

Conceptualisations of the Work-Life Nexus of Non-Standard Workers

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Abstract

A variety of concepts and models have been developed to explain the changing face of work in contemporary society, especially the increasing significance and extent of non-standard work. This paper initially points to the conceptual and definitional inadequacies of both 'non-standard work' and the notion of the 'work-life balance'. Drawing on interview data from the non-standard work phase of the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme, a major New Zealand government funded interdisciplinary research programme, we present our notion of the work-life mosaic as an approach to understanding work-life experiences. The image of the mosaic attempts to capture the combinations and permutations of individual workers' employment, free-work and home life experiences and activities and also encompasses ideas on open and closed portfolio work. We argue that despite the value of the work-life mosaic concept, it neither effectively conveys the dynamic context in which aspects of the mosaic are located, nor recognises sufficiently the importance of the evolving nature of an individual's relationships and networks. The paper highlights the challenge of developing relevant conceptualisations to fit the work-life nexus of the spectrum of workers in the twenty-first century.

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Introduction

Not so long ago the organisation and regulation of paid employment in most advanced western countries seemed a relatively simple matter. Generally, paid employment was performed at the employer's workplace and was mediated by a direct relationship between employer and employee. The proportion of male to female workers was relatively high and the wages and salaries of male workers (the 'family wage') were generally sufficient to support a wife and family. Employees usually worked for a set number of hours per day, which became nominally about forty hours a week. Moreover, the expectation of most workers, at least most male workers, was to have a job for life. Such employment, premised on the public/private split, strongly gendered roles and the traditional nuclear family, was the basis for determining the rules and legislation regulating terms of employment and industrial relations. Working arrangements like these are often described as 'standard work' (Felstead and Jewson, 1999).

As a great deal of labour market literature attests, the extent to which standard work is the norm in contemporary western labour markets has changed considerably over the last two decades and continues to do so (Crompton et al., 1996; Henson, 1996). For a variety of reasons, employers and employees are increasingly engaged in alternative forms of work, as standard jobs are being eroded and 'non-standard' arrangements become more common. A variety of concepts and models have been developed to explain the changing face of work in today's world, especially the increasing significance and extent of non-standard work (Burgess et al., 1999; McCartin et al., 1999; Mangan, 2000; VandenHeuvel et al., 2000).

With major changes in the nature of work and work arrangements, including the increasing numbers of women participating in the paid work force, changes in women's career expectations, the decline of the family wage, the disappearance of the job for life and changes in family formation, the relationship between families and labour market participation has come under considerable scrutiny. In particular, the notion of the 'work-life balance' has developed both as an ideal that people should strive to attain and a critique of the model of standard work as an inhibiting factor in attaining this balance. Thus, increasingly, in the academic literature, through such legislation as family friendly workplace policies and in workplace practice, the work-life balance has been promoted as a means through which the model of standard work can, and should, be modified.

This paper is based on our observation that the world of paid work has changed rapidly, as has the way people experience and understand the connection between their paid employment and other aspects of their lives. What has not advanced to the same extent are the available conceptual frameworks through which academics can study and make sense of these changes in the work-life nexus. Initially in this paper we point to the conceptual and definitional inadequacies of the concepts of 'non-standard work' and the 'work-life balance'. Drawing on interview data from the non-standard work phase of the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme, a major New Zealand government funded interdisciplinary research programme, we present our concept of the 'work-life mosaic'. Our argument is that the work-life mosaic provides a more fitting and more broadly explanatory metaphor than the work-life balance through which to understand the work-life nexus. The image of the mosaic

attempts to capture the combinations and permutations of individual workers' employment, free-work and home life experiences and activities. Nevertheless, despite its value, the concept of the work-life mosaic also has limitations. It neither conveys effectively the dynamic context in which aspects of the mosaic are located, nor recognises sufficiently the importance of the evolving nature of an individual's relationships and networks. The final section of this paper highlights the challenge of developing relevant conceptualisations to fit the work-life nexus of the spectrum of workers in the twenty-first century.

