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From a Distance: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Telecommuters Working Remotely in Virtual Teams

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Abstract: In this paper, the social and emotional experience of telecommuters working remotely in interdependent virtual teams is explored through a phenomenological inquiry into participants' lived experiences. The problem this study addresses is a lack of understanding about the process by which individuals subjectively experience remote work in virtual teams. The research methodology for this study is qualitative—drawing data from interviews of 10 participants. The participants for this study represented a variety of industries and organizations. They were telecommuters who worked remotely more than 80% of the time, had a minimum of one year's experience, and collaborated with others to develop a shared work product. Data analysis surfaced the two major themes of the social and the emotional experience of participants, as well as subthemes that identify contextual, structural, and personal factors that shaped their experiences.

Keywords: Telecommuting, Virtual Teams, Workplace Learning

There is a fundamental change occurring in the modern workplace, and it involves a new conception of time and place enabled by technology. This is a disruptive development with wide ranging personal, social, and economic implications for the modern workforce (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). In fact, one-third of American workers would choose a virtual work arrangement over a pay raise (Snyder, 2012). Statistics highlight that the “how” and “where” of work are altering at an accelerating pace, driven by the preferences of employees seeking more flexible work arrangements (Brotherton, 2012). In the context of broader economic trends, globalization, and the pace of technological innovation and application, we are quite simply witnessing the decoupling of work from time and place (Pyoria, 2011).

The purpose of this study was to increase knowledge and understanding of the lived experience of telecommuters working remotely in virtual teams with a focus on the social and emotional dimensions of the experience. The literature has identified many personal, economic, and social benefits for telecommuting (Allen et al., 2015). The trends are undeniable, and it is no longer a question of “if” telecommuting will become more prevalent, but “how” it will impact individuals and organizations, and how best to capitalize on its revolutionary possibilities

(Gilson et al., 2014). This study was shaped by the major research question: What is the social and emotional experience of working remotely in interdependent virtual teams?

Related Literature

Whether telework, remote work, distance work, or virtual work, all of the various labels placed on work that takes place at a distance from a central office and through technology have attempted to define a phenomenon that is both a context and an aspect of modern work (Bélanger, Watson-Manheim, & Swan, 2013). Two main bodies of literature are relevant to understanding what is currently known about the experience of the phenomena of telecommuting and virtual teams.

Firstly, multi-disciplinary academic research literature addressing the experience of telecommuting. The literature for telecommuting was organized into the following themes: factors in telecommuting work environment, computer-mediated communication, and presence. Secondly, multi-disciplinary academic research literature addressing virtual teams.

The following themes emerged in the review of literature: virtual team structure and process, teamwork and coordination, team technology, management and leadership for virtual teams, and team experience.

In spite of broad interest in the topics of telecommuting and virtual teams, from a diversity of disciplines ranging from Management Science to Psychology, there is a surprising lack of attention paid to the lived experience of remote workers, and rarely are their actual voices captured. While the literature identifies correlates and factors relating to effective telecommuting and collaboration in virtual teams, the lived experience of individuals as they actually experience the process is conspicuously absent.

This study sought to fill that gap, and increasing understanding of how individuals experience the personal, emotional, behavioral, social, and environmental factors in the context of telecommuting and teamwork. But also how they perceive individual and team factors, the emotional and social experience, their personal and workplace identities, and their experience of periods of being with coworkers through technology and the virtual workplace. In order to frame the experience, and analyze how individuals make meaning, two frameworks provided important constructs for this study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research study is based on the Learning in Work Life model (Illeris, 2011) and the Being There for the Online Learner model developed by Lehman and Conceição (2010). Both helped to frame the purpose of the study, its research question, and the phenomenon under investigation. Various frameworks are helpful for conceptualizing how individuals experience the unique context of virtual teams, and help identify critical factors for analysis (Curseu, 2006; Kreijns, Kirschner, & Vermeulen, 2013; Lin, Chiu, & Tsai, 2010; Lu, Xiang, Wang, & Wang, 2011). The frameworks range from broadly applicable psychological frameworks to those very specific and particular to the factors relevant to the experience of telecommuting and learning in virtual teams. The Learning in Work Life model (Illeris, 2011) and Being There for the Online Learner model (Lehman & Conceição, 2010) provided factors applicable to the lived experience of telecommuting and working in virtual teams which created a framework for analytically separating the dynamic and interdependent components of the experience.

The meanings of the experience of remote work in virtual teams were analyzed in relation to their perception of presence in the virtual environment. Employing the Being There for the Online Learner Model to analyze the experience of the telecommuters in this study provided critical insights into how the experience of presence was shaped by the modes and directly related to how they made meaning of the virtual work environment.

When coupled with the Learning in Work Life Framework, the Being There for the Online Learner model identified personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, combined with attention, emotion, comprehension, and behavioral interdependence, all of which contribute to and shape the meanings that participants construct for the experience of working remotely in virtual teams.

In the case of telecommuters, work life becomes more entwined with personal life, and the elements of work identity and personal identity are more fluid. Interaction is constrained by time and distance, and factors such as family and home are more salient (Sieben, 2007). The model provides a structure to analytically separate social and individual level factors involved in the social and emotional experience of telecommuting and working in virtual teams.

