CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

The other side of a pandemic in I-O psychology research

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Rudolph et al. (2021) provide an excellent overview of some research and practice areas of work that may be affected by the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) and on which industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists may do well to focus future research. We make our comments from the viewpoint of I-O psychologists in Africa, where we research and work, in the hope that it contributes to a more global take on the issues tackled in the focal paper. We consider how research on telecommuting under different environments might result in positive or negative outcomes. We also invite finer research into the different types of telecommuting stress, considering the conflation of domains as has happened during the pandemic restrictions. We then make a call to the I-O psychology community to pay more attention to cross-cultural considerations as they conduct research on remote virtual teams as well as to global inequalities in remote work resources. We then touch briefly on issues such as information overload, millennials and the new workplace, work–life balance, and work process restructuring.

Telecommuting: Two sides of a coin

The pandemic forced many organizations to hasten their adoption of telecommuting, and they have been pleasantly surprised. Research says that job attributes such as decision autonomy have positive well-being and motivation outcomes, whereas increased job demand is usually associated with negative outcomes. Rudolph et al. (2021) were likewise upbeat about how working from home gives employees more discretion about how and when they do their work. It should be noted that because employees were caught unaware and not adequately prepared to work from home, they face unique challenges that may reverse expected gains of this work structure. With the conflation of domains and of roles in one physical location, the old patterns of interrelationship between variables may no longer hold. In fact, the new dynamics of how work and family variables interrelate should cause us to be careful in applying erstwhile models and theories of work and well-being to the present pandemic. We ought to distrust any generalizations and as it were, critically reexamine the theories on work and well-being as we apply it to lessons learned about the pandemic. Although remote work, telecommuting, and flex work may not be new, the present forced-experiment situation is new. Therefore, more research is needed because the new chaos introduced by this conflation of roles may imply that employees have lost control over their work.

Differentiating between the types of telecommuting stress

There is a need to consider the intensity of telework as I-O psychologists conduct research and design interventions for employees who work from home due to the pandemic (Fay & Kline, 2011). Konradt et al. (2003) differentiate between three types of telecommuting. We highlight these and recommend that I-O Psychologists consider the differences as we design studies around

remote virtual work. According to Konradt et al. (2003), home-centered teleworkers are employees who work remotely more from home, office-centered teleworkers blend working from home with working at the company office, and nonteleworkers work only in the company office. Home-centered teleworkers experience higher non-job-related stressors than do other groups but fewer task-related stressors. Thus, employees who work remotely at home (as was the case with most people during the pandemic) may experience more stress from family or social life (non-job-related stressors) but less stress from their task performance. This theoretical lens may thus be useful in explaining some observed phenomena as we research about the pandemic in the near future.

Cross-cultural considerations

Culture and the challenges of virtual teams

Our comment here is in part a response to Rudolph et al.'s (2021) inviting additional contributions especially with respect to organizational culture and cross-cultural differences. We thus draw attention to the effect of culture on remote and virtual work. Some organizations previously adopted virtual work (mediated by technology) based on its acknowledged merits (access to new talents and markets; 24-hour availability across time zones; increased individual productivity; reduction of carbon footprint; cost savings from overhead, travel, and infrastructure), and the pandemic has forced almost all organizations to adopt it. As the pandemic opened up more opportunities for increased collaboration by geographically distributed teams, more research is needed on how the national and ethnic cultures of these employees affect their work (Staples & Zhao, 2006). Where people communicate across cultures, especially communication mediated by technology, problems like the "common knowledge" one can arise. According to Krauss and Fussel (1990), information commonly held by all members of a team is a good thing because it allows each person to formulate their contribution aware of what others know or do not know. "Common knowledge" can however become a problem as teams may spend more time discussing information that is common to everyone. Minority opinions, even when they are correct, may remain unknown or unstated by timid team members who are trying to avoid conflict.

Other cultural problems experienced by global virtual teams include uneven information salience, contextual ambiguities, cognitive biases, and misattributions or the misinterpretation of silence, even when this is caused by the limits of asynchronous communication.

The pandemic provided a natural and worldwide expression of remote virtual work. It thus provides a unique opportunity to study the effect of culture in these remote collaborations.

Global inequality in remote work resources

During a pandemic, where physical contact is restricted (and thus more remote work), access to technology for work and communication becomes indispensable. This need would thus highlight the disparity in resource availability between developed and developing countries. Remote work presumes access to a personal computer and an Internet connection. These are not as available in Nigeria as they are in the United States, for example. Therefore, I-O psychology researchers should develop more granular and culturally responsive explanations for observed phenomena in order to accommodate for such socioeconomic disparities.

