# Information Technology and Work At Home: Some New Trends

*by Alladi Venkatesh*

Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, that is, since the early part of the 19th century, the organization of family life and (paid) work life has been a major area of concern to writers, employers, workers, social planners, and politicians. While many aspects of these two spheres of our lives have changed over the last 200 years or so and continue to evolve in new ways, two conditions had remained unchanged for a long time. The first condition, which is still the reigning principle, is the strict separation of family and work lives in theory and practice. The second condition which has changed drastically, but only recently, is the viewpoint that women are in charge of the family life while men take care of work outside the home. My recent research is concerned with the examination of how new technologies of information—computers and telecommunications—are making a dent on this separation of family and work lives. Specifically, in what ways are these technologies contributing to the phenomenon of work-at-home?

In this information age, the world of management is seriously examining the question of how computers can shape people's work habits and create opportunities for employees to work at home while they are employed outside the home. In some quarters, this kind of activity is known as "telecommuting." (In our study, we found that telecommuting is only one type of work-at-home and not necessarily the most common.) In more esoteric circles, this type of work arrangement is known as "distributed work." Still others refer to it, simply as "remote work." It has also been labeled "flexible work," and organizations which facilitate it are known as "flexible organizations." No matter what the label, the general idea seems to be the same—that working-at-home is no longer unfashionable. Of course, history tells us that although a sepa-

ration between work life and family life does exist, it has never been complete. Even in the good old days, people always worked at home while gainfully employed outside. So, the question is, what is new?

In order to investigate this question, we conducted a three-year longitudinal study of about 600 households with computers and slightly less than 300 households without computers. The sample for this study was a national sample and the study was funded by the National Science Foundation.

We found that there are in fact five different types of work-at-home:

1. *Self-employed work-at-home*. This refers to people who run businesses from their homes. Usually, this includes small-business entrepreneurs, both young and old, men and women, of different ethnic and social backgrounds, and scattered all over the country.

2. *Telecommuters*. These are people who remain at home and work, may be two or three days a week, and go to the office the rest of the week. Usually, in these cases, telecommuting becomes a substitute for transportation; that is, people divide their work hours between two locations, the work site and the home site, in order to save transportation costs, reduce traffic congestion, and be with their families.

3. *Supplemental work-at-home*. This includes managers and professionals who work full-time in their work-site, bring their work home in the evenings or weekends, and put in additional hours of work. This type of arrangement is not to be confused



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with telecommuting, which is a term usually reserved for describing transportation substitution. Supplemental workers carry out their normal work activities at the usual work-site but also continue to work at home. (True workaholics!)

4. *Traditional remote workers*. Included here are regular wage-earners, but due to the nature of their jobs, the category also includes those who are required to work at home or from other remote locations. Typically, this category includes sales people, journalists, and other field workers.

5. *Moonlighters*. This category includes people who work for a regular employer during the day but earn extra income on a free-lance or moonlighting basis.

It should be clear that in all the above cases, the new technologies can potentially make a substantial difference. Our study focused on the supplemental work-at-home group. In this category, we found that people who owned computers reported doing more hours of work at home than did those who did not own computers. The average time spent working at home was eight hours per