A systemic approach to interpersonal relationships and activities among French teleworkers

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Within a systemic and interactional approach, this study seeks to understand how French teleworkers (re)organise their relationships with others as well as their activities. Lexical analysis of interviews with 24 telecommuters (nomadic, alternating and working at home full-time) confirms and complements the results in the literature in this field. On one hand, the findings confirmed a decline in the quality of professional relationships due to their being mediated through technology. On the other hand, there was a distinction between the ways in which different types of teleworkers ascribed meaning and adapted their activities and business, family and social relationships.

Keywords: telework, systemic approach, interpersonal relationships, activities, organisation.

Introduction

The massive use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the workplace as well as at home and the economic shifts towards globalisation and a service economy are all characteristics that have contributed to the emergence and organisation of remote and Internet-based forms of work (Kouloumdjian, 2007). Emblematic of the transformations currently affecting work (Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006), teleworking in France has progressed slowly but steadily. According INSEE1 (2009), just over 20 per cent of French companies have adopted teleworking programmes and, according to a study conducted in 2012 in large French companies2 by a French ministry, just over 12 per cent of employees telework.

Although there is no consensus on how to define and understand teleworking, four key elements must be specified if we are to arrive at a clear definition: technology, location, time and contractual arrangements (Haddon and Brynin, 2005). For this study, teleworking is considered to be a generic term that refers to a contractualised form of organising and carrying out professional activities that take place entirely or partially remotely (i.e. occurring outside the employer’s premises at least one day per week) and through the use of ICT (Taskin and Devos, 2005; Maruyama et al., 2009).

Depending on where the work is done, four broad categories of telework can be identified (Hill et al., 2003; Taskin and Devos, 2005; Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006; Hislop and

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1 INSEE: National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies
2 Ministry: Ministry of Employment and Solidarity
Axtell, 2007): telework at home full-time or permanently (work is performed exclusively at home); alternating telework at home (the employee partly works at the office and partly at home, i.e. at least one day per week from home); mobile telework (the teleworker works from multiple sites); and finally, telework at a telecentre3 (the work is done at premises reserved for working, outside the company and near the employee’s home).

Given these characteristics, this study focuses on the transformation of the system of relationships with others and changes in the ensemble of activities among three types of French teleworkers from different private companies (home full-time, alternating and mobile). As discussed below, theoretical and empirical research on teleworking focuses primarily on its impact in the professional world and on work–life balance. However, the literature does not sufficiently address the study of interpersonal relationships, of activities and of the ways in which these two are adapted, even though the characteristics of telework lie in the use of ICTs that result in changing the place of work and the boundaries between different areas of workers’ lives. This article’s contribution is to address, systemically, how teleworkers perceive and organise their relationships with others (work colleagues, supervisors, family members, close friends, etc.) as well as their activities (occupational duties, caring for home and family, sports and leisure, etc.) in the different spheres of their life (related to work, family, social and personal life). The results of a qualitative study of 24 French employed telecommuters revealed certain commonalities in the way they ascribed meaning to their new situation, as well as showing differences in how they managed their relationships and activities. These findings contribute to the current state of knowledge and understanding of the way in which employees integrate telework into their daily lives.

Teleworking and changes in the world of work

In the academic literature, conflicting interpretations exist on the impact of telework. On the one hand, studies claim that teleworking reduces interruptions, disruptions and distractions at work, thereby increasing concentration, productivity, commitment and quality of work (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Halford, 2005; Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006), and this is true particularly when employees have support from their managers (St-Onge et al., 2000). Moreover, some studies have shown that the increased feeling of empowerment and motivation at work (Hill et al., 2003) and the increased sense of control over their working time (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Maruyama et al., 2009) are ultimately associated with greater satisfaction among teleworkers (Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006). According to Virick et al. (2010), teleworkers who work on average the least and the most days per week at home are those who are the least satisfied (an inverse U-shaped relationship). For St-Onge et al. (2000), teleworkers are most satisfied with their new work situation if they have a separate room at home dedicated to working as well as technical and material support provided by the company.

On the other hand, according to Bailey and Kurland (2002), the results observed concerning the increase in productivity are the consequence of an intensification of work. In fact, because teleworking reduces commuting time and enables more flexible work organisation, teleworkers tend to increase their weekly time spent working time in order to meet deadlines, handle emergencies and unexpected tasks (Hill et al., 2003; Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Metzger and Cléach, 2004; Taskin and Devos, 2005; Maruyama et al., 2009). For this reason, several authors have raised the issue of the deleterious effects of telework on health and that telework can encourage overwork, workaholism, occupational stress and even lead to burnout (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Hill et al., 2003; Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Metzger and Cléach, 2004). In the same vein, some authors have found greater dissatisfaction among teleworkers and believe that this stems from the physical separation from others in the professional sphere and a sense of disconnectedness (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Taskin and Devos, 2005; Golden, 2009). As a result of this physical separation,
teleworkers seem less attached, more independent and have less sense of belonging to their company (Hislop and Axtell, 2007; Golden, 2009). Hunton and Norman (2010) found that organisational commitment and involvement are actually lower among teleworkers who work at home full-time, but are higher among alternating teleworkers.

