

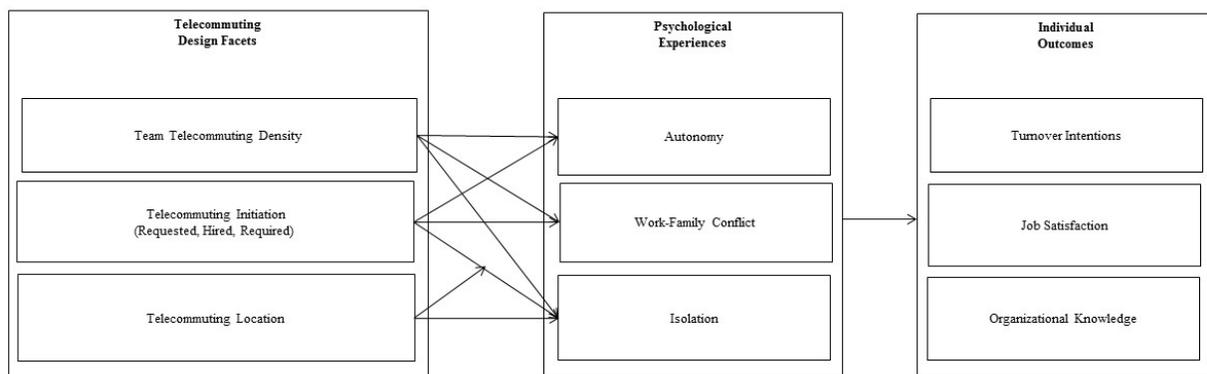
Not All Telecommuting is Created Equal: An Examination of the Effects of Telecommuting Design



Organizations are increasingly turning to telecommuting as a means of enhancing employees’ work experiences, as well as their bottom lines. Some 43% of employees in the United States work remotely at least part of each week, although their specific arrangements vary considerably across – and even within – organizations. Previous research on this topic has largely ignored these variations, providing only limited guidance for program designers and managers. This study, in contrast, documents differences in three common facets of telecommuting and then examines their individual and collective effects on important employee experiences and outcomes (as shown in Figure 1). The analysis centered on the experiences of 2,115 full-time teleworkers in a large U.S. insurance company, all of whom telecommuted at least 60% of the time.

All three facets of telecommuting studied – initiation (i.e., whether employees become involved in telecommuting voluntarily or involuntarily), density (i.e., the percentage of team members involved in telecommuting), and location (i.e., the distances between telecommuters’ homes and their home offices) – affected employees’ sense of autonomy and/or feelings of isolation on the job (but not the extent of work-family conflict). In turn, those who felt less autonomous and/or more isolated at work were also more likely to lack important career-related knowledge (e.g., how to fit in, the identity of key decision-makers), to express dissatisfaction with their jobs, and to be actively thinking about leaving the organization.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Telecommuting Design



In particular, the analysis identified three aspects of telecommuting that incur special challenges for program designers and managers:

1. **Conscripts or volunteers?** Involuntary shifts of employees from traditional work arrangements to telecommuting occur with some frequency, particularly when organizations summarily shutter offices to save on real estate and related costs. In this study, involuntary telecommuters experienced significantly higher levels of psychological stress and unproductive work-related outcomes than did employees who had volunteered to work this way. The lesson for organizations is clear: When planning for changes that will force employees into telecommuting expect resistance and related adverse effects – and act accordingly. Otherwise, don't be surprised when increases in labor costs and related expenses eat into whatever savings may otherwise accrue.
2. **Where are they?** The farther telecommuters in this company lived from their home bases, the more likely they were to feel isolated and out of the loop, as well as to be limited in their career-related knowledge, dissatisfied with their jobs, and susceptible to turnover. (Involuntary telecommuters were especially prone to these effects.) Organizations have long known that considerable effort is required to keep teleworkers in tune with and committed to their companies and colleagues. This study adds convincing evidence in favor of making extra efforts to embrace, assist, and retain teleworkers who reside in the outer reaches of a work group's domain.
3. **What's the scope?** Where teleworking is a rarity, the "chosen few" are inclined to feel special, to particularly relish their inherent freedom and flexibility (i.e., autonomy), and to be highly motivated to make the experience a success. Ironically, though, this and other studies show that as the percentage of telecommuters increases, the experience shifts from unique to normative and these inherent psychological and behavioral advantages tend to diminish. Managers who succeed with largely intact work teams bolstered by a handful of essentially self-motivated teleworkers may well lack the special knowledge and skills required to lead groups mostly or completely consisting of teleworkers they rarely see and barely know. At a minimum, these managers will need special training. Alternatively or additionally, it may be necessary to recruit outsiders who are already experienced at leading geographically dispersed or virtual teams.

Telecommuting comes in many forms. For best results, then, it is essential that organizations carefully consider possible permutations and their likely effects in the early stages of program design. This study uncovered three important variations, but others remain to be uncovered. It is particularly important to conduct field experiments involving comparisons between two (or more) program designs, carefully tracking their effects over time. CAHRS companies interested in exploring this approach to making evidence-based improvements in their telecommuting efforts are encouraged to contact Professor Brad Bell, CAHRS' academic director, to discuss the best way forward. As telecommuting continues to spread, it becomes increasingly critical that it be the best possible experience for employers and employees alike.



This ResearchBrief by the following three authors is based on the working paper "Not All Telecommuting is Created Equal: An Examination of the Effects of Telecommuting Design."



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