

The New Economy and the Work–Life Balance: Conceptual Explorations and a Case Study of New Media

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Given the varied claims made about the new economy and its implications for the organization of work and life, this article critically evaluates some conceptualizations of the new economy and then explores how the new media sector has materialized and been experienced by people working in Brighton and Hove, a new media hub. New technologies and patterns of working allow the temporal and spatial boundaries of paid work to be extended, potentially allowing more people, especially those with caring responsibilities, to become involved, possibly leading to a reduction in gender inequality. This article, based on 55 in-depth interviews with new media owners, managers and some employees in small and micro enterprises, evaluates this claim. Reference is made to the gender-differentiated patterns of ownership and earnings; flexible working patterns, long hours and homeworking and considers whether these working patterns are compatible with a work–life balance. The results indicate that while new media creates new opportunities for people to combine interesting paid work with caring responsibilities, a marked gender imbalance remains.

Keywords: work–life balance, new media, new economy, gender

Introduction

Given the diverse nature, varied understandings and different claims made about the new economy, this article seeks to explore how one sector, new media, has materialized in one particular location — Brighton and Hove — focusing on the gender differentiated nature of opportunities and risks, work and working hours and the impact on work–life balance.

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The article is divided into three sections. The first explores some of the varied conceptualizations of the new economy and outlines some of the potential risks and opportunities that have been identified in the literature. The second outlines the view put forward by government and politicians, including the UK's Women's Unit, that the new economy, especially the development of communication and information technologies and in particular the Internet, which potentially extends the spatial and temporal range of paid work, provides new opportunities for people with caring responsibilities, and is potentially a means of reducing gender inequality. The third section evaluates this expectation by reference to a qualitative study of the new media sector in Brighton and Hove, which has become a new media hub. It does so by exploring gender-differentiated patterns of ownership, management and earnings; working practices, in particular long hours, flexible working patterns and homeworking, and considers the extent to which these working patterns are compatible with a work-life balance, especially when caring responsibilities are involved. The article concludes by contesting some of the ideas about the new economy and makes some suggestions for redressing the gender imbalance that, so far, seems to be being reproduced in this new area of activity.

The new economy, new media and the organization of work

The new economy is a concept that has recently entered academic and media discourse and, although widely used, has several meanings with differing implications for the well-being of the economy, individual and social welfare. Optimistically the term has been used to refer to the unprecedented coexistence of economic growth and a booming stock market with low inflation, tight labour markets and low wage pressures (Greenspan, 1998). More substantively it has been used to depict 'a new technological paradigm centred around micro electronics-based information/communication technologies, and genetic engineering' (Castells, 2000, p. 9). The development of the Internet, in particular, is said to have profound implications for the organization of economic activity and for increasing productivity (Castells, 2001). Other analyses focus more circumspectly, on the changing character of work associated with technological change, deregulation and globalization (Beck, 2000; Carnoy, 2000; Sennett, 1998) and the new social inequalities that seem to be accompanying these processes. Ulrich Beck (2000) argues that work at all levels is characterized by insecurity and increasing inequality. Similarly, Richard Sennett (1998) maintains that new, insecure and increasingly fragmented forms of work are leading to an imbalance between the values required for a successful working life and those required for a stable family leading to the 'Corrosion of Character'. Fernando Flores and John Gray (2000,

p. 24) speak of the 'death of the career' and argue that lifelong identities are giving way to 'brief habits' and 'the lives of wired people are more like collections of short stories than the narrative of a bourgeois novel'. The empirical support for these claims is, however, more varied. Interestingly, Danny Quah (1996, 2001) and Robert Reich (2001) in different ways link the positive and negative dimensions analytically and argue that they form part of an emerging digital divide. That is, they argue that some of the essential characteristics of the knowledge-based economy, which contribute to economic growth, also increase economic inequality (Perrons, 2002). Reich (2001) and Martin Carnoy (2000) also emphasize that the new economy puts increasing pressure on maintaining a work-life balance, and on social sustainability, but otherwise less attention has been given to questions of reproduction and the gendered nature of emerging inequalities in the new economy, an omission noted by Castells (2001)¹ and something this article seeks to explore.

Perhaps more is said about the 'new economy' and the lives and livelihoods of people working within it than is actually known and there may be a tendency to generalize from the little that is known especially within popular writings (see, for example, Reeves, 2001, in which a very optimistic and one-sided view of the future of work is developed). Thus, detailed, comparative, empirical work is necessary in order to investigate the varied forms taken by the new economy and how it is experienced in practice. Kevin Doogan (2001) has made an explicit empirical critique of the insecurity thesis and this article also seeks to make a contribution to the debate by reporting on a qualitative analysis of the experiences of women and men working in the new media sector in Brighton and Hove.

In this brief review of work on the new economy emphasis is placed on explanations which foreground long-lasting, substantive changes, that is, the potential offered by new information and commuting technologies and new working arrangements in terms of time and contracts, rather than those that rest on nominal economic variables, such as inflation-free growth, as the sustainability of the new economy on these criteria has already been questioned as economic growth in the USA began to slow down in the middle of 2001.

Thus thinking of the new economy as characterized by the increasing use of information and computing technologies, and the Internet, it is clear that new ways of organizing the production, distribution and exchange of existing goods as well as entirely new goods and services have come into being. The distribution and exchange of goods via the Internet are generally referred to as E-commerce and takes place between businesses and consumers (B2C), a well-known example of which would be Amazon.com which supplies books, videos and CDs, and transactions between firms or businesses (B2B) which so far are quantitatively more significant (OECD, 2000) and have been said to lead to new forms of business organization. Castells

(2001) argues that the Internet has allowed the potential of networked forms of organization within and between firms to be realized. Existing services such as training, marketing, advertising and public relations are also increasingly being provided through the Internet, becoming e-training, e-marketing and e-pr, usually in addition to traditional means of provision through CD-ROMs, videos and brochures. The Internet also facilitates the development of new interactive services including digital TV, games and interaction with virtual worlds, for example, with a pop group.² In turn, these new services, products and methods of distribution generate new forms of knowledge-based employment ranging from web-based graphic design, web system/database management, video installations through to programming. One outcome is a range of new activities and jobs now commonly referred to as new media, which do not fit neatly into existing industrial sectors or occupational categories.

This conceptualization of the new economy conforms to media images, which emphasize ICT and high status employment and also forms the main subject of this article. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that these activities also generate and depend on a range of lower level jobs in distribution and consumer services. E-commerce, designed and managed by the higher-level workers, generates low status employment in warehousing and delivery.³ Some work is displaced from conventional retailers and banks to call centres and some is transferred to consumers who manage their own transactions directly via the Internet. Furthermore, given the long hours worked by knowledge-workers (IER/IFF, 2001) there has been an expansion of jobs in the personal care and consumer services sector to cater for their needs (Perrons, 2002). Thus, the new economy is characterized by a duality or digital divide, which in practice may build upon and possibly reinforce existing social divisions of class, gender, race and ethnicity. Middle-class, well-educated and white men are likely to be over-represented in high level 'self-programmable' (Castells, 2000) jobs, while women, ethnic minorities and people from lower social classes are more likely to be found in the generic, lower-paid jobs, in delivery and personal services such as office cleaning, personal fitness, catering and care. There is, however, some similarity in the contractual structure and temporal demands of employment, if not in lifestyles and levels of pay, between high and low level workers that create problems for managing work-life balance.

