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The effects of cognitive style and media richness on commitment to telework and virtual teams

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Abstract

Telework (also known as telecommuting) and virtual teams (also known as virtual collaboration) are seen as strategic organizational innovations with potential benefits to individuals, business, and society. Despite the rapid growth of telework and virtual team innovations, very little empirical research has investigated factors associated with their success. Thus, practitioners can only speculate why they succeed or fail. This empirical study investigated telework and virtual team innovations drawing upon commitment, information richness, and cognitive style (mental self-government) theory. Results indicate that certain combinations of cognitive styles and media contribute to commitment to the telework function and to virtual teams. Consequently, specific recommendations are made for teleworker selection, development, and for the design of the telework environment.

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1. Media richness influences on perceptions of virtual work

Telework and virtual teams are seen as innovations with the potential to effectively respond to turbulent business environments through their “instantaneity”—anytime,

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anywhere work (e.g., Baruch & Nicholson, 1997), and they have purported benefits to the individual, business, and society (Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998). While there have been many definitions of dispersed work and workers (Ellison, 1999; Hill et al., 1998), the literature frequently defines telework as working full-time in a remote location, such as one's home, and a virtual team as consisting of a group of teleworkers who collaborate through an electronically mediated infrastructure (Ellison, 1999; Ruppel & Howard, 1998). This infrastructure embodies a wide range of information technologies such as e-mail, telephones, video conferencing systems, groupware such as Lotus Notes and other information databases (Lococo & Yen, 1998).

There are approximately 7 million full-time teleworkers in the United States, many who are working in virtual teams (e.g., Hill et al., 1998; Miller, 1999; Wallace, 1998), and these innovations are experiencing an annual growth rate of 5–10% (BTS, 1999; GartnerGroup, 2000). Despite the apparent enthusiasm for telework and virtual teams, implementation rates have not met many projections (Hill et al., 1998; Ruppel & Howard, 1998; Stanworth, 1998; Wells, 2001), and between one-fifth and one-half of these innovations have been failing to live up to expectations. In many cases, previously effective employees have failed to cope with a virtual work setting; consequently employers of these failing programs are reverting back to a traditional office environment (Fusaro, 1997; Wallace, 1998).

Ellison (1999) reviewed the state-of-the-art for telework and virtual teams and concluded that while little is known about these innovations, there has been some speculation that telework may reduce worker "commitment" to their jobs. For instance, it has been posited that reduced teleworker commitment may result from working in an environment that is very ambiguous, solitary, and lacking in externally supplied structure (Baruch & Nicholson, 1997; Erben & Dafler, 1998; Stanworth, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to explore what types of people are likely to respond well to telework and virtual teams using Sternberg's (1997) thinking styles framework, and whether the effects predicted from this framework are mitigated by the use of richer media that better simulate face-to-face exchanges. More specifically, this study examined the effects of an employee's cognitive style on his or her commitment to the telework function and to his or her virtual team, and whether media richness moderates those effects.

2. The nature of telework and virtual teams

There are many reasons to expect businesses to escalate the implementation of telework and virtual teams. The technology is becoming cost effective and mature enough to support efficient dispersed work (BTS, 1999; Chakravarthy, 1997; Fritz, Higa, & Narasimhan, 1995). The flexible work environment enables companies to get closer to their customers, yielding a strategic advantage (Katz, 1997; Lococo & Yen, 1998). Companies report benefits that include productivity increases by as much as 34% and increases in revenues by as much as 19% (Katz, 1997; Turban,

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