At Pi, one engineer commented:

'There is a sort of unofficial flexitime. As long as you make the 37 hours, it's usually alright, although people don't tend to start too late. We have 90 minute lunches and nobody says anything. I decide when I take my lunch'

There are limits, however:

'There's one guy who wanted to work 7.30-3.30 but they told him they couldn't really work around those hours. That was also partly to do with supervision though. There was a complaint that he spent the first hour just surfing the net'. [P-I-03]

(2) Coping with the demands

From the above accounts, distinguishing factors derived from technology and labour market between the sectors were plainly apparent. Software workers enjoyed more autonomy over hours and patterns of work, with voluntary and temporary part-time options and teleworking available. The majority of software employees were men and long hours were treated by them more as a physical challenge rather than domestic issue. In call centres, the majority of employees were women, often with direct caring responsibilities. Employees in call centres were subject to stringent management and organisational controls, which meant that balancing domestic with work obligations was a more sensitive and complex process.

Call Centre Coping Strategies - Workplace

Coping strategies can be classed as either work or domestically initiated. Work –based approaches in call centres enjoyed little company support and in consequence tended to be fragmentary and informal. There was some informal shift swapping among operatives, though finding a "partner" at weekends could be difficult, as indicated by an operative at E, where a formal process for nominating individual shifts was not recognised by the company:

‘ You would have to get somebody that was maybe off that Saturday and if you were working that Saturday they could swap with you. So you have to put out an email or put in a shift swap form and see if anybody is willing to do it for you, which is quite difficult because there is not a lot of work 9-1’. [E-HI-02]

A more formal workplace approach could be job sharing, though little evidence for this practice was found in any of the four call centres. Where it had been attempted, it has been either through the direct initiative of individual members of staff, or encouraged by management in order to cover awkward shifts, as explained by the same E operative:

‘...it’s job sharing that suits them ... If you are prepared to work 1-9 they will give you job share. One of the girls who was in our team she applied, she’s got two children and her husband’s got two children from a previous marriage, so at the weekend she has four children and it was getting really difficult for her to arrange child-minding and everything, so she’s asked to do the job sharing ... and she was told yes they would give her job sharing but she had to work a constant 1-9 shift’.

Other, more individual, approaches to deal with work pressures include informal absence. One (male) team leader at E, required to work on regular Saturdays, which clashed with football, explained that:

‘I just go. I presume that my manager knows that I just go to the football ... I’ll maybe go in in the morning and just go to the football in the afternoon’. [E-HI-04]

Another approach is simply to refuse to take on extra responsibilities. After being told by his son that he never sees his father, the operator at E refused to continue with the better paid but disruptive backshift, despite the pleas of his manager that he should continue. There were no instances in any of the interviews of staff working at home instead of working in the office, a not unexpected finding for call centres. There was evidence, however, of team leaders and more senior managers taking extra work home after their regular work hours.

Software Coping Strategies – Workplace

As we saw above, longer-term workplace coping strategies include part-time working and for more short-term demands, flexible work-patterns, involving either home working or manipulating working hours were utilised and accepted by management in return for employee commitment to work flexibly when required.

Hence at Pi, one engineer pointed out:

‘You are only working with a handful of prospects at a time ... and so you can pretty much choose when you want to see them. Occasionally they will rigidly set times or dates but you have reasonable control over when you want to see people’ (P-I-08)

An engineer at Beta pointed out that:

‘I guess the phrase I would use is you are responsible for your own hours ... There is nobody looking over your shoulder ... so you are trusted to work your own hours and I think that is probably better’ (B-I-08)

Another Beta engineer also demonstrated the choices available to him when asked how he uses the home terminal provided by the company:

‘My sons use it to log onto the internet. I log on now and again to check my email. I work from home now and again depending on the circumstances. I use it to suit me. I don’t want to work from home full time, because it suits me coming in here’ (B-I-02)

At Omega, similar flexibility was offered:

‘I am contracted 35 hours but actually their other permanent staff, or some of them work part-time, but their full week is 37 ¼ I think it is. When I started with them I said that I couldn’t – you see I live in Dunblane and I have a family, so 35 hours was all that I could manage to work so that’s what I’m contracted to do’

