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Managing Teleworkers At A Telecentre: an examination of the *Age Of Paradox* theory

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Abstract

This paper reports a single case study that examined how managers from a public sector organisation supervised their office-based staff who also worked one or two days at a telecentre. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four managers to examine the issues and concerns they have when managing their respective teleworkers. In particular, we also examined the applicability of the Pearlson and Saunders's Age of Paradox theoretical framework in this context. Preliminary results appear to negate two of the paradoxes suggested by Pearlson and Saunders. Implications of the findings for practice and research are discussed.

Keywords

Telework, telecentre, virtual work

INTRODUCTION

Recent telework literature mostly focuses on aspects other than telework management – such as the types of jobs and persons suitable for teleworking, the impact of teleworking on organisational culture, using telework to balance work and personal lives as well as advantages and disadvantages of teleworking. While there is some literature on telework management, it is mostly written by practitioners or appears in practitioner journals and/ or magazines. There has been little academic research done on managing telework. Literature search indicates that there are few academic articles published in the past five years on managing telework, for example, Staples *et al.* (1998), Garner and Dick (1997), Harman and Bordow (1996) and Pearlson and Saunders (2001). It appears that there is a knowledge gap in respect of academic literature on telework management. To fill this gap and contribute to the related body of knowledge, there is the need to conduct academic research on the management aspects of telework.

The purpose of this paper is to report a single case research study that examined how managers from a public sector organisation managed their office-based staff who also worked one or two days at a telecentre. The telecentre that is located about fifty kilometres from the office is situated near the homes of these part-time teleworkers. When exploring the management of teleworkers based at a telecentre, I¹ will be guided by this research question:

What are the issues and concerns that managers have when managing part-time teleworkers based at a telecentre?

This paper is organised as follows. The following section provides a literature review to provide background of telework and the management of teleworkers. The second section describes the research methodology, the third section describes the research findings and the final section discusses the implications of the study and possible future research directions.

¹ The first person singular 'I' or 'me' will be used to indicate the researcher role of the first author. 'We' is used to denote the joint activities carried out by both authors. The second author provided advice and support during the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teleworking is a work arrangement in which organisational employees regularly work at home or at a remote site on one or more complete workdays per week in lieu of working in the office (Duxbury *et al.*, 1998). Olson (1987) reported on the positive outcomes for both employees and organisations as a result of teleworking pilot studies. Horvath (1986) and Soloman and Templer (1993) sought to establish the extent of teleworking participation. Much has also been written on the employees' perceived impacts of teleworking (Bailey and Foley, 1990; Betts, 1995; DeSanctis, 1984). Hartman *et al.* (1992) explored if the teleworkers feel that their productivity while teleworking at home is higher or lower than that at the office. Gainey *et al.* (1999) discussed how teleworking could lead to employee isolation and impact on the corporate culture. Duxbury *et al.* (1992) addressed the conflict arising when teleworkers do extra work at home. Pontell *et al.* (1996) conducted four case studies of knowledge-based organisations to estimate the effects that new ways of working would have on them. They analysed teleworking as one of the many new ways of working and examined it in the context of agency and institutional theories. Duncanson and Dick (1998) explored how teleworkers and non-teleworkers could differ in viewing the advantages and disadvantages of teleworking and whether these could present major difficulties for managers considering setting up teleworking programmes.

However, little research has been done on managing telework from the managers' point of view. Garner and Dick (1997) reported a study of senior managers to determine their information sources and their perceptions of and attitudes to teleworking. Staples *et al.* (1998) investigated how virtual organisations can manage remote employees effectively. They used self-efficacy theory to build a model predicting relationships between antecedents to employees' remote work self-efficacy assessments and their behavioural and attitudinal consequences. Harman and Bodow (1998) looked at telework management from the perspective of the teleworker/ manager relationship. They undertook empirical study on teleworking by highlighting the significant interactions occurring between the manager and the teleworker in the course of their working relationship. They then came up with a model providing a framework for exploring the manager's and teleworker's ways of thinking about their relationship as built on considerations of trust, commitment, autonomy, performance, authority, control and support.

