A Study of Remote Workers and Their Differences from Non-Remote Workers

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Information technology (IT) is enabling the creation of virtual organizations and remote work practices. As this practice of working remotely grows, so does the importance of making these remote end-users of technology effective members of organizations. This study tested a number of relationships that were suggested in the literature as being relevant in a remote work environment. Interpersonal trust of the employee in their manager was found to be strongly associated with higher self-perceptions of performance, higher job satisfaction and lower job stress. There was weak support for the impact of physical connectivity (i.e., the availability of IT) on job satisfaction, supporting the enabling role of IT. These findings were similar for both remote employees (i.e., those that worked in a different building than their managers) and non-remote employees. However, more frequent communications between the manager and employee was associated with higher levels of interpersonal trust only with the remote workers. Cognition-based trust was also found to be more important than affect-based trust in a remote work environment, suggesting that managers of remote employees should focus on activities that demonstrate competence, responsibility and professionalism.

INTRODUCTION

Working remotely is becoming more common with advances in information technology (IT). Information technology is enabling distributed work both for IS professionals and other professionals. Therefore, many remote workers will be end users of information technology. Making these end users effective in a remote environment holds many challenges for organizations. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the challenges and issues.

In recent years, there has been some research on telecommuting to understand one type of remote work practice, that of working remotely from home (DeSanctis, 1984; Duxbury and Haines, 1991; Duxbury, Higgins, and Irving, 1987; McCloskey and Igbaria, 1998; Neufeld, 1997; Olson, 1988). A key issue in telecommuting and virtual organizational structures is the management of employees who are located remotely from their manager (Beyers, 1995; Tapscott and Gaster, 1993). Managers’ roles are changing as traditional, hierarchical methods are no longer appropriate (Grenier and Metes, 1995; Jenner, 1994; Lucas and Baroudi, 1994; Snell, 1994). The fear of lost managerial control is reported to be a significant factor preventing widespread adoption of telecommuting (DeSanctis, 1984; Duxbury et al., 1987; Duxbury and Haines, 1991; Goodrich, 1990; Phelps, 1985; Risman and Tomaskovic-Devey, 1989; Roderick and Jelley, 1991). The objective of this research was to study issues of remote work and remote management and to explore differences in these issues among remote workers and non-remote workers. For this study, remote workers were defined as employees who work in a physically separate location from their managers. The employee’s location could vary considerably from working at another company office or in their home, to working at a customer’s location or out of their car. Employees working at home are by definition telecommuting; however, telecommuting is only a small part of the virtual workplace, in which people work together while being physically distant from each other.

A series of hypotheses identifying potentially important IT and management issues in remote work were developed based on the literature and suggestions from exploratory research carried out for this study. The exploratory research was carried out in order to identify key issues of working remotely, both from workers’ and managers’ viewpoints. The hypotheses were then tested with data gathered via a questionnaire. The development of the hypotheses is presented in the next section. This is followed by a discussion of the methodology used for testing the hypotheses and then the findings are presented. The last section discusses the findings, their contributions and limitations.
DEVELOPMENT OF HYPOTHESES

A series of testable hypotheses were developed based on suggestions in the literature and results from exploratory research carried out for this study. The purpose of the exploratory research was to identify key issues of working and managing remotely and possible practices to address these issues. Details of this exploratory research are briefly described below, and the hypotheses that were developed are then presented.

Exploratory Research

The exploratory research was conducted using focus group interviews to collect the views of both people who were working remotely and managers who were managing remote workers. A total of 104 people from five different organizations participated in nineteen focus groups, split fairly evenly between managers of remote workers (58 participants; 56%) and remote workers (46 participants; 44%). Sixty percent (n=63) of the participants worked in Canada, 37% (n=38) worked in the United States, and 3% (n=3) of the participants worked in England. Each focus group lasted for an average of 1.5 hours. After brainstorming about remote environment issues for about the first half of the meeting, each participant in the focus groups identified the top three issues from their perspective and ranked them in descending order. The last half of the focus group was spent discussing possible actions organizations could take to address the issues (see Staples [1997] for a full report on the results of these focus groups).

Hypotheses

The first four hypotheses deal with the role of trust in remote work. Both the literature and participants in the exploratory research suggested that trust between the manager and employee is an important factor for making remote work effective. Developing trust and minimal supervision expectations are important since it is very difficult to supervise and control remote employees due to limited face-to-face contact (Duxbury et al., 1987; Handy, 1995; Lucas and Baroudi, 1994; Savage, 1988; Snell, 1994). However, trust between employees often goes against a managerial tradition of control and a tradition that believes control and efficiency are closely linked and that control is necessary for efficiency (Handy, 1995).

Trust is the belief or confidence in a person or organization’s integrity, fairness and reliability (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). In a remote work setting, where employees are working in different locations than their managers, the opportunity for face-to-face contact is limited. This means that the manager has significantly fewer opportunities to view employee behaviour than would exist in a conventional work setting (i.e., where the manager and employee work in the same building). Observing behaviours is no longer a feasible coordination and control mechanism in a remote workplace; trust needs to be used instead. From the remote employees’ perspective, interpersonal trust with their managers is very important since the potential for isolation is high. The informal communication and information gathering opportunities for employees in virtual work environments are typically less than in non-virtual settings. The employees rely on their managers to keep them informed of necessary information and to support their activities with effective feedback and recognition.

Davidow and Malone (1992) suggest that trust is the defining feature of a virtual enterprise and that all types of management in the era of virtual enterprises must be built on trust. Lipnack and Stamps (1997) suggest that “In the networked and virtual teams of the Information Age, trust is a ‘need to have’ quality in productive relationships.” (page 225). Although the literature contains many suggestions about the importance of trust in remote work (Brown, 1994; Caswell, 1995; Caudron, 1992; Duratta, 1995; Duxbury et al., 1987; Grensing-Pophal, 1997; Handy, 1995; Hartman, Stoner and Arora, 1992; Klein, 1994; Miles and Snow, 1995; Posch, 1994), there has been little empirical research done on this topic.

The results of the exploratory research support the views in the literature. In the focus groups, remote employees were concerned about how to remotely build trust and a relationship between managers and employees. Managers who managed remote employees also identified performance management issues as being common problems (ranking second in terms of weighted frequency). Many of these performance management issues involved trust. Key issues identified included how to build trust between managers and employees such that the manager feels confident about what their employees are doing, as well as how to measure productivity and shift towards a result-based focus.

From the above, the importance of trust in a remote work environment, where the employee works remotely from his/her manager, appears clear. However, in a non-remote environment, trust is also important and has been suggested to be related to performance and effectiveness (Golembiewski and McConkie, 1975; McAllister, 1995; McCauley and Kuhnert, 1992; Rotter, 1967). McAllister (1995) in his study of cognitive and affect-based trust, found significant correlations between both types of trust and performance. Therefore, a positive relationship was hypothesized between employee/manager trust and employee perceptions of the effectiveness of working remotely.

Hypothesis 1. Higher levels of trust between the manager and employee will be associated with more positive perceptions of self-performance.

Employees in the focus groups suggested that trust of the manager in their abilities and being able to trust the manager increased the enjoyment and satisfaction they received from their job. McCauley and Kuhnert (1992) lend support to these focus group participants’ ideas by suggesting that trust in management is associated with a number of job
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