

telenetworking:

New Opportunities for Malaysian Women?

by Cecilia Ng¹

Through overcoming the barriers of time and space, telenetworking—working from a distance with the support of information and communications technology (ICT)—has been purported to increase the international competitiveness of developing countries.

In addition, the lower wage rates, the relatively high literacy levels and language skills in some countries like India, the Philippines and Malaysia, could provide a comparative advantage in terms of the online relocation of information processing jobs, or teletrade, from the industrialised countries to the South. It is also believed that teleworking could and would reach the traditionally disadvantaged groups, as well as those in remote areas, bringing about a more sustainable development in society.

Women in the developing world would then be able to partake and benefit from this new and flexible mode of employment, hence increasing their participation rate in the labour force.²

In the following case studies, we have tried to explore the possibilities, fears and barriers faced by Malaysian women in pursuing telenetworking as an alternative work arrangement. To what extent do the new opportunities present clear career paths for them? Different types of teleworking arrangements are presented here; a case of a

male telehomeworker is also discussed to contribute to the debate on teleworking and the gender division of labour. The data show that it is difficult to make generalisations at this time.

Theresa, a mobile teleworking consultant

Theresa, a partner/consultant in a joint-venture firm, is a full-time teleworker. Previously she managed a team of systems analysts and programmers but found it difficult to continue due to health problems. These problems were aggravated by traffic jams and the distance between her home and office, which took about three to four commuting hours every day. As a result, Theresa decided to resign from the company in early 1997. Given the option to telework, however, she accepted.

Theresa is paid a consultant's fee (including transport allowance) which she finds to be very reasonable. The company provides her with the necessary equipment such as a computer, modem, as well as access to the Internet and E-mail facilities. She has her own fax machine and printer. The company pays for the telephone bill and maintenance of the office equipment.

As a teleworker, she comes into the company office at least two or three days a week. Otherwise she works the normal working hours from the office of her husband, a businessman, which is within walking distance from their home. She found it impossible to work directly

from home because of the children. Theresa feels fortunate to have her mother-in-law and a helper take care of her children.

Being an independent consultant, Theresa has full authority to discuss prices, negotiate on software details and other technical matters with clients. The opportunity to be a teleworker and to continue with her career makes her happy. She says she is less stressed and healthier, and her productivity has increased considerably even as she also spends more quality time with her family. In a nutshell, she enjoys working as a teleworker and has achieved greater job satisfaction.

Joo, a teleworker based at the client's site for five years

When we interviewed her in early 1998, Joo had just completed her assignment at the client's site where she had been teleworking for the past five years, or since graduation. During that time she was promoted from analyst programmer to senior analyst programmer to her present position as system analyst. Joo said she enjoyed teleworking and found the job at the client's site quite challenging.

In this project, Joo had to work with employees from three other firms. Initially she and her nine colleagues had problems adjusting to the different work culture and ethics of the others. Everyone needed some time to adjust. One of the other companies had also subcontracted about 10 programmers from India for one year and communicating with these programmers was difficult at first.

When asked about the advantages of teleworking, Joo stated that she gained a lot of experience and knowledge by working with employees from other companies. She also learned about teamwork. In addition, at the client's site, the employee was involved in only one project. In contrast, someone working at the main office might be asked to assist in various other projects at the same time. As for disadvantages, the only problem was the initial adjustment of working with employees from other companies and the lack of personal contact with the main office.

Wee, a home-based tele-entrepreneur

Wee has been working from home as a software developer since returning with his family

from Hong Kong, where he was a lecturer at the university. His wife, Chooi, worked with a regional organisation in Hong Kong, and since coming back to Malaysia has been employed by the NGO sector. They have two children, five and four years old, and have hired an Indonesian maid to help in household chores and take care of the children. Wee does not deal very much in household responsibilities and his children have been trained not to disturb him when he is working in his room. The couple however agree that his presence at home has meant that there is a stabilising force in the family. He is glad to be with the children, and does take time off to be with them.

Chooi's parents and siblings live around the housing estate and the children are sent quite often to their cousin's house to play. In fact this was the main reason that Chooi decided to buy a house in that vicinity—to be close to her relatives who would provide that support system for her and her family. Wee is fortunate that he has a supportive wife who is the main breadwinner in the family. Nonetheless, she is somewhat anxious about his limited income-earning capabilities.