Non-standard work: definitional and conceptual difficulties

Since undoubtedly there have always been exceptions to, or variations on, what might be considered standard work, it is appropriate to ask the question whether there is such a thing. Certainly, there has been a predominant pattern of employment and working that developed from the time of the Industrial Revolution and which became the major form of work for male workers in the twentieth century that provides the yardstick against which employment categories have been constructed and understood. This pattern has generally been characterised by special features including employment for wages or salaries by a single firm, where people work full-time on the employer's premises and expect, and are expected, to be employed for an indefinite period of time (McCartin et al., 1992:2). This sort of narrow definition could well be extended to include temporal aspects of work organisation, such as the Monday to Friday week and set hours of work each day (Carroll, 1999).

Yet while there are certain characteristics that are often cited in relation to standard work, unfortunately there seems to be no consistent or agreed upon definition. This, in turn, creates problems when it comes to defining non-standard work, as is clear to many scholars in the area (see for example, Mangan, 2000; Zeytinoglu and Muteshi, 2000). In addition, categorising non-standard workers is a difficult task, given they are such a disparate group and that they can simultaneously work in multiple forms of both standard and non-standard arrangements (Carroll, 1999). It is not surprising therefore, that confusion also plagues efforts to conceptualise non-standard work and enumerate non-standard workers (Barker, et al., 1998:11).

Notwithstanding a general agreement regarding definitional difficulties a range of descriptors have been applied to non-standard work including 'non-traditional', 'atypical', 'flexible', 'alternative', 'market-mediated', 'vagrant', 'vulnerable', 'precarious', 'disposable', and 'contingent' (Kalleberg, 2000:2). Arthur and Rousseau (1996:373) attempt to draw together the underlying sense of these terms in their description of contemporary employment as 'a temporary state, or the current manifestation of long-term employability'. In their view therefore, it can no longer be assumed that long-term commitments and stable relationships are a part of the employment relationship. Accordingly, they introduce the idea of a 'boundaryless career', the key aspects of which are: that employment moves across boundaries involving separate employers; a career is validated outside the boundaries of an organisation or employer and is sustained by external networks; hierarchies are no longer valid; and careers can be rejected for personal lifestyle or family reasons. In sum, a boundaryless career is one where there is *independence from*, rather than *dependence on* traditional working arrangements (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996:6).

Though recognising that the definitional landscape is already a crowded and contentious space, research that we have been part of suggests a further concept that has some utility in describing and explaining non-standard forms of work. As has already been acknowledged, these forms of work emerge from, or arise out of, the predominant pattern of employment and, as such, entail variation in one or more of the following: hours of work; location of work; tenure of employment; and employee/employer relationships. They are, therefore, derived from the predominant pattern and could be viewed as *derivative work forms*.

While variations on hours of work could include shift or roster workers, the greatest change in the last few decades in this regard has been the growth in the number and proportion of part-time workers in the paid work force. Part-time work can be permanent or temporary. What is classified as part-time work can vary from country to country. For example, in Australia the maximum hours a part-time worker can work per week is 34 (Mangan, 2000), while in New Zealand it is 30 hours (Carroll, 1999; Statistics New Zealand, 2000). Temporary part-time arrangements include casual, fixed-term and on-call workers, whose work is irregular and generally paid by the hour. Variations on the type of work relationships arise in a number of ways with alternative forms of work. Contracting has emerged as a growing area of non-standard employment, as has the use of intermediaries such as temporary help agencies and contract companies as a strategy to find additional or alternative employment. Increasingly common too is the phenomenon of portfolio working or multiple job holdings. Faced with increasing part-time work, a growing number of people increase their working hours by patching together various part-time jobs (Felstead et al., 1999). Mangan (1999:199) defines a portfolio worker as a person who 'works simultaneously, in different jobs or aspects of a job'. Individuals can also be described as non-standard workers because of the location of their work. Increasingly the terms working from afar, or teleworking are associated with this aspect of non-standard work. People can also be engaged in forms of non-standard work that would fit multiple criteria. For example: temporary workers can be engaged to work any number of hours; temporary agency employees can be classified according to their tenure, the hours they work, or on the basis of the use of intermediaries in the work relationship; and each of multiple jobs an individual may be employed in can be characterised as non-standard (in terms of hours, tenure, relationships and location).

