

COMMENTARY

Considering the interaction of individual differences and remote work contexts

Darrin Grelle* and Eric Popp

SHL

*Corresponding author. Email: darrin.grelle@shl.com (alternate email: darrin.grelle@gmail.com)

The focal article by Rudolph et al. (2021) does an amazing job of summarizing the 10 key areas in which industrial-organizational (I-O) psychologists can learn and make substantial contributions during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Although the sections on telecommuting and virtual teams are comprehensive, the focus is largely on contextual factors, organizational barriers, and leadership strategies that may influence success and job satisfaction in remote roles and virtual teams. There is not much discussion of individual differences and how those differences interact with various contextual factors. This commentary discusses how understanding which traits and competencies are related to success and higher job satisfaction in remote roles can help design training and manager-to-subordinate interventions to yield positive outcomes through the duration of this crisis and beyond. The purpose of this commentary is not to provide a comprehensive review of the remote work literature but rather call out key opportunities for study.

As discussed in the focal article, telecommuting is not new. What is different during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis is that many people are working remotely that would normally not choose to otherwise. Also, many people working remotely, even those with years of remote work experience, are doing so with the added burden of childcare responsibilities due to school closures. In addition, those living with other adults may have had to begin sharing limited home office space. We have a body of literature upon which to draw to better understand which individual characteristics predict success in a remote role, but this literature was written during a time when the majority of people working remotely were doing so voluntarily, many still went into an office location regularly to connect with colleagues, and most had childcare arrangements that allowed them to focus on work. I-O psychologists need to take this opportunity to grow the remote work literature and study how traits that have been shown to have an influence on remote work success interact with new or more prevalent contextual factors and other individual differences not previously studied. A few areas worthy of exploration are outlined below.

Extroversion/maintaining working relationships

The ability to maintain good working relationships with colleagues is a desirable trait for any employee in any context. Individuals that have good relationships with colleagues help foster team cohesion and cooperation with colleagues in other departments. In an office setting, these relationships are often developed and maintained through face-to-face contact, but in a remote setting, these opportunities are removed (Wang & Haggerty, 2011). Remote workers that focus on building relationships with coworkers have been shown to have higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Golden & Veiga, 2008). Therefore, a measure of relationship building may be helpful in identifying employees who feel isolated because they tend not to reach out to coworkers for informal conversations. Managers can use this information to set up virtual

coffee breaks or encourage employees more prone to foster relationships to reach out to less socially engaged coworkers.

It is possible that the tendency to engage in relationship building activities is a proxy for extroversion. Extroverted individuals thrive on interpersonal contact that may not translate to the virtual environment. Therefore, it is possible that these are the individuals who are more likely to feel a sense of isolation and experience lower job satisfaction and a decrease in job performance. These may be the individuals who typically would not choose to work remotely and, thus, have a more difficult time adjusting to working remotely full time. Introverted individuals may prefer the ability to focus on their work without the distraction of informal conversations with coworkers and the fatigue that social interactions can generate.

To further complicate this relationship, the at-home context in which someone is working likely interacts with this relationship-building trait. If an individual is more prone to relationship-building behaviors and they are living in a situation where a spouse, roommate, or other adult is present, the feelings of isolation may be less likely because they have some nonwork-oriented social interaction throughout the day. Conversely, someone with remote work experience who is less prone to work-relationship-building behaviors who is working at home with other adults present who might not have been present prior to the pandemic crisis could experience lower job satisfaction and a decrease in job performance due to the unwanted distractions generated by the other adults.

Adaptability/flexibility

The world of work is constantly evolving, but at no other time has such a dramatic change happened so suddenly. Workers new to working remotely need to make significant changes to how they do their jobs. Even experienced remote workers need to make significant changes due to frequent shifts in priorities due to economic uncertainty, logistical issues related to childcare needs and other pandemic-related fallout, and the introduction of new tools and procedures. Adaptability has been shown to predict job performance in traditional settings (Pulakos, et al., 2002) and to be effective for increasing team cohesion for those working remotely (Macdonnell, et al., 2009). Adaptability is likely to predict success in making the transition to remote work and adjusting to new surroundings and should be investigated.

It is unclear how time-dependent adaptability is as a predictor of successful remote work. It is clearly critical when first transitioning to remote work, but does it remain important when remote work becomes more routine? There may also be seasonal aspects requiring adaptability. Parents may experience periods of transition when children are out of school and have different needs. During the pandemic crisis, we may see cycles of lockdown and reopening. These cycles will cause shifts in daily life to which everyone must adjust. Researchers should collect data on adaptability, work stress, job satisfaction, and job performance at regular intervals to see how these variables interact with time. If possible, additional data points should be collected when unanticipated events such as school closings occur that disrupt routines.

