Maintaining family rituals when working away from home

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Professor Adele Ladkin with one of the machines designed for the Family Rituals 2.0 project

The way we work is fundamentally changing, with a rise in mobile working – people who travel away from home for long or short periods

of time. Some people, such as lorry drivers, may be away from home as part of their normal working life, while other workers may have occupations that require them to travel and represent their organisation regionally, nationally or even internationally. For mobile workers and their families, this kind of travel can have consequences for daily family life. Alongside an interdisciplinary research team, made up of academics from across the UK, BU's Professor Adele Ladkin has investigated the consequences of mobile working and what it means for family life.

Family Rituals 2.0 is an interdisciplinary research project, drawing on expertise from a number of universities across the UK. The project considered work-life balance for mobile workers and their families, in the context of our digital age. It stemmed from the researchers' interest in discovering how being away from home affects people's ability to participate in family activities – or rituals. Family rituals could be celebrations such as birthdays or anniversaries, or simply day-to-day activities such as reading bedtime stories to children. These are the kinds of things that a mobile worker might miss out on while away from home and technology could enable families to continue to enjoy their meaningful family activities even when they're not together.

There were three stages to the project; the first involved interviews with Human Resource Managers from organisations that employ mobile workers. The second stage was talking to the mobile workers themselves and their families, and the third stage of the project was design-led ethnographic research with five families. In this final stage, the designers and computer scientists designed a prototype technology, which lived with the family as a mechanism to explore the consequences of the absence of a family member and how to maintain important family rituals.

Professor Ladkin's involvement in the project came about because of her expertise in tourism employment. Business travel is an important sector,

and many employees in tourism are routinely mobile due to the nature of their jobs, for example in the case of airline personnel, tour guides and cruise ship workers.

"I think the one thing we look at a lot in tourism is the idea of employees' health, wellbeing and the work-life balance. It is widely recognised that tourism work can involve long hours, and can involve travel away from home, so an understanding of people's working environments and how that might impact on their wellbeing has been helpful in this project," says Professor Ladkin. "My research experience in qualitative data collection and analysis through interviews and diaries also came in useful for this project."

The team working on the project consisted of sociologists, computer scientists and designers. They came from the University of the West of England, Newcastle University, The Royal College of Art, and Bournemouth University. Between them, the team had a wide range of experience and knowledge, which benefitted everyone, but also presented its challenges at times. "Sometimes it was a challenge to understand our different approaches," says Professor Ladkin. "For example a designer works in a different way to how I, as a social scientist, would work and both are different again to the way a computer scientist works. We have very different terminology, so we had to work out what each other meant!"

The research results showed that employers were aware of the importance of work-life balance for their employees and had policies in place to support this within their organisations. However, the research also showed that there was a gap in HR policies for managing the work-life balance of mobile workers. "There were no separate HR guidelines to address the different issues that people who are travelling may encounter, such as physical travel fatigue or managing absence from home and the workplace," says Professor Ladkin. "There was a degree

of awareness of some of the potential issues but no specific 0mechanisms in place to help support the work-life balance of mobile workers."

Through interviews with the mobile workers and their families, the team learned about the importance of connecting to home and the implications of this for fostering work-life balance. "Our findings to date have centred around understanding what it means to be absent from family during the course of work, how technology can mediate absence, and what organisations might consider to facilitate the work-life balance of mobile workers," explains Professor Ladkin. "We are particularly keen to take our findings back to organisations who may be seeing a growth in their numbers of mobile workers."

"We feel there is more work to be done and will be seeking further funding to help continue the research," continues Professor Ladkin. "We were quite ambitious with our aims and it would be really beneficial to have more time to research this issue."

  More information: Further information on the project can be found at familyrituals2-0.org.uk/

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