

Telework and Professional Isolation: The Role of Social Networking

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Abstract

The workplace environment is changing as organizations look for creative and agile methods of staying competitive (Chafkin, 2010). With this in mind more and more organizations are choosing to adopt telework and virtual organizations as one creative approach to achieving this goal (Chafkin, 2010). One report from Gartner Dataquest reported an increase from 11 million in 1999 to 34 million Americans who are currently working from home. As virtual organizations and telework continue in popularity, there is a need to address telework issues that may impact the telework experience. This research seeks to explore the relationship between professional and social isolation and teleworkers who work away from the office. This is an exploratory study which uses theory from social identity theory, technology acceptance model and interactivity theory. This research can be valuable to organizations seeking to increase or improve telework environments or for people working in virtual teams or in the development of organizational social networks that will be used for outside workers.

Key words

Social Networks, Virtual organizations, telework, telecommunication, technology acceptance model, social identity theory

Introduction

The workplace environment is changing as organizations look for creative and agile methods of staying competitive (Chafkin, 2010). With this in mind more and more organizations are choosing to adopt telework and virtual organizations as one creative approach to achieving this goal (Chafkin, 2010). One report from Gartner Dataquest reported an increase from 11 million in 1999 to 34 million Americans who are currently working from home. But are these employees dissatisfied with their work situation in terms of their professional development? Are they feeling isolated and displaced from other co-workers, customers and suppliers? And if so, can the use of social networks help alleviate the perceptions of isolation? There does not appear to be any previous research on social network and professional isolation. This exploratory research examines telework and professional/social isolation and whether the use of social networks can help reduce this isolation by presenting a conceptual model and proposed study focusing first on interviews followed by the use of surveys.

This research may help organizations in terms of training, recruitment and retention of teleworkers. Disabled or retired workers as well as other workers associated with brain drain may be more inclined to continue working for a firm if the telework environment is satisfying and rewarding. It may help in the planning and development of virtual teams

and virtual organizations or the development of social networks associated with teleworkers.

There is a difference in the richness of the interaction in face-to-face communication versus computer-mediated communication such as email (Daft & Lengel, 1984, 1986; Williams & Christie, 1976). The telework environment is different from the traditional environment in regard to interaction and communication. Currently, there does not appear to be previous research that evaluates the telework relationship in terms of professional isolation and social networks. The paper is organized in the following way: first a literature review is provided which supports the research topic; second the model and constructs are presented, third a discussion of the proposed study is given.

Literature review

Virtual Organizations, Telework and Social Identity theory

Social identity theory

As organizations embrace virtual organizations and telework, more employees may experience feelings of isolation and not being connected to the rest of the organization. Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) helps in understanding how people feel when they feel they are discriminated against within a group because of lack of social identity with the group. When individuals feel they are not part of the group socially, they feel their development can be hindered. In the case of teleworkers working in a virtual organization, their feelings of social and professional isolation may lead them to feel they are missing out on job promotions and career opportunities.

Furthermore, since virtual organizations and teleworkers involve remote work, away from a traditional office the issues associated with social identity may be a consideration in managing and working in a telework environment. Virtual organizations are organizations where all employees perform work-related jobs outside the office and there is not a brick and mortar office building for employees to physically access. Virtual organizations involve use of telework, telecommunications and computer systems in interacting with others inside and outside of the organization.

As organizations become more distant and globally dispersed (Reich, 2001), the challenges and issues associated with telework and virtual organizations will become more important. Employees and their online interactions and telework relationships will become important considerations. Will the employees be less happy and less productive in the telework environment? Will employees feel less connected and more isolated and