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Technology enabled work: The role of self-efficacy in determining telecommuter adjustment and structuring behavior[☆]

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Abstract

We explore factors associated with employees' ability to cope with the challenges of telecommuting—an increasingly pervasive new work mode enabled by advances in information technologies. Telecommuting can trigger important changes in employees' job responsibilities, especially with respect to the degree of proactivity required to effectively work from a distance. Survey responses from a sample of 723 participants in one organization's formal telecommuting program were used to examine the inter-relationships between telecommuter self-efficacy and extent of telecommuting on telecommuters' ability to cope with this new work context. Results indicate that there is a positive association between telecommuter self-efficacy and both employees' behavioral strategies (i.e., structuring behaviors) and work outcomes (i.e., telecommuter adjustment). Moreover, these positive relationships are accentuated for employees who telecommute more extensively. Implications for research and practice concerning the effect of technology on jobs and careers are presented.

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Keywords: Telecommuting; Autonomous work; Self-efficacy; Structuring behavior

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1. Introduction

Recent advances in information technology have altered employees' jobs and careers in fundamental ways. One of the most prevalent and important changes that new information technologies have brought about is the ability for employees to work anytime and anywhere. In fact, approximately 23.6 million US workers, or more than 10% of the US workforce, reported telecommuting (i.e., working from home as a remote office) at least part time (International Telework Association & Council, 2000). Moreover, the effects of this change are not concentrated in one portion of the labor force—formal telecommute programs are being offered to employees across the spectrum of occupational categories and hierarchical positions (Kurland & Bailey, 1999). Organizations such as AT&T and Cisco Systems, for example, offer telecommuting to over 50% of their employees (Business Week, 1998).

Telecommuting has immediate effects on where and when people work, but perhaps of even greater importance, telecommuting may lead to significant changes in employees' jobs and careers. Many job and career changes may be instituted by an organization and its management to accommodate employees' reduced physical proximity. These may include task redesign to enhance autonomy, development of new communication and co-ordination protocols, and formal mentoring and networking programs (Raghuram, Garud, Wiesenfeld, & Gupta, 2001). At the same time, employees themselves are increasingly playing a proactive role in redefining their job roles and responsibilities and making career related decisions (Bridges, 1994; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Moreover, the very factors that create the need for job changes may also define how these changes are enacted. Specifically, telecommuters may be more able to shape and define individual job roles and responsibilities because their work mode allows greater autonomy. This autonomy results from the fact that they are working from a remote location, they are highly skilled knowledge workers, and they have the necessary information technology tools (Bridges, 1994; Mirchandani, 1999). Consequently, this research focuses on telecommuters' proactive attempts to define their job responsibilities and careers.

Overall, telecommuters' job performance and career choices are likely to depend upon their ability to cope with the demands of this information technology-enabled work. Telecommuters who implement behavioral strategies to proactively adapt their job responsibilities in response to the changes, and attain successful individual work outcomes, will flourish and yield a variety of benefits to their employers. However, telecommuters who fail to cope with the new demands (i.e., telecommuters whose work attitudes and performance are negative and whose behavioral strategies are ineffective) may be ineffective in executing their job responsibilities, witness derailment of their careers, and be costly to their employers. Understanding the factors associated with telecommuters' work outcomes and behavioral strategies is therefore critical for both scholars and managers, yet little research has explored this topic to date (Cascio, 1999).

Research suggests that individuals' abilities and motivations are important predictors of their behavioral strategies and their adjustment to a new work context (e.g.,

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