

Thematic Article

Present to Anyone on Any Devices? The Conflict Between Telework and Family Life for Teachers and Researchers of Helping Professions

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Abstract

The study examined the digital work experiences of academics in human services professions (teachers, doctors, health workers, and clergy). Answers to the following question were sought after: What are the patterns related to digital work? How does work-life or family conflict (WLC) affect teleworking? It was hypothesized that digital work generates WLC. Quantitative international data were collected by the Research and Development Centre for Higher Education (CHERD–H) at the University of Debrecen in 2023, across five countries (Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, and Ukraine). A subsample of 315 academics involved in caring professions was collected and principal component analysis, ANOVA, and correlation tests were performed using the SPSS statistical program. The subsample included 114 male and 193 female teachers, 33 of whom were Romanian. Perceptions of advantages and disadvantages dominated the digital work patterns. In addition, a "digital super-power" component was identified. The ANOVA test showed that Romanian academics had a significantly higher average in perceiving disadvantages compared to others. Academics working minimal hours were considerably more open to seeing the benefits of digital technology than those with longer working hours. According to the correlation test results, there was a negative relationship between the level of WLC and the perception of technology benefits: those who detected digital advantages had lower WLC values, while those who recognized disadvantages had higher WLC values.

Keywords: helping profession academics; telework; work - family life conflict; quantitative research; Romania

Introduction

Teleworking is a relatively new phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe, its legal framework has been regulated in Romania since 2018, based on Law 81/2018. In this sense, it is a specific form of work organization through which an employee regularly and voluntarily performs tasks related to the job, occupation or profession he or she performs at a place other than the workplace organized by the employer, usually from his or her own home (Portal Legislativ). Teleworking also refers to a special communication between employer and employee via the Internet and telephone, using digital or electronic devices (Cambridge Online Dictionary, n. d.).

In the field of education, virtual education denotes a learning environment where the teacher and student are separated by time, space, or both, and the curriculum content is delivered via IT applications and multimedia. The first online service dates back to 1960, when the University of Illinois created an intranet for its students. This system consisted of interconnected computer terminals, allowing students to access course materials and listen to recorded lectures at any time. The growth of virtual education in recent years has been diverse, rapid, and global (Dung, 2020). Traditional education has also utilized various internet platforms and virtual tools to diversify instruction. However, for many teachers and students, it was previously unimaginable to work in a "classroom without walls" over the long term (Radović-Marković, 2010). A paradigm shift in higher education occurred in 2020, at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, when the participants in traditional higher

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education—teachers and students—were forced to continue their teaching, learning, and research activities in the virtual realm.

International surveys suggest that in November 2020, almost three-quarters of European higher education students studied either exclusively or primarily virtually, and more than half had little or no interest in obtaining their degree in the online sphere (QS, 2020). The changes associated with the sudden closure of educational institutions, as well as the long-term consequences that will impact the educational, social, psychological, and professional development of the younger generation, must be the focus of future research (UNICEF, 2020). Medical students in Poland found virtual learning enjoyable. Among its main advantages, a majority considered staying at home in a comfortable environment, continuous access to online materials, and the possibility of learning at their own pace as positive aspects. Respondents cited a lack of professional experience and technical problems with IT equipment as the main disadvantages. In terms of developing professional and social skills, online education was less effective than traditional education (Baczek et al., 2021).

In a previous study, I conducted a series of online focus group interviews. The research explored students' experiences in Oradea, focusing on the period of transition from the traditional classroom to the virtual space. The results were presented at the Hungarian Educational Research Association 2021 online conference. During this qualitative research, I sought to answer the following questions: How did students perceive the transition from traditional to online education? What experiences did they gain? How did they evaluate the methods and techniques of the instructors? How were they able to complete their internships? What was the atmosphere of online education? What are the advantages, disadvantages, and future effects of online training? The study's sample included 32 full-time social work students from two universities in Oradea. In semi-structured interviews, the advantages and disadvantages of virtual education were also noted. Students considered that this process improved their technical equipment and digital device use skills. They became more proficient at multitasking, and their sense of responsibility for virtual learning increased. The lessons were interactive and varied, depending on the teachers' creativity. Students also articulated lifestyle benefits: they could spend more time with their families, and connecting to those classes was more convenient than the traditional way. The lack of direct human and peer contact, the closure of the physical library, and the deprivation of internships were cited as disadvantages. In this way, the curriculum proved to be more concentrated. Students also highlighted monotony while online, fatigue, and difficulty in concentrating (Berei, 2021).

