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COMMENTARY

Using the job demands-resources model to understand and address employee well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Rudolph et al. (2021) highlight 10 areas of industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology that are relevant to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on work. They also briefly describe the prototypical media headlines that highlight these different topics. Indeed, since the beginning of the pandemic, many popular press articles have been written on how managers and organizations should handle and address a multitude of changes brought on by COVID-19. Although these articles offer a host of practical recommendations, they often lack a theoretical foundation that would provide decision makers with greater understanding of *why* certain recommendations might be effective. Without an explanation of why recommendations might work, managers might feel uncertain as to which recommendations to try, and if they find that a recommendation does not apply to their context, they might dismiss the suggestions completely. The current work extends et al.'s focal article by focusing on telecommuting and the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001), using job demands and resources to provide a framework that underlies the many recommendations provided for managers and organizations during COVID-19. By providing this framework, we hope to empower decision makers to better adapt existing recommendations to their unique work contexts in order to maintain employee well-being and performance while telecommuting.

Telecommuting during COVID-19 and the JD-R model

Previous research has demonstrated that telecommuting can positively affect employee well-being when it provides employees with greater flexibility, reduces the stress and time costs of commuting, increases employee productivity, and allows employees to better balance their home and work lives (for a review of the benefits of telecommuting, see Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). However, telecommuting can also result in a greater intensification of work and a decreased ability to "switch off" from work (Felstead & Henseke, 2017), and evidence for beneficial outcomes tends to come from individuals who *chose* to telecommute and were able to effectively create work–life boundaries (e.g., Greer & Payne, 2014; Montreuil & Lippel, 2003). In contrast, the COVID-19 crisis did not give employees the choice to telecommute; rather, it triggered a forced transition to telecommuting for many. The volatility and uncertainty caused by this pandemic has engendered enormous strain for workers, with one survey finding that 69% of workers regard COVID-19 as the most significant stressor in the entirety of their careers (Ginger, 2020). It has rapidly changed the workplace environment by blurring the boundaries between work and home life, subsequently exacerbating work–family conflict and jeopardizing work–life balance for many employees (Knight et al., 2020). This multipronged threat has also heightened employees' social

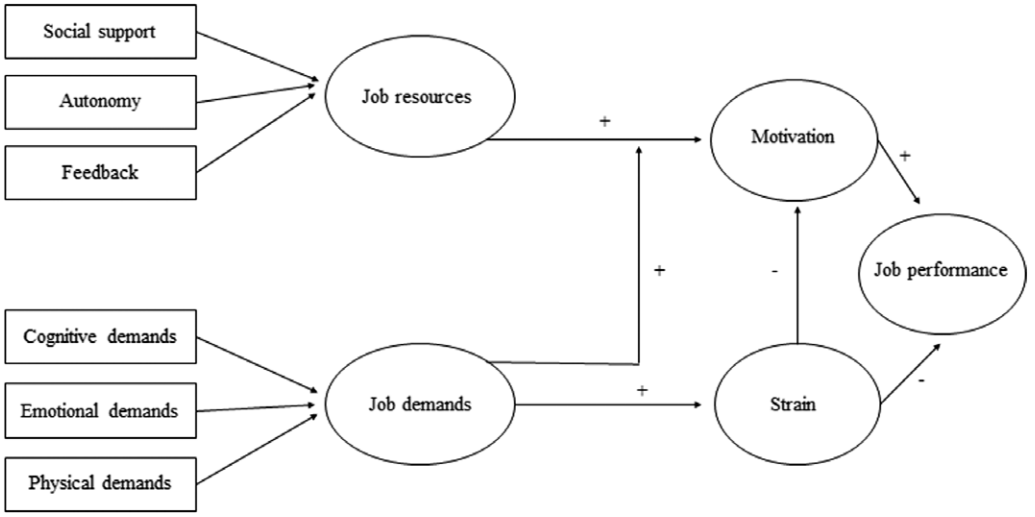

Figure 1. Adapted JD-R Model and Employee Well-Being.
Note. Adapted from Bakker & Demerouti (2007, 2017).

isolation, making it increasingly difficult for them to access instrumental and emotional support from coworkers and organizational leaders.