New working patterns and the work-life balance

With the possibilities offered by ICT, increasing deregulation and associated moves towards the 24/7 society, the temporal range of working hours has expanded leading to an expansion of flexible and long working hours (Harkness, 1999; IER/IFF, 2001; Presser, 1999; Rubery *et al.*, 1998; Twomey,

2001). For example, the recent IER/IFF (2001) survey found that 11% of workplaces in the UK (covering 19% of the employees) operated 24 hours a day 7 days a week and 11% of employees, among whom fathers were especially prevalent, were working 60 or more hours a week. There was also a connection between flexibility and long hours in that the former were sometimes allowed simply to permit the latter, that is the demands of the workplace were so intense that people were 'allowed' to work on Saturdays and Sundays and take work home, a practice which has been facilitated by ICT and Internet access which enables continual connection between work and home through mobile phones and email.⁴ This can be construed positively as a means of extending the range of locations from which paid work can be carried out, more negatively as a means of work invading the home or indeed elements of both. The Department for Employment and Education (DfEE, 2000a, 2000b) emphasizes the business case for flexibility, termed work-life balance, and provides illustrations of how it can increase productivity, reduce absenteeism, improve staff commitment, increase retention rates and thus reduce employer costs. Indeed, within this perspective, flexible working seems to be more concerned with accommodating life to rather demanding and unquestioned working hours rather than one of reorganizing work to allow time for domestic and caring responsibilities. The IER/IFF survey (2001) found that while some forms of flexible working were permitted, especially work at weekends and during unsocial hours, only a tiny minority of employers provided other forms of flexibility such as job shares or forms of leave additional to statutory requirements. Nor did many provide any direct assistance with childcare (2% provided a workplace crèche and 3% financial assistance) yet 26% of workplaces provided workplace counselling/stress management. They suggest that employers are prepared to pay to alleviate their employees' stress but less willing to provide facilities that might prevent it in the first place (IER/IFF, 2001, p. 25). It is important to recognize, however, that even when available, the take-up rate of family leave-related arrangements is low (DfEE, 2000a) possibly because of stigmatization. Thus, flexible working patterns have opened up opportunities for a wide range of people, including carers, to take paid employment, even though employers often retain control over the parameters of flexibility (Breedveld, 1998; Dex and McCulloch, 1997; Figart and Mutari, 1998; Perrons, 1999; Rubery *et al.*, 1998).

New working patterns have eroded the boundaries and collective rhythms of working life and the concept and reality of a fixed working day have declined for many people. The process is also cumulative. As working hours become more varied, people will expect services to be available at a wider range of times. Further, as the boundaries of the working day have become more opaque, many salaried workers are expected to work long hours to demonstrate commitment (Doyle and Reeves, 2001; Fagan, 2001; Hochschild, 1997; McDowell, 1997) and to match the working hours of different time

zones. The main reason given by employees for long hours is 'to get the work done' but the IER/IFF survey (2001) found that 70% of those working over 60 hours enjoyed their work compared to 57% in the survey as a whole. Entrepreneurs and freelancers similarly work long hours to get the work done, but also because of the unpredictable nature and flow of work together with tight deadlines and in some cases endorsing the findings of the IER/IFF survey, because of intrinsic work satisfaction, which means that the boundaries between work and life become blurred (see Massey, 1996; IER/IFF, 2001; Reeves, 2001 and the case study below). This blurring can also be explained by the fact that knowledge work depends on human rather than fixed capital and thus is characterized by bursts of activity followed by fallow periods and thus does not fit easily into a 9–5 structure (Gershuny, 2000). Consequently, knowledge-based societies are said to be moving to a post-industrial time regime (Gershuny, 2000; Doyle and Reeves, 2001; Fagan, 2001).

Richard Reeves (2001) argues that concern over long working hours is misplaced because they often reflect worker preferences. He argues that time at work increasingly involves doing interesting things in attractive physical and social environments and so may be preferred to watching a TV soap, carrying out domestic work or looking after children. In part, following the ideas of Arlie Hochschild (1997) Reeves argues that:

while the workplace is growing in attractiveness for many people home, or 'life' is looking a bit gloomy. For dual-earner couples with children, life outside work is one of fixed timetables (childcare), conflict (whose turn is it to pick up the kids?), low-skill work (cooking, cleaning, nappy disposal) and thankless masters and mistresses (the kids). As work enters the post-industrial era, home life has become industrial. (Reeves, 2001, p. 128)

There may be some truth in this illustration for some people, or on occasions for many but Reeves (2001) pays little attention to the terms and conditions of employment for those who might provide childcare and domestic services or 'life-style fixers' (Denny, 2001) or whether they similarly would welcome increased working hours. Furthermore, Reeves (2001) seems to overlook the complex nature of care work. Although the domestic division of labour may be a source of conflict (Beck, 2000) or the outcome of complex processes of intra-household negotiation (see Jarvis, 1999), this should not negate the multifaceted nature of care work, or its potential for positive utility (Perrons, 2000). Michael Rose (1999), for example, found that domestic workers, including cleaners and dinner ladies had the highest levels of job satisfaction. Good quality care may also bring positive social benefits (Folbre and Nelson, 2000; Folbre, 2001). If, however, the gender division of domestic labour and child care is systematically uneven, which it currently is in the UK (Murgatroyd and Neuburger, 1997) and if longer working hours are gen-

eralized, then time or the willingness to work long hours will form a new means of gender differentiation, just as other differences, such as qualifications and formal opportunities are becoming more equal. That is, even though some people may enjoy their paid work, it should not automatically be assumed that they dislike reproductive work but rather that the demands of the long hours culture in the context of a society with a social deficit in child and elder care provision often forces a choice between jobs with career possibilities and those that can be combined with caring for at least one parent, typically the mother.

