

Commuting Patterns, Lifestyles and Household Dynamics: Learning from a Firm's Relocation Process

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1. Introduction

Over the last years, the city of Toronto has experienced a process of employment dispersal. For example, for the period 2000-2003, Toronto lost 37,100 jobs, representing an annual decline of 1.0%.¹ In contrast, the neighbouring Regional Municipality of York increased its employment by 53,785 jobs, with an annual growth of 7.1%.² Changes in employment location are a major factor in determining current commuting trips, and workplace relocations are an ongoing part of this dynamic.

Variations in terms of commuting patterns are regularly observed at the aggregate level for the Greater Toronto Area. However, the micro dimensions of these changes are yet not well understood in the planning field, particularly, in terms of how complex commuting patterns shape our daily life. Commuting is part of the larger structure of our household's activities and is also a fundamental component of our own agendas. For many of us, adapting to longer or different trips to school or work means the reorganization of certain routines that are vital for our household's maintenance.

The focus of my research is to study the case of a firm recently relocated from a transit-accessible location in downtown Toronto, to a suburban setting, poorly served by public transit. In this context, I explore how people alter their schedules, non-work

¹ City of Toronto, Urban Development Services, Employment profile 2004.

² Calculation based on data available from the Regional Municipality of York, Employment and Industry, 2003.

activities and household responsibilities in response to changing commuting patterns. Also, I looked at the role of travel modes and work built environments in providing commuters with opportunities or barriers for undertaking essential activities. Finally, I studied whether commuting influences long-term decision such as residential location and career expectations.

1.1 Commuting patterns become more complex every day

It is argued that the ongoing urban processes of decentralisation of jobs and the growth of employment in North American cities have altered urban spatial structures to the point of generating a disconnection between home and workplace (Kain, 1992). Changing household structure has added to the intricacy of this problem. Often, long commutes are unavoidable for households with two or more workers, as it is not possible to match the household's residential location to both or more of the workplaces. Larger households face complicated locational and travel needs, as they need to escort, pick-up or drop-off their members in their respective activities throughout the day (Crane, 1996).

1.2 Exploring qualitative methods to address transportation issues

Although research to date has indicated that issues such as family responsibilities and lifestyles interact to affect commuting behaviour, travel demand studies and commuter programs do not often address these matters. One of the reasons for this gap is that commuting patterns are typically examined and forecasted from a quantitative perspective, while disregarding social components of the picture. Yet, some authors reiterate the need for shifting from a pre-occupation with where vehicles go, to an analysis of what people do and why they need to travel (Kurani and Lee-Gosselin, 1996). My research draws on qualitative methods to explain these issues in a case study.

2. Methods

The present research uses the post-intervention approach to retrospectively assess social impacts of workplace relocation. I use qualitative techniques to gather my data, i.e. interviews with key informants, and field observation.

2.1 Interviews

A series of in-depth interviews with key informants were conducted between January 14 and 28 of 2005. Participants were contacted via email, with the help of the Human Resources division at the firm studied. In total, twelve people were interviewed. The name of the workplace as well as the identity of the interviewees is kept anonymous at the request of the firm's management.

2.2 Field Observation

I did field observation at the previous and current workplace locations to assess the level of opportunity for employees to link non-work activities with the journey to work at both sites. These were conducted over morning hours on February 25, 2005 for the Markham site, and February 28, 2005 for the downtown Toronto site.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Commuting and household functioning

Travel is part of a larger structure of household activities. When one of the family members in the household makes a significant change in her or his daily journey to work, this variation may impact the overall functioning of the household's schedule. For example, when one householder faces a longer commute, it may affect who is responsible for fulfilling necessary household activities such as picking up children from daycare or food

shopping. In large households, the constraints are even more complex because some household activities need to be performed together with other household members (Law, 1999).

3.2 Non-work activities, travel and the built environment

Built environments and travel modes determine to a great extent the relationship between commuting, lifestyles and activity patterns of workers. Previous research demonstrates that certain characteristics of the built environment influence the way employees perform their non-work activities on their way to or from work, or during the workday (Cervero and Kockelman, 1997; Krizek, 2003). It is argued that suburban workplaces provide lower accessibility levels to activities when compared with locations in central areas of a city (Krizek, 2003).

