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ICT-enabled Autonomy and Control in COVID-19 Remote Work

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

When the COVID-19 pandemic started two years ago, employers throughout the US were forced to adopt remote work modalities overnight. This new environment was difficult to navigate for both the employees and the employers. Many employees, particularly those new to teleworking, struggled with setting up a designated workplace at home and with simultaneously managing work and household responsibilities (as all family members worked or studied at home). Employers were also challenged by having to suddenly adapt their control process to the new remote working environment.

To maintain business continuity, organizations have relied on various information and communication technologies (ICT). These technologies can be considered both a facilitator of telework activities and an inhibitor of behaviors associated with them. On the one hand, ICTs enable employees to meet and collaborate; on the other hand, the use of certain features may have divergent roles for and impact on the employers and the employees. For example, using webcams may support conversation through body language or help strengthen ties among coworkers (Jessesky, 2019). Employers often enforce the use of webcams during meetings, otherwise perceiving workers as less engaged or less productive (Kelly, 2021). Yet, for employees, sharing their living situation through webcam may be a stressful experience. Those with children, for instance, may fear that they come across as less professional or less committed to their job (Kelly, 2021). Thus, remote work and, associated with it, use of ICTs, change the interactive dynamics between the management and the employees, creating tension between the interests of the two sides.

Central to the sudden shift of work from onsite to remote is the tension between worker autonomy and employer control. Remote work arrangements amend traditional forms of control that are based on observability and measurability. Remote work provides employees with autonomy but imposes the need for employers to establish procedures and strategies to control the work processes (Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021); and there is a need for research on how employees perceive and manage the tension between autonomy and control in the remote environment (Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021). While an increasing number of employers wish for onsite work to resume, many employees are not willing to return to the office full time (Sahadi, 2022), with the tension between worker autonomy and employer control as a conceivable factor driving this situation (Kohler, 2021). The sudden and yet prolonged shift work from onsite to remote, triggered by the pandemic, gave momentum to long-term shifts in employer and employee expectations.

Thus, it is crucial to investigate the current changing nature of work and, particularly, the issue of control and the tools that can play a role in it – in a positive or negative manner. This study aims to examine the dynamics of remote work: the role of ICT feature use in worker autonomy and employer control, and their impacts on the employee's willingness to return to office in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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