**Telework and work–life balance**

Research focusing on the relationship between work and life outside work has also provided mixed results (Maruyama et al., 2009). Some emphasise a positive impact of telework on work–life balance. In this case, teleworking is associated with more availability for family activities and relationships and greater flexibility to better balance multiple roles and to better prioritise various activities (Baruch, 2000; Hill et al., 2003; Metzger and Cléach, 2004; Maruyama et al., 2009). However, Hilbrecht et al. (2008) find that even in the case of a better balance between work and family, teleworkers have little time for themselves or individual leisure activities. Other findings, however, highlight the negative consequences of this form of work. In these studies, teleworkers say they feel great pressure because they struggle to juggle both work and family demands. These studies find that the boundary between these two spheres becomes blurred (often associated with the difficulty to limit work), that tensions and conflicts emerge within the family, that there is an increase in stress in personal life and that there is a disruption of work as well as family activities due to their overlapping in space and time (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Metzger and Cléach, 2004; Taskin and Devos, 2005).

Many authors, in fact, explain that work–life balance varies depending on the type of telework (Hill et al., 2003; Metzger and Cléach, 2004; Hislop and Axtell, 2007; Camps, 2008; Golden, 2009; Maruyama et al., 2009). These studies have found that when teleworking involves doing a majority of professional activities at home, teleworkers have a harder time finding a balance between the time and the energy invested in work and their personal lives, and in managing the intermingling of work and family. However, when they are able to do so, telework is associated with a better work–life balance. Regarding mobile teleworking, which involves doing more professional activities outside the home, the distinction between work and private life is less of a problem. Rather, the problem for these workers is the considerable amount of time spent at work (through many business trips and driving) and their focus on work.

**Teleworking and professional relationships**

A third important aspect has received relatively little attention in the literature: the risk of teleworkers’ social isolation (Hislop and Axtell, 2007). According to Taskin and Devos (2005), telework is part of a process of individualisation and, as such, constitutes a social innovation that can lead to the fragmentation of work groups and produce exclusion. Recent research on telework has focused more on individual processes, neglecting the study of relational processes and their transformations. However, some studies have recently identified actual professional isolation among teleworkers. Golden et al. (2008), for example, show that physical separation from others in the working world means psychological separation and a feeling of exclusion, which are associated with a decrease in performance. Montreuil and Lippel (2003) report the case of teleworkers who did not receive information from their supervisors about work expectations and evaluation criteria, which gave them the feeling of being sidelined, to such an extent that their anxiety led to long periods of sick leave due to burnout. Taskin and Edwards (2007), however, found that when faced with social pressure, teleworkers developed strategies for remaining visible to their colleagues and superiors to show that they are present and working, by sending frequent emails, etc. Other studies (Baruch, 2000; Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Brown and O'Hara, 2003; Taskin, 2003) reported a feeling of loneliness, of professional
isolation and also social isolation and a lack of spontaneous or informal interactions with colleagues. These teleworkers believed it was their manager’s responsibility to maintain cohesion within their team by organising more regular physical meetings. In contrast, Halford (2005) showed that virtual communications allow teleworkers to build productive new relationships and open up new spaces of intimacy.

Although these studies inform us about certain processes associated with entering telework, in order to fully understand these changes, in particular interpersonal ones, these effects need to be analysed by taking into account the system as a whole. In addition, a qualitative study, which includes a multiple-variable, systemic, and interactionist approach, can help to understand the psychological mechanisms involved in these changes in the working environment and better explain some of the conflicting results in the literature.

**Systemic and interactionist approach to teleworking**

The concept of a ‘system of activities’ seeks to go beyond the simple dichotomy of work/outside work (Hajjar and Curie, 1985). This notion argues first that the very concept of life ‘outside work’ gives absolute primacy to work. Second, ‘outside work’ is not a homogeneous category that can be reduced simply to the family or ‘private’ sphere, but actually covers a plurality of experiences (family activities as well as those with friends, recreation, civic and community commitments, political activities, etc.).

This theoretical framework of a ‘system of activities’ considers that people’s activities form a system because first, they use resources that are limited in time and in energy, and second, every activity is likely to provide other activities with resources that the person derives from their physical and social environment (Hajjar and Curie, 1985; Curie and Hajjar, 1987; Curie et al., 1990). The system of activities consists of a plurality of subsystems (family, professional, social and personal), which themselves consist of multiple activities (e.g. caring for children, performing a professional task, practising a collective sport, reading a novel). This theoretical framework also allows for the fact that individuals manage their system (substituting one activity for another, postponing, planning).