Pearlson and Saunders's (2001) paper appears to be the most recent academic article on managing telework. The authors examined the *Age of Paradox* theory (Handy 1995) in the context of telework management. These paradoxes were seen from the managers' perspective. Each of these three paradoxes will be explained below.

Paradox One – Increase in both structure and flexibility: Pearlson and Saunders (2001) state that teleworking is attractive because of its ability to stretch time and space and provide flexibility in terms of work environment. Stretching time allows teleworkers to work during whatever hours they choose. Teleworking also provides flexibility in terms of working environment. Teleworkers can work in workplaces other than their offices in whatever clothes they want and at whatever pace they want. However, such flexibility is often accompanied by managers' need to change the structure of the work environment to accommodate the interaction of patterns of teleworkers with their managers and group members. Chance encounters and informal chats that could contribute to developing working relationships would not occur that often in teleworking. Managers and colleagues must therefore schedule formal meetings, reviews and other communication with teleworkers. In addition, managers must keep track of work schedules to ensure that there is sufficient work coverage at all times.

Paradox Two – Greater individuality, more teamwork: Pearlson and Saunders mention that while jobs most suitable for teleworking appear to be those whose tasks and activities can be performed in isolation, teleworking takes place in a world committed to teamwork. The goals and work routines of these teams may conflict with those of the individual. In order to deal with this paradox, managers must establish goals for teams and individual workers.

Paradox Three – More responsibility, greater control: Pearlson and Saunders (2001) state that managers are often afraid of losing control when their staff are not readily observable as in the case of the teleworkers. Alternative work arrangements like

teleworking involve tasks that teleworkers can do on their own, yet managers want to understand and evaluate their subordinates' processes for completing tasks as well as to see their outputs. Since unobtrusive or impromptu discussions about work progress are not appropriate for teleworkers as work progresses, meetings or progress reports are often used.

In summary, recent literature search shows that much of the academic research about teleworking has been done in the aspects of positive outcomes, employees' perceived impacts, comparing teleworking productivity with that at the office, the impact on corporate culture and organisations as a whole as well as different views of teleworkers and non-teleworkers. Little research has been conducted on the managing telework from the managers' point of view except Garner and Dick (1997), Staples *et al.* (1998), Harman and Bodow (1998) and Pearlson and Saunders (2001). Pearlson and Saunders's (2001) paper appears to be the most recent academic article on managing telework. The authors looked at the *Age of Paradox* theory (Handy 1995) in the context of telework management from the perspective of the managers. These paradoxes are increase in both structure and flexibility, greater individuality but more teamwork as well as more responsibility but greater control.

RESEARCH METHOD

Creswell (1994) describes case research as a method in which the researcher explores a single entity or phenomenon... bounded by time and activity... and collects detailed information by using a variety of data collection procedures during a sustained period of time. Yin (1994) indicates that there are a number of reasons for using single case design. The first reason is that a single case is where the case represents an *extreme or unique case* (Yin 1994). Since this study focused on how office-based managers managed part-time teleworkers based at a telecentre, it is considered to be a relatively new work arrangement in the current business environment. Another reason for adopting the single case study design is that the case represents the *critical case* in testing a well-formulated theory (Yin 1994). The theory has a specific set of propositions and circumstances within which the propositions are believed to be true (Yin 1994). There may exist a single case to confirm, challenge or extend the theory (Yin 1994). Pearlson and Saunders (2001) applied the *Age of Paradox* theory to home-based telework management. This research project explored whether the *Age of Paradox* theory is applicable to a telecentre-based telework management environment. For these reasons, the single case research approach was appropriate for this study.