A further strand of thought in discussions of the new economy is insecurity and risk in both work and home life. Dealing only with the former in this article, workers at both ends of the jobs hierarchy have been said to have been affected by increasing insecurity — Beck (2000), Sennett (1998), Flores and Gray (2000) — but there is also extensive debate about whether there is any evidence for their claims in relation to the UK (Heery and Salmon, 1999; Doogan, 2001). At the aggregate level only a small proportion of new jobs in the UK during the 1990s were full-time and permanent (Gregg and Wadsworth, 1999), giving some support for the insecurity thesis but counter-evidence suggests that there has been little change in the average length of time that people stay with any individual employer: average job duration for men was 10.5 years in the 1970s and now 9.5 years and for women there has been little aggregate change (Green *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, there has been an increase in long-term employment (defined as employees who have been in 'current employment' for ten years or more) from 34.6% to 36.7% for men and from 21.2% to 28.5% for women between 1992 and 1999. These increases were found across growing and declining, public and private, traditional and new sectors and across all occupations, and was greater in the higher skilled, managerial and professional groups than in elementary and lower skilled occupations (Doogan, 2001, p. 423). Doogan (2001) explains the paradox of increasing long-term employment and the high perception of insecurity among employees, varying between 28% and 53% (MORI, 2000, cited by Doogan, 2001), to 'manufactured insecurity' generated by the government introducing market discipline into a growing range of jobs, partly through privatization. This manufactured insecurity may have lowered wage demands (see IPPR, 2000) and thus contributed to inflation-free growth and possibly to an unwillingness to risk changing jobs, thereby accounting for the increase in long-term employment. Whatever the explanation, not all elements in society ever had a career, therefore writers emphasizing increasing insecurity are perhaps over-stating the extent of change. Furthermore, in new media temporary or contract work can also be a positive choice, as it provides an opportunity for individuals to continually update their skills, knowledge and pay as they move from project to project and firm to firm (Ó Riain, 2000). However, this security is very contingent on tight and

expanding labour markets and leaves unanswered broader questions of caring and social reproduction or social sustainability (Carnoy, 2000).

The range of the developments associated with the new economy is immense and the ramifications are difficult to assess. It is important to emphasize, however, that these developments have not happened because of new technologies but rather because of the ways in which technological developments occur within a capitalist and increasingly global economy. The processes shaping these changes are those, which motivate the decision-makers in the large corporations and nation-states and at the individual and social response level. Similarly, the capacity of people to organize their own work biographies and plan their lifetime finances continues to vary now, as in the past, with individual and social factors. The former include responsibilities and opportunities outside as well as within the workplace and these remain highly structured by individual characteristics including gender, ethnicity, race, social class, educational background, age and stage in life course as well as individual preferences. Social factors include the level of development, the welfare and gender regime and prevailing labour market regulations, company size and status. Thus although everyone is affected by and to a lesser degree affects these developments, they are experienced in different ways and to different degrees depending on their existing individual and social positions. Therefore, these issues require empirical investigation, as there will be considerable variation in outcomes. Before presenting the findings of the case study, however, the current state of gender inequality in the UK is outlined together with some indication of official thinking about how the new economy might contribute to increasing gender equality while maintaining a work–life balance.

The new economy potential for redressing gender imbalances

Gender inequalities in employment in the UK have narrowed in that more women, (73%) more mothers with dependent children (69%) and more mothers with very young children (under-5) (58% in 2000 compared to 48% in 1990) are economically active than ever before while male activity rates continue to decline from 88% to 84% during the 1990s. The figures above, together with the fact that in the age group 25–39 the gap between the female (75%) and male 94% activity rates is at its highest (Twomey, 2001), indicate that children still constrain women's participation rate and although there has been some convergence between women and men, gender inequalities in terms of hours of work, segregation and earnings remain (Bower, 2001; Rubery *et al.*, 1998; Thair and Risdon, 1999; Twomey, 2001). On the most favourable measure, hourly earnings, women remain at 80% of the male level but only receive 60% of male average earnings (EOC, 2000). A study projecting lifetime incomes identified a very wide gender gap, 'the female

forfeit', even for those women without children (Rake, 2000). Furthermore, women are over-represented in part-time employment, which often represents the private solution to the low levels of childcare in the UK and indeed the increase in women's activity rate is associated with the increase (12%) in part-time work between 1990 and 2000 compared with a 4% increase in full-time employment (Twomey, 2001).

There is an extensive range of recent literature on the position of women in the labour market (Bradley, 1999; Crompton, 1997; McDowell, 2001; Rubery *et al.*, 1998; Thair and Risdon, 1999; Walby, 1997, to name a few) and some studies of women in various sectors associated with the new economy (Baines, 1999; Stanworth, 2000) but there is less detailed analysis of the implications of ICT on women's employment overall. Nevertheless, the Women's Unit of the UK government has argued that ICT represents 'one of the biggest opportunities for women in the twenty-first century to earn more, have more flexible working practices and adapt their current business or try a business start-up'. Thus, they maintain that 'self-employment and enterprise offer women a real alternative means of earning good income and achieving greater flexibility in their working lives' (Women's Unit, 2000). That is, given the way that contemporary technologies extend the range of working opportunities both temporally and spatially, they potentially provide a means of opening up new opportunities for paid work and thereby potentially redress current gender inequalities. As the case study below illustrates, there is some substance to this view, but the flexibility offered by ICT for new working patterns could also be seen as a way of allowing government and employers to sidestep any responsibility for facilitating work-life balance by passing the responsibility entirely to the individual (woman) by allowing her to adjust her life around paid work (see also Hardill and Graham, 2001).

Entrepreneurs, homeworkers and freelancers can manage their own routines, even if they always cannot control the quantity of work. In some ways they may realize the vision of the 'electronic cottage' (Toffler, 1980) although the problems of social isolation, and family tensions also have to be recognized (Baruch, 2000; Huws, 1996; Phizacklea and Wolkowitz, 1995) leading to the contrasting image of the 'electronic cage' (Zimmerman, cited by Baines, 1999, p. 20). Women also face constraints; although they are beginning to become more qualified than men as measured by the number of graduates, they have a long historic deficit to overcome. Furthermore they are under-represented on ICT courses and the proportion working in IT has fallen. Women also have greater difficulty in obtaining access to capital and the Women's Unit have been holding workshops to identify ways of overcoming these constraints. The purpose of the empirical investigation discussed below is to illuminate some aspects of new economy, to outline the differential opportunities and constraints experienced by women and men in this sector and to consider the implications for managing the work-life balance.

Opportunities and constraints for women and men in the new media sector in Brighton and Hove

Brighton and Hove — 'The Place to Be'

Brighton and Hove on the south coast of England with a population of 255,800 (ONS, 2001) has been socially constructed as 'The Place to Be' and become the 'focal point for creative industries in Europe' (Brighton and Hove Council, 1999). It has always been a very vibrant place where 'eyebrows are more often pierced rather than raised at eccentric behaviour' (BHC, 1990) and it attracts celebrities, media, arts people as well as tourists. It is also a divided town, with more restaurants but also more people sleeping rough per head than anywhere outside London and of 354 council areas in the UK it is the 94th poorest (Edwards, 2000; ONS, 2001). Thus while marketing itself as the 'place to be' it is simultaneously applying for and receiving funds targeted at the poorest areas under a variety of regeneration programmes nationally and from the European Union.

Brighton and Hove was chosen for this study because it is said to constitute a 'new media hub' and in fact reflects the varied dimensions of the new economy within a relatively small location (see also Pratt, 2000; Tang, 1999). It has at least 200 new media companies with a further 170 companies in East Sussex — the surrounding county.⁵ Most of the companies are very small but it is this type of company that corresponds to the opportunities for women identified by the Women's Unit. However, the research findings suggest that although the new media sector provides opportunities for women, significant gender divisions remain.

