

Re-spacing work

Technology, location, contractual arrangements, and time are the four substantive components to consider when defining “telework,” according to an article by Leslie Haddon and Malcolm Brynin in the journal *New Technology, Work and Employment*. Students of the telework phenomenon have gone from leaving technology entirely out of the definition to focus on the knowledge content of the work itself to requiring at least some use of new information and communications technology to be considered any sort of telework at all. The authors acknowledge the crucial role of technology, but suggest that different technologies do more to define the specific type of telework one might be engaged in rather than to define telework itself.

Similarly, on the factor of location, some definitions of telework refer exclusively as work in the home while other broaden out to other “remote” worksites. Again, the authors look at location as more a measure of how telework is being done, and would exclude only those who work only at a standard workplace from being engaged in some form of telework.

The main distinction in the contractual arrangements argument for defining telework is between self-employed and wage-and-salary workers, although some would distinguish between a self-employed teleworker who works for a single client and a self-employed freelancer who works for several clients. Analysts incorporating time in their definitions of telework must take into account arrangements that stretch from an occasional hour of away-from-the-office work in the evening or on a weekend to working

almost exclusively from a home or mobile work space.

In any case, in the six countries Haddon and Brynin studied, working at the standard workplace is by far the most common arrangement, followed by what they call “mobile users”—workers including outside sale and transportation workers—who use a mobile phone but not any of the other advanced technologies. Old-fashioned home-based workers who do not use computers, the internet, or a mobile telephone come in third in Britain, Italy, Germany and Bulgaria, while personal-computer-using homeworkers are third in Israel and Norway. The oft-depicted internet-enabled homeworker is generally in the smallest definitional class.

A case study by Susan Halford of the impacts of that more uncommon arrangement—working from home using a broadband-enabled personal computer for some part of the workweek—appears within the same issue of *New Technology, Work and Employment*. While she acknowledges that studies have found negative outcomes of homeworking by full-timers or the self-employed, her own study concludes that having a hybrid home-workplace arrangement was generally evaluated positively by both management and employees.

Global variety

Many popular discussions of globalization revolve around jobs, while more academic debates about the benefits of international trade focus on the lower prices of existing goods. In a recent issue of *Current Issues in Economics and Finance* from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, Christian Broda and David Weinstein

summarize their research into another important gain from global trade: increased availability of a wider variety of goods.

Their first finding is that the sheer number of goods available increased, on net, from not quite 8,000 in 1972 to just more than 16,000 in 2001. The total number of “varieties,” each variety defined as a specific good imported from a particular country, was just under 75,000 in 1972 and almost 260,000 in 2001.

As the arithmetic implies, there was a significant increase in the number of countries from which the United States imported goods. According to Broda and Weinstein, not only were there far more goods involved in the import trade, but in addition, “the median number of countries supplying each good doubled, rising from six countries at the start of the period to twelve at the end.”

As part of their calculation of the impact of increased import variety on economic well-being, Broda and Weinstein estimated the substitutability of the varieties of the thousands of goods being imported. The highest degree of substitutability of varieties was found in crude petroleum and shale oil and the lowest was in footwear. “In general,” say the authors, “the degree of substitutability was higher for homogeneous products (petroleum is an apt example) than for highly differentiated products.”

Once the increase in varieties and the substitutability of one variety for another is taken into account, Broda and Weinstein estimate that an import price index would have a rate of change 1.2 percent per year lower than the conventionally calculated index. Such a drop in import prices, they argue, has raised economic well-being in the United States by some \$260 billion. □