Because each of these subsystems is relatively independent, they may use management processes specific to that activity (e.g. management of many tasks may exist in professional work and not in domestic work). Yet as these subsystems are, at the same time, relatively interdependent, each one receives and provides constraints and resources to the other subsystems (motivational, emotional, material, temporal). Regulation and coordination of inter-systemic exchanges take place depending on the kind of lifestyle the person wants, which the subject creates and which is guided by his or her values, knowledge, relationship modes and plans (Hajjar and Curie, 1985; Curie et al., 1990). This life model interconnects the experiences relative to each subsystem (intersignification of activities) and controls inter-systemic exchanges, either for inhibiting or activating them. Preventing exchanges means ensuring that the functioning of one subsystem does not interfere with the other subsystems (compartmentalisation). To activate them means using the resources resulting from one subsystem in order to act in another subsystem and thus increase their interdependence (Curie, 2002).

From an interactionist perspective, and following the model of systemic activities, Almudever (1998) proposes a model for relationships with others. She postulates that observations conducted at the *intrapersonal* level require a similar approach at the *interpersonal* level. These observations concern the relationships that a person maintains with the important people in his or her life (significant others) in the different spheres of his or her life. According to the author, although these links to others are subject to changes over time, as well as a changing social environment, they are constantly (inter)signified and reconstructed by the person himself or herself. According to this approach, the contribution of interpersonal relationships in dealing with and succeeding in professional transitions is an essential object for study.
Finally, in this article, we consider that beginning to telework constitutes a disruption in the system of activities and in the system of relationships with others, by changing the subsystem and professional relationships, and by integrating new kinds of activities and relationships that must be reorganised with other areas of life and other relationships. This professional transition must therefore be associated with a change in inter-systemic exchanges, which calls upon processes for regulating the whole system (Curie and Hajjar, 1987), and with the introduction of new choices and aspirations, in cooperation and in conflict with others.

The objective of this study, therefore, is to identify and analyse the changes in activities and in relationships associated with different areas of the subjects’ lives and the management processes that they utilised from the moment they began teleworking.

Methods and data collection

A qualitative study (with heuristic aims) with 24 teleworkers was conducted. It focused on employed telecommuters from many different companies in France. Participants were recruited using opportunity and snowball sampling. This included contacting employers, advertising on a French specialised website (e.g. a telework national discussion forum) and word of mouth. Three types of telework were targeted: eight subjects working at home full-time, eight alternating (telecommuting on average between two and three days per week) and the last eight were mobile teleworkers.

The number of years that the sample had been engaged in teleworking varied from 3 months to 15 years (standard deviation: 5.5 years). The subjects were senior and middle managers working in diverse medium-sized and large organisations in the private sector (see below class 4). Two-thirds of them (16) live less than two hours drive from the company they work for. The average age of the sample was 39 (range 27–60 years). It was composed of 15 men and 9 women, 21 living with a partner and 15 have at least one child.

Semi-structured telephone interviews that lasted between 25 and 55 minutes were conducted. The topics discussed were, first, the person’s career path before entering telework and the reasons for teleworking. Following that, subjects were asked to describe their professional, family and social relationships, as well as changes in them since their started to telework. These latter elements enabled us to identify changes in the system of activities and the system of relationships with others that were in the process of changing, as well as changes in their organisation and functioning since the transition.

Because this research also had an exploratory component, we conducted a morphosyntactic and lexical analysis (i.e. word distribution patterns within a text) using Alceste software (Reinert, 1990), as one of the major advantages of this programme resides in the inductive nature of the process. Alceste software identifies the main lexical universe present in the speech, highlights the similarities and differences in vocabulary and analyses the distribution of that vocabulary into the phrases that make up the text of the interview. This process enables us to detect the presence of speech classes (see below the five classes), which are each made up of sets of utterances [elementary context units (ECUs), i.e. sentences or fragment of sentences] that are homogeneous in the sense that they are co-occurrences of the vocabulary in that class (i.e. sentences that Alceste identifies within each class contain the characteristic words statistically associated with one another). These classes taken together differ significantly between each other. First, the software categorises the subjects’ responses according to a hierarchical cluster analysis (HCA). Afterwards, it tries to establish a correspondence between the responses of one subject and those of other individuals or groups of individuals based on certain attributes (in our case: age, gender, marital status, children, type of telework, years of experience teleworking and geographic distance from the company). The task of the researcher consists in attributing meaning to each of the classes that have been identified from the corresponding semantic field.
Results

The HCA results show that the speech corpus is divided into five classes that significantly represent the speech of all respondents (69 per cent of the corpus or 2,010 ECUs categorised). On the dendrogram (Figure 1), class 4 stands out from the other four classes. Indeed, class 4 characterises the careers of teleworkers, while the speech associated with the four other classes focuses directly on the changes triggered by telework. A second level of distinction opposes class 1, centred on the professional sphere, with classes 3, 5 and 2, which are more related to the interdependence of different areas of life (family, professional, social and personal). Finally, class 3 is distinct from 5 and 2, as it concerns the ways relations with others as well as different activities were (re)organised, which in turn depended on the type of telework (mobile vs. alternating and home-based teleworkers).

