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Remote Work Overload: The Differential Effects of Neurodiversity

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

Due to a global pandemic starting in 2020, knowledge workers across the globe have experienced one of the largest ad-hoc shifts in their work environment, tasks, and expectations due to a forced pivot to remote work. While the majority of organizations were not prepared for a pivot to entirely remote work for their teams, many were able to find innovative ways to allow their employees to work remotely in a safe environment for nearly two years consistently. During this time, we have seen some employees thrive in these remote environments, while others potentially struggled with the shift towards isolation, increased IT-based communication, and changes in their tasks routines. As organizations now attempt to move their employees back to the offices for face-to-face interactions, many employees are pushing back, changing organizations, or leaving specific industries entirely as seen by the "Great Resignation". Some employees who feel like they have thrived during their remote work environment have requested to continue their work remotely as they feel more productive, however other individuals are adamant on returning to a co-located workspace and environment. Understanding why some employees are more productive in a remote work environment compared to others is critical for organizations to understand before pushing further shifts in their workplace policies after this global pandemic to ensure they are not pushing their employees out of the organization by requiring them to come back to the office.

To explore the differential effects of remote work on employees, we build upon prior research by utilizing a neurodiversity perspective (e.g. Jia et al. 2022) to examine how individuals with varying levels of autistic tendencies react to task inertia, information overload, and workplace communication during remote work. Utilizing a survey-based approach consisting of both a general population sample and an IT-specific organization sample, we will explore the different reactions (e.g. job satisfaction, turnover intentions, job attitudes) that neurodiverse individuals have towards their job due to the experiences they have had during their remote work environment. In the psychology literature, autism has repeatedly been characterized as an "engineer's disorder" and an "open secret" of the IT profession, and recent work in IS has highlighted this important relationship (Jia et al. 2022). Individuals with autistic tendencies typically can hyper-focus on their tasks and experience a sense of enjoyment while focusing on tasks related to their interests. This hyper-focus became easier during remote work environments by reducing office distractions. However, remote work has also increased IT-based communication and interruptions and these individuals can have significant negative reactions that can lead to subsequent burnout, meltdowns, and negative affects compared to neurotypical individuals. An exploration of these reactions will allow organizations to understand the type of individuals that performed well during remote work, which individuals may continue to perform well via remote work, and also understand when, why, and how individuals will react to requests to shifts in their current workflow to provide a more inclusive and productive work environment for their employees.

References

Jia, R., Steelman, Z. R., Jia, H. (2022) "What Makes One Intrinsically Interested in IT? An Exploratory Study on Influences of Autistic Tendency and Gender in the U.S. and India," MIS Quarterly (Forthcoming).