

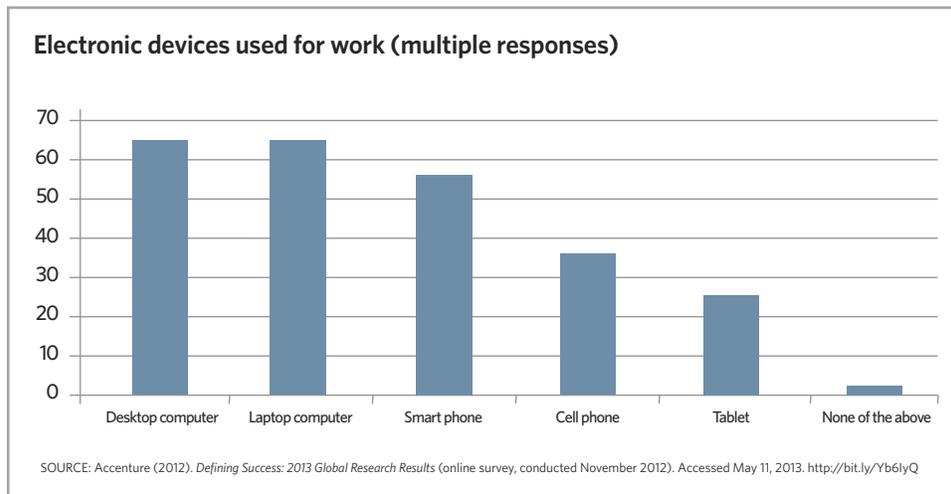
FASCINATING FAMILIES

Aussi disponible en français.

AUGUST 2013 | ISSUE 56

Out of the Office: Workshifting and Remote Work in Canada

BY NATHAN BATTAMS



Workplaces are undergoing a major transformation, with smartphones, tablet computers and Wifi network access reducing an employer's need for fixed office locations and physical presence of their employees. This has fuelled the trend of "workshifting" in Canada, as a growing number of organizations are now allowing their employees to work remotely with customized schedules. For many people, being a mobile worker provides greater flexibility and an opportunity to effectively manage multiple life roles. But for some, the technologies that make remote work possible have also blurred the line between their work and personal lives, and "unplugging" from the office is more challenging than beneficial.

For those who feel there simply aren't enough hours in the day, the constraints of traditional workplaces can be a source of frustration. Commuting to the office, for

example, can contribute to time stress: in 2010, the average Canadian worker spent 26 minutes per day travelling one way to work, and those who commuted 45 minutes or longer (representing 1 in 5 commuters¹) were significantly more likely to report difficulty fulfilling family responsibilities and feelings of "not having enough time for family and friends" than other workers with short or no commute.²

New parents or those providing caregiving to their parents are likely to feel restrained by traditional working patterns. In a 2013 international study, 44% of surveyed women cited "juggling family and life" as a career challenge, and 8 in 10 identified a "flexible work environment" as the most important factor in determining the success of the next generation of professional women.³

...2/

The desire for greater workplace flexibility has been around for several decades, but the evolution and growth of portable communication technologies create an opportunity to support a truly mobile labour force, capable of working from just about any time, any place. Portable computing devices have spread at a rapid pace, particularly when one considers that BlackBerries are only a decade old, and iPhones only half as old as *that*. In 2013, smartphones and tablet computers were owned by 47% and 21% of Canadians, respectively – up from 34% and 10% one year earlier.⁴ Many of these devices are being used for work, with surveyed employees reporting in 2012 that they use smartphones (56%), other cell phones (36%) and/or tablet computers (25%) for their work.⁵

One 2012 study on mobile work identified 69% of employed Canadians as mobile workers – a number projected to grow to 73% of the work force by 2016.⁶ Surveys suggest that flexible work programs are quite popular among Canadian employees, with 9 in 10 saying that “offering a flexible work program makes a company more attractive.”⁷ Many recognize the role technology is playing in current workshifting trends: in 2013, 78% of survey respondents agreed that technology enables them to be more flexible with their schedules.⁸

While remote working may be more popular and prevalent than ever, many employees are finding that the “de-standardization” of their working hours – coupled with the increased accessibility made possible by smartphones and tablet computers – has blurred their home and working lives. In a 2012 international

survey, 7 in 10 respondents said that “technology brings work into [their] personal lives.”⁹ This seems to hold true in Canada, where nearly half (44%) of surveyed employees said in the same year that they “receive work-related phone calls or emails when [they are] off/on holiday” and 29% feel that their employer expects them to be available “24/7”. For some, workshifting is redefining workplace flexibility from working *any* time and *any* place to working *all* the time and everywhere.

Family Lens

As communication technologies become more prevalent and affordable, workshifting is set to become the new norm for many Canadians. For those who experience high time stress or are held back from full participation in the labour market due to mobility restrictions, remote work can help provide much-needed flexibility. New parents, older Canadians and people living with disabilities can benefit from these flexible working arrangements, no longer bound to fixed daily schedules and particular workspaces. However, while workshifting may eliminate certain barriers, it has also eroded the clear separation of “work time” from “personal time” for those who prefer a clear distinction. But workshifting is here to stay, and Canadian workers – with the support of their families – will adapt to this ever-changing landscape.

Nathan Battams is a researcher and writer at the Vanier Institute of the Family.

¹ Statistics Canada (2011). “Average commuting time to work and proportion of workers, by selected characteristics, 2010,” (Table) from *Commuting to work: Results of the 2010 General Social Survey*. Accessed May 1, 2013. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2011002/t/11531/tbl001-eng.htm>

² Turcotte, Martin. “Commuting to work: Results of the 2010 General Social Survey,” in *Canadian Social Trends* (Winter 2012, No. 94). Statistics Canada Reference No. 11-008-XWE. Accessed May 5, 2013. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2011002/article/11531-eng.htm>

³ LinkedIn/Cross-Tab. *What Women Want @ Work: Executive Summary* (survey, conducted January 2013). Accessed May 4, 2013. <http://www.slideshare.net/linkedin/linkedin-what-women-want-work>

⁴ Ipsos (2013). *Close to Half of Canadians Now Own a Smartphone* (survey, conducted in January 2013). Accessed May 7, 2013. <http://www.ipsos-na.com/news-polls/pressrelease.aspx?id=6005>

⁵ Accenture (2012). *Defining Success: 2013 Global Research Results* (online survey, conducted November 2012). Accessed May 11, 2013. <http://www.accenture.com/SiteCollectionDocuments/PDF/Accenture-IWD-2013-Research-Deck-022013.pdf>

⁶ International Data Corporation (2012). *Canadian Mobile Worker 2012-2016 Forecast* (2012 study). Accessed May 9, 2013. <http://www.idc.com/getdoc.jsp?containerId=CA7MS12>

⁷ Harris/Decima (2010). *Evaluating Attitudes about Flexible Work Survey* (survey, conducted March 2010). Accessed May 9, 2013. http://about.telus.com/community/english/news_centre/news_releases/blog/2010/05/18/new-harrisdecima-survey-reveals-89-per-cent-of-canadians-attracted-to-companies-that-offer-flexible-work

⁸ Accenture, 2012.

⁹ Accenture, 2012.

¹⁰ Randstad (2012). *Randstad Workmonitor Global Press Report, Wave 1* (survey, conducted January-February 2012). Accessed May 10, 2013. <http://bit.ly/12m5RPF>