Factors such as the specific vocabulary, the most representative ECUs and significantly descriptive attributes associated with each of these classes enable us to describe them more precisely. For various reasons, we have assigned each teleworker a pseudonym.

Specificities of teleworkers’ career paths (class 4)

Class 4 consists of 456 ECUs (22.69 per cent of the analysed data set). No descriptive attribute is significantly associated with this class (or is excluded from it), thus it represents the totality of the speech of those interviewed.

Although it is not directly connected to the aim of this study, this class, overall, provides a detailed description of the subjects’ professional characteristics and careers, before and after entering telework (see Table 1, category 1).

The significant lexical forms highlight the diversity of industries and the diversity of companies in which the subjects have worked (see Table 1, categories 2 and 3).

Beyond this heterogeneity, the teleworkers’ profiles and their professional careers also contained some specific characteristics. All the teleworkers interviewed had university level degrees and had positions of responsibility (see Table 1, category 4), which correspond to the ‘standard profile’ of teleworkers (Haddon and Brynin, 2005). They all worked in companies with an international dimension (see Table 1, category 5). Most of them have had many changes in their career paths (see Table 1, category 6). These paths have been marked by significant changes in the companies they work for: Aude, Celine, Leah, Jules, Yves, Pierre and Jean mentioned their companies being bought out or...
reorganised, which affected the life of their company and led them to either change jobs within the company or change companies. The subjects’ speech also denotes considerable inter-enterprise mobility:

I changed companies nine times in 25 years (Jules).

Inter-company mobility also seems specific to teleworkers in that it is associated with voluntary choices that involve risk and that reflect a high degree of independence. Indeed, some interviewees say they had rejected positions or offers for promotion within their company, or that they voluntarily left their company, because they felt the company did not offer the kind of career development that they aspired to (Fred, Marc, Mina, Aude, Cloe and Anne). Finally, all teleworkers mentioned upward mobility within their company, which led them to having a position of responsibility.

Reorganisation of professional relationships and changes in their quality (class 1)

Class 1 includes 647 ECUs (32.19 per cent of the analysed corpus) and represents the speech of all those interviewed (no illustrative variable was significantly associated with or excluded).

Two main themes emerged when examining the lexical forms significantly associated with this class (see Table 2, categories 1 and 2): the situations and means of communication associated with work relationships and the changes in the quality of professional relationships since starting telework.

The speech of teleworkers in this class is thus focused on the description of the tools used to communicate with colleagues and, to a lesser extent, with superiors (see Table 2, category 3). The means of communication were adapted depending on the

| Cat. 1  | Year; work placement; job; path; to be in charge of; contract; profession; experience; career |
|---------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cat. 2  | Computers; technology; web; telecom; technical; tool/sale; to sell; salesperson; marketing/air/financer; bank/recruit; evaluation/translation; language/real estate/pharmacy; laboratory; medicine |
| Cat. 3  | Company; firm; industry; agency; business; group |
| Cat. 4  | Study; training; diploma; master’s; bachelor’s; in charge of; manager; developer; engineer; management; leading; head; task; give responsibility; executive |
| Cat. 5  | French; European; international; Europe; English; American; French-style; France; country; English-speaking; national |
| Cat. 6  | Hire; join; evolution; to buy out; to suggest; to change; to look for; to determine; to figure it out; to give; project; to quit; perspective |

| Cat. 1  | Telephone; email; physical; distance; to send; meeting; message; to use; to speak; to meet; method; to see; MSN; face; to discuss; conference; connection; Internet; chat; webcam; Skype; etc. |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Cat. 2  | Relation; same; exchange; lack; bond; together; share; different; human; coffee; relationship; virtual; need; serious; enough; affinity; informal; etc. |
| Cat. 3  | Colleague; hierarchy |

Table 1: Categories associated with the specific vocabulary of class 4

Table 2: Categories associated with the specific vocabulary of class 1
content of the exchange. In daily life, teleworkers all said that they use primarily asynchronous tools when away from their workplace:

I work a lot by email (Marc).

Not a day goes by that I don’t communicate with a colleague by email (Zoë).

In a complementary way, they used synchronous tools that enabled them to communicate in more detail:

I often use the telephone for things that a bit more specific or require good understanding (Eric).

If I need specific help on the project, we do it by Skype or by telephone (Jean).

Nevertheless, most teleworkers insist on the fact that face-to-face meetings remain indispensable for certain aspects of their job:

It’s harder to talk by phone or Msn than to really talk to each other when there’s a problem or when we want an opinion (Jean).

