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# TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE MODEL OF TELECOMMUTER ADJUSTMENT

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## Abstract

*Despite predictions to the contrary, telecommuting programs are gaining in strength. While research has addressed many aspects of telecommuting, a comprehensive framework for telecommuting research is lacking. This paper aims to broaden our understanding of telecommuter performance and management issues by borrowing from the organizational socialization and expatriate management literatures and extending an existing model to (1) explicitly address telecommuter socialization or adjustment processes, (2) organize extant research, and (3) highlight areas where research is needed.*

**Keywords:** Telecommuting, research framework, organizational socialization, employee adjustment

## Introduction

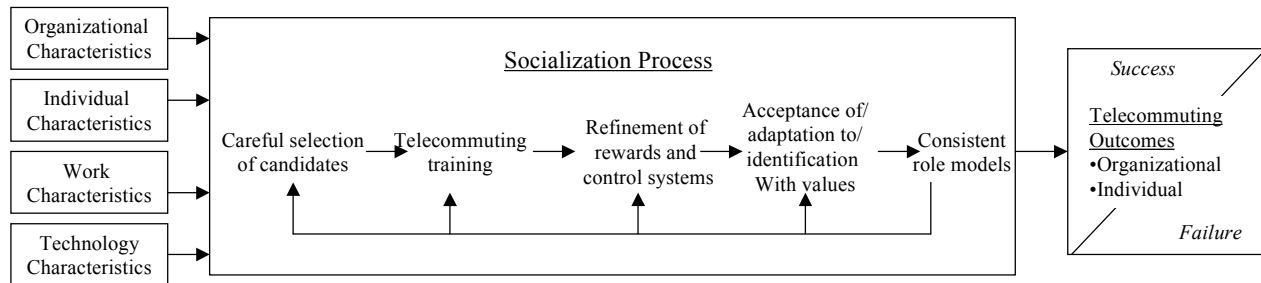
Contrary to predictions telework programs are not fading away (Wilde 2000). Research by the International Telework Association and Council (ITAC 2000) shows that the number of teleworkers in the US increased from 19.6 million in 1999 to 23.6 million in 2000. While research has focused on multiple facets of the growing telecommuting phenomenon, systematic research regarding telecommuting based on an integrative theoretical framework has been limited. Noting the lack of theoretical foundations, Belanger and Collins (1998) developed a research framework founded on the notion of fit between organizational, individual, work and technology characteristics that affect the organizational, individual, or societal outcomes of distributed work environments. By borrowing from the organizational socialization and expatriate management literatures, this paper aims to broaden our understanding of telecommuter performance and management issues and extends the Belanger model to guide future research.

## A Model of Telecommuter Adjustment

Organizational socialization has been defined as “the fashion in which an individual is taught and learns what behaviors and perspectives are customary and desirable within the work setting as well as what ones are not” (Van Mannen and Schein 1979, pp. 211-212). The transition to telecommuting, just as expatriation, can be viewed as another stage in the successive socialization of a person in a business organization. Figure 1 below extends the Belanger and Collins model by integrating Pascale’s stage model of socialization (Pascale 1985) to explain how fit is achieved between the various variables that affect outcomes. Training and selection have also been referred to as anticipatory socialization or adjustment (Black, Mendenhall, and Oddou 1991), while the latter stages can be referred to as on-the job adjustment and socialization.

### *Careful Selection of Candidates*

Choosing the right employees is critical to telecommuting success. Companies often select volunteers to eliminate people who have a strong desire to be with others (Nilles 1998). Screening tests for selection should be administered to prospective teleworkers as well their immediate supervisors. To date empirical research of this dimension including types and adequacy of currently used selection processes is missing. A valuable dimension for assessment and training from both a practical as well as research perspective is the concept of learning orientation, an individual characteristic. One could hypothesize that employees with a stronger learning orientation adapt better and have a greater chance for success than employees with a weaker learning orientation (Porter and Tansky 1999). Future research may also focus on the importance of Schein’s career anchors (Schein, 1978).