The 'Work/life' Balance

Various forms of non-standard work were described in the previous section. Growth in these forms of work has increasingly resulted in changes in the way paid work is perceived and organised. However, both non-standard and standard work, appear to share pressures brought about through a general movement towards work intensification, defined by Burchell (2002:72) as 'the effort that employees put into their jobs during the time that they are working'. Downsizing, restructuring and moves to achieve a more 'flexible' labour market have resulted in what Lapidó and Wilkinson (2002:36) call 'a compulsion to work'. This compulsion can have considerable personal consequences, not only in terms of time and stress, but also, as pointed out so effectively by Sennett (1998), although expressed differently, with regard to identity and subjectivity. Much empirical data on work intensification has been assembled.

A major response to the issues and problems associated with work intensification has been the introduction of the notion of a work-life balance. Defined by the British Department of Trade and Industry as about adjusting working patterns so people can find a rhythm to help them combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations (DTI, 2003) and by Greenblatt (2002:3/17) as ‘the absence of unacceptable levels of conflict between work and non-work demands’, the work-life balance is frequently proposed as a means through which stress and/or burnout can be addressed. It implies organisational change in employer/employee relationships, through encouraging employers to introduce a range of options to create greater flexibility of working arrangements. Fundamental here, are notions about the development of a responsive work place through the implementation of family friendly policies. The literature on work-life balance is overwhelmingly positive, seeing strategies which promote work-life balance as ‘having the potential to be a win-win for both individuals and organizations’ (Barnett and Hall, 2001:192). With regards to businesses and organizations, it is claimed that work-life balance policies can ensure that the best available talent is attracted and retained, while employees also benefit in that they can meet family, work and community responsibilities.

Referred to by Greenblatt (2002:1/17) as a ‘powerful, new national sentiment’, the extent to which the idea of the work-life balance has been adopted as an important component of workplace organisation and relationships can be seen in a number of ways. Work-life balance campaigns are common, like those emanating from Britain’s Department of Trade and Industry (DTI, 2003) and Northern Ireland’s Department for Employment and Learning (<http://www2.bitc.org.uk>). Such campaigns aim to offer flexibility in the number of hours worked, the arrangement of hours and the place of work. Moreover, countless web sites offer advice and resources on work-life balance. For example, the web site http://editorial.careers.msn.com/worklife/work_life_balance, provides downloads under such headings as ‘stress’, ‘working from home’, ‘working mothers’ and ‘taking a vacation’. Workplace training programmes on work-life balance proliferate. There are specialist consultants and coaches in work-life balance and software packages are even available on how a work-life balance can be achieved (see for example, <http://www.llamagraphics.com>).

The irony does not escape us that agitation for workplaces to be organised in a way that promotes work-life balance, results in the development of practices that, in some instances, strongly resemble some of the less desirable elements of non-standard work, such as a reduction in work hours, or work outside the standard work day hours. Moreover, it seems to us there are sound arguments that could be made that the work-life balance is another normalising discourse in the Foucauldian sense, given credibility because of its institutional basis in health and management. But the point of this paper is not to rehearse the academic literature in this area, or debate issues such as the psychological, economic and social benefits attributed to the work-life balance. Instead, we want to suggest that there is a problem with the terminology itself and the imagery it invokes. In support of our argument we draw on material from the Labour Market Dynamics Research Programme.

The Labour Market Dynamics and Economic Participation Research Programme (LMD)

The LMD programme is a long-running research project which, in its second phase, investigated non-standard work (Firkin et al., 2002). The material drawn on in this paper relates to non-standard workers whose work involved either a knowledge or technology component. Thus our participants were purposely selected through non-probability sampling and restricted to people living in the Auckland area. Forty in-depth interviews were held, canvassing transitions to non-standard work and work histories and experiences. Issues explored in the interviews included planning, education and training, autonomy, surveillance, work intensification, job security, the roles of networks, the use of technology, compliance and the regulatory environment, the work/life nexus and the advantages and disadvantages of non-standard work. The literature indicates that work itself and lack of flexibility have been the major impetus for the encouragement and promotion of the work-life balance. In this section we draw on our interview findings in order to look critically at the assumed disadvantages of work intensity.