Call Centre Coping Strategies – Home

With little scope or encouragement for workplace support for coping with domestic responsibilities, most call-centre employees with dependents relied on a combination of domestic strategies involving the immediate household, support from neighbours and extended family, and more rarely institutional arrangements, eg for childcare. Male partners, where part of the household, provided some support:

‘There is an equal share. Basically my husband and I are both sort of taxi drivers for the kids now ... we both share whatever’s to be done in the house. The mornings that I’m off will normally be my sort of housework mornings. G does all the ironing. I never ever iron’ (M-HI-18)

Nevertheless, the most common and consistently applied coping strategy for respondents with care responsibilities was reliance upon extended family, with about half of survey respondents pointing to family as a source of care provision (see Hyman, et al. (2003) for full results). The interviews confirm the key role of the mother of the employee within the family network:

‘Well, my Mum takes the kids for me. She knows when he (partner) is on standby ... so normally she will say bring them down the night before to save them getting up in the morning’. [E-HI-02]

The same employee also confirmed that ‘Mum’ takes the children if there is an in-service day at school or a similar event, but also confirmed her husband’s role in taking the children to school in the morning, though ‘that’s one of the things that annoys me in winter because [her son] is really in school at about 8.25, so he is there quite a bit before the school goes in but...’ [E-HI-02]

A call centre sales assistant at M made a similar point:

‘My Mum gets the girls three days a week for me and watches them from 3 till 5 until my husband comes in from work. My mother in law gets them two days a week. So the two grans are widows, live on their own and it means that they enjoy...’ [M-HI-18]

Very little use was made by interviewees of institutional childcare which was often rejected on the grounds of expense, or less often, because childcare times did not conform with shift working times. When used, it tended to be adopted as a temporary solution to immediate childcaring problems.

Software Coping Strategies – Home

Compared with call centre employees, there were two key differences for software workers. Firstly, the availability of workplace provision, formal or informal, meant that less reliance was needed in seeking domestic remedies. Second, three-quarters of software workers were men, who unlike the women in the call centres, rarely, if ever raised the question of coping with domestic chores or emergency caring demands. Children, where they existed, were scarcely mentioned by (male) respondents. For women, however, the second shift (Hochschild, 1989) was in evidence:

‘I seem to have to do most of the washing up and the ironing, all these household chores ... when he was working in Edinburgh I did more chores but then not that much more than I do now. It is certainly difficult even if you consider yourself quite liberated. I think the onus is always back on the women if the man isn’t going to do it then the woman is going to do it. The buck stops here if you like’ (O-I-09)

A part-time engineer at Omega described the reality of her ostensibly attractive long weekends:

‘I work four days a week. Long weekends. Friday morning is taken up with the weekly shopping, children home from school at midday and I look after other people’s children on a Friday afternoon so it’s not a day off as such.’

Insert Table 3 here

Discussion: Different Coping Strategies

The central question for this exploratory paper has concerned the ways in which coping strategies are identified and developed by employees to deal with work-home tensions in two different contemporary employment settings. It was initially established that negative spillover from work to home was evident in both tangible (eg shiftworking) and intangible (eg exhaustion) ways. Our first substantive finding was that spillover can be expressed differently according to sectoral or organisational context, where the nature of the product and associated labour processes are key factors. Call centres were typified by overt organisational controls complemented by rigid (though expanding) shift systems and rotas, often involving evening and weekend working. The dominant imperative was to staff the phones to ensure that an efficient service to clients was maintained, sometimes on a 24 hour basis. Notwithstanding employer policy commitment to family-friendly employment, responses from employees indicated that these operational demands were accompanied with few practical concessions from their companies to employees’ domestic demands or pressures. There was little obvious permeability between work and home: they were treated as two separate (and potentially competing) domains, akin to segmentation perspectives identified above which treat ‘work and home as separate spheres of life, either because they are inherently independent or because workers actively keep them that way’ (Lambert 1990: 240). Respondents infrequently chose to socialise with work colleagues out of work and in interviews, frequent reference was made to attempts at “shutting off” from the call centre on leaving work, though in practice, the intrusive nature of call centre work often made this difficult to achieve. Interestingly, though three-quarters of call-centre workers in our sample were women, many with caring responsibilities, the lack of practical organisational support seems to run counter to previous American studies which suggests a positive association between proportions of women workers and employer application of family-friendly policies (Kossek 2003).