Győri and Pusztai (2022) explored the relational aspect of higher education between teachers and students during the Hungarian emergency remote period. The lack of personal relationships among them increased the risk of their dropout from academic-level studies.

During the pandemic, we carried out a quantitative international analysis examining the availability of digital assets among students and their families during the 2018–2019 academic year. We focused on their learning strategies and digital leisure activities. We found that 97% of students had access to the most essential digital equipment with internet connectivity. Both traditional and virtual techniques were used during the learning process. Most students preferred summary illustrations and short presentations, and more than half had never studied using tutorials or audio recordings. Statistical analyses also revealed that the boundaries between students' learning and leisure activities became blurred in their everyday lives, especially when accessing virtual spaces (Berei & Pusztai, 2022).

Following the pandemic, our attention was redirected toward the higher education landscape which had transformed globally, changing teacher and researcher working conditions, altering digital work challenges, and the well-being and health of academic personnel. The difficulties of academic work, the conflict between academics' professional and personal or family life (WLC), and the digital aspects of academic work have been explained in our previous publications (Berei & Kovács, 2025; Engler & Berei, 2024; Buda & Kovács, 2024). Thus, in this study, I proposed to analyse patterns of digital perception and their association with WLC among professional helper academics.

Professional helpers are human services workers who share common skills in educational, social, medical, health, spiritual, and security sectors (American Professional Guide, n. d.). These professionals aid student professional socialization through support, supervision, and training in the development of practical skills. The attractiveness of helping professions, however, is low, primarily due to lower salaries compared to other fields (Csók, 2020). Thus, in order to support human resource development and supervision, and to make the field more appealing, it would be beneficial to make changes to the system (Berei, 2012; Pusztai & Csók, 2020).

Academics who train professionals in these fields of human and social support are under-researched. Here, I outline the advantages and disadvantages of academics working remotely, who represent higher education human resources in teaching, healthcare, and pastoral care professions. Moreover, I investigated the association

between working from home (WFH) and work–family conflict, addressing the questions: what are the patterns of home-based work? does working remotely contribute to conflict between work and family life?

Research and Method

Quantitative international data are provided by the Centre for Research and Development in Higher Education of the University of Debrecen (CHERD – H) in 2023. The complete database consists of 821 responses from universities and colleges in five countries (Romania, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, and Ukraine). In the framework of this study, a subsample of 315 was scrutinized, selecting data from academics working exclusively in the helping profession. The selection criteria applied for sampling, including socio-demographics and academic field characteristics, were described previously (Berei & Kovács, 2025). In this study, factor analysis was performed to identify patterns of telework perception, followed by an ANOVA test to compare means and a correlation test to examine relationships, using the SPSS statistical program. The hypothesis of the study was that digital work by teachers and researchers generates conflict between work and family life.

The subsample consisted of 114 male teachers and 193 women, 33 of whom were Romanian. The average age of teachers in the helping profession was 46.7 years, and most of them were married (69%) and had children (75%). On average, they had been working in higher education for 17.8 years, and most held the position of assistant professor or a lower status (such as teaching assistants). The majority (73.5%) worked more than 40 hours per week.

