



# Avoiding depletion in virtual work: Telework and the intervening impact of work exhaustion on commitment and turnover intentions

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## Abstract

Despite the tremendous growth of telework and other forms of virtual work, little is known about its impact on organizational commitment and turnover intentions, nor the mechanisms through which telework operates. Drawing upon the conservation of resources model as the theoretical framework, I posit telework's impact is the result of resource stockpiling and flexibility as teleworkers are able to yield work and personal benefits and protect themselves from resource depletion in the office. Using a sample of 393 professional-level teleworkers in one organization, I therefore investigate the intervening role of work exhaustion in determining commitment and turnover intentions. Results indicate that telework is positively related to commitment and negatively related to turnover intentions, such that a higher degree of teleworking is associated with more commitment to the organization and weakened turnover intentions. Moreover, work exhaustion is found to mediate the relationships between teleworking and both commitment and turnover intentions.

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## 1. Introduction

The ability to work 'virtually' away from the office has become a ubiquitous new work mode that promises to yield important benefits for employees and the organiza-

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tion. Teleworking, as a form of virtual work, can involve working in multiple satellite offices or other remote locations away from the company office, though most commonly teleworkers allocate their work time between an office and home (Bailey & Kurland, 2002). With at least 37% of companies offering telework arrangements, increasing at 11% per year (SHRM, 2001), teleworking is becoming a highly popular way for professionals to ease ever-increasing work demands yet still fulfill personal and family needs (Rau & Hyland, 2002; Stephens & Szajna, 1998). Moreover, the widespread assumption that employees who telework are more committed to the organization and less likely to leave it often provides the rationale for organizations implementing telework programs (Guimaraes & Dallow, 1999). To date, however, researchers understand little about this work arrangement, particularly its impact on fundamental outcomes such as organizational commitment and turnover intentions (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Pinsonneault & Boisvert, 2001).

A growing body of research, although focusing exclusively on traditional work modes rather than telework, has recently investigated work exhaustion as a possible antecedent to commitment and turnover intentions (Moore, 2000a, 2000b). Exhaustion research suggests that individuals are more vulnerable if exposed to continuous face-to-face contact with co-workers and others in their work (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Leiter & Maslach, 1988). Since teleworking involves separation from others and greater discretion over when and how to interact via electronic media (Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999), it is likely to affect the nature and intensity of interactions and offset exhaustion emanating from continuous face-to-face contact. Moreover, by avoiding a commute, telework aids the acquisition of additional time to spend fulfilling family and work demands (Guimaraes & Dallow, 1999), thereby conserving emotional and mental energy. Work exhaustion may therefore represent an important explanatory variable to help understand the impact of telework on work outcomes, and shed insights to fill the void in current literature (e.g., Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Feldman & Gainey, 1997).

In this study, I therefore investigate the link between telework and organizational commitment and turnover intentions, and focus on how work exhaustion altered by teleworking acts as an intervening factor. Because teleworkers vary in the degree to which they work away from the office (Baruch, 2001; Cummings, 2005), and since researchers have generally only compared teleworkers to non-teleworkers (e.g., Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Igbaria & Guimaraes, 1999), I reason that changes in commitment and turnover and the intervening impact of work exhaustion are the result of the degree to which employees telework. Drawing on the conservation of resources (COR) model of stress (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989) and the literature on work exhaustion and burnout (e.g., Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Moore, 2000a, 2000b), I suggest that telework's impact may be the result of resource 'stockpiling' and flexibility as teleworkers are able to yield benefits and protect themselves from resource depletion in the office.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. *Work exhaustion*

Professional-level employees who telework generally spend a considerable portion of their time at home while remaining connected to the office via email, phone, and

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