The results reported come from a wider study of the local labour market in the context of the new economy, deregulation, equity and representation. Initially, seven in-depth interviews were carried out with women who attended the Women in the New Economy seminar in Sussex sponsored by the Women's Unit in July 2000. From these, key issues were identified and 50 further interviews lasting between 45 and 75 minutes, based around a structured questionnaire, were carried out with owners, managers and some employees of small firms and micro enterprises.⁶

Gender composition, size of companies and earnings

New media is an emerging sector comprising of wholly new companies, which have developed in response to new needs as well as existing companies that have restructured their operations to make use of contemporary technologies. Of the companies participating in the survey, 63% had been in existence for less than three years, while 14% were over five and a further 11% over ten years old. The majority (70% $n = 38$) are owned and managed by men, despite the fact that the original interviewees were women attend-

ing the women in the new economy conference. Just over half of the total are limited companies (38% female and 63% male) and 20% (43% female and 11% male) are one-person firms. Measured by direct employment the majority of the companies in the survey were small, 50% having no direct employees and 25% not even employing freelancers on an occasional basis (see Figure 1). Companies owned by women tended to have a smaller number of employees of either kind than men but the difference was not statistically significant (see Figure 1).

Women are also over-represented among the smaller companies as measured by turnover. Only one wholly owned female company, compared to 14 owned by men had a turnover of above £500,000 and the two female companies in the £250,000 to £500,000 category were co-owned with their male partners (see Figure 2). When divided into two broad categories — above and below £50,000 — this gender difference is statistically significant.⁷

There was a significant association in the data between earnings and turnover,⁸ but in the case of small companies, and especially sole traders, earnings are difficult to evaluate. The owner can receive earnings, dividends or re-invest profits in the company. Indeed, accountants often advise owners that it is tax efficient to pay themselves only the minimum wage. With these qualifications in mind, women in general earned less than men.⁹ Taking earnings and turnover together it is clear that the majority of people in this sector do not conform to the media image of high earners even though they were mainly graduates and worked long hours (see below). For people on low earnings especially, a further problem arises from their irregularity:

I earn less than £10,000 p.a. sometimes there is a whole month with no earnings — the big companies in particular are very slow at paying out. (woman, aged 35–44, web page designer, caring responsibilities, herself major role, ID 1)

Gender, caring responsibilities and working hours

Working hours for women and men in this sector are varied, often flexible but also long, the mean number of weekly hours for women was 46 (SD = 16) and 48 (SD = 17) for men. The main gender difference was at the upper end of the distribution with a small number of men working extremely long hours (6 working over 70 hours a week compared to only 1 woman who worked over 65 hours). However, the median (45) and mode (55) for women were higher than for men 45 and 40 respectively, probably because men were more likely to be managers of larger companies with more standard working hours, while women were more likely to be sole traders or owners with more varied working patterns. Some women and men worked part-time hours but for different reasons. For the men this was either because their new media activity was a second job (this was also the case for one of the women), or



Size of companies by direct employment

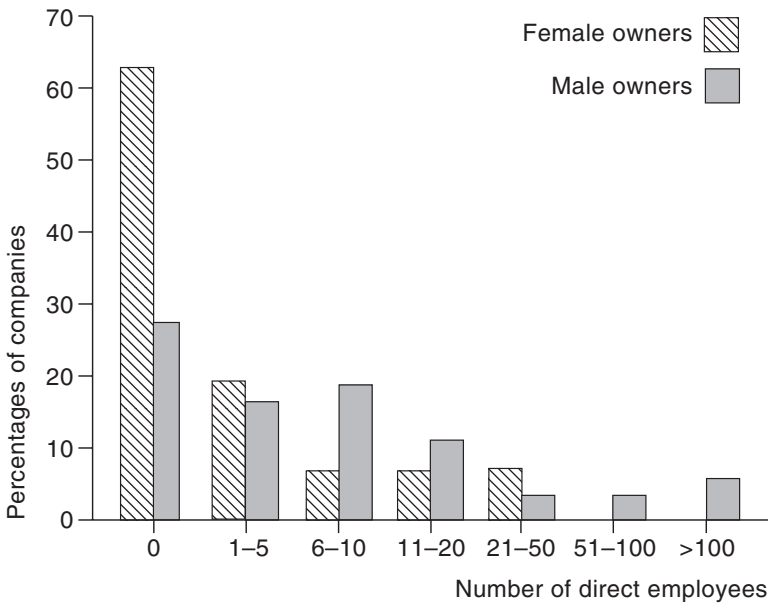


Figure 1: Company size and employment

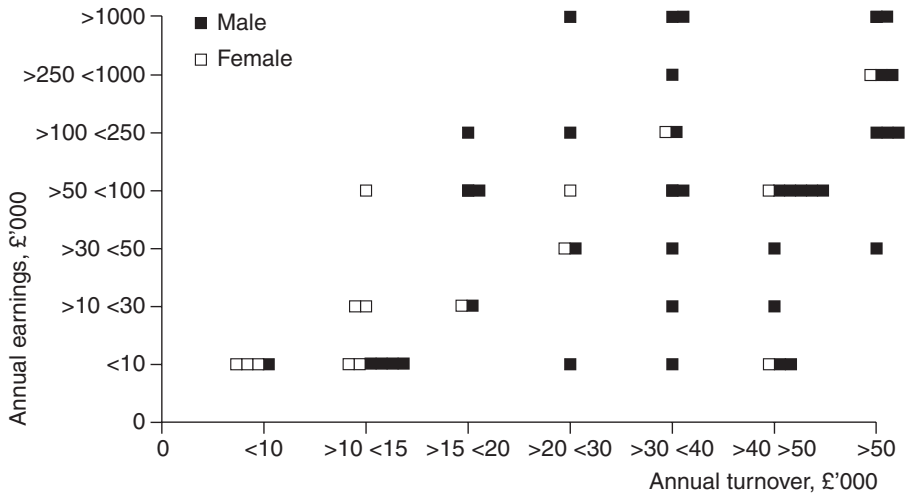


Figure 2: Gender, turnover and earnings

because they had been unable to get more work. For women domestic responsibilities were more likely to curtail their hours, see Figure 3. Women were statistically more likely (at the 5% level) to have a major responsibility for childcare. Overall, working hours were long and were either increasing or remaining the same as was the pressure of work, only a minority, 12% and 9% respectively, reporting trends in the reverse direction. It is necessary, however, to point out that the data rests on self-reporting — there is no independent corroboration and being ‘busy’ forms part of the identity of a successful operator in new media (see Reich, 2001).

There are four main reasons why people work long hours in this sector: the unpredictable nature and flow of work; uncertainty associated with a business start-up (Baines and Wheelock, 2000); the need to continually update skills and knowledge; and the intrinsic satisfaction derived from the work itself.

