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TOWARD RECONCILING COMPETING PERSPECTIVES ON TELEWORK

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Abstract

While the popular press and practitioner journals provide considerable anecdotal evidence that telework and job satisfaction are synonymous, the information richness and social presence literature suggest otherwise. Indeed, this literature suggests that extensive levels of teleworking may hamper the individual's ability to maintain important work related relationships and result in decreased levels of satisfaction. Given these competing views, this paper proposes a curvilinear relationship between extent of teleworking and job satisfaction.

Keywords: Telework, telecommute, technology-enabled interactions

Toward a Deeper Understanding of Telework

The widespread adoption of telework programs continues to rise world-wide. Although estimates vary, teleworkers comprise nearly 10% of the U.S. workforce (U.S. Department of Transportation, 1994) and this number is projected to grow nearly six-fold by 2030 (Wilkes, Frolick & Urwiler, 1994), with Europe, Asia, and Australia expecting similar growth rates (Korte & Wynne, 1996; Teo, Lim, & Wai, 1998). These teleworkers spend a consistent portion of their work week at a location other than the traditional centrally located workplace, typically working out of their home, and rely upon computer and telecommunications technology to do so. Yet despite telework's tremendous growth, researchers have been slow to investigate this increasingly popular work arrangement. In particular, existing research has been largely based on empirical analysis between groups of teleworkers and non-teleworkers, and has largely ignored establishing an integrative theoretical framework to support empirical testing.

To date, conventional wisdom contends that teleworking and job satisfaction are synonymous. Indeed, while the popular press is replete with poignant characterizations, antidotes, and future prospects for teleworkers (e.g. Apgar, 1998; Piskurich, 1998), with few exceptions (e.g. Cascio, 2000; Igarria & Guimaraes, 1999), only limited conceptual and empirical evidence exists to support such claims. Furthermore, although some evidence suggests that work outcomes are generally positive, this contention is countered by concerns about social isolation, deteriorating relationships, and decreased productivity (Ruppel & Harrington, 1995).

Given these competing perspectives, I propose an integrative theoretical framework that more fully examines the link between a teleworker's extent of teleworking and job satisfaction. In so doing, I draw from two areas of research. The first area drawn from literature on work adjustment (Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1968) and the job characteristics model (Hackman & Oldham, 1976), suggests that as the extent of teleworking increases, job satisfaction will increase. This suggestion stems from the increased autonomy and flexibility associated with teleworking, and the positive outcomes associated with such characteristics. The second area of research draws from literature on information richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984), social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). This literature suggests that as the extent of teleworking increases, the positive work outcomes may be tempered by the characteristics of the communication media through which teleworkers conduct their work activities. This paper integrates these competing perspectives to suggest a curvilinear relationship between the extent of teleworking and job satisfaction.

Reconciling Perspectives

Teleworkers, by virtue of their different work mode, are likely to experience greater job satisfaction than non-teleworkers (Guimaraes & Dallow, 1999). As demonstrated by the large amount of literature on employee flexibility, when workers have the ability to adjust tasks to meet their needs and desires they are more likely to be satisfied (Baltes, Briggs, Huff, Wright, & Neuman, 1999). In addition, as suggested by the work adjustment model (Dawis, et al., 1968), work adjustment occurs when the abilities of the individual and the ability requirements of the job correspond with the needs of the individual and the satisfaction of those needs by the work environment. In other words, since teleworking involves an altered work environment more controlled by the worker (Hartman, et al., 1992; Weiss, 1994), the teleworker is apt to experience increased ability to organize and conduct work activities so as to satisfy both individual and organizational needs. Similarly, job characteristics theory (Hackman & Oldham, 1976) suggests that autonomy is an important psychological state that leads to job satisfaction. The more extensively one teleworks, the more autonomy experienced, leading to higher levels of job satisfaction (Boutellier, Gassmann, Macho, & Roux, 1998). Taken together, the literatures on work adjustment and job characteristics suggest a positive association between extent of teleworking and job satisfaction.

On the other hand, interaction mediums are particularly important to teleworkers since in order to perform effectively these individuals must be able to establish and maintain effective working relationships, coordinate work activities, share information, and transfer outcomes of their work efforts (Fish, Kraut, Root, & Rice, 1993). In turn, when such activities are more difficult to perform, job satisfaction is likely to suffer. Since interaction mediums differ in their capacity for transferring messages (Lengel & Daft, 1988; Rice & Shook, 1990), the exchanges which occur between the teleworker and others in the organization are likely to be highly impacted. Consonant with this theory, social presence theory (Rice, 1993; Short, et al., 1976) suggests that one's social presence, when communicating with others, depends not only on the words utilized during the interaction, but also on the range of verbal, non-verbal, and contextual indicators (Short, et al, 1976). Taken together, this literature suggests a negative association between the extent of teleworking and job satisfaction. Consequently, the more extensively individuals telework, the lower their job satisfaction.

The competing perspectives posed by these two sets of research streams and their associated predictions may be reconciled by hypothesizing a curvilinear relationship between the extent of teleworking and job satisfaction. In effect, when the extent of teleworking is minimal, teleworkers are able to enjoy some of the advantages of increased autonomy, while at the same time they may be able to more easily adjust work activities to fit the limitations of the interaction mediums, thereby enabling increased job satisfaction (Dawis, et al., 1968). However, as the extent of teleworking increases, the benefits of autonomy are likely to be significantly offset by the individual's increasing isolation and frustration experienced due to extensive reliance upon impoverished communication mediums to conduct a larger proportion of work activities involving interactions with others. Rather than competing perspectives, however, these two areas of research may be best viewed as complementary, and suggestive of a more complex relationship between the extent of teleworking and job satisfaction.

Consider the following. When teleworking is limited to only one or two days per week, employees may be able to easily manage (e.g. adjust) work activities to fit the limitations of the interaction mediums, thereby enabling increased job satisfaction (Dawis, et al.). As the extent of teleworking increases, however, the worker will be increasingly forced to rely upon IT enabled communication mediums to conduct a larger proportion of work activities involving interactions with others. The worker may no longer be able to defer most interactive tasks to when he or she is in the office. Whereas teleworking 1 or 2 days per week facilitated a large amount of flexibility to adjust work activities to meet both individual abilities and needs as well as the ability requirements of the job, increased amounts of teleworking reduces this flexibility.

The above discussion suggests that there is likely to be an optimal extent of teleworking that maximizes its benefits while minimizing its drawbacks. At either extreme of the teleworking continuum, the advantages of teleworking are not likely to be as substantial as when a mid-level of teleworking is practiced. At a mid-level of teleworking, the capability to maximally align individual and work demands and characteristics of the job, as well as the ability to minimize limitations imposed by IT enabled interactions, may be both achieved. Hence, when comparing among teleworkers, the relationship between the extent of teleworking and job satisfaction is likely to be curvilinear in shape.

Conclusion

This paper proposes an enriched theoretical perspective for understanding how telework impacts job satisfaction. In departure from previous literature, it proposes that this relationship is not positive or negative, but rather curvilinear in nature. Moreover,

it suggests that the extent of teleworking may be an important consideration when seeking to understand the impact that teleworking has on job satisfaction, rather than simply if employees telework. While more work is needed, this constitutes an important first step towards a more complete understanding of telework and other technology-enabled interactions.

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