Data collection

The case study took the form of interviewing four telework managers at XYZ Corporation in January 2002 on the issues and concerns they have when managing their staff that are teleworkers. Two of these four managers co-manage one teleworker, the third manager manages one teleworker while the fourth manages two. There are altogether four teleworkers involved. Out of these four teleworkers, three telework at the ABC Telecentre while one teleworks at a XYZ Corporation national branch office.

In all these cases, teleworkers work in professional office environment with facilities provided – such as computers fax and email. This is not a home-based telework situation. All telework one or two day(s) in a week and spend the rest of the working week in the XYZ Corporation head office except one teleworker based in one of its national branch offices. Working in the XYZ Corporation national branch office all working week and reporting to a manager in the head office, she does not have much face to face contact with her manager.

During the interviews with the telework managers, they were requested to express their views on various issues relating to their experience of managing the teleworkers. These issues included but were not limited to the impact of teleworking on efficiency, performance standard, teamwork, managing people and time resources. The teleworker managers were free to express their opinion on any other issue they could think of in relation to their telework management. I tape-recorded the interviews that were then transcribed. I then sent the interview transcripts to the telework managers for their amendment (if any) and verification. When necessary, I followed up and emailed telework managers to clarify some of the issues as stated in the interview transcripts.

Data analysis

One method of data analysis is by creating a provisional “start list” of codes prior to fieldwork (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This list could be from the conceptual framework, list of research questions, hypotheses, problem areas and/ or key variables that the researcher brings to the study. For this study, the Pearlson and Saunders’s model was used as the organising framework for the initial data analysis.

The initial set of codes was then converted into a data display. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe data display as a visual format that presents information systematically, so the user can draw valid conclusions and take needed action. One form of data display is through the use of matrices and this is the crossing of two lists, set up as rows and columns. This display is especially helpful for understanding the flow, location and connection of events (Miles and Huberman 1994). The columns that I came up with were the “codes” as derived from the list of research questions – including but not limited to the impact of efficiency, effectiveness, teamwork, working relationships with colleagues and professional associates, balance of work and personal/ family lives and other issues – as mentioned in the last paragraph. The rows in my data display were each of the telework managers and labelled as Manager 1 and Manager 2. I noted in the boxes (the crossing space between each row and each column) the comments as made by each of the telework managers in relation to each of the research questions that I used as codes.

I then detected ‘patterns’ from the visual display of data. Since the focus of my research project was on the issues and concerns that managers have when managing part-time teleworkers based at a telecentre and place the research results in the *Age of Paradox* framework of Pearlson and Saunders (2001), I viewed the data to see how they were related to the patterns of the three paradoxes under this framework – increase in both structure and flexibility; greater individuality but more teamwork; and more responsibility but greater control as stated above.

RESULTS

The results will be presented below within the context of the *Age of Paradox* theoretical framework (Pearlson and Saunders 2001). The goal was to examine the applicability of each paradox in respect of telework management within a telecentre environment.

Paradox One – Increase in both structure and flexibility

This paradox suggests that teleworking is attractive because of its ability to stretch time and space and provide flexibility in terms of work environment. However, such flexibility is often accompanied by managers’ need to change the structure of the work environment to accommodate the interaction of patterns of teleworkers with their managers and group members.

Results from this study do not suggest that Paradox One is applicable to the XYZ Corporation teleworking situation. Instead of changing the structure of the working environment and keeping track of work schedules, all four managers appeared to take a “hands off” approach – that is, leave things as they are and are happy with the teleworkers’ work progress and performance. Three of the four managers responded that work productivity is not a problem as the teleworkers are self-motivated. The fourth manager did not express an opinion.

I think if a person’s strictly self-motivated it shouldn’t be a problem ...

I think it comes back to my earlier comment that it really depends on the nature of the person, and so it’s not been difficult at all to manage the productivity.

Fortunately that part’s much easier because both these people are not the sort of people whom you need to actively manage their productivity. They’re both really good self-workers, and to my mind that’s one of the ways that makes teleworking an easier thing to do.