Many global organizations have increasingly looked to the developing world for cheaper talent. The pandemic-induced remote work confirmed to many of them how Africa, for example, had people as talented as some employees they were paying huge wages in Silicon Valley. If remote employment becomes the norm, we wonder whether these big organizations would apply the same

criteria of resource allocation, monitoring, evaluation, job demand requirements, and performance expectations to employees in different geographical and cultural locations?

What about the skewed and unequal availability of state welfare support across cultures? Developed countries can count on stimulus packages for its citizens in times of crises. This would buffer the effects of wage cuts or job losses. Although this may be so, say in the United States, it is not the case in most of Africa. Without delving into the reasons for the unequal availability of welfare resources (such as poor governance or an inefficient tax system), research is needed that would distill out these cultural and socioeconomic differences as suggestions and recommendations are proffered. A crucial step in this direction, which will provide a more complete picture, is to focus more research work and intervention on poorer countries.

Developed economies may lose more jobs

When global enterprises begin to hire more geographically distributed but cheaper talents for remote virtual work, local talents may lose their jobs. Having the needed technology, modern welfare structures and modern government may exist side-by-side with job insecurity in developed economies. This is yet another reason why I-O psychology research will be well served to search for granular, culturally sensitive explanations for phenomena. Thus, places like Africa may have more job security in a remote virtual work world than workers in developed societies.

Information overload in remote virtual work

Due to its affordance of multimedia and more grounded and contextual communication, and that it is the closest approximation to face-to-face meetings, the use of video conferencing has increased exponentially during the physical restrictions of the pandemic. Video meetings are convenient because participants can attend from anywhere, needing only a digital device (smartphone or computer with a camera) and an Internet connection. The convenience of this type of meeting, and the fact that time zone differences matter little, has increased the number of meetings attended by people. When hitherto people could find excuses due to limitations of physical mobility, the limit is now determined by the number of Internet capable devices available. Either for meetings or for learning, multiple video calls mean that people are processing more information than before. It would be good to find out the short- and long-term effects of this information overload on the mental and physical health of workers.

A workplace built for millennials

Although telecommuting and flex work may be antidotes or solutions for many adult workers, it is the norm desired and preferred by many millennials, and the experiences of many technology companies have shown that this is not an obstacle to productivity. Telework improves the work–life balance of millennials as well as their commitment (Gross, 2019). The pandemic conflated digital immigrants and natives, and what before was considered a privileged way of working may now (after the pandemic) become the norm. Millennials will not need to grow into this new way of working because it was, for many of them, the only way they know how to work. This demographic group may thus be expected to take the lead in the postpandemic workplace. They would be more agile, be more comfortable with new remote work technology, and also be likely more culturally open. Tomorrow's workforce will be younger, and if as Giessner et al. (2017) argue, that new ways of working may help companies attract and retain their best talents, we may be looking at a future workplace made according to the mind of the millennial.

This demographic shift calls for an adjustment in the theories hitherto used to explain workplace behavior and interactions.

Work–Life balance

It is usually easier to mentally picture spouses and their dependents (children or older persons) when discussing work–life balance, as it is easier to frame the conversation in the context of the dual domains of work and home, with corresponding spillover and crossover of stress and relief.

A more complete picture of work–life balance issues, particularly in the pandemic situation, would be to also consider the situation of single people without dependents (children or older persons). Like everyone else, the blurred boundary between work and nonwork during the pandemic will likely result in a decreased experience of well-being. Rudolph et al. (2021) correctly point out that many during this period lack the social support they would have received from coworkers. We believe that single people may be worse off than those with spouses because the latter can count on contact with their spouses and/or dependents to provide them relief from stress or be agents of recovery. We suggest that this demographic group be uniquely identified in work–family studies around this period.

Other research and practice areas

Not surprisingly, there are many potential areas that should be the focus of I-O psychology research that are not covered by either the focal article or by our commentary. For example, financial experts predict that the pandemic will be followed by economic recession in many parts of the world. Researchers should prepare for this, and, perhaps, some are already collecting data that would enable longitudinal studies. Organizations need research help to understand how to address human resource issues in functional areas like the sales department. The sales force would usually be out having face-to-face interactions with clients. If remote virtual work becomes the norm, how should such work be structured and what nature would performance management of the sales force take? Will small businesses (say of two people) be able to survive in a remote work scenario? What about the leadership attributes of managers and supervisors? What would be the cognitive, affective, and behavioral framework for the manager of such future remote virtual work, considering that they would be managing employees who are either a new breed or themselves struggling to adjust to new realities? Finally, until the workforce can completely transform to a "new normal" (whatever form that would take), what recommendations might I-O psychology research make on what to do with some job functions (e.g. chauffeurs, cooks, cleaners) that cannot be done remotely?

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