In new media, many products and services are ‘bespoke’, but clients are often uncertain about what they want or what to expect and frequently change their specifications as the project develops. Over a third of interviewees autonomously identified this lack of clear boundaries around project content and corresponding uncertainty about the volume of work, as a major source of strain especially because deadlines were often inflexible — for example, the launch date for a web site. As many of the companies were new and building their reputations, they wanted to produce high quality products, and often did not charge for all of the amendments made. They also considered themselves to be at the cutting edge of new software

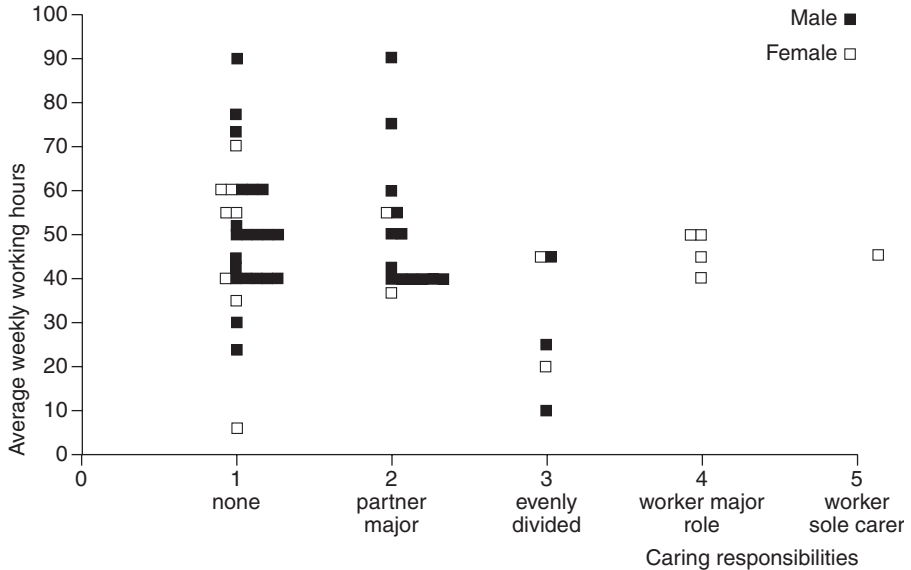


Figure 3: Working hours and caring responsibilities

Note: Each square represents a male- or female-owned or managed organization

developments and were intellectually interested in exploring new possibilities. Thus the hours of unpaid work could be seen as a form of 'physic income' (Baines, 1999) or self-exploitation or indeed a combination of the two. Furthermore, there was a reluctance to turn down work, similar to all new start-ups, because of uncertainty about future contracts.

For owners and sole traders, working long hours was often seen as temporary, and a form of investment in the company and their own future as illustrated in the sentiments below which were repeated many times.

I am working long hours now (110 a week) but this will not be forever. I want to earn a lot now so that I can *do* things later on — like travelling. [his emphasis] (man, aged 25–34, specialist web programmer, no caring responsibilities, ID 7)

At present I am building the company up — the harder I work the more I enjoy it. As a Director, at present, the company's interests come first. (man, aged 25–34, project manager and localizer, on average working 74 hours a week, no caring responsibilities, ID 13)

Well, I'm in a start-up role at present and we have been expanding a lot so I'm still trying to get structures in place. Last week I worked about 70 hours but this will go down. I aim to work standard hours. I do aim to 'get

a life'. But work is part of life — I enjoy it. The company is covered by the Working Time Directive and they agree with it. (woman, aged 25–34, manager, no caring responsibilities, ID 39)

Many of those unhappy with the current volume of work had considered expanding the number of employees or utilizing freelancers more intensively. Freelancers form an important part of this sector, not only do they help companies manage the fluctuations in the flow of work, but also allow companies, especially the smaller ones, to draw upon a much wider range of skills than their size would permit, in accordance with the changing nature of their work. One of the larger companies, which had experienced dramatic expansion immediately prior to the survey, subsequently 'let go' half of its staff, but then within two days was advertising for freelancers.¹⁰ Indeed, uncertainty was an important reason why others were reluctant to expand. Besides having to finance extra office space to accommodate new workers and ensuring a sufficient flow of work there were also problems of monitoring quality, given that there was little formal accreditation for skills in this sector and concern that growing beyond a 'reasonable size' would lead a loss of control and a qualitative change in their working lives.

We plan to expand to about the size of 25–30. After that we would have to think carefully about the costs and benefits of further expansion. If we expanded too much it would change the atmosphere. We might set up another company instead. (man, aged 25–34, database design and management, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 15)

This perspective confirms the image of new independent operators as a 'cross between employer and day labourer, self exploiter and boss on their own account... with the objective of moulding their own lives rather than conquering world markets' (Beck, 2000, pp. 54–5; see also Baines, 1999, for a similar finding in the case of media freelancers). Having control over their work was important, as explained below by a respondent, previously earning £100,000 p.a. with a London company, now paying himself only 25% above the minimum wage (having allowed for dividends):

Well, it's like prostitution isn't it? I set up my own company so that I have freedom and can control what work I do. (man, aged 25–34, E-commerce developer, no caring responsibilities, ID 53)

This comment reflects the findings of Rose (1999) from the wider-scale analysis of SCEDI data in relation to work satisfaction, that although there was a positive association between job skills and job satisfaction, the more significant association was found between own skills and job satisfaction. Specifically, the least satisfied workers were high-skilled workers in low-skilled jobs. In the case of Brighton and Hove, job dissatisfaction arising from the nature of the work or the wider context in which it was offered were

important reasons for new media people to set up on their own (see also the comment from ID 35 below). Indeed, for the ordinary employee, there may be an inverse relation between firm size and job satisfaction, in that work in the larger firms was more likely to become formulaic and less challenging. In several cases, there was also desire to escape from office politics and from male power structures. Having been independent one female respondent found that:

After a while you can't go back — you think why should I be doing this for them and they aren't doing it very well anyway. Power has to be earned by respect for competencies — not imposed. The IT world is still a very male world and some men have difficulty in treating women as equal. (woman, aged 35–44, Internet PR, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12)

For this woman, working independently enabled her to escape the glass ceiling, which she had continued to experience in the new economy (see also Stanworth, 2000).

For employees, the situation of long working hours was more problematical and employees were often treated in a rather paternalistic way. Employers, just as owners, faced unpredictable volumes of work and tight deadlines and although they could, and in fact often did, take on temporary or freelance workers, this could not always be done at short notice, so existing employees found themselves working extremely long hours. One company as a matter of policy required employees to voluntarily opt out of the EU Working Time Directive, but if employees did work long hours they were compensated by time off in lieu and also by special bonuses.

If they 'throw an all nighter' [work through the night] I pay for them to have a 'stressbuster' — at the Grand [a one or half-day special massage and health treatment at a major hotel]. (man, aged 25–34, project manager and localizer, no caring responsibilities, ID 13)

Another small company provided a free breakfast at 8.30 a.m. because

It encourages people to be here on time and so we can start work fairly promptly at 9 a.m. (man, aged 35–44, manager and Internet marketer, some caring responsibilities, ID 43)

Thus, echoing the concierge strategy of Microsoft (Chaudhuri, 2000). This company also held various social events such as long weekends away and a company football team (male only), but was also in conflict with employees over the implications of the EU Working Time Directive for paid holiday. In fact, there was a curious mixture of concern for employees' well-being, on the one hand, but an unwillingness to endorse regulations to enhance employees' rights, on the other.