3.3 People's decision-making and the commuting paradox

It is assumed in urban economics theory that individuals will freely optimize their decisions to attain an optimum equilibrium in their trade-offs between commuting, housing and jobs choices. (Alonso, 1964). However, this traditional economic framework may come short in explaining people's situations and choices with regards to commuting. For instance, Stutzer and Frey (2004) empirically investigate individuals' compensation for commuting and analyse their level of utility using "reported well being" as a proxy measure for utility. Stutzer and Frey's findings showed that people who spend more time commuting systematically perceived lower levels of life satisfaction (controlling for socioeconomic variables). This suggests that commuters incur losses that the utility maximization approach does not consider.

4. Previous research on office relocation

Hanssen (1995) and Parolin et al. (2001) conducted research aimed at understanding some of the possible impacts of workplace relocation processes on travel mode. Hanssen (1995)

looked at commuting impacts of a firm's relocation process in Oslo, Norway. He found that employees significantly change their travel behaviour when the firm studied moved out from the central district to a suburban area. Building on Hanssen's research, Parolin et al. (2001) examined the relocation processes of three firms in Sydney. All three relocated from the Central Business District (CBD) to suburban settings. The authors presented similar findings to those of Hanssen, with a 50 percent reduction in the use of public transport and an increase in car use by 16 percent across all respondents after relocation. What is distinctive about the research done by Parolin et al. (2001) is that a major theme in their research is the effect of workplace relocation on the employee activity patterns. They conclude that: "Relocation from an activity rich to an activity poor site leads to a rearrangement of activities where more employees choose to perform non-work activities outside of normal working hours – mainly to and from work- thereby contributing to traffic flows (Parolin et al., 2001: 15)".

5. Characteristics of the firm studied

My findings are based on the case study of workers in the Information Technology Services sector that were relocated in July 2004, from downtown Toronto to the Town of Markham.

5.1 Original location

The former site of the firm was well served by public transit. It was close to three subway stations. There are all kinds of pedestrian amenities surrounding the original building, e.g. wide sidewalks, bus shelters, benches, stores, among others. This building is also connected underground to a large pedestrian tunnel that connects to local and regional transit.

5.2 New location

The new location is situated in an emerging business cluster in Markham. Land uses are fairly segregated, being industrial uses predominant. The cluster lacks design elements that would attract pedestrian activity. There are only sidewalks on one side of the street, and in the winter snow is not cleared very often. It can be observed that access to the new site is easiest by highways as many of them converge near the site. The urban form pattern for the area has poor street connectivity and extremely long blocks. These characteristics may be deterrents for workers to use alternative modes of transportation like bicycling or walking, both, as part of the trip to work, or as a way to link non-work activities to the workday.

6. Findings

6.1 Mode choice for the journey to work

Consistent with the literature review, there was an increase in car use by the respondents, while public transport use declined. Interviewees used to take public transit or walk to get to the previous workplace location and car use was very low. Some of these workers relied so much on public transit for all kinds of trips that they did not even own private automobiles. After the relocation, interestingly, only those interviewees who already owned a car started commuting by this means. But, what are the intervening factors that defined interviewees' modal choice to the new journey to work?

6.1.1 Private automobile commuters

- **Economic benefits of cars and inconveniences of using transit**

Three of the interviewees analyzed the cost, time and convenience of commuting by car as opposed to transit. For

them, private automobile use was highly beneficial considering previous car ownership and free parking availability at the new site.

“While a transit fare to this site is \$10 dollars a round trip, my gas expenses are around \$8 dollars a day (interviewee No. 1)”.

Interviewee No. 2 mentioned a similar argument, adding that the difference in time comparing car against transit is very high. He would need to transfer six times in total and adding forty minutes of travel time a day, which he thinks is unreasonable.

- **Cars provide reliability for parents with a high level of household responsibilities**

Interviewee No. 4 is currently driving to work. Her case is unusual, because before the relocation she used to work from home on a regular basis. Currently, due to a new policy of the firm, she was required to work onsite at the new office. Due to the fact that she is a single mother of two children, she relies on her car to get things done more efficiently. It allows her to stop on her way home to get what she needs, and is also useful to have it in case of an emergency.

6.1.2 Transit commuters

Most of the current transit users who were interviewed live within the city of Toronto and close to a TTC subway station. In general terms, they mentioned that they were not willing to purchase automobiles for their daily commute, and that transit was the most convenient option. Due to the fact that they do not own cars, shifting their mode would imply that they were to incur in high costs, including a big investment in purchasing the vehicle, and new monthly fees like insurance and parking in their places of residence. Although mobility costs heavily influence

this population's decisions, certain attitudes help us better understand their ridership as it will be explained in this section.