It was clear from the interviews that many of the non-standard workers in our sample felt that their work was more intense now than when they were engaged in standard arrangements. This was experienced in a range of ways. Those with more than one job usually felt that they worked harder in each of these jobs and that the combined effect was far more than a single job. Even those with a single work role found that they worked more intensely. However, work intensity was not necessarily equated with work overload. It was not uncommon for participants to feel that greater work intensity had advantages in they were less distracted and much more focused working in non-standard ways.

Well you haven't got the distractions, I suppose. I mean I just sit down and get stuck into it, generally.

I work harder and am more focused.

I try and work faster and smarter all the time.

Consequently these non-standard workers perceived themselves as working more productively and having a greater output than they would have had as an employee. In addition, many said they provided better value for their clients.

We're a lot more productive, a lot more efficient.

If I put in ten hours a day here, that would have easily been a 14 to 16 hour day in the office.

Balancing a number of pieces of work at any one time, which many contractors reported doing, could also increase the work intensity. Though agreeing that he worked more intensely, one man added that this had always been the nature of the industry he worked in and was not simply a feature of contract work. Another contractor saw ebbs and flows in the intensity of his work, something that he utilised to his advantage.

Some people acknowledged that while many of the pressures on them to produce and work hard were self-induced, these were often seen as part and parcel of being a contractor. One man observed, the quantity and quality of one's work is vital for continued employment.

Pressure comes from within – when you're working for yourself, you realise you have to do it right.

Countering the more common position regarding the intensification of work was a woman who felt that although the way she worked had changed when she adopted a non-standard approach to working, it had in fact become less intense for her.

It's changed quite dramatically, but less intense. I feel much more relaxed about it. It's sort of like ... it's fun. It's become fun rather than being a hard slog. Probably because I personally like to be in control and this way I can be, whereas when I was employed by somebody else I tended to be less [in] control.

Interestingly, since some people felt that their work was much more intense and their output far higher, this impacted on how they charged for their work. As a result, some felt that they needed to work far fewer hours to generate a comparable income as an employee. For one woman, the intensity in one of her jobs as a contract writer for an annual publication, and the manner she was paid, freed up time for other work or more pleasurable activities.

So really this job at the moment, I'm probably doing three or four hours a day, and it probably should be full-time. But the thing is that I can get the work done in that time and then it allows me time for doing my other work. And you see one thing that is really important to me is I walk over the fields every day. I do a big hour and a half walk in the country, I don't do it every day but I do it sort of five days of the week. That's really important to me, so it is important that I have time to do those things.

Given that greater work intensity had been acknowledged by most of our non-standard workers we were interested in how people organised their work since an external structure was absent or certainly weakened, and how their way of working interacted with their relationships, responsibilities and activities in the private sphere. Almost all participants reported at least some time flexibility and well over one third noted that they had complete flexibility. Even those workers with set hours commented that their situations were not necessarily restrictive. So set hours need not imply inflexibility. Flexibility did not however, imply a lack of routine or pattern and these were structured according in a number of different ways. For example, personal preferences meant that people liked some of their day 'to themselves', liked working at unusual times, or fitted in with established household or family rhythms. The most common factor affecting the structuring of time was the variable demands of workflows. Uncertainty was a prominent feature of non-standard work, particularly, though not exclusively, for contractors. This meant that there was an unpredictable quality to how much work people would have at any time. Consequently, they often had quiet periods and very busy periods.

Our interviews highlighted the fact that many non-standard work forms, with their greater blurring and blending of home and work life, clearly upset the old public/private divide of work and home. When the vexed question of "what is work" is added to the mix, the boundaries become even less distinct.

We always have this debate, what is work? If I was selling cars it is pretty obvious what is work, I turn up I go to the yard, I sell cars, I come home and I am not working anymore. We are writing a book at the moment on knowledge. ...I will go home, and if I read a [related] book ... is that work? Even if I sit down and start writing, and I really like writing, is that work? Even if there is a dollar

attached to that, does that count as work? And if it is only ever work when it feels like work, then it's hardly ever work. We talked in the beginning about blurring of distinctions and the hardest one for me is actually working out what work is. It is particularly difficult when you do what we do because, lets say we work 50-60 hours a week and that varies all the time, we might only charge out a third or a half of that, so you can't even say what you charge out is work because the subsidy of what we do is chargeable. Then there is some other stuff that is legitimate work and there is other stuff around the periphery of that which directly influences and impacts upon our work that you would never charge.

