
Getting Work Done: Family-Based Research and Design

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Abstract

For many parents, mobile technology provides opportunities and obligations to conduct work outside of traditional schedules and workplaces. From this flexibility, parents' personal and professional identities are increasingly intertwined. Children experience their parents integrating paid and unpaid work throughout the day. They observe parents' orientation towards autonomy and responsibility for both kinds of work, often resulting in unpredictable negotiation of technology use. Research on work at Citrix has focused on office workers, their tools, and workspaces, rather than their families. This approach overlooks some important issues regarding family routines and obligations that are often inextricable from work goals. For this workshop, I present research findings on work and families to identify opportunities for co-design and discuss the design of the home as a space for both paid and unpaid work for children and parents.

Author Keywords

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Introduction

Increasingly, many parents in knowledge and information professions do not have firm boundaries between their personal and professional identities. This “presence bleed” is evident in research findings on working individuals, ICTs that facilitate mobile and remote work practices, and the physical spaces, often the home, the where their paid work is carried out (e.g. [2]). At Citrix, we use design research methods to study these working individuals to create technology for parents to “do their best work.” However, our approach to co-design with adults does not focus on the family and as a result overlooks routines and obligations that are often inextricable from work goals. I propose the incorporating family and children into the design of work technologies for two reasons: (1) to improve the design of technologies for people’s professional goals that are not bound to a time or location, and (2) to improve the design of the home as a place for families to get work, both paid and unpaid, done.

“Workstyles”

Numerous information and communication technologies, including the smart phone, email, and software for remote collaboration, shape the “always on” world of today’s workers. Studies on the nature of this connectedness report that workers feel more free and, simultaneously or in turn, also feel more obligated to conduct their business in remote locations, on the go, and outside of the traditional business hours. In 2011’s *Work’s Intimacy*, Gregg states that the appeal of the working from home or having a more flexible work schedule is “the possibility of combining paid work with other tasks and activities- among them interaction a with and care for children.” The time and place for paid work matters less than the activities to be completed,

and as such, these tasks are jumbled with other unpaid domestic labor and caretaking items on a never-ending “to do” list. Children, therefore, experience their parents interweaving different kinds of work goals throughout the day. They observe fractured and unpredictable patterns of technology by their parents to get work done. They are also immersed in narratives of work and technology that persist around them. Absent fathers and working mothers have long been to blame for the ills of society [1], while technology addiction and workaholic tropes are pervasive in fictional media. These oversimplifications and the lack of families involved in workplace studies do little to help in the design the home and the tools to support the intersection of unpaid and paid labor.

Designing at Citrix

At Citrix Systems, the designers and researchers of the Customer Experience team employ user-centered design methods as the foundation to develop products and services that allow people to “do their best work.” GoToMeeting and other products support remote collaboration contributing to the ever-growing number of information and communication tools for flexible work. In a recent study we conducted two-hour contextual interviews with participants in their workplaces, either their homes or offices. These interviews were recorded and transcribed for open-coding and analysis. Our findings mirrored studies like Gregg’s and highlight the tensions workers have in the face of flexible workstyles that are supposed to improve their lives. Participants attempt to use the flexibility of the technology to negotiate the obligations to work and to their family. For example one participant states that “the rest of my work I try and do from home. I have school aged kids, so I really like to try and be home

when they get home.” Another participant feels the obligation to work a burden: “So I don’t necessarily think it is fair that I work, you know, a whole lot over 40 hours a week and not get paid for it, I guess, so there’ll be many times where it’s you know, 5:00, 6:00. I have West Coast openings to work on, but my kids want to go out an play.”

Also evident in the interviews are the active attempts to keep different roles and identities separate, while those attempts live side by side with the benefits of ease or convenience that comes from mixing their different roles. Some participants insisted on time-bounded activities and maintained different tools to achieve separation. But throughout the day, they recounted personal and professional goals overlapping. Participants reported checking emails from bed or in front of the Today Show. They reported checking personal email and social networking sites during traditional work hours. As the quotes above suggest, they worked from home to be with their children.

A popular solution proposed by Human Resource departments is work-life balance, an entirely oversimplified notion of separate personal and professional objectives. It often positions the home as more desirable than work, not addressing the unremunerated and sometimes alienating work that goes on there. Nor does it account for the satisfaction from paid work, which leads some to purposefully choose a work-skewed “imbalance.” In Gregg’s study, participants, especially women, felt “lucky” to work from home, to be able to carry out both kinds of responsibilities. Homes are sites of paid and unpaid work, where parents seemingly have never ending workdays [2]. The increased ability to vacillate between the two types

of work can render domestic work invisible. This may distort children’s understanding of labor and perpetuate gender inequalities in both the home and the workplace.

Choice and flexibility about when and where to work are packaged as a promise of autonomy. This autonomy, however, is paired with an increase in obligation to the demands of work, generating individual responsibility and self-regulation on the use of technology. In Gregg’s study, the anxiety to stay on top of emails was pervasive among participants and many recounted not keeping up to be personal failure rather than a institutional inefficiency [2]. Children observe their parents’ erratic hours and the self-imposed pressures to keep up. Parents negotiate their use of technology in their attempts to realize this promise to be able to control their work. However, as Harmon and Mazmanian note the “same person can experience autonomy when engaging with their smart phone or casting it aside, and this experience might shift in a matter of minutes” [3]. Individuals waver between integration and dis-integration of technology into various parts of their lives and often use both to achieve the same goal of control over their work. Parents’ use of technology is inconsistent even in dealing within seemingly singular goals like the guilt of not being “present” for their children or the affinity for they feel for their work.

From our corpus of data, we began to have a deeper understanding of work for the purpose of designing remote collaboration tools. However, this research only scratched the surface of the issues of autonomy, control, obligation, and the intersection of paid and unpaid labor. It did not approach these individuals with

regard to their intertwined identities. For example, what could children's perceptions of their parents' home office tell us about their work practices? We should use the opportunity to design with children and families to inspire better tools for work and, as a result, better homes.

Workshop Discussion

Co-design with family in the domain of work can have other potential impacts beyond improving tools for paid work. In this workshop I would like to explore the following questions: How can we improve the design of the home as a place for unpaid and paid work done by all members of the family? How can we encourage reflection on technology practices that are not reduced to simple notations of tools vs. toys or work vs. play? How can parents help children understand their unpredictable work hours and affinity for work? How can familial relationships be strengthened and sustained in light of the overlapping roles that parents play?

I want to encourage the discussion at the workshop to include issues of work, in addition to the focus on designing with children for learning, play and exploration. As a designer who works mainly with adults, I also hope to learn from methods of co-design

with families and children to be able to incorporate these opportunities into our studies more often.

Summary

In this paper, I describe the entangled nature of paid work and unpaid domestic tasks for working professionals that utilize mobile and remote technology. These individuals aim to be self-fulfilled in their jobs as well as to support healthy, thriving families. Children grow up in homes that need to support both professional and personal goals. Co-design with families is an opportunity to identify some of these challenges and create the foundation for the design of technology that supports getting work done in the home. We should aim to identify the kinds of technologies that need to be created for families to sustain these integrated practices; to be able to provide both food for the dinner table and the dinner table conversations.

References

- [1] Coontz, S. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. Basic Books, 1993.
- [2] Gregg, M. *Work's Intimacy*. Polity, 2011
- [3] Harmon E. and Mazmanian, M. Stories of the Smartphone in Everyday Discourse: Conflict, Tension & Instability. To be published in *Proc. Of CHI 2013*.