Conversely, software production does not impose the same spatial and temporal demands on labour. Whilst teamworking is common and project deadlines need to be met, the execution of knowledge work undertaken in these enterprises was far less constrained than in call centres. For software workers, the work environment was more open to manipulation and boundary flexibility by employees. Though spillover was evident in long and sometimes intense working hours, work regimes were flexible. Further, the software market was growing at about 15% annually at the time of the study and markets for software workers were tight. Flexible working arrangements such as part-time working were formally accommodated by employers and working times could often be informally adjusted by employees to comply with domestic demands.

From these observations, it is apparent that formal and informal organisational accommodation to domestic demands differs according to sectoral and product requirements. For the employees, this has obvious implications. In call centres, where work is routine and largely unskilled, we found little evidence of practical organisational support. Call centre work is generally low paid, low status with few opportunities for development or career advancement (Belt 2002; Belt et al 1999) and of course, the majority of employees in the present study were women, as is commonly the case in call or contact centres. Employees were expected to work shifts, often on a rotating basis and sometimes changed at short notice. Whilst individual supervisors may be sympathetic to employees’ domestic demands, the nature of the work and their subordinated status provided employees with little control over work and domestic boundaries, and coupled with high labour turnover, this ensured that there

was little organisational scope for employees to construct or manipulate work-derived strategies to combat spillover. For employees with caring responsibilities in particular, this lack of organisational scope required the development of coping mechanisms as best they could from their domestic base. In contrast, the majority of software workers were men, whose professional status was reflected in their pay, work autonomy and status, assisted by working in an expanding and developing sector. These workers were able to exercise a measure of control over these boundaries, both through formal provision in terms of part-time contracts and informally, through adjusting working times.

A related factor in the development of coping strategies was clearly gender. From both surveys and interviews it is clear that irrespective of sector or working hours, women take responsibility for more routine domestic responsibilities (see Table 3) and hence work spillover compounds the demands placed upon them. Women in call centres, with little employer support, often had to rely upon a combination of family and social networks to deal with child-care, which usually excluded institutional provision on grounds of cost. Men in the software companies had fewer difficulties in organising their work-home environment, both because of the informal and formal organisational mechanisms available to them but also because of supportive domestic circumstances in many cases. Despite these more favourable work contexts, the situation for women in organising their domestic lives could be problematic. We saw from interviews above, that shortened paid working weeks were often burdened with additional caring responsibilities. Further, the prospects for part-time women in a male-dominated occupation were not always favourable as indicated in the following comment from a woman software engineer, working part-time at Beta following maternity leave:

'I don't feel disadvantaged in my team. I feel it is a disadvantage within the company. If you wanted promotion, I don't think it would be looked upon favourably. Not at all' (B-I-14).

Conclusions

We have found that spillover, in whatever form it takes, is a consistent outcome of work in the contemporary economy. This presents particular problems for employees with caring responsiblities, and especially women, whose majority presence in call centres presents specific difficulties owing to the lack of worker control between work and domestic boundaries. The work-life boundaries of software workers, though these can experience long hours and intense working conditions, were clearly more permeable. From these findings, it is clear that establishing balance between the demands of work and home can be complex and contested, especially for those women with little work autonomy or status.

The study was undertaken at a time when potential tensions between work and domestic demands were being recognised and receiving policy, employer and media attention, though there was little evidence from the study that these pressures had impacted noticeably upon the practices of the employers. Software managers accommodated part-time and flexible work because they had no wish to lose valuable and difficult to replace employees. Call centre employers were not facing these constraints and could tolerate high staff attrition levels. These employees had little opportunity to adjust their working lives (indeed their working lives were being adjusted around them), and so were faced either with leaving or organising their domestic arrangements to accommodate work.

The portents for the future look increasingly uncertain. One of the dominant features of both sectors has been the rapidity of organisational change, expressed in almost continuous restructuring of working arrangements and times, the usual outcome of which has been demands for increased worker commitment to their employment and organisation. Whilst labour market conditions serve to offer high status or scarce employees some control over the dimensions of their working lives, there is little evidence from this or other studies that the UK's long hours working culture is diminishing. Despite improved legislation allowing parents to request flexible working from their employers, it seems that the most important factor to determine work-life boundaries will continue to derive from production demands and management interpretation of these demands.