The following quote also illustrates just how blurred life and work can become.

My work and my passions and my interests and hobbies are all spent doing the same things. Most of my friends are like activists, strategists and schemers so that's how we spend our spare time. ...When some friends who don't sort of understand my life say you have got to have a break from your work, it's like having a break from your life. I work every day, it might be even the books that I read, even the fiction that I read. I have always got my eyes scanning for ideas with everything, even conversations that you have it's like oh that is a good idea and you make a mental note, it is a never ending process really. I never know the boundaries. I won't be at my computer at 8.00am and at 5.00pm be in the kitchen.

What these last two quotes highlight for us is the irrelevance of the notion of work-life balance for some of our non-standard workers. The blurring of the boundaries and the way work and life interpenetrate are not caught at all through the metaphor of the work-life balance. For these knowledge workers, work and life, and the various aspects that make up these elements, are strongly integrated, rather than separated out as the work-life balance metaphor implies. That many people in our sample worked from home, that work itself ebbed and flowed and that many of our knowledge workers were unable to treat work as if it were controlled by an on/off switch, makes us question the value of the work-life balance conceptualisation as the dominant metaphor for contemporary work

Unsettling the 'balance'

The work-life balance has become accepted as a normative model for a healthy worker in a healthy workplace. As such it echoes other currently prevalent discourses of 'balance' like the importance of 'balanced eating regimes', or the desire to produce 'healthy balanced children'. Put another way, we argue that the work-life balance has become another buzz word of our time and agree with Benn (2002) who notes not only the 'new age element' associated with it, but that '[b]eing against work-life balance would be a bit like being against summer or good sex'. Notwithstanding Benn's comment, in this section we briefly critique the model before focusing more explicitly on the balance metaphor itself.

With respect to the model we argue that even if something approximating the balance could be achieved, it could only be achieved by relatively few people. The types of organisations who would be most able to manage flexible hours and family friendly workplace policies are those of sufficient size, that if workers are not present for one reason or another, others can pick up tasks for a limited time at least. In a labour market like New Zealand's where 86 percent of enterprises employ five or fewer

people (Statistics New Zealand, 2002), the notion of balance appears to be problematic.

Given the extent and rapidity with which the notion of the work-life balance has captured the hearts and minds of people in all walks of life, we might be forgiven for thinking this is a new concern. If so, it is worth a reminder that the theme has a long history. While cast somewhat differently, Marx's alienated worker could be seen as suffering from an 'imbalance', although in a Marxist scenario the sharp dichotomy between work and life has little meaning. Yet even before the neo-liberal changes of the 1980s, when a job for life was still a taken for granted, concern was expressed over the imbalance resulting in work becoming oppressive. For example, Weil (1978:84) noted that '[e]verybody is busy repeating, in slightly different terms, that what we suffer from is a lack of balance, due to a purely material development of technical sciences'. While similar statements about lack of balance are common, from Weil's perspective the content of many family friendly workplace policies would do little to address the nature of the problem of work. She argues that what transforms work from an oppressive to a rewarding process are workers' interpretations of the tasks they are doing as worthwhile, as well as providing the opportunity through which workers can fulfil their obligations to others and to the wider society. The extent to which work-life balance programmes and legislation can facilitate these conditions is one that requires further research.

While the notion of balance in the workplace is not new, nor are criticisms of the work-life balance metaphor and we are certainly not the first to comment its limitations. For example, Thompson and Bunderson (2001:17-18) argue that the balance imagery suggests there is 'an appropriate distribution of hours that an individual should achieve among the domains of work, family, community, religion, recreation and so forth'. In a phenomenologically based argument that critiques the balance orientation on the grounds that it 'limits the work-nonwork relationship to a zero-sum allocation exercise', they assert the need to go beyond the balance metaphor. By way of alternative, they posit the metaphor of time as a container of meaning, arguing that while this metaphor recognises that time is finite and zero sum, it also 'allows us to address the *nature* of the activities that occupy our time, including the significance that they assume' (Thompson and Bunderson, 2001:18).