None of these managers indicates that he has introduced or needs to introduce a new structure to the working environment to accommodate the needs of the teleworkers in their teams.

Paradox Two – Greater individuality, more teamwork

Pearlson and Saunders (2001) mention that while jobs most suitable for teleworking appear to be those whose tasks and activities can be performed in isolation, teleworking takes place in a world committed to teamwork. The goals and work routines of these teams may conflict with those of the individual. In order to deal with this paradox, managers must establish goals for teams and individual workers.

This paradox appears to be valid in respect of the XYZ Corporation teleworking environment. All 4 managers suggested that whether teleworking would be effective very much depends on the nature of the jobs and/ or the type of the persons involved. There is a certain element of individuality involved.

I imagine that some types of work are not suited to teleworking – some are more suited than others...

The first time when the individual became involved in the pilot it was fine, as they were in a role further down the chain, but when they became a manager it was difficult because they really needed to be in the organisation. Really, I don't think teleworking can happen when they are a manager and in charge of staff.

[Generally speaking, do you recommend teleworking for today's organisations?] On the whole, I would say yes. I would struggle to say, however, how that could be managed with some staff. I know for instance in our regional offices we've got staff there who are maybe young clerical staff and without some direct management, which in a teleworking environment you'd have to have someone who's designated their manager who makes sure that they are in fact doing a reasonable output.

On the other hand, 1 manager expressed concern about keeping up teamwork when the teleworker is also a manager.

...When they became a manager it was difficult because they really needed to be in the organisation. Really, I don't think teleworking can happen when they are a manager and in charge of staff.

Another manager is of the view that managing people and teamwork in a telework environment would be more difficult and complex and ensuring teleworkers to work in the office during part of the working week is important to foster teamwork.

The areas I believe where teleworking is more difficult are in team dynamics and assisting the wider area of an office, like training. We are fortunate in that my teleworking staff have all met and worked together before they teleworked. It would be a whole new ball game if staff were solely teleworking and team dynamics had not already been established.

Well, that's [managing teamwork] one of the areas of the difficulty, and we actually achieve that at the moment by making sure that both the teleworking people don't telework 100% of the time.

In respect of the impact of teleworking on working relationships, 2 of the 4 managers do not think there would be a problem since people are linked up through phone and email and the third manager did not express an opinion (she co-manages a teleworker with another manager – who is 1 of the 2 managers mentioned here). The fourth manager is of the view that teleworking does impact on working relationships and the teleworker has to make the effort of coming in the office to see his colleagues and set appointments to see clients when he works in the office for part of the working week.

Yes, it does, because if they are on a remote location they really still have to come in – people still look at the organisation (it's probably a cultural thing) because teleworking is not really fully (in [this country] in particular) that common yet. They have to fit around the clients, and so therefore they have to make meetings etc when they are back in the office ...

Therefore it does appear that while there is an enhanced degree of individuality, on the other hand there is more emphasis on teamwork and working relationships.

Paradox Three – More responsibility, greater control

Paradox Three states that managers are often afraid of losing control when their staff are not readily observable as in the case of the teleworkers. Alternative work arrangements like teleworking involve tasks that teleworkers can do on their own, yet managers want to understand and evaluate their subordinates' processes for completing tasks as well as to see their outputs. Since unobtrusive or impromptu discussions about work progress are not appropriate for teleworkers as work progresses, meetings or progress reports are often used (Pearlson and Saunders, 2001).

The third paradox does not appear to be applicable in the XYZ Corporation teleworking context. All 4 managers interviewed have positive comments when it comes to teleworkers' work quality and/ or performance standards. They trust that the teleworkers are self-motivated and efficient individuals capable of delivering work of high professional standards.

I had no problem with that either, because the particular individual that I had contributed was relatively senior and therefore the work quality and performance standards was not a problem, and actually did a lot of the work particularly using electronic emails etc., so there was no problem with the quality at all, in fact it probably was better, because they had more time.