If it’s something important, we try to meet with each other, it’s always easier to say things face to face than to write it or say it over the phone (Simon).

While some subjects referred to difficulties or misunderstandings, overall telecommuters said they were relatively satisfied with their professional relationships mediated through technology:

Exchanges are just as fast, sometimes even faster, I find (Anne).

My relationships are good; I’ve never had any conflict (Simon).

My [professional] relationships are quite positive, in the sense that we can interact with people however we want, we can send email, or get them, anytime and anywhere (José).

However, the majority of teleworkers have some qualms about the lack of face-to-face meetings. According to them, the physical distance limits the cultivation of friendly relationships with co-workers, which traditionally develop around informal moments. In this sense, meetings organised by the company are considered paramount, even though they are not as frequent as some would like.

From a distance, it is more difficult to create affinities on personal matters with colleagues (Eddy).

It makes things quite impersonal, it is not the same thing to send each other emails as to see each other at a table and have a coffee (Celine).

As for colleagues, what’s difficult when you’re telecommuting is to still have this connection, to be visible when we have become invisible (Eric).

There’s a need to talk with people physically, people have to meet with each other for them to feel like they’re part of the same company (Tom).

Finally, we noted that the importance of relationships with colleagues became greater, as their professional networks appear to be less extensive since beginning telework:

We talk much less for example with Human Resources or Secretaries, because these are people we would run into at the coffee machine or at noon when we go to eat (Eddy).

Organisation of activities and interpersonal relationships among mobile teleworkers (class 3)

Class 3 includes 402 ECUs (20 per cent of the analysed corpus). This class is clearly characteristic of mobile teleworkers ($\chi^2 = 19.53$). Note the significant absence of speech by alternating teleworkers ($\chi^2 = -13.52$) and those who work from home full-time ($\chi^2 = -11.77$).
Overall, the subjects’ speech concerns the spatio-temporal organisation (see Table 3, category 1) of their activities and their relationships with others in family, professional and social areas of life (see Table 3, category 2). Teleworkers explain at the outset that managing these activities and relationships depends entirely on their projects and trips for business (see Table 3, category 3).

In fact, because these trips are irregular and driven by the needs of the company and its clients, it is impossible for mobile teleworkers to organise their different activities as they would like:

The work can be anywhere . . . we can’t foresee, anticipate, we’re not in control, it is the customer who decides . . . you have to be ready to go at any time (Luke).

I try to plan my work a bit how I want, but there are weeks when it’s the client who plans (Zoé).

In addition, these trips are sometimes associated with weather or transportation problems that may make the duration unpredictable.

In this context, it is inconvenient for mobile teleworkers to have regular leisure activities and to maintain social (leisure or friendly) relationships:

I am not bound to the city where I live now . . . to play a team sport becomes very difficult, if I have a practice on Monday night or Wednesday night, it could happen that I miss them for four months . . . (Ben).

It is difficult to integrate yourself into the social life of the place where you live, if you’re not in the same place during the week and during the weekend (Peter).

In terms of family life, here again the business trips inherent in mobile telework create relationship problems:

In the end, I see my wife little, because in fact on Monday I have to be on-site, so because of that, usually I leave on Sunday (Ben).

There is regular tension with my girlfriend [about absences from home] (Jean).

Finally, mobile teleworkers also say that there is a clear separation between the professional world and the social world:

With telework, you’re connected to your co-workers, but there’s not this personal side that enables you to go out together, or to have leisure activities with your co-workers (Aude).

They are clearly my colleagues, not my friends; telecommuting doesn’t do that, doesn’t bring you closer like that (Ben).

In addition, these teleworkers tended to consider the professional sphere as central and to be absorbed by their work:

The professional comes before the personal (Zoé).

You are in constant contact with the job, it’s true that sometimes I work late at night and on weekends, I struggle to keep my phone away from myself (John).

We may tend to deny contact with friends and think only about the job (Mina).

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Table 3: Categories associated with the specific vocabulary of class 3

| Cat. 1 | Week; day; city; weekend; place; period; time slot; pace |
| Cat. 2 | Sport; spouse; leisure; home; husband; friend; job |
| Cat. 3 | Trip; to return; kilometre; to go back; to find again; to move; to travel; to come; return; road; to arrive |
Finally, these ‘nomads’ seem to maintain a balance between their various spheres of activities by forbidding interaction between the field of work and their other areas of life.

Reorganisation of family and social relationships among teleworkers at home full-time and alternating (class 5)

Class 5 includes 232 ECUs (11.54 per cent of the analysed corpus). This class is characteristic of teleworkers with children ($\chi^2 = 52.63$) and teleworkers at home full-time ($\chi^2 = 29.61$) without, however, excluding the speech of alternating teleworkers. However, we noted the significant absence of speech by mobile teleworkers ($\chi^2 = -31.36$).