While we agree that it is important to go beyond the notion of time assumed in the work-life balance metaphor, we believe the alternative metaphor they offer, 'time as a container of meaning', also has limitations. It fails to do what a metaphor should do which is, according to Inkson, who is well published in the area of career metaphors (see for example Inkson, 2002; Inkson and Amundson, 2002), to 'provide a powerful tool for us to express ourselves, and at the same time betray[s] deeper constructs in our thinking'. Inkson goes on to note that metaphors 'describe the world in a vivid, lively, yet familiar way, enabling us to see events from a special perspective' (Inkson, forthcoming). Our contention is that 'time as a container of meaning' falls short in terms of Inkson's criteria. Although potentially useful in terms of a framework for academic research, the metaphor of 'time as a container of meaning' does not conjure up an image that would be sufficiently vibrant to become the basis for workplace legislation or regulation.

The Work-life Mosaic

In previous research the LMD team developed the concept of the *work-life mosaic* in an attempt to better capture the breadth and complexity of people's personal, paid and unpaid work lives and the interconnections among these elements. In arguing for the idea of a mosaic, we begin with the very basic and hardly novel idea that our lives are composed of more than paid employment. The concept is similar in some respects to Handy's notion of the portfolio in which he identified two broad categories of work – paid and free (or unpaid) work. Both these forms of work are then subdivided. Paid work is made up of employment for which wages or fees are received. Free work comprises homework or all the tasks that go on in the home, gift or voluntary work, such as community work, charity work and so on and study work which includes formal and informal study and sports training (Handy, 1990: 184).

Although we accept Handy's categories as representative of the working activities that people are, or can be, engaged in during their lives, we have elected instead to employ the metaphor of a mosaic rather than a portfolio. While not denying that some people approach all aspects of their lives in a very business-like manner, managing their activities as portfolios, we feel that the idea of a work-life mosaic has greater resonance. Including those pieces of the mosaic outside of paid employment is important, not just for recognising what feminists have long emphasised – the value of unpaid activities – but also because any analysis of alternative working arrangements frequently has to account for the more intimate connections between home and work that often arise as a result.

Mosaics imply the combining of pieces, many of which may be very different in size, shape, colour and composition. The edges of some pieces are sharp and clear while others are less so. In a mosaic some of the joins can be close and neat and others more dispersed. We can visualise a person's life as comprised of different pieces, just as a mosaic is. That is, people combine different forms of work, each with various characteristics. Some of these combinations of work would fit neatly together and others require more effort or concessions in order to make them fit. The distinctions between components can be very clear in some places and less distinct in others.

Given that the combinations of activities that people are involved in change across time, viewing the particular combinations of work people do at any one point is very much like looking at just one area of the mosaic. By drawing back from focusing on the various smaller pieces, we are gradually able to discern a larger picture that portrays the mix of work activities people undertake at various points and how they change across time. Since change need not be global, that is, only one or two pieces of work may be changed at any time, viewing the whole allows us to see how the various pieces that remain unchanged fit with those that are altered.

Having categorised work into various forms, it is important to note that each category is not simply represented by one piece of the mosaic. Rather, where a category is made up of a range of activities, then each is a piece of the mosaic. Thus, two forms of voluntary work are represented by two mosaic pieces. The various activities undertaken in the home, those related to study, as well as any voluntary work combine to create the unpaid work segment of a person's mosaic. Any activities undertaken for

wages or fees form the employment segment. Holding more than one form of paid employment concurrently – what has variously been referred to as multiple job holding or another interpretation of portfolio work – is easily represented as multiple pieces making up the employment segment of the mosaic (though for simplicity we often refer to this as the employment mosaic). This image of a mosaic within the mosaic is used in preference to the idea of multiple jobs for a couple of reasons. Clearly, it fits with the overall theme of a mosaic. More importantly, our research found a number of people whose paid employment involved self-employment and a position as an employee. Our impression was that people who were self-employed did not really consider this work a ‘job’, which tended to be equated with being an employee. Though this might be dismissed as semantics, our view is that a workable model should reflect the experiences of those involved as closely as possible. When taken together, the free-work and employment segments produce the mosaic for an individual. Though we examine aspects of how the unpaid work segment interact with the employment segment, our main focus is on the latter area.

While not displaying every variation on the standard employment arrangement, the mosaic approach does allow the image of a changing employment situation to be developed on a number of planes. The make-up of an individual’s mosaic can be constructed for any one time and across time. Individual mosaics could be drawn together based on certain criteria for comparison.