Time is especially important in new media, where skills and knowledge need continual updating and networking is necessary to find out about contemporary developments and to acquire work. The vast majority of companies stated that they provided time at work for employees to engage in self-learning via magazines and the Internet. Some also had informal systems of work shadowing and workshops for exchanging ideas. Single operators would clearly have to provide this time for themselves. Some employees also saw their time with an organization as a period in which to acquire new skills prior to setting up on their own.

I have always worked long hours — it is self-imposed, I have a tendency to be a workaholic. When I worked for an organization, I was trying to gather work experience. I would stay late to work with the software experimenting etc. At home I would no longer want to see a computer — I tried to incorporate study hours into the working environment but it was difficult — you were often so busy — working every minute. Different projects would dovetail with one another, it was like a continuous production line — I wanted to get away from feeling a cog in a process, I wanted more autonomy. (man, aged 25–34, web design and multimedia, caring responsibilities, evenly divided, ID 35)

Work-life balance

The most striking finding was that the vast majority of people surveyed liked their work, with (80%) strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement that 'generally speaking I am very satisfied with the nature of my work'. Gender differences were not very marked except that the 10% that disagreed with this perspective were all male. The following quotations encapsulate this perspective:

I enjoy work — the barriers between work and non-work are very blurred. (woman, aged 35–44, web designer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12)

Work and life merge — work is my hobby, work is myth. (man, aged 45–54, web designer, no caring responsibilities, ID 9)

Work excitement and pressure are opposite sides of the same coin. (man, aged 35–44, Internet consultancy and web designer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 24)

People clearly enjoyed and were personally very much involved in their work: 75% strongly agreeing or agreeing with this view and 90% thinking about work when they were not there (see Figure 4), even though work was very demanding; 57% strongly agreeing or agreeing with the statement: 'I am often too tired when I get home from work to do other things' and 64% often taking work home. Responses were more divided over the question of

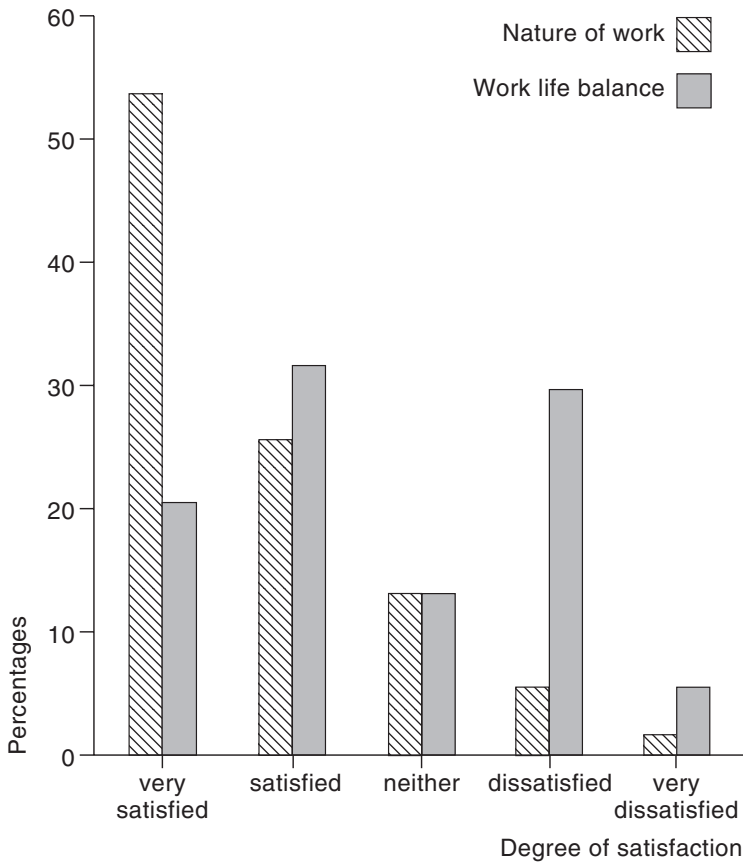


Figure 4: Work satisfaction and work-life balance

work-life balance with just under 50% agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement that 'my work takes up time beyond a reasonable working day that I would rather spend on other activities' and the same proportion strongly agreeing or agreeing (54% men and 47% of women) with the statement that 'generally speaking I am very satisfied with my work-life balance'.

One-third of men and 40% of women were, however, dissatisfied and either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, as did just over 40% of people with pre-teen children living at home. The reasons underlying the negative response differed between women and men. A higher proportion of men than women were dissatisfied with the amount of time they spent at work (too much) and in the home (too little). Similarly, people, women and men, without caring responsibilities expressed concern that they

were perhaps becoming rather one-dimensional and spent too much time working. Those with pre-teen children living at home, women and men, basically felt time-starved and often felt very torn between the competing demands on their time, wanting to have more time to spend at work and at home as the women below explain:

I have to cut down work in the school holidays because I cannot do that much when the kids are around. I feel very torn. (woman, aged 35–44, web page designer, caring responsibilities, major role ID 1)

I only managed to take one day off with my daughter during the whole of her summer holidays. (woman, aged 35–44, web designer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12)

Another man with three young children regularly spent the time between 6 and 8 in the evening having dinner with and helping his children with homework, but this was just about the only time, other than a few hours on Sunday and sleeping that he spent away from his computer:

All I do is work, I have no concept of not working . . . The job rules me — I started as a programmer but I am now a manager, litigation, marketer. All the pressure is on me and I don't pass it on. I don't have holidays or any social life . . . I absolutely hate it. (man, aged 25–34, E commerce and web application, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 14)

This particular individual might well fit the description of working in an electronic cage (Zimmerman, 1983, cited by Baines, 1999, p. 20) rather than the electronic cottage.

All of which provides some empirical support for a renegotiation of the gender division of labour between paid and unpaid work. Another woman, a single parent running her own company and working on average 60 hours a week, when asked what happened if her school-aged child was unwell replied, 'I am sodded big time' (woman, aged 35–44, Internet PR, caring responsibilities, sole responsibility, ID 54). When asked about what could be done to improve her situation she replied, 'I'd like to find myself a good wife', which provides some confirmation for the ideas of Reeves (2001) about the relative preferences between paid work and childcare and domestic services, although in this case, and probably more generally too, these preferences are shaped by perceived financial constraints. This person was, however, an owner/manager and had considerable flexibility and was able to take the child into the office when all other arrangements failed.