- **Transit as part of young professionals' lifestyle**

Most of the interviewees who kept their traveling mode after workplace relocation are young and single. Some of them commented on how SOV phenomenon affects the environment, and in addition, they said they enjoyed reading or doing other activities during the trip to work, while on the bus or train. They mentioned feeling attracted to the activities that they can carry on in the city and the people they get to network with. For example, interviewee No. 6, age 23, is just starting her professional career and her income is low considering her expenses, i.e. her housing and leisure expenditures. She could afford to buy and maintain the costs associated to a car only if she were to give up some of the activities she does over weekends or move to a less expensive place. But she is not willing to do any of those; therefore she makes a 1 hour and 15 minutes commute by transit in the morning and a 1-hour and 5 minutes in the afternoon.

- **Perceived economic benefits of transit as compared to cars**

Interviewee No. 5, age 28, experienced a severe change in her commute routine following the office relocation. She used to walk to work in 15 minutes when the firm was located downtown. Now, she commutes for two hours and twenty minutes a day. She finds transit to the new work site very expensive, but much more inconvenient than it would be to drive. In an effort to further reduce the commute, she tried moving back to her parent's home in Markham. That experiment did not work because she found that even in Markham she would still need a car to get to her worksite, and for carrying on her non-work activities.

- **Physical activity and enjoying the ride**

While the high cost of purchasing a car was a reason to stick to transit, interviewees mentioned other factors influencing this decision. For example, Interviewee No. 9 is a lawyer in the firm who could afford the costs and expenses of purchasing a car. He even had a car once, but living next to a TTC subway station, he sold his vehicle four years ago, when he realized how convenient the transit service is. In addition, he regularly used to jog to get to work, and would also do it for other types of trips. He finds transit less stressful than driving. Interviewees No. 9 and No. 11 thought about getting a car when they first knew about the relocation to Markham. However, they wanted to keep their traveling routine. They actually found a better service from what they expected.

6.2 Commuting and household responsibilities

Changes in the commuting routine of interviewed parents significantly affected the internal division of labour in the household. Because of longer commutes, interviewee No. 2 had to change his time departure and get going much earlier to work to avoid traffic congestion. As a consequence, his wife is currently assuming all of the household's morning activities, like cooking the breakfast, helping the children to get ready, and dropping them by at school. This may be an uneven load of responsibilities, since she too has to get to work afterwards.

Similarly, in Interviewee No 2's case, the wife is in charge of the food shopping, picking up the children, and driving them to afternoon lessons. Furthermore, she has reduced the number of activities that she used to do by herself, in order to adjust to the new uneven distribution of household labour.

6.3 The work environment and changes in non-work activities

“One day I didn’t get the chance to stop by an ATM machine to get some money before coming to work. When I got here [the workplace], I found that the only ATM in the building was out of service. I was really mad! I was without money the whole day and at the end I had to borrow from someone just to be able to go back home (Interviewee No. 8)”

Office relocation heavily influenced the range of non-work activities undertaken by the interviewees. One of the benefits these employees had while working in the original downtown location was the opportunity to do banking, dry cleaning, shopping and other errands in their way to work, over lunch time or in the afternoon on their way home. Then, we can infer that, it was not just the change in travel mode and commuting times that influenced changes in the organization of non-work activities, but also, the possibility of linking different endeavours to the built environment of the workplace.

Most of the interviewees (particularly those with a high level of household responsibilities) mentioned that they are doing fewer non-work activities after workplace relocation. For example, Interviewee No. 7 used to go to a gym early in the morning, before going to the office. Now, because her transit commutes lasts one hour and a half, she had to abandon this activity. For five other people the relocation had this effect of reducing the number of activities carried out over weekdays.

Many interviewees mentioned reduced social activities after workplace relocation. For example, Interviewee No. 9 used to have a meeting with his friends of the poetry club once a week. Similarly, most of the interviewees would often get together over lunchtime with outside friends and family who work in the area.

“I used to have lunch with my sister every two weeks and also do some shopping with her. But now, seeing her is much more difficult because we work so far apart (Interviewee No. 7)”

In the new location, there are no restaurants within a 20-minute walking range, so employees must bring their own food and often have lunch at their own desks by themselves. Several interviewees explained that with flexible working hours, they are allowed to have a half-hour lunch break, and go home half an hour earlier. Although there is a cafeteria where employees can warm their food and sit, they often prefer to stay alone at their desks to save time.