Initially we found the work-life mosaic a useful concept for exploring the non-standard work experiences of many of those interviewed. It highlights the idea of a lack of predictable patterns. Unlike the work-life balance the metaphor does not suggest equilibrium. Rather, the metaphor brings to mind an image of different pieces of different shapes, sizes and colours that fit together to make a coherent whole. On reflection however, we now view the work-life mosaic as too rigid for our purpose. The image of a mosaic is of a set or finished piece that is cemented in place in the way a mosaic table top or mirror surround is made. The problem we see with this metaphor is that, despite our earlier argument to the contrary, it fails to fully capture both the dynamic context in which the mosaic is located and the evolving nature of an individual worker’s networks and relationships.

Where to Now?

Given the problems we see with the concept of the work-life mosaic it is clear we feel that more needs to be done to emphasise the dynamic and interactive nature of work roles, both alone and together with non-work and other unpaid activities. Consequently, we introduce the idea of *configuring lifestyles* which is loosely based on the work of Norbert Elias. A configurational approach is based on a dynamic process of interdependence and tension between phenomena, in this case work and home. Firkin (2003) used this notion in a related LMD study of midwives as non-standard workers. Using Tabboni’s definition of Elias’ configurational approach posited as ‘a model of interdependence, a field of tension ... that is created between that phenomenon and the directly opposing one (Tabboni, cited in Firkin, 2003:91), Firkin explains that in terms of the lives of the midwives in his study what happens in one area of their lives needs to be considered in relation to other parts of their lives, with tension and interdependence essential ingredients of each and the whole

While on occasion midwives in Firkin's research referred to notions of trying to 'balance' work and home, they more often talked about developing a *lifestyle* and *integrating* the aspects of their life together. A number of quotes from the Firkin research highlight this idea:

It's very much a lifestyle, my phone never gets turned off so if it rings at 2am or 3am that's my job.

It just becomes integrated into your life.

Eventually that just becomes part of your life.

I mean that this is a choice that you make, it's a lifestyle that you choose.

I always used to say it's not a job it's a lifestyle.

Importantly, the perfect or ideal integration may never be achieved. Rather, it is an ongoing and reflexive process that occurs through the employment of strategies. Following Felstead and Jewson (2000:148) the term strategy is used to capture the emergent patterns which might, or might not, involve deliberate planning and premeditated intent and are the outcome of 'conscious planning, or emerge in a cumulative and unreflexive way'. This latter point is highlighted in the following quote from the midwives research:

One of the mistakes that people make is that they say I'm on call so I can't go out or I can't do this. You get to a point where you just carry on your life. You do what you do. You go to the movies or you go to whatever and if you get called you get called. And most of the time you don't get called.

From the above comments, and the earlier quotes in this paper from the knowledge workers which demonstrate the interconnection and blurring between life and work, we suggest the 'integrated lifestyle' as a metaphor which better fits the attempts made by these workers to manage the work-life nexus. It also seems that to examine new ways of working may necessitate exploring new ways of living and hence the development of new conceptual frameworks.

The benefit of adopting a configurational approach is that it can still retain an element of the mosaic, while better conceptualising the dynamic nature of the process across time. It also reflects the way many of our sample were somehow trying to integrate their personal, home, family and social lives with the new working arrangements they had adopted.

Whether the concept of the 'integrated lifestyle' offers a more appropriate depiction of the work-life nexus for contemporary workers has yet to be fully established. We believe it has significant explanatory potential for workers like those in our sample, who experienced considerable control, autonomy and flexibility in their jobs. Currently the LMD project is in the process of completing research on non-standard work at the lowest tiers of the occupational hierarchy – contingent work. Whether the concept is as appropriate for this group of non-standard workers remains to be seen.

The focus of this paper has been on conceptualisations of the work-life nexus among a sample of non-standard, knowledge or high-tech workers. After outlining the definitional difficulties associated with non-standard work we critically examined the concepts of work-life balance and the work-life mosaic and suggested that the concept of the integrated lifestyle has considerable merit. Saying that, we still believe however, that the development of relevant conceptualisations to fit the work/life nexus and are sufficiently encompassing to cover the spectrum of workers in the 21st century remains a challenge.

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