Comfort with technology

Jobs that are suitable for remote work likely already require some degree of proficiency in technology-based collaboration, whether it is as basic as sending and receiving emails or more complex like creating dashboards or virtual white boards. In the absence of in-person meetings and reduced access to in-office technical support, remote workers will need to become acquainted with new programs for collaboration and learn how to troubleshoot issues on their own when things go wrong. As mentioned in the focal article, there may be a tendency to focus on generational differences in technical proficiency, but gaps should be evaluated company wide. There is

likely more variance in technical proficiency explained by current work function than by age. For example, people in sales who regularly set up virtual meetings with clients may be more technically proficient than are people in human resources departments who collaborate less within their organization and handle interviews in person or on the phone. This is likely to be different for every organization, so research into the interaction between technical proficiency and work function on remote work success will have important implications for training. If workers are uncomfortable with the tools they have available, they are limited in how effective they can be at work.

Work focus

As with every trait discussed so far, the tendency to work hard to complete tasks on time and take on extra responsibilities is desirable in all work contexts. In a time when schedules may need constant adjustment, additional distractions are present and work demands may be higher due to layoffs or illness, so the ability to use time efficiently and the preference for taking on extra work is especially important. Self-discipline and effective time management has shown to lead to better outcomes for experienced remote workers (Baruch, 2000). Research is needed to determine what interventions (e.g., white noise generators, task planner apps) help remote workers stay focused on work. Longitudinal research into task focus and work orientation can determine whether remote workers improve their ability to stay focused over time and which contextual factors affect task focus and work orientation. There is likely an interaction between other individual differences (e.g., multitasking ability) and job characteristics (e.g., task variety and task complexity) on one's ability to stay focused.

The ability to stay focused can help when there are more distractions than normal, but work orientation might lead to burnout for people unable to separate themselves from work. The *Harvard Business Review* is reporting a 40% increase in the number of hours worked per week since the pandemic began (Williams, 2020), and despite fears of plummeting productivity, most organizations are saying that productivity is at the same or higher levels than it was pre-pandemic. Although it may seem great that people are working harder and longer during this crisis, it is unclear how long this can be sustained and what the long-term outcomes of this trend will be. It is also unclear to what extent the increase in hours worked is due to the inability to stay focused and how much is due to people taking on extra responsibilities. Remote workers may be working longer hours to meet goals because they are unable to stay focused or because they are taking on additional work.

Conclusion

The traits discussed in this commentary are by no means comprehensive. The goal of this commentary was to point out how critical it is to understand which individual differences are likely to predict success in a remote work role and how those differences interact with different contextual factors. With such a significant portion of the workforce working remotely and with many of these individuals not preferring to work remotely under normal circumstances, a wealth of research opportunities is available that can enrich the remote work literature. In a more practical sense, the more we understand the successful remote worker, the better I-O psychologists can guide organizations to best practices. One-size-fits-all approaches to management are ineffective, especially during times of uncertainty. Managers need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of their subordinates in order to guide them to success. Training programs that are guided by this research can increase employee effectiveness while maintaining job satisfaction. With no end to the pandemic in sight and the possibility of much of the workforce remaining in remote roles, I-O psychology should take every opportunity to learn and provide guidance.

References

- Baruch, Y.** (2000). Teleworking: Benefits and pitfalls as perceived by professionals and managers. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, *15*(1), 34–49. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-005X.00063>
- Golden, T. D., & Veiga, J. F.** (2008). The impact of superior–subordinate relationships on the commitment, job satisfaction, and performance of virtual workers. *Leadership Quarterly*, *19*(1), 77–88.
- Macdonnell, R., O’Neill, T., Kline, T., & Hambley, L.** (2009). Bringing group-level personality to the electronic realm: A comparison of face-to-face and virtual contexts. *Psychologist-Manager Journal*, *12*(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10887150802371773>
- Pulakos, E. D., Schmitt, N., Dorsey, D. W., Arad, S., Borman, W. C., & Hedge, J. W.** (2002). Predicting adaptive performance: Further tests of a model of adaptability. *Human Performance*, *15*(4), 299–323. https://doi.org/10.1207/S15327043HUP1504_01
- Rudolph, C. W., Allan, B., Clark, M., Hertel, G., Hirschi, A., Kunze, F., Shockley, K., Shoss, M., Sonnentag, S., & Zacher, H.** (2021). Pandemics: Implications for research and practice in industrial and organizational psychology. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, *14*(1), 1–35.
- Wang, Y., & Haggerty, N.** (2011). Individual virtual competence and its influence on work outcomes. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, *27*(4), 299–334. <https://doi.org/10.2753/MIS0742-122270410>
- Williams, J. C.** (2020, May 11). The pandemic has exposed the fallacy of the ideal worker. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2020/05/the-pandemic-has-exposed-the-fallacy-of-the-ideal-worker>

Cite this article: Grelle, D. and Popp, E. (2021). Considering the interaction of individual differences and remote work contexts. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* *14*, 244–247. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.51>