Organizational psychologists have identified employee well-being as a vital work outcome, one that is highly influenced by individual and organizational factors such as feedback, autonomy, and emotional demands. These characteristics of individuals and their jobs are often grouped into two broad categories, namely job demands and resources, which are associated with employee motivation and strain and ultimately contribute to job performance (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; see Figure 1). The literature's current conceptualization of the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017) also incorporates personal resources, as well as actions that employees take based on their job demands and resources (e.g., job crafting, self-undermining). However, in this paper we specifically focus on job demands and resources in an attempt to highlight the role of managers and organizational leaders. Job demands refer to the physical, social, or organizational characteristics of the work itself (e.g., role overload, ambiguity, time pressure) that require prolonged physical and/or mental effort by employees and are subsequently associated with significant decrements in employee health and performance over time. Job resources (e.g., job control, supervisor support, feedback) are the physical, psychological, social, or organizational facets of work that help galvanize employees toward achieving work goals and reduce the physiological and psychological consequences of heightened job demands. In the following sections, we discuss a comprehensive (but nonexhaustive) list of job demands and resources, adapted from Bakker and Demerouti (2007) and Xanthopoulou et al. (2007), to help provide a clearer framework of how organizations and their leaders can improve telecommuter well-being. Each demand and resource is outlined in addition to how it is influenced by telecommuting and examples of how organizations can adjust these demands and resources. These examples are not necessarily one-size-fits-all solutions; rather, organizations should apply what they know about their employees and needs in order to adapt and create practices that work for them.

Reducing job demands

A reduction in job demands might sound daunting to an organization that is focused now, more than ever, on preserving the bottom line. However, reducing job demands does not mean lowering

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quality or production standards—in fact, reducing unnecessary cognitive, emotional, and physical job demands should improve employee well-being and therefore positively affect organizational outcomes.

Cognitive demands

Although a certain degree of cognitive demands are inherent in any job, there can be additional cognitive demands placed on employees during COVID-19 that are not directly task related. For example, transitioning to telecommuting may create some role ambiguity and conflict if employees are unsure about how to adapt to the decreased boundaries between work and life or have increasing caretaking demands at home. Employees may also be thinking about their personal and loved ones' health during COVID-19 as well as their job security during these precarious times. There are all stressors that may increase employees' cognitive demands and make it harder for them to focus on their job tasks. One way that organizations and managers can help reduce employees' cognitive demands during this time is by maintaining transparency and reducing role ambiguity and conflict. Both role ambiguity, defined as a lack of information or unclear information about a given worker's job or expectations, and role conflict, defined as an individual's experience of incompatible demands from the different roles they have (e.g., employee and parent), have been consistently associated with decreased job satisfaction and commitment, as well as increased mental health issues (e.g., depression, anxiety; Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Tubre & Collins, 2000). As a result, it is important for managers to be as transparent and clear as possible when communicating with their teams about how project timelines, priorities, and tasks may be affected during this time. For example, managers can make clear what projects and tasks are most critical during each meeting so that employees are cognizant of what they should be focusing on—and what tasks they can potentially delay if they have other responsibilities come up at home. Managers should also set expectations on how team members will keep each other updated (e.g., virtual meetings versus emails, frequency of contact) and how the team plans to adjust to potential changes.

Emotional demands

Employees are likely also experiencing many emotions during this time; however, they may feel pressure to only present positive emotions at work (e.g., during virtual meetings) in order to create a good impression or a positive work environment for others. Research has demonstrated that emotions often spill over work–life boundaries (e.g., Sanz-Vergel et al., 2012), and when telecommuting, it may become even harder to prevent this spillover as the boundaries between work and life are blurred. Employees may engage in surface acting (i.e., displaying a fake emotion without changing the felt emotion) in an attempt to hide some of their negative emotions, but this acting can lead to increased stress, work withdrawal, and burnout (Grandey, 2003). In addition to creating negative effects for the individual, hiding these emotions can create the false impression that everyone is doing fine and can further isolate employees who feel like they are struggling. However, research has also shown how a climate of authenticity (i.e., acceptance and respect for individuals' felt emotions) can buffer some of these negative outcomes (Grandey et al., 2012). Managers and coworkers can regularly check in on a personal level, encouraging each other to express their authentic emotions instead of simply focusing on tasks that need to be completed. Managers can also help set an example by discussing some of their authentic emotions and how they have been coping in order to normalize these conversations and destigmatize mental well-being issues so that their employees feel comfortable seeking help if needed.

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Physical demands

Telecommuters also may not have as many natural breaks built into the day (e.g., walking to a meeting, chatting with coworkers). This is an important concern because employees will be more likely to burn out if they are constantly working, and breaks have been shown to help reduce stress and increase work engagement (Hu et al., 2016; Kühnel et al., 2017). To compensate for this lack of built-in breaks, managers should encourage their employees to be intentional about taking breaks throughout the workday and avoid scheduling multiple back-to-back meetings. In addition, now that employees have fewer boundaries between work and home, managers should remind their team members that they do not need to expand their work hours and work during nonwork hours (e.g., early morning, late evening) because this can have negative effects on employees' recovery processes, resulting in worse mood and increased cortisol levels (Dettmers et al., 2016). Managers should also be cognizant of when they send work emails and avoid sending them during nonwork hours, instead delaying the email or using a service that allows for scheduled emails. This can help relieve pressure from employees to feel like they constantly need to be working now that they are telecommuting.

