

The Online Faculty Work Environment: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

There is a considerable literature on college faculty working in in-person institutions and their work. However, there is little research on the online faculty home work environment. The present study, consisting of 236 survey respondents from 38 online institutions, examines how online faculty structure their home work environment.

Problem

Although previous literature has examined the overlap between space and the meaning ascribed to it in in-person institutions, little is known about how online faculty work from their home nor the meaning they ascribe to their *space*. The present study examines who is present during faculty's work, where they work, and when they work as a beginning step in exploring the *space* (environment)/ *place* (social meaning) interaction.

Purpose

The purpose of the present study is to begin an examination of the online faculty's home work environment. To identify areas specific to online faculty and explore differences with in-person faculty.

Relevant Literature

Research on telecommuting, or the study of those individuals who work virtually for an outside organization from within their own homes, has examined aspects of the virtual worker's environment such as physical characteristics (see Belanger, Watson-Manheim, & Swan, 2012) and psychological perceptions of job control and work/home boundaries (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006). There is a considerable literature on faculty working at in-person institutions and their work environment (e.g., Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Gornall & Salisbury, 2012; Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2011). There is also significant literature on the perception and role that environment plays in social identity of in person faculty (Kunz, 2012). However, there is very little research on the online faculty home work environment. Oliver (2009) conducted the only previous study on the online faculty work environment through a qualitative study of 26 community college faculty who worked both online and in-person. The present study addresses the gap in the literature on faculty working only virtually.

Research Questions

- 1) Who is present in the online faculty household?
- 2) Where do online faculty do their work?
- 3) When do online faculty do their work?

Procedures

Participants

Walden University's IRB and OIRA approved this study. Online secondary education faculty were recruited through three recruitment procedures: 1) Online faculty who attended the 2012 Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning in Madison, WI were sent an invitation to complete a survey on Survey Monkey. 2) Walden University's Center for Faculty Excellence posted ads for 3 months in the weekly newsletter inviting participation. 3) All participants were asked to forward the invitation on to other online faculty they knew (i.e., snowball recruitment).

Materials and Procedures

The research reported was part of a larger survey study investigating many aspects of the online work experience. The survey, presented on survey monkey, consisted of a consent form explaining the study and a series of questions. For the current study, questions regarding the work environment and demographic questions are reported.

Findings

Demographics

A total of 236 respondents (female = 168 [71.2%], male = 62 [26.3%]; 6 [2.5%] no response). 200 (85.6%) were white. Highest degree: 169 (71.6%) reported having a doctorate, 61 (25.8%) a master's and 3 (1.3%) a Bachelor's.

38 colleges and universities were represented, Walden had the most identified faculty with 19.1%; however, 117 (49.6%) did not provide an institution. Thirty-six different departments or programs were represented, the largest of which was education (n=35, 14.8%).

Fifty-one percent of faculty indicated they work at one institution, 21.2% at 2 institutions, 6.7% at 3, and 5.6% at 4 or more institutions.

1) Who is present in the online faculty household?

34 participants (12.9%) lived alone, 119 (45.0%) live with a spouse or partner, 9 (3.4%) live with some other adult, 18 (6.8%) did not answer the question. 84 faculty (31.8%) lived with at least one child under 18. 99 (40.4%) provide caregiving to another adult at least occasionally.

171 (63.6%) have a pet at home. Of participants who had pets, 48% (n= 82) indicated that it was somewhat to very important that their animals be present in the home while working.

92 (38.7%) described feeling very to somewhat isolated in their virtual work; 26.4% of full time faculty and 45.4% of part time faculty described themselves as feeling isolated.

2) Where do online faculty do their work?

80% often or always do their online work at home. 57% have a dedicated office (a room primarily used as an office). Being married was correlated with having an office ($r(242) = -.137, p = .03$). Parents with small children were less likely to have a dedicated office than people without children ($r(242) = -.238, p = .001$).

The majority (60.9%) indicated that they never or rarely do online school work outside the home (e.g., coffee shops, library). 61% stated that they sometimes to often have TV, radio, or music on in the background while they do their online school work (one sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, $p = .001$). 81% indicated that they have a schedule or routine when working online (one sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, $p = .001$).

3) When do online faculty do their work?

Faculty reported working an average of 26.17 hours per week for their online institution(s); faculty that worked at multiple colleges/ universities worked longer hours ($r(205) = .198, p < .01$). A mean of 9 hours per week were worked after 5 pm. A mean of 6.5 hours were worked on the weekend. The majority reported often or always working on holidays (50.9%) and vacations (69.9%).

Limitations

The participants in the current study were recruited through email and snowball sampling, thus may not be representative of the population of online faculty in general. The survey relied on self-report, thus, information relies upon the respondents' accuracy. Individuals interested in the virtual workplace may have been more likely to volunteer for the survey study.

Conclusions

This study has provided some new insights into the online faculty member. The sample in the current study tended to live with a partner or spouse, many either had a child present or do caregiving of an adult. The majority indicated that they have a pet in their home, half of these individuals felt it was important the animal was present when they were working.

The majority do their work at home in a room that has been dedicated as an office. Surprisingly, parents with small children were least likely to report having an office. The majority have background sounds in the environment and they tend to rely on a regular schedule or routine for their work.

The majority of the sample indicated that they work during the day, evenings, and weekends, as well as, working on holidays and vacations. This combination has been identified as potentially leading to burnout (Rosenberg, & Pace, 2006). Nearly half of part time faculty indicated that they feel isolated, suggesting a need to build a sense of institutional community.

Social Change Implications

The information from this study suggests that institutional administration can support faculty through understanding their family responsibilities and the limitations of their work environment. Future research might examine the virtual faculty worker's psychological perceptions of their home work environment and investigate further how a virtual worker's perceptions of their environment impact both job satisfaction and organizational outcomes.