Results

The pattern of academics' perceptions of telework

The perceptions of the teachers and researchers were put through factor analysis based on the correlation of 9 variables (9 items, principal component method, varimax rotation, KMO=0.711, $p=0.000$, explained variance 60.57%). Three factors were previously revealed, with their value being greater than 1 (2.69; 1.56; 1.18), the latent structure emerging after their perpendicular rotation. 3 factors were identified (Table 1), to which the following names were given: 1. Advantages or Profit – perception (27.3%), 2. Challenges, Disadvantages or Drawbacks perception (17.4%), 3. Digital Super – Power perception (15.8%). Perceptions of benefits dominated the pattern, the communication advantages and variables, measuring how offline and online activities are easily balanced, fit together. The perceived challenge factor is also significant, encompassing the conflict between work and private life, exhaustive intellectual work and constant availability. There is also a third factor in the sample, which combines the indispensability and research benefits of digital technology. This latter factor was deemed the digital super-power component.

Table 1. Patterns of teachers' and researchers' views on digital work

	Profit	Drawbacks	Super Power
The asynchronous communication of digital technology makes it easier to handle situations more thoughtfully, thus reducing stress levels	.811		
A major advantage of digital technology is that situations can be resolved without the stress of personal presence	.763		
Students can communicate effectively with teachers digitally	.753		
It's easy to find a balance between offline and online activities	.568		
The blurring of work and life is largely the result of digital devices		.786	
Activity done on digital devices is more exhaustive than mental work done without them		.657	
The constant availability made possible by digital technology is very frustrating		.645	
Higher education cannot be imagined without digital technology			.809
Digital technology makes it easier to meet the requirements of scientific metrics			.664

Sources: CEETHE 2023

The perceived advantages point to the respondents communicated through digital devices and how stress levels were reduced. The advantage factor includes a variable of the slight balance between real and virtual life at the

same time. The disadvantage factor consists of a variable measuring an important drawback of telework, namely: the conflict between work and personal life (Table 1).

Using the ANOVA test, it was identified that academics of Romanian helping professionals had a significantly higher average in detecting challenges than others ($F=4.3$; $p=0.039$). Overall, teachers and researchers with minimal time commitments were significantly more open to perceiving the benefits of digital technology than human resources with longer working hours ($F=10.9$; $p=0.001$).

Work-family conflict and telework

In our previous works, we explained in detail the series of questions used to measure the WLC (Engler & Berei 2024). From 7 variables (Table 2) a principal component was created called “the WLC score of academics in helping professions” ($m=47.66$; $SD=28.78$; $N=310$). Work-family conflict is significantly higher among women teaching in helping professions ($F=5.07$; $p=0.25$) and those who worked more than the standard 40 hours per week ($F=26.93$; $p=0.000$). The highest average score ($m=3.14$) had a lack of personal activities achieved variables. Teachers and researchers simultaneously gave high scores to the difficulty of balancing work and private life ($m=2.98$) (Table 2).

Table 2. Work–life conflict variables, descriptive characteristics

	Mean	SD	N
My personal life is compromised because of work	2.78	1.26	314
Work causes difficulties in my personal life	2.63	1.22	315
My personal needs are neglected for work	2.98	1.32	315
I push my private life to the background for work	2.90	1.29	313
Personal activities are missing because of work	3.14	1.30	314
I find it difficult to balance work with a life separate from work	2.98		314
I am dissatisfied with the amount of time allocated to activities outside the workplace	2.98	1.34	314

Sources: CEETHE 2023

Spearman, a nonparametric correlation test processing concluded that there is a negative relationship between the degree of WLC and the perception of benefits (Table 3). Digital advantage perceivers have significant lower WLC scores, those perceiving disadvantages have higher WLC values and vice versa.

Table 3. Work–life conflict factor correlation with telework perception factors

	Profits factor	Drawbacks	Super forces
WLC score factor	$\rho = -0.237$ $p=0.000$	$\rho = 0.173$ $p=0.003$	Not significant

Sources: CEETHE 2023

Discussion

In the research on the working conditions of academic staff, Kinman (2014) considered the changes that have occurred in the academic environment consequences of social and political transformations from the last century. Previously, teaching and research work was characterized by relatively low stress and few challenges; by the 21st century, this had changed, and academics became a group exposed to “high risks,” alongside healthcare workers (Kinman, 2014). In the field of higher education research, digital tool usage recently became an educational, learning, and social phenomenon (Berei, 2021; Berei & Pusztai, 2022; Buda & Kovács, 2024), while digital work (teleworking) is today a relatively new area of research.