Flexible working

Flexible working and homeworking, neither of which affected the volume of work, were practised to organize working time around domestic responsibilities, or vice versa. Working in the evening, at night and during the

weekend was also inevitable, in cases where the number of hours worked exceeded a standard week. Only a minority of people in the survey regularly worked standard hours and women were less likely to do so than men. Over two-thirds regularly worked flexible hours and only 2% never did so. Nearly 60% of people regularly worked evenings and 35% did so sometimes and just under a quarter of people reported that they regularly worked at night (between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. in the morning). Relative to their representation in the survey, women expressed a slightly higher tendency to regularly work in the evening and a lower tendency to work at night than men. However, the proportion saying that they worked at night sometimes was relatively higher than for men. Nearly half of the people reported that they regularly worked on a Saturday and Sunday with only 25% never doing so, figures considerably higher than the IER/IFF (2001) survey reported earlier.

Just over 40% of the sample had pre-teen children living with them, but only 20% had an evenly divided, a major role or total responsibility for their care (see Figure 2). None of the respondents had responsibility for elder care. Where the partner of the interviewee had major responsibility for childcare, which was more likely the case for men rather than women, working hours followed a similar pattern to those with no caring responsibilities, corresponding to the general tendency in the UK for fathers to work very long hours (Harkness, 1999; IER/IFF, 2001). Of the fourteen people who worked over 50 hours a week, five had dependent children living with them including two women, one a single parent and sole carer and one whose partner took major responsibility for care. What is striking is the lack of caring responsibilities overall, which cannot be explained by age as the majority (80%) were between 25 and 44 (38% between 25 and 34 and 42% between 35 and 44 years) the primary child-rearing ages, which raises doubts about the extent to which this sector facilitates the work–life balance. Indeed, recognizing the incompatibility one manager argued:

We have no intentions of starting a family until we can get to grips with the business. (man, aged 35–44, project manager, no caring responsibilities, ID 10)

For those with senior positions or running their own companies even when the hours of work are long, the pattern can be arranged so as to enable them to spend some time with their children, as one respondent explained:

I would like to be able to spend more time with the children. Being an MD [managing director], however, enables me to work flexible hours so I can go to school events. (man, aged 35–44, new media productions, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 36)

For some people, especially mothers, being able to work flexibly was critical given the continuing low level of publicly provided and high cost of private childcare in the UK, despite recent initiatives.

During school holidays it's a bit tricky, but otherwise after dropping kids to school, I do 0.5 hours housework and then work through until I pick the children up at 3 p.m. Then I will work in the evening, sometimes at night and usually one of the weekend days. (woman, aged 35–44, web page designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 1)

But even so, she went on to point out that:

The school hours limit my day — it ruins concentration. I would like something like an au pair to pick up children from school. The children go to an after school club (open until 6 p.m.) on two days a week but it does not always work and it costs quite a lot — £8 for the two children for each session. (woman, aged 35–44, web page designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 1)

Home working and work–life balance

Of those working from home either some or all of the time (63%), most (58%) felt that it enabled them to combine work and family life. Some were extremely positive in this respect and the proportion of women expressing this view was greater than men; 55% of women who worked from home viewed homeworking positively in this respect compared to 44% of men. One respondent was particularly enthusiastic:

It's wonderful! [her emphasis] As I own and run my own business in the home, my work/life balance could not really be improved. I have the flexibility I need which is why I set up the business in the first place. (woman, aged 35–44, web design and specialist software, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 46)

Another respondent (similar to ID 1 above) commented on the way school hours can interrupt the flow of thought but also pointed out the value of children: 'You just get motoring on a project and you have to pick them up on the other hand sometimes the enforced break is needed. I enjoy looking after them — I don't resent it.' He went on to say:

I don't mind if they [the children] come in the office. I sometimes work there while they play — children do not need a high input all of the time they just like you to be there. People in the West worry too much. I think children like to see you working and being with you — the notion of a special period of childhood is a particularly western concept. (man, aged 25–34, web design and multimedia, caring responsibilities, evenly divided, ID 35)

This comment was unusual, but unfortunately partners were not interviewed in this study so there is no independent corroboration of this rather positive view of combining paid work with caring. More often, mixed responses and

tensions between home and work were reported together with strategies for overcoming them:

You need to create a workspace, then working at home is enjoyable. If the job is difficult then being at home can be difficult — if she cries and my partner is looking after her it's hard to concentrate and not to interfere. Otherwise, at present, I enjoy the flexibility because I can take her to the park, etc. and be around. (woman, aged 25–34, web designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 28)

Homework does create some tensions with the children but I don't feel isolated — I have increased the number of contacts through the web. (man, aged 45–54 consultant and trainer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 31)

This comment also reflects the way in which the web itself has become an important medium for social contact, and in some cases virtual connections were consolidated through physical meetings. For example, there is locally based electronic email list through which members exchange technical, discuss local and national events and organize physical social gatherings. One respondent actually met her current partner via a chat room. Only a tiny minority appeared to depend on the Internet as the primary means of social (virtual) contact.

Homeworking also created tensions, however:

I work from home, so am continually kicked out of the office and accused of ignoring my family and being a workaholic and preferring the computer to real people. It's too easy to just go in for 30 minutes and spend 3 or 4 hours without noticing the time slipping away. (woman, aged 35–44, Internet PR, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12)

Overall, the findings indicate that the experience of homeworking is varied and is probably influenced by the precise nature of the work being done as well as the gendered politics of the household (see Baines, 1999). There were also tensions for the homeworkers themselves, as they could never really escape from work even when they wanted to.

Even when I *do* have some spare time, I sometimes find it difficult to relax in my home as I associate it with work and the PC and the 'to do' list always beckoning. (woman, aged 25–34, web designer and writer, no caring responsibilities, ID 34)

After working at home I was a wreck . . . it is not healthy there are enough pressures at home already — it is much better now — when I close the door I can forget work. I would never do it again — not as a business — I worked longer hours at home because it is quite compulsive — you are constantly reminded of work — you could never escape it. (man, aged 25–34, web designer, no direct caring responsibilities, ID 18)

Some respondents also reported that homeworking was positive from the point of view of managing a work–life balance but had negative effects in terms of the work itself.

The main problem with working from home is both social and work isolation — there is no one to bounce ideas off. Otherwise working from home enables me to combine work and family life and have a higher net income than if I worked elsewhere. There are tensions though and I can't always concentrate when there are piles of washing lying around, for example. (woman, aged 35–44, web designer, caring responsibilities, major role, ID 1)

Other respondents reported that although much could be done through the Internet, face-to-face meetings were vital both to convince potential clients of their own merits, considered difficult from the home, and so that they too could assess whether they could trust their potential clients, which is crucial considering that the products or services supplied are often customer specific:

I moved into the studio because I needed a space to meet clients — I could not meet them in my flat because it was too small. Face-to-face contact still matters so I need a space in which to meet clients so as to convince them that I can do the job. (man, aged 25–34, specialist web programmer, no caring responsibilities, ID 7)

Other homeworkers met clients in the numerous cafés or hotel restaurants in the town, thereby facilitating the necessary face-to-face contact without disclosing the actual size of the company. Contemporary telephone technology was also used to divert calls or provide an answering service that also provides a professional image for small organizations.