Wee is quite happy working in his office at home. Soft-spoken, quiet and amiable, he is comfortable working alone at his counter the whole day. He spent several years developing his software investment package but sales have been slow due to the current meltdown in the economy. He is now developing another product that will be more marketable.

Rani, a home-based teleworker

Rani majored in the Tamil language. She taught for one year, got married, and gave birth to a baby girl in 1996. However, as she could not obtain any help to take care of her baby, she stopped teaching in mid-1996. Her husband, who teaches computer studies in a local college, has developed a Tamil software which is being used in desktop publishing. Rani takes pride in being a digital family and tries to serve the Tamil community by raising their awareness on the benefits of information technology.

In early 1997, the couple approached a multimedia firm to use their Tamil software. Subsequently the CEO of the firm offered Rani a job to translate their scripts into Tamil. She accepted the part-time position and since then

she has worked on several translation projects, and does Tamil voice recordings as well. Rani is paid RM500 per project which can take two to three months to complete. She does not obtain any other benefits.

Rani works from home, using her own computer and printer. Documents are downloaded to her via E-mail from the company and she does likewise when she has completed the translation. If she needs to fax she goes to a relative's house; otherwise she uses the telephone or e-mail. She works three to four hours daily, dividing her time between housework and her job. Usually she works after midnight. Her husband is very supportive, she says, and helps in the housework and childcare.

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Rani is quite happy with her home-based teleworking as she feels it is part of her contribution to the Tamil community. She stresses that she does not work for the money but for the love of work. As a result she is disciplined in her work and meets deadlines. Working from home also saves time and energy. The disadvantage for her is that she does not get to meet people; if she were in the office she would learn other things, for example, working in a team which inculcates attitudes like tolerance and patience.

Teleworking: blessing or burden for women?

Teleworking is popularly thought to be a blessing for women who can combine housework with gainful employment. It offers flexibility to working mothers, can potentially liberate women from male control in the office, and give them increased autonomy and creativity. For those worried about the degeneration of family ties, teleworking is perceived as bringing families closer together as well as bringing down divorce rates.³

On the other hand, critics argue that electronic homeworkers are actually faced with the double burden of work, and put in longer hours than if they worked at the office. Indeed,



the empirical picture reveals that women are not necessarily obtaining better job opportunities, and at higher value, relative to men.⁴ At best teleworking offers new work opportunities for women and at worst, it exploits and reinforces the secondary position of women in the labour market as carers and housewives.

Teleworking trends in the software industry

About 30 percent of IT professionals were women in the 10 firms we interviewed, while at the administrative level, the majority of the employees were women. In four firms, women were highly positioned as project and IT managers, although in terms of corporate leadership, there was only one woman who was managing director.

In the Malaysian IT industry, women were able to position themselves into higher professional jobs due to several factors. For example, the education system has encouraged the youth, regardless of gender and ethnicity, to enter into computer technology fields. Indeed, female computer science students make up at least 50 percent of total enrolment in the Computer Science or IT Faculties in the public universities in Malaysia. Their entry into the fast-expanding IT-related sectors is almost guaranteed. They would also be the potential high-skilled teleworkers who would command a high wage in this labour-scarce sector.

Despite the numbers employed in the IT sector, however, there is still a gap in meeting the skills sought by the industry. The software industry needs to employ more people, including women, who have specialised skills. This

openness towards employing women also coincides with a changing trend in management practices, characterised by a “flatter” line of authority, decentralised decision-making and a merit-oriented approach towards recruitment and career advancement.

Nonetheless, these women represent a minority of the female labour force, the majority of whom are still at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy. Hence, in the service sectors which are fast becoming computerised, most low-skilled job categories, such as data operators and typists, are predominantly held by women. These women also represent a constituency for would-be teleworkers, albeit at the lower end of the teleworking continuum.

Teleworking and the gender division of labour

To be sure, the software industry offers differential employment conditions for different types of teleworkers. The differences appear to hinge on the type of work performed and the skills level of the teleworkers in question. Joo, who works at the client’s site, represents the young and upwardly mobile male and female IT personnel who are progressing fast up the organisational hierarchy. Their experiences at the client’s site are positive factors in terms of the ability to manage projects independently as well as to work as a team with others.

As for Theresa and Rani, while both are women, they are evaluated differently from each other. As a highly-skilled software professional, Theresa can command more income and better facilities; for example she is provided with a computer and fax and her transport allowances are covered by the company. On the other hand, Rani is not provided any facilities and her income is quite low for the amount of work she has to do. The company seems to take advantage of her dedication and her informal work as a translator, compared to professional translators who would be paid more at the market rate. As such, she has no prospects for training nor career advancement. What the two women have in common is the support of the family in their choice to be teleworkers. In the case of Rani, the alternative would be no work at all.