The speech associated with this class focuses on changes in the system of relations with others since beginning telework (see Table 4, category 1). Overall, the subjects of this class concern the perceived benefits of teleworking in terms of family relationships as well as from a more personal point of view (see Table 4, category 2).

With regard to the domestic sphere (see Table 4, categories 2 and 3), all subjects in this class said that the change in the way of working has had a positive impact on their relationships with their children and/or spouse:

- I’m more available for my children (Leah).
- We enjoy being each other more (Teo).
- You spend more time with children (Jules).

An improvement in the quality of relationships with family members was associated with better organisation and prioritisation of family activities:

- It allows our loved ones to take advantage of our presence, to help with household chores or the kids’ homework . . . I see many benefits of flexibility, being present at home, especially with my four children who are not very old (Fred).
- I can go pick up my kids at school earlier, I can organize myself to go to a parent-teacher meeting (Leah).
- It enables you to organise yourself depending on each person’s needs (Jules).

As for personal life (see Table 4, categories 2 and 4), teleworkers’ speech in this class continues in the same sense:

- Teleworking, from a personal point of view, is an advantage (Marc).
- With teleworking, I get to take time for myself (Mary).

However, the benefits described in the family and personal areas are offset by losses in social relationships (see Table 4, category 5). As regards the social world, while men take care of their children more, they explain that establishing social relations in a female-dominated environment remained complicated:

Table 4: Categories associated with the specific vocabulary of class 5

| Cat. | Categories |
|------|------------|
| 1    | Impact; incidence |
| 2    | Advantage; available; priority; to help; to dedicate; intense; to make the most of; to manage; positive; to contribute; flexible; to improve; benefit; to organise |
| 3    | Child; family; woman; couple |
| 4    | Personal |
| 5    | Mom; parent; inconvenient |
| 6    | House; room; to frustrate; to understand; to suffer; to separate; in exchange |
I do not have close relationships with the other parents or teachers (José).
They are relatively superficial relationships . . . I talk with the other mothers [picking up their kids at school] but we don’t have much in common (Marc).

In addition, the more general question of the teleworkers’ social isolation was spontaneously mentioned:

The impact of telework on social relations is still significant, you have to be careful not to lock yourself away (Marc).

It [telework] can be positive, but it requires an ability to remain isolated (Eloise).

Finally, it is important to note that the interviewees’ speech was also marked by mentioning difficulties due to the intermixing of work and family life (see Table 4, category 6). Permeability between these two spheres of activity was (and still is for some) a source of misunderstandings or even conflict:

As for the family, there’s a little frustration, the family sees you but they can’t really enjoy your presence (Jules).

They have a mother who is there but not really there (Eloise).

For my wife, it was hard because I was busy in the evenings (Fred).

Thus, the benefits of telework mentioned above arise in reality from the prior establishment of a clear distinction between work life and family life. The establishment of such a boundary, in fact, involved a physical separation of the workplace within the home, as well as negotiations with friends and family (see Table 4, category 6):

At the beginning, they had a bit of trouble, and then ultimately they realized that when I was in my office with the door closed, they were not to come bother me [about children] (Teo).

Some adaptation was necessary, so that everyone understands that it’s not because I’m at home that I’m available . . . the main point that you have to be careful about is the separation between work life and personal life, because it’s no longer the physical space that makes the separation . . . everything’s in the same place . . . so I have a separate room (Marc).

Temporal reorganisation of the system of activities among alternating and at home full-time teleworkers (class 2)

Class 2 consists of 273 ECUs (13.58 per cent of the corpus). It is representative of alternating teleworkers ($\chi^2 = 18.90$), although without excluding teleworkers at home full-time. However, the discourse of mobile teleworkers is clearly excluded ($\chi^2 = -18.36$).

The main theme that emerges from this class refers to the temporal reorganisation of the subjects’ different activities since they began teleworking. The workers explain that this new form of work offered them greater flexibility in organising their activities and ultimately allowed them to obtain significant temporal benefits (see Table 5, category 1).

A first important element was travel between home and the office (see Table 5, category 2). Teleworkers in this class are unanimous in saying that since they began teleworking, the fact of having to go less frequently to their workplace and/or to be
able to commute outside of traditional office hours is an important time daily gain (this was the case for Yves, Eddy, Noah, Mary, Leah, Celine, Marc and Teo). Moreover, it is clear that the reduction of time spent commuting to the office as well as the autonomy in managing their working hours are associated with better quality of life. In the most representative ECU class, Noah, Teo, Anne and Mary explicitly mention a decrease in stress and fatigue since they began teleworking (see Table 5, category 3).

In addition, this class of teleworkers clearly explain that the temporal benefits obtained are reinvested in their different areas of life (activation of time resources) and allow them to better balance them. Some also mention the fact of being able to devote more time to and better manage work activities:

It’s a win-win, I’m more efficient and productive (Noah).