This study really confirms that there are mixed responses to homeworking, and whether it enables people to manage their work–life balance is really contingent on their overall context (Baines, 1999). The key difference between this sector and other forms of homeworking is that potentially incomes are higher as the new technologies allow single operators to operate very efficiently in highly professional ways from home as one woman explained:

The Internet — this is just what I was waiting for. I can now run my own business from home and have much more flexibility and control over my work than when I was a freelancer. (woman, aged 35–44, web designer, caring responsibilities, partner major role, ID 12)

Conclusion

The new media sector in Brighton and Hove provides a small-scale illustration of the way some aspects of the new economy materialize in practice.

This research is based on 55 interviews in an emerging and varied sector, which is highly volatile, so further research is necessary before any definitive statements can be made about the opportunities and constraints it provides (see Batt *et al.*, 2001, for work on the new media in the USA).

Two of the findings, at least, conflict with the theoretical work on the new economy, which emphasizes insecurity, isolation and community fragmentation (Beck, 2000; Sennett, 1998). With a small number of exceptions, both men and women owners, managers and self-employed had few concerns about job security, or their ability to acquire work. It has to be emphasized, however, that the survey was conducted mainly in the Autumn of 2000, that is after the first burst of the dot.com boom but before the onset of the first recession of the twenty-first century, since when the job market has been much more volatile and there have been job losses in Brighton and Hove, especially in some of the fast-growing companies, and freelancers, who probably bear the cost of the fluctuations, were not the focus of the study, though the distinctions between freelancers and sole traders in this sector are rather blurred. At the time of the survey, the problem was more likely to be over work arising from its unpredictable nature and flow, and the former was often seen as an exciting intellectual challenge. There was also a strong sense of community, in terms of the physical location, Brighton and Hove, and in terms of physical, virtual, social and business locally based networks, thus casting some doubt on the ideas of insecurity and fragmentation that have been associated with the new economy. There was also little concern with questions of health and safety, despite long hours spent at the computer.

The research provides mixed support for the expectations of the Women's Unit that ICT will provide new opportunities for women to earn more and have more flexible working practices. The use of ICT which forms a vital part of the new media sector has expanded the temporal and spatial range of paid work and thereby provided the necessary flexibility and time sovereignty to enable people to combine interesting, enjoyable, intellectually challenging and highly satisfying work with family life. Indeed, the survey included some people who fully encapsulated the positive image of teleworking in the global economy, for example, a woman working from her front room and subcontracting some of her work to a programmer in India. Furthermore, some women found that this was the only way of entering this sector as their age (perceived to be too old at the age of 35 to 40) and lack of formal qualifications meant that they had been unable to obtain work as employees. Nevertheless serious tensions between work and life remained for half of the sample overall and a higher percentage among those with major or sole caring responsibilities who were disproportionately women. The reasons for dissatisfaction varied; a higher proportion of men wanted to have more time to spend at home and women expressed a strong desire for more time for both. Furthermore, the sector is characterized by gender imbalance

with women being under-represented overall and over-represented in the smaller firms measured either by turnover or by the number of employees. The sector is characterized by high qualifications but from a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds so the main constraints seem to lie with finance and especially time. Some provisional explanations are given below but more research on this issue is required as well as on the extent of and reasons for gender imbalance in the sector more generally and especially among employees.

There was some suggestion of gender bias in lending practices by banks and venture capitalists. One company in particular emphasized the significance of assistance from a business angel, known through past business contacts, who had been far more effective in terms of offering the required level of funding while allowing the firm autonomy over its use. Certainly, the women owners of larger companies were in the older age group and had finance from a previous working life. Some short- to medium-term financial support for equipment and especially income to sustain a livelihood during the early phases of development would be helpful. Many people, especially women, had failed to obtain bank loans and venture capitalists were often not interested, as the projects were considered too small or insufficiently financially attractive. Moreover the entrepreneurs' micro-businesses were sometimes viewed with suspicion, as some prioritized personal objectives for making a reasonable standard of living in an enjoyable way rather than rapid growth. Earnings overall appear comparatively low and especially for women, considering the hours worked, their qualifications and experience, but these are quite hard to assess, especially in the case of independent operators. In terms of time, women worked fewer hours, earned less than men and were more likely to have sole or major responsibility for childcare, although only a small proportion in the survey had any direct responsibility for care and this is not explained by age and thus casts some doubt on the compatibility between work in this sector and family life.

Thus although ICT permits greater flexibility in working hours and locations which potentially allows those with caring responsibilities access to paid work, an important starting point for redressing gender inequalities, the traditional constraint of time arising from the uneven division of domestic work and caring remains. This finding echoes previous work and suggests that it is necessary to look beyond the workplace to wider systems of social support for caring and to ways of resolving inequalities in time use between women and men to resolve persistent gender inequalities in work and to provide a better work-life balance for men as well as women. That is, although technology provides new opportunities, it is introduced within existing social structures and, unless these are challenged, it is likely that they will simply allow life to be squeezed around the growing demands of work and gender inequality, albeit in new forms, will remain.

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Notes

1. Castells (2001, p. 7) makes a pledge to remedy this omission viz 'I have vowed to myself [and to the reader] to continue working on this topic [gender and the Internet] and have it ready for a possible second edition of this book' [*Internet Galaxy*]. (my insertions)
2. For example, the Gorillaz, a virtual pop group designed by Damon Albarn of Blur, had a top ten hit in June 2001 and also a best-selling CD. It is possible to visit the site, talk interactively to the virtual band members and spray graffiti on the walls of their virtual flat.
3. This is encapsulated in a recent advert for Consignia in which Elton John selects a whole range of expensive goods from the Internet, then expresses frustration that they are only virtual, but the door then opens and a large group of very happy-looking (but in reality low-paid) postal workers appear with the physical parcels.
4. Overall in the IER/IFF survey 15% of employees worked on Sunday and 12.5% on Saturday and Sunday.
5. This data comes from the Wired Sussex database (<http://www.wiredsussex.com>, — this database is regularly updated, registration is voluntary and free — so is likely to be an under- rather than over-statement. In total about 3,000 people are employed with a turnover of about £300m.
6. The firms were identified from the Wired Sussex database and invited to participate in the study by email. A 25% response rate was obtained. Two of the original in-depth interviews were dropped from the final analysis as the firms were not in Brighton and Hove.
7. For calculations about company size I have changed the gender of one company from female to male because the interviewee was neither the owner nor manager. Chi square was significant at the 5% level.
8. Chi square was significant at the 1% level.
9. For example 58% of women (n = 10) earned less than £15,000 p.a. compared to 43% of men (n = 16) and 22% of men (n = 8) above £50,000 compared to 11.8% (n = 2) women, but the differences were not statistically significant.

10. Information from an academic and entrepreneur in the new media sector obtained in the follow-up survey and verified by the company concerned. The role of freelancers is being explored in further research.

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