**Figure 1. Model of Telecommuter Socialization  
(Based on Pascale [1985] and Belanger and Collins [1998])**

### ***Training***

Problems with telecommuting often stem from inadequate training of employees to deal with the telecommuting experience (Gresing-Pophal 1998). The transition to telecommuting may be likened to entering a new culture (Reinsch 1997). Just as predeparture cross-cultural training is critical for expatriates to facilitate their adjustment, training of teleworkers, their supervisors and their non-telecommuting coworkers is essential to telecommuting success (e.g., Gresing-Pophal 1999, Nilles 1998). Teleworkers at Bell-South, for example, must be able to disassemble and reassemble their computers, modems, printers, and fax machines before they can work remotely (Wilde 2000). Scholarly research that explores the training processes of companies and their relationship to individual and organizational success of telework programs is highly desirable.

### ***Refinement of Rewards and Control Systems***

Managing and evaluating at a distance - with potentially limited amount of direct contact and less opportunity for performance feedback (Thomas 1999) - requires new controls and supervision processes that not only move away from an activity-base to a focus on results, but also include other indicators of telecommuter success such as customer satisfaction (Davenport and Pearlson 1998). Rotter (1999) found no problems with the performance appraisal format in place but noted difficulties on the part of the managers with setting interviews up in a timely fashion and getting to know the employee. A study by Igbaria and Guimaraes (1999) showed that telecommuters were overall more satisfied with supervision than non-telecommuters. Research regarding justice and control in telecommuting environments found no relationship between outcome-based evaluations and any form of organizational justice (Kurland and Egan 1999). Altogether, research on performance appraisal systems is sparse, and no consensus has been developed with respect to career success outcomes.

### ***Acceptance of, Adaptation to, and Identification with Telecommuting Values***

Following the expatriate adjustment literature, several dimensions of adjustment and adaptation can be identified (Shaffer, Harrison, and Gilley 1999): work adjustment referring to the work itself, interaction adjustment involving the telecommuter's socialization with fellow workers and managers, and general adjustment which might include the telecommuter's ability to balance work life and home. Acute telecommuter failure, an unresearched topic, is most likely to occur in this phase as problems of earlier phases compound. Past research has investigated issues such as distracters and stressors, balance of work life with home (Hill, Miller, Weiner, and Colihan 1998) and communication and coordination issues (Fritz and Narasimhan, 1998). Future research could examine strategies or socialization tactics that companies have in place to facilitate the adaptation such as assignment of a mentor or occasional face-to-face get togethers with peer telecommuters.

### ***Consistent Role Models***

Having peers or superiors who share common qualities and who are formally or informally recognized as winners is a powerful organizational communication tool and one of the most powerful ongoing training programs available (Pascale 1985). Applied to telecommuting, experienced telecommuters either still telecommuting or those that have returned to a more traditional work arrangement cannot only serve as mentors to novice telecommuters, but could also be involved in developing organizational policies regarding selection, training, and appraisal systems. The number of total telecommuters in the firm will of course affect availability of role models.

## Conclusions

The discussion of the telecommuter adjustment model developed in this paper has highlighted many areas where research is needed. Telecommuting should be viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon that requires adoption of a comprehensive multi-step socialization process to produce successful results for both the individual telecommuter and the organization. From a research perspective, this paper was a first step in developing a study with a large sample from a cross-section of companies and industries to test some of the research implied by this model. The overall hypothesis is that comprehensive socialization strategies are positively related to telecommuting success. Specific research propositions, operationalization of the variables, and a questionnaire to be mailed to a random sample of telecommuters are currently being developed. One contribution of this study is the extension of telecommuting research, providing a comprehensive theoretical framework for future studies. From a managerial perspective, the proposed research also highlights the need for managing the dimensions of telecommuter adjustment as a concerted and well-coordinated effort (Pascale 1985).

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