6.4 Adjusting activities to new times and schedules

Dysfunctional commuting implies that interviewees need to wake up earlier in the morning, and give up usual activities like reading the news, having breakfast, or walking the dog. The most common alternative mentioned by the interviewees to accommodate for the new commuting routine was to change schedules.

6.5 Perceived costs and decision-making: Considering future changes

Given the fact that almost all of the interviewees experienced an increase in the time and cost of their journey to work, most of them feel that they have been demoted. They are not only paying double the transportation costs that they used to pay, but also, given their long commuting times, they are spending almost two hours a day in their trip that they are not compensated for.

“Before the office relocated, I used to walk 20 minutes to work. It was great exercise for me. Now I’m just sitting on a bus for 90 minutes. It’s such a waste of time! (Interviewee No. 5)”

This situation may force employees to make major decisions in order to reduce their traveling expenses in time and money. For people like *Interviewee No. 5*, there is no way to equilibrate this imbalance. Her commuting expenses cannot be equilibrated either by moving closer or shifting to driving as both options sharply increase her expenses. As a result, she absorbs the stress and disutility generated by the dysfunctional commute, and accepts a reduction in her perceived well-being.

6.5.1 Moving closer to work

None of the interviewees considered the option of moving closer to work in order to reduce their commuting time, as all of the interviewees living in Toronto appreciate the fact of being in the city. Several people said that, to sustain their way of life it is important to live close to restaurants, movie theatres, clubs, museums, and above all, subway stations. The region where the firm is nowadays located would not offer them such an urban vibrancy.

“I grew up in the suburbs and went to a university that was outside the city. I have always liked the idea of living in the city because it’s much livelier than the suburbs (Interviewee No. 6).”

6.5.2 Changes in career expectations

Some interviewees expressed that their actual commuting situation and the isolation of the new work site had deeply altered their career expectations with the firm. One of the employees has applied to graduate school and expects to start it after the summer. This decision was prompted, she says, because her current commuting routine is unsustainable. Moreover, she does not like the isolation of the new building where the office is located.

7. Summary of findings and conclusions

In conclusion, commuting is a crucial factor in determining the way people organize their daily routines, activities and schedules. Commuting time and distances influence the household's division of labour and the times and places for doing errands.

In terms of travel mode, it is interesting that six months after relocation, there are still many interviewees taking public transit to Markham, even when the service is poor. Lifestyle preferences and economic benefits explained this behaviour. The remaining question is whether these commuting patterns will be sustainable in the long run. Lifestyle preferences also explained the reasons for preserving a housing location far from the workplace, and levels of dissatisfaction with the actual commutes.

Consistent with the findings presented by Parolin et al., (2001) my findings corroborate that, being relocated from an activity-rich to an activity poor site leads commuters to a rearrangement of activities where they choose to carry out errands and other activities outside of normal working hours. This constitutes a major issue for relocated employees, because in the new location they face more difficulties performing activities that they used to do in a simple way at the previous site.

Changing working hours was the main way in which employees adjusted to their new travel situation. However, changing the times for departure and arrival has implied for some interviewees a decrease in the number of activities conducted outside and inside of the household. In addition, many of the activities that interviewees used to undertake over weekdays are now being carried out during weekends. Such changes generate great levels

of life dissatisfaction for employees willing to perform a high number of activities throughout a weekday.

In the transportation field, it is generally assumed that people make travel decisions reducing at all cost their total travel expenses, considering time, monetary costs and other inconveniences. However, as suggested by previous literature and confirmed by this exploratory study, there are other factors that come to play in determining commuters' decision-making and trade-offs that have been little researched to date, such as household responsibilities and lifestyle preferences.

It is assumed in the urban economic field that individuals will freely optimize their decisions to attain equilibrium in their trade-offs among the journey to work, housing consumption and job choices. Under this rationale, the burden of long commuting times would be accepted if it brings some kind of benefits to the individual or household unit. However, at least for the interviewees of the case studied, longer commuting times are sometimes accepted even when they do not provide any utility functions, and instead, generate dysfunctional situations.

This leads us to more general questions. First, how can public policy provide more options for people to attain a better balance between their jobs, non-work activities and family responsibilities via urban planning? And second, how can transportation and the location pattern of activities be not only environmentally sustainable but also socially sustainable? Given that this study is only preliminary, it only begins to provide answers to these important questions. Further research that explores the issues at hand is needed to generate new public policy responses.

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