In general, the two hours of commuting that I no longer do, I spend them on work instead, it’s a total benefit for the company (Leah).

Regarding the family and domestic life:

If I want to mow the lawn in the afternoon, I’ll mow the lawn; if I want to get the children at school at 4 o’clock, I’ll go get them (Jules).

I can take short breaks and go to the butcher to buy a piece of meat or even vacuum quickly (Eddy).

For personal and social life:

I have two hours less commuting in the morning so I sleep a little more . . . I can take two hours at the beginning of the afternoon and spend time with a friend (Mary).

By teleworking, I have more time to go out for a beer and chat with friends (Noah).

However, the benefits associated with changing working mode necessarily require the establishment of rigorous organisation (see Table 5, category 4). As the teleworkers in this class explained, such an organisation was essential for distinguishing work from ‘nonwork’ for establishing a new balance between the different areas of life, and also to avoid being overwhelmed by work, which had a tendency to intensify:

There must be some discipline to get to work in the morning, but also for not letting it get out of hand, and to stick to certain hours . . . my work takes a lot of time, but I do not want to end work every night at eleven o’clock, so I discipline myself (Mary).

I have set myself limits, and so I go out a little bit, because there are days I do not leave the house, because in the morning I start working right away until the evening (Celine).

I try to ensure that work does not take precedence over my personal life, even though I sometimes work outside the ‘legal’ working hours (Anne).

Discussion

Using a systemic and interactionist approach, the objective of this exploratory study was to identify and analyse the ways in which employed teleworkers perceive and (re)organise their activities and interpersonal relationships since beginning this form of work. It focused on France, a country in which there is comparatively little material in English.

At first, the results from a morphosyntactic and lexical analysis of the body of data enabled us to identify similarities among all those interviewed.

In terms of occupational profile (class 4), we found that the French teleworkers surveyed all have a high level of education and a position of some responsibility (Haddon and Brynin, 2005). Moreover, they also had a career path marked by mobility, independence and risk-taking, the purpose of which was the realisation of their short- or medium-term career aspirations.

Regarding relationships in the professional sphere (class 1), it was immediately clear that this was an important subject in teleworkers’ speech, whereas this is a neglected area of research. The results show that the physical separation from other professionals also meant a psychological separation among teleworkers (Baruch, 2000; Cooper and
Kurland, 2002; Brown and O’Hara, 2003; Taskin, 2003; Hislop and Axtell, 2007; Golden et al., 2008; Golden, 2009). Technological tools, although they enabled them to interact and collaborate in good conditions, established relationships that remained strictly professional. In addition, they did not replace face-to-face exchanges, which were necessary for managing certain work activities and to developing friendly or closer relationships.

Teleworkers also felt that it was their employer’s responsibility to set up regular meetings or get-togethers that would enable them to meet with their colleagues face-to-face and, more broadly, to stay connected to the life of the company. They very clearly expressed a need for management to be involved in developing specific practices of personnel management (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Taskin, 2010). It is important to note that the sense of disconnection and psychological distance affected all teleworkers, including those in alternate mode, which contrasts with the results of certain studies that tend to argue that part-time teleworking has no significant impact on professional relationships and being part of a team or the company (Bailey and Kurland, 2002). These initial empirical findings are crucial because little is known about teleworkers’ relational processes. Moreover, they outline the need to avoid overestimating the effects of the proportion of work done remotely, as alternating teleworkers were not exempt from isolation and professional exclusion.

What was common to the speech of all teleworkers (classes 3 and 2) was the importance of their professional involvement, or in some cases, the omnipresence of work (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003). The results show that their considerable time investment at work ultimately occurred at the expense of personal and social life (Hilbrecht et al., 2008) in order to preserve their family life. Moreover, the teleworkers’ speech clearly underlines the need to develop new time management skills to create new boundaries and to reorganise time for different activities (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Metzger and Cléach, 2004; Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006) in order to avoid the deleterious effects of teleworking. In fact, the freedom to organise their working time without formal and imperative safeguards can lead to overwork (Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Metzger and Cléach, 2004) and have adverse effects on health as well as on the balance between the different spheres of life (Hill et al., 2003).

Second, the results of this analysis also highlight differences in how teleworkers organised and/or reorganised activities such as relationships with others. Mobile teleworkers (class 3) highly valued their work and inhibited the permeation between their different areas of life to a greater extent. They seemed to have little control in planning their different activities as well as their relationships with others, which ultimately are planned around their work and business travel. These elements are consistent with the research that finds that mobile teleworkers describe an imbalance between work and personal life, although they have less difficulty distinguishing work from nonwork (Hill et al., 2003; Hislop and Axtell, 2007; Camps, 2008). In their situation, working outside the home facilitates the establishment of clear boundaries. However, the centrality of work as well as the partitioning of their different areas of life, identified through the theoretical model of a ‘system of activities’, is also able to explain these results.