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TABLE 1
Comparison of Mean Ratings for Work-life Variables: Call Centres and Software

	Question [a]	*Call centres (N=739)* *Mean*	*S.D.*	*Software (N=262)* *Mean*	*S.D*	*t*	*Sig.*
1	Influence over hours/shifts	2.00	1.10	2.49	.99	6.35	.000
2	My immediate boss is quite sympathetic about personal matters	3.78	.99	4.07	.77	4.85	.000
3	It is hard to get time off during work to take care of personal or family matters	2.75	1.07	1.94	.78	12.85	.000
4	To get ahead in X employees are expected to put their jobs before family	3.00	1.17	2.56	1.02	5.11	.000
5	Influence over family friendly arrangements	2.17	1.04	2.63	.96	6.26	.000
6	My job has tended to adversely affect my health	2.07	.80	2.05	.77	.41	.684
7	After I've left work I continue to think about my job	2.21	.78	2.61	.73	7.35	.000
8	I feel exhausted after work	2.41	.74	2.46	.63	1.01	.313
9	Problems associated with work keep me awake at night	1.69	.77	1.78	.71	1.71	.092
10	My job prevents me from spending enough time with my family/partner	1.96	.86	1.87	.78	1.39	.164
11	My work keeps me from spending the time I would like with my friends	1.98	.85	1.71	.76	4.53	.000
12	Frequency with which I feel stressed in my job	3.19	.82	3.02	.80	2.76	.006

Source Adapted from Hyman, et al. (2003)
Notes [a] Items 1-5 were measured on a five point rating scale: 1 'Strongly Disagree', 2 'Disagree', 3 'Neither Agree nor Disagree', 4 'Agree', 5 'Strongly Agree'; items 6-12 represent strain, behavioural and time effects of work on nonwork life and were measured on a four point rating scale: 1 'Never', 2 'Occasionally', 3 'Quite often', 4 'All of the time'.

TABLE 2
Profile of case studies

Case Study	Location	Sector	Services Provided	Year Opened	Workforce Size	Questionnaire Respondents N(% within sector)
			Call centres			
M	City	Financial Services	Sales, customer service	1995	170	98 (12%)
T	City	Various/Outsourcer	Customer service, sales, IT/ technical support, telemarketing	1998	320-400	236 (27%)
	Non-city	Telecomms/Entertainment	Customer service, sales, transfers	1998	530	254 (31%)
E						
H	Non-city	Holidays/Travel	Sales, enquiries, some customer service	1997	340	249 (30%)
						Total - 8277
			Software			
Beta	City	Telecomms; internal clients	Bespoke telephone operations; robotic tools; database integration; financial systems	Former public sector utility; software centre restructured 1999	275	112 (37%)
Omega	City	Public sector, health services, financial services	Applications development, resourcing, testing, client support; AS400 technology	1985	248	122 (40%)
Gamma	Non-city	Database users, initially manufacturing but recently financial and business services	Systems integration of front and end operations; bespoke CRM systems; subcontractor linking major platforms for clients	1986	150	18 (6%)
Pi	City	Law firms	Legal and business software development, testing, support, training and maintenance.	1977/1999	50	38 (12%)
Lamda	Non-city	Insurance; IT multinationals	Health and safety recording software	1996 (bankrupt 2002)	20	14 (4%)
						Total = 304

TABLE 3

Call Centre and Software Respondent Home Demands

	Call centres						*Software*					
	Men		*Women*				*Men*		*Women*			
	N	*%*	*N*	*%*	*Chi2*	*Sig.*	*N*	*%*	*N*	*%*	*Chi2*	*Sig.*
Has dependents	58	25	178	32	4.06	.026	75	34	29	38	.58	.307
Has care responsibilities	52	23	157	29	3.88	.144	48	27	27	36	6.13	.047
Contributes more than half/all to household income	103	45	166	30	14.95	.026	175	80	35	46	30.74	.000
Prime responsibility in household for:												
Children	58	22	163	30	5.24	.013	42	19	26	34	7.31	.006
Cooking	73	32	300	55	34.98	.000	82	38	49	65	16.2	.000
Shopping	68	30	301	56	42.82	.000	73	34	46	62	17.7	.000
Cleaning	53	23	313	58	77.46	.000	59	28	45	59	24.41	.000
Washing/ironing	71	31	312	59	48.51	.000	64	30	49	65	28.36	.000
Total	231	30	550	70			220	74	76	26		