Research Design

Following Creswell (2012), the methodology for this study is shaped by a constructivist worldview, the problem identified, and an analysis of extant literature. In addition, the research question formulated is consistent with a qualitative methodology as the emphasis is on the

lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings created by the participants. Focusing strictly on the perceptions of the participants, this study was interested in uncovering meanings, and assumed a phenomenological approach.

Moustakas (1994) frames the phenomenological approach as a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that capture the essences of the experience. The central phenomenon under investigation is telecommuters' experience of working remotely and in virtual teams from the perspective of the participants themselves.

This research employed purposive sampling, identifying individuals that satisfied the criteria of telecommuting intensity (80%+), responsibility for a collaborative work product, and experience level (>1 year).

The data collected for this study were textual, presenting description, themes, and findings from interview transcripts. Data analysis was discovery-oriented, moving from a thorough review of the data, to organization of the data into themes and meanings, and finally to interpretation and synthesis. The intention of this research was to allow patterns and meanings to emerge from the faithful description and analysis of individual subjective experience.

Discussion

Key findings paint a complex picture of the day-to-day work-life of telecommuters in which telecommuting is not as much about where and when people work, as about how they get work done, echoing the contention of Belanger, Watson-Manheim, and Swan (2013) that telecommuting is both a context and an aspect of work. The social experience was at once isolating and empowering, and shaped by communication infrastructure, opportunities for social interaction, and the collective norms and expectations of coworkers. The emotional experience was characterized by a melding of identities both personal and professional along with modes of presence that transported participants into a virtual space.

The social experience of working remotely in interdependent virtual teams was the first theme to emerge in the analysis of the data. The social experience reflected the dynamic interaction of the individual with the environment and coworkers. In the unique context of telecommuting, the social experience was particularly salient for the participants in the study. Where participants reported that social dimensions were more or less taken for granted in co-located work, they became increasingly significant when individuals are separated in time and

space from their team members. The external social level of the experience of telecommuting working in virtual teams consists of two environmental factors in dynamic relationship to each other. On the one hand, there is a technical-organizational environment. On the other hand, there is the social structures of the telecommuting environment. In order to analytically separate the dynamic components of the social experience, subthemes, and connected elements were identified from the participant's perceptions and lived experiences.

The emotional experience of participants in this study related to how individuals subjectively processed thoughts and feelings, and made meaning of their work as telecommuters. It was intimately linked to their personal identities, their backgrounds, experience, and reasons for seeking out a remote work arrangement. With the exception of one participant, each telecommuter in this study had actively chosen the work arrangement for a variety of personal, family, and quality of life reasons.

The following five findings were common to the experience of telecommuting and working in virtual teams for the participants in this study:

1. Telecommuters perceive time as an elastic, boundless aspect of how they work.
2. Telecommuters perceive increased effectiveness as a result of their work arrangements.
3. Individual initiative mediates the challenges of the social and emotional experience of telecommuting.
4. The social and emotional experience of telecommuting in virtual teams is impacted by the perception of others.
5. The emotional experience of presence is enhanced by informal interactions.

The findings for this study highlight factors of the social and emotional experience of telecommuting and working in virtual teams that deserve additional attention in the context of the modern, knowledge-based, technologically enhanced workplace. Implications of this study apply to individuals, organizations, and society.

Implications

Though the findings and interpretations of this study are not generalizable, they highlight factors of the social and emotional experience of telecommuting and working in virtual teams that deserve additional attention in the context of the modern, knowledge-based, technologically enhanced workplace. Implications of this study apply to individuals, organizations, and society.

Technology has provided modern workers with unique and unprecedented opportunities for flexibility in their work lives. Telecommuting is no longer an aberration, or passing fad, it represents a fundamental change in how, when, and where people work. But it represents so much more for the participants in this study. It represents an opportunity to take control of their personal and home lives, while also succeeding in their careers.

Organizations can analyze and identify jobs that are particularly suited to the virtual environment, with an emphasis on outcomes over process. Training specific to the context of telecommuting and virtual teaming can reduce ambiguity and provide telecommuters with a set of skills that will allow them to prosper in the work arrangement. Training interventions can increase telecommuters' confidence and perceptions of self-efficacy, leading to improved performance (Staples, Hulland, & Higgins, 1999).

Organizations should also focus on the technological and communication infrastructure provided to telecommuters. Providing multiple platforms and reliable networks can reduce anxiety and support telecommuters in their day-to-day activities. This should include attention to social affordance, and creating opportunities and spaces in which telecommuters can interact socially and communicate informally, building trust and cohesion.

Participants in this study reflect a narrow slice of a much larger and expanding trend toward a new conception of working life. As a society, we are witnessing a fundamental change in how people work and live. In the new conception, time and place decrease in relevance, and a new set of skills grow in importance. These new skills relate to the use of technology to complete work, and the ability to learn and change as the context for working life alters. These trends underscore the importance of education for 21st century skills and support for continuing and lifelong learning.

But telecommuting is also a piece of a thoroughgoing change in how people learn and interact. Virtual worlds and spaces that exist through digital technology have the power to shape how we interact and understand one another, and how we experience being together and projecting ourselves and our personalities into a virtual space. Technology is breaking boundaries and flattening the world with each new development. It is critical that we understand these changes and how they will alter our basic understanding of ourselves and our communities, and that we take full advantage of the opportunities it affords while striving to ensure equity, and guarding against the potential of our work identities to invade all parts of our lives.

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