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The Decision to Telework: A Model of Prediction

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The idea of using technology to bring the work to the worker has been around for over twenty years. The advantages of telecommuting, remote work, and virtual offices have been widely explored and projections have been made as to why, where, how, and how many people and organizations will take advantage of these types of work arrangements (Nilles, Carlson et al. 1976; Toffler 1980; Nilles 1982; Miles 1989; Vitalari 1990). It is also widely documented that the adoption of these alternative work arrangements has not progressed at the rates previously predicted (Forester 1989; Handy and Mokhtarian 1994; Fritz, Narasimhan et al. 1996; Pontell, Gray et al. 1996; Westfall 1997).

This study seeks to answer what factors are important to telework adoption. It seeks to do this by exploring the dynamics of the actual decision process of managers and their subordinates. Factors such as institutional policy, legal considerations, economics, and peer pressure may (and most likely do) influence the views of each party to the agreement. However, since either the manager or the employee can undermine or veto successful implementation, it is my assumption that regardless of any other factors which may influence the decision, both parties must decide that telecommuting is a work arrangement which they want, or are at least willing to accept. So what influences their decision?

There are a variety of decision models that may have application in the area of the decision to telework. From the discipline of psychology, the Decomposed Theory of Planned Behavior (Taylor and Todd 1995) may predict the adoption of telework. The Technology Acceptance Model (Davis 1989) can be used to approach telecommuting as a problem in technology adoption. Economic models such as Expected Utility Theory (Bernoulli 1738), Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), and Agency Theory (Eisenhardt 1989) approach the decision to telework as an assessment based on costs, benefits, risks, and contractual arrangements. From a sociological perspective, Institutional Theory emphasizes the importance of the organizational culture in limiting or advancing the decision to telecommute. Each of these models describes some aspect of the telecommuting decision process, but there is a lack of empirical evidence comparing the various approaches.

This dissertation seeks to compare three models (the Decomposed Theory of Planned Behavior, Agency Theory, and Institutional Theory) with regard to their abilities to predict the willingness of managers and employees to telework. Two questionnaires will be developed using the methodology described in Davis (1989) one for managers and one for non-managers. These will be administered to 500 managers and 500 employees working at 20 of the largest organizations in Los Angeles who are selected through two stage stratified proportionate sampling process.

Dun's Regional Business Directory for Los Angeles County, 1997 contains a listing of the largest 1,000 employers by number of employees. This will be reduced to 500 companies by stratifying it into 5 groups of 100 (numbers 51-150, 251-350, 451-550, 651-750, and 851-950) which represent organizations of different sizes. From each of these groupings 4 organizations will be randomly selected to survey. The company will be contacted to coordinate surveying 25 managers and 25 employees. If a company is unwilling to participate, another will be randomly selected from the same group to replace it. Within the organization we will select employees and managers as randomly as we are allowed, preferably by being given a list of all employees and randomly selecting from that list.

The importance of this study is that it can inform public policy regarding telework. If telework is to be promoted, should we focus on the familiarity, ease of use, and appeal of the technology; changing peer pressure; reducing the economic costs of telework; or change corporate culture?

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