Increasing job resources

Job resources do not need to cost organizations much money, if they cost anything at all, but increasing these resources can have dramatic payoffs in terms of employee well-being and mental health. This section expands on the resources of social support, autonomy, and feedback.

Social support

Extensive research has demonstrated the positive effects of social relationships on mental and physical health (e.g., Cohen, 2004). Feeling a sense of support at work can have many benefits for workers, such as buffering the negative effects of work stress and work–family conflict (Etzion, 1984; Kossek et al., 2011). Providing social support at work may be especially important during this time because employees may be more isolated from their normal sources of support (e.g., friends, family) or relationships with these sources may be shifting (e.g., increased amount of time spent with family or other housemates). Managers can set an understanding and empathetic tone by being flexible about their expectations for how their team will work together and accomplish tasks during this time. They can also hold regular virtual office hours or set an open-door policy so that team members have a way to reach out about any questions or concerns. In addition, as managers check in with employees, they can acknowledge that individual employees may be contending with these changes in different ways and work with them to develop a plan that takes caregiving or other home obligations into account such as flexible meeting times, shorter meetings, or even doing away with unnecessary meetings altogether. However, managers may not know what type of support their employees could benefit from, so they can use a needs analysis approach to discern what might be helpful. In this context, a needs analysis need not be formal or include statistics at all—a series of conversations with employees and/or an anonymous survey could shed light on what employees are struggling with and better inform managers as to which kinds of support would be most helpful.

Managers can also encourage social interactions among team members to maintain team cohesion and provide an additional sense of social support. As many employees will likely be dealing with a variety of challenges, it may be beneficial not only to process those experiences with others but also to help others realize they are not alone. Managers can block out time in virtual team meetings for employees who are comfortable with sharing to talk about their life updates; this may also increase empathy and understanding among team members about why another team member may be less responsive or attentive than usual.

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Autonomy

The many demands of working and living during the COVID-19 pandemic can feel like a loss of control and autonomy. Although this may seem like an occasion for increased employee monitoring to ensure that employees are getting their work completed, these efforts may have a negative effect because they further reduce employees' sense of autonomy. Instead, increasing employee autonomy can enable them to be more engaged and thus more productive (De Spiegelaere et al., 2016). For example, for employees who may be preoccupied during typical working hours due to taking care of children or other family members, managers can brainstorm different ways to keep these employees engaged (e.g., recording and posting meetings, getting the employee's thoughts before a meeting and sharing them with others if the employee is unable to attend). Managers can also suggest virtual "working meetings" where team members can independently set aside times to work on projects together outside of the regular check-in meetings if any employees need help setting a routine or maintaining accountability with others. This way, managers can provide a foundation for team members' work schedules but ultimately allow the individuals to decide what works best for them.

Feedback

Although managers may not see their employees as often while they are telecommuting, it is important to still check in regularly and provide feedback on how their employees are doing. Due to the abrupt nature of this transition to telecommuting, employees may not be certain about whether they are performing in an adequate manner, especially because typical avenues for more informal feedback may be missing (e.g., discussing how a meeting went on the walk back from a conference room or the drive back from a client site). Providing feedback in an accurate but sensitive manner can alleviate some of these concerns as well as improve job satisfaction and performance (Demerouti et al., 2001; Kim & Hamner, 1976). In addition, this feedback can help clarify what tasks or projects employees should be prioritizing, especially given that they may have more limited resources now from increased responsibilities at home, fewer work–life boundaries, and so on. It is also important to ask for feedback from employees and inquire as to whether there is anything that the manager or organization could be doing better to aid employees during this time. This provides employees with a sense of voice (i.e., feeling like one has the opportunity to challenge or influence a process or outcome at work), which has been shown to have positive effects on employee engagement, commitment, and performance (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2012).

Conclusion

Organizations, managers, and employees have likely been inundated with lists of suggestions on how to effectively adapt to telecommuting during the COVID-19 pandemic, but these lists are not always evidence based and may be difficult to navigate. Additionally, not all suggestions apply to each situation, and as a result it is helpful to understand not only *what* the recommendations are but also *why* a particular recommendation works. The JD-R model provides this *why*, enabling decision makers to better understand which recommendations may help them decrease the job demands and increase the job resources of their workplaces so that their employees can work more productively and maintain their personal well-being. Although the demands and resources provided here are not exhaustive, they attempt to clarify that current occupational stress theories like the JD-R model can cut through the noise to steer organizational leaders toward ideas that are rooted in decades of scholarship.

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