Similarly, Wee is able to be a home-based software entrepreneur due to the support of his wife, the maid and his wife’s extended family.

Despite not earning a regular income, nor his product being a runaway success, he is kept going by his commitment to his work and belief in his own professional ability. As a man, he is also able to steer away from household responsibility (a role that Theresa could not abdicate; to avoid taking care of the children, she had to work from her husband’s office).

Another group we did not manage to interview are the 200 data-entry operators in the East Coast of Malaysia, who had been hired for one year to key-in land registration data. They are mainly computer-literate women from the rural areas who have just completed their secondary education and are involved in low-skilled and low-paid work without much prospect of joining the company at the end of the contract.

For teleworking to benefit women, it must first seriously consider the existing socio-economic conditions under which it is implemented so as not to reinforce and/or reproduce the unequal social and gender relations in society.

Conclusion

The most prevalent form of teleworking in Malaysia today is client-based, where both male and female analysts and programmers have equal opportunities to be remotely placed as well as promoted. There are many others like Joo who have worked off-site and have not been marginalised in the company. In fact, their experiences are appreciated and they have been promptly promoted, irrespective of gender. Their skills have also the potential to be tapped in teletrade relationships, where firms in industrialised countries find it more cost-effective to have their information processing done across borders.

The benefits of being a highly skilled IT professional are also experienced by Theresa, who wanted to resign but was offered the attractive teleworking package. However, this package was

not offered to Rani, a translator, confirming that class barriers have certainly not been broken by teleworking.

The experiences of Joo, Theresa, Rani and Wee raise concerns over adopting teleworking as a full-scale employment option. The issue of gender and class equity arises in the way skills are graded to their marketability. The software industry places greater market value on the specialised and professional skills of Joo and Theresa as compared to Rani's skill as a translator. The higher market value of Joo and Theresa also allows them to have "choices" to unburden their dual role as women and domestic maids, while in Wee's case, as a man, he passes some of his burden to his wife and maid. In Rani's case, she has little choice. The 200 rural-based data entry teleworkers will also not be able to climb up the occupational ladder due to the absence of IT skills.

Besides the skills, another barrier to the ability of the poor in backward areas to benefit from teleworking is the lack of infrastructure facilities in the rural areas. The rural population have limited access to reliable and efficient telecommunications facilities, not to mention exposure to computer literacy. Rural women because of their lower educational levels would be further excluded from the benefits of IT.

Has the domestic division of labour been altered as a result of men and women working at home? The cases above disclose that not much has changed, and women, be they wives, in-laws or domestic helpers, are still responsible for housework. In the case of Rani, support of her husband was encouraging, and reflects changing gender roles—although she worked at night when her baby had gone to bed.

To conclude, for teleworking to benefit women, it must first seriously consider the existing socio-economic conditions under which it is implemented so as not to reinforce and/or reproduce the unequal social and gender relations in society. Secondly, the kind of model to be adopted must also be gender-friendly and culture-friendly. Emerging management practices seem to be more flexible in terms of pro-

viding more gender equity at work. Malaysians still prefer face-to-face contact in dealing with each other. Activists and academicians are also hesitant about women working from home, given the prevalent gender subordination and domestic abuse faced by Malaysian women. They also point to the lack of space at home, especially for the urban poor who live in cramped two-room, low-cost flats.

Thirdly, the whole family must support whoever has chosen to telework, enabling the domestic division of labour to be shared equitably by all. And finally, the state has to provide the appropriate regulatory framework which would

not only protect teleworkers from exploitation, but also enhance their skills in new and creative ways. Consultation between the government, NGOs and the private sector on joint initiatives in the implementation of teleworking programs, for example the establishment of community/neighbourhood telecenters, should be encouraged.

Government policies to attract teletrade investment should also ensure that the competitive edge offered by developing countries for professional services is not centered on the availability of low-waged labour. Without equitable policies and regulatory safeguards, the international competitiveness of developing countries would only mean downgrading the conditions of employment and work, with or without teleworking. ↻

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²Mitter and Efendioglu, 1997.

³Huws, 1996; Gunnarson, 1997.

⁴Bibbly, 1996; Oldfield, 1991.