Again, these two people are high quality workers and are so naturally. And because I'm not having to actually monitor that quality for that reason, and I do see what they do and so on...but it's not for the reasons of making sure their quality is as high – because it is high, because it is high. And it's not to make sure that they are meeting other standards because they have no trouble meeting those standards – so again, I'm fortunate that those two particularly teleworkers of mine are high in those areas.

All 4 managers do not think that managing the teleworkers has impact on their position as managers or their accountability to their seniors. They appear to have accorded a high degree of autonomy to the teleworkers and do not feel the need to exert more control as Pearlson and Saunders (2001) suggest.

...The other person in this interview, is my senior, so in terms of this particular teleworker, obviously we have deliverables and as long as those deliverables are delivered there's no additional impact. The accountability is the same – the work needs to be done – needs to be delivered on time. In terms of impacting on my role as the team leader, I still have the same functions that I have to carry out.

And again it doesn't impact on my position as a manager because we have a way of managing those staff and the way they work that don't require that level of detail management, which I've said earlier is very fortunate. So, in fact it doesn't impact on my decisions as manager...

The results from our study show that the managers are positive about teleworking based at a telecentre and have not encountered major problems in managing teleworkers who worked part-time at a telecentre. They think that the teleworkers are efficient and have high quality performance though there is some concern about the impact of teleworking on teamwork. It appears that these managers have accorded the teleworkers with much autonomy and flexibility. These results appear to negate two of the paradoxes that Pearlson

and Saunders (2001) suggested – which are, increase in both structure and flexibility as well as more responsibility but greater control.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results from the previous section suggest that the second paradox (increased individuality and more teamwork) of the *Age of Paradox* theory is the only paradox applicable to the XYZ Corporation's teleworking situation. This could be due to two reasons: the part-time telework structure and the organisation's teleworking arrangement is telecentre - rather than home-based. With a professional working environment equipped with office facilities (that is not too different from the organisation's office environment except for the absence of most work colleagues), there would be little concern regarding the teleworkers' work efficiency and other performance conditions and therefore there is less need to increase the structure (the first paradox) and control (the third paradox of the same).

Implications for practice

Pearlson and Saunders (2001) suggested four strategies in managing the three paradoxes and they all appeared to be applicable in the XYZ Corporation's teleworking context. Firstly, the telework managers may wish to consider accepting the fact of the teleworkers' occasional absence and utilise it constructively by making the best use of the time when they meet with the teleworkers. Secondly, they might want to clarify differences in perspectives about the teleworkers' roles and responsibilities as team members/leaders as well as individual professionals – so as to ease tension and reach consensus. Thirdly, they could coordinate the teleworkers' individual time frames with those of the team with the view of resolving differences in perspectives in terms of time. Finally, they may wish to question the assumption that all-time face-to-face communication is essential for fostering teamwork and shift the assumption to quality of communication (instead of frequency) with the objective of maintaining teamwork.

Implications for research

Two implications for research are suggested here. Firstly, research could be conducted on comparing and contrasting the issues faced by telework managers in managing these home-based as well as telecentre-based teleworking. Secondly, a research project on comparing the teleworkers' and their managers' perspectives could also contribute to the existing knowledge regarding telework feasibility and management.

This paper reports a single case study that examined how managers from a public sector organisation supervised their office-based staff who also worked one or two days at a telecentre. In particular, we also examined the applicability of the Pearlson and Saunders's *Age of Paradox* theoretical framework for teleworking based at a telecentre environment. The results indicate that managers are positive about teleworking and have not encountered major problems in managing teleworkers who worked part-time at a telecentre. They think that the teleworkers are efficient and have high quality performance though there is some concern about the impact of teleworking on teamwork. It appears that these managers have accorded the teleworkers with much autonomy and flexibility. These results appear to negate two of the paradoxes suggested by Pearlson and Saunders.

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