Alternating and at home full-time teleworkers (classes 5 and 2) have, in turn, individual responsibility (Taskin and Devos, 2005) for setting limits between their various spheres of activities. According to existing studies (St-Onge et al., 2000; Sullivan and Lewis, 2001; Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Metzger and Cléach, 2004; Taskin and Devos, 2005; Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006; Hilbrecht et al., 2008), in order to reconcile these different areas of life, teleworkers had to exercise self-discipline and self-restraint to avoid being overwhelmed by work, to create a physical and symbolic separation of their work environment and to negotiate compromises with their friends and family. One key finding from this study is that the process of reorganising the various activities associated with changing teleworkers’ way of working happened gradually and was not without problems. It meant making considerable personal effort to overcome the problems arising from intra- and inter-individual deliberations (Curie and Hajjar, 1987; Almudever, 1998; Baubion-Broye and Hajjar, 1998). Once this new organisation had
been stabilised, there was a general improvement in quality of life and the quality of family relationships (Baruch, 2000; Metzger and Cléach, 2004; Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006; Golden, 2009). This (re)structuring phase, identified as an ‘adjustment period’ (Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Raghuram and Wiesenfeld, 2003; Maruyama et al., 2009), may explain the contrasting results in the literature. Note, however, that relationship benefits in family life must be qualified: to compensate, professional and social relationships are more superficial, distant and even sometimes strained. In addition, the social isolation observed among teleworkers, often associated with work (Baruch, 2000; Brown and O’Hara, 2003; Cooper and Kurland, 2002; Golden et al., 2008; Taskin, 2003), does not only concern professional life. These latter new results underline the contribution of this study and the importance of adopting a systemic framework: if we want to better understand the changes and adjustments associated with beginning to telework, researchers must not limit themselves to examining only one area of life.

Conclusion

This research has important implications for both theory and practice. Results from this study clearly shows that mobile, full-time at home and alternating teleworkers do not ascribe the same meaning to their new work situation, and they are different in the ways they reorganise and adjust their system of relationships with others as well as in their activities. The findings thus support and reinforce the argument that we must not consider telecommuters as a homogeneous population and, therefore, specific studies must be done that take into account the variety of teleworking situations, as a complement to studies that propose an overview (Bailey and Kurland, 2002; Hill et al., 2003; Rey and Sitnikoff, 2006; Camps, 2008).

While these results need to be confirmed and refined through more extensive, and in particular, a longitudinal study, this research nevertheless shows the advantages of using a model of system activities (Curie and Hajjar, 1987; Almudever, 1998; Baubion-Broye and Hajjar, 1998) to better understand the process of intersignification of behaviour among teleworkers and the psychosocial processes associated with these new forms of work. This approach contributes knowledge and understanding to extant telework literature.

We also argue that future research must deepen the study of relational processes (at the interpersonal, intra- and inter-group levels) and their changes over time, if we want to better understand professional identity in remote work situations mediated through ICT.

In practical terms, the sense of isolation and the lack of informal relationships and of support reported by teleworkers show the need for regular and formal face-to-face meetings to ensure the planning and management of work activities while fostering exchange (formal and informal) and the sharing of information. If companies want the transition to telecommuting to be successful, to preserve teleworkers’ quality of life and well-being and to avoid excluding those who do not have the personal resources to take on these responsibilities, they must develop and deliver training programmes and implement effective policies for managing human resources that seek to support and integrate/reintegrate teleworkers. Support from supervisors, managers and, more broadly, the involvement of all people within the organisation has been recognised as factors for the success of teleworking (St-Onge et al., 2000; Montreuil and Lippel, 2003; Taskin and Edwards, 2007; Golden et al., 2008; Golden, 2009).

Notes

1. Institut National français de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques (French of National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies). http://www.insee.fr/fr/fic/ipweb/ip1228/ip1228.pdf.
2. A study ordered by the French Ministry for Industry, Energy, and the Internet Economy.
3. We decided not to interview teleworkers who work in telecentres because they do not work at home.
4. This article builds on what is known in France as systemic theory, in which there are four interacting and overlapping spheres of life (Baubion-Broye and Hajjar, 1998).
5. For a definition of significant others, see Mead (1934, cited in de Queiroz and Ziolkowski, 1997).
6. Although the interviews and thus the lexical corpus are in French, to facilitate reading, they have been translated here into English.
7. For each class, Alceste computes a list of words that are characteristic for that class. The strength of association between each word and its class is expressed by a $\chi^2$ value: the most highly associated words are listed in our five tables. For better interpretation, we subdivided the specific vocabulary of each class into thematic categories.
8. Alceste uses the $\chi^2$ measurement of association to assess the extent to which the interviewees’ discourse, according to their attributes, is or is not associated with a particular class of vocabulary.

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