In this research, I highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of telework for academics who constitute the higher education human resources of the helping professions (teachers, doctors, health care professionals, and pastors). In addition, the association between working remotely and work–family conflict was investigated. The first research question connected to the latter was: What are the digital patterns of telework?

Results showed that, according to teachers and researchers, digital work is characterized by both advantages and disadvantages. Perceived advantages of working from home include reduced stress associated with physical presence, a better balance between online and offline activities, and improved communication with students. Moreover, the main disadvantages identified were the blurring of boundaries between personal and work life, the exhaustion from continuous intellectual activities, and the expectation of constant availability through digital technology.

Recent research has similarly focused on the advantages and drawbacks of telework (Kaushik & Guleria, 2020; Choudhury et al., 2021). An extreme belief was identified: that higher education work without digital technology is not possible. Teachers in the helping professions exhibited a “super-force” perception, as they could no longer imagine the future of higher education without digital devices.

In a previous analysis, we defined a map of challenges for academic work among the professional helper academic subsample. Global performance pressures—such as the need to publish articles and be efficient in scientific roles—were highlighted as challenges for teachers, medical, and health education workers (Berei & Kovács, 2025). Thus, the use of technology in work is considered an advantage, even a superpower, in scientific activities; however, we had not previously examined the correlation between digital technology usage and work–life conflict for this field.

Here, it was hypothesized that digital work generates conflict between work and family life. The hypothesis was partially confirmed: those who perceived digital advantages had lower work–life conflict (WLC) scores, while those who perceived disadvantages had higher WLC values, and vice versa. Working with technology can generate additional stress and work–family conflicts (Harris et al., 2025; Giunchi et al., 2023), but the functionality and advantages of the process could help reduce stress.

Teachers and researchers in professional human service higher education fields experienced a lack of personal activities and difficulty balancing work and personal life, as is also observed in other academic or professional areas (Hill et al., 2001; Bowering & Reed, 2021; Shi Mohammadi, 2022; Hosseini et al., 2023). Women, those living alone, and those were not parents experienced significantly higher levels of work–family conflict (Engler & Berei, 2024). This research also concluded that women’s work–life conflict (WLC) scores were significantly higher than those of men. This aspect is considered particularly relevant in helping professions, especially in teacher education, where a higher percentage of female staff and student enrollment is typically observed compared to males (EUROSTAT, 2022).

Conclusions

The formal training of professionals working in the field of human services (teachers, trainers, social workers, clergy, special education professionals, social pedagogues, medical assistants, doctors, nurses, midwives, family counsellors, foster parents, police officers, emergency professionals), the formulation and development of common competencies, the issue of quality, lifelong learning, and the importance of workplace further training often come to the forefront of discussions related to these occupations. However, the well-being of those who train helpers and the examination of the characteristics of work in the 21st century is not a frequently researched area.

This study examined the relationship between the use of digital technology in work activities and work–family conflict among academics in helping professions. The latent patterns of telework revealed both perceived advantages and disadvantages in the use of technology. To maintain proper functionality in meeting work demands, academic workers need to recognize the advantages of technology. The ANOVA test identified that Romanian teachers had a significantly higher average in perceiving disadvantages compared to others, while those working the minimum number of hours per week had a significantly higher average among those who recognized the benefits of digital technology.

Reducing digital stress is beneficial for higher education institutions, academics, and students. Academics should develop efficient work strategies to maintain a balance between online and offline activities, ensuring that personal life is not negatively impacted by home-based work. Higher education institutions are responsible for providing students and teachers with the necessary technology to support learning, teaching, and research activities. They should also offer mentorship to address the difficulties associated with technology use, thus

minimizing digital stress. Finally, digital technologies should be advantageous for users, but policymakers ought to regulate work hours accordingly, in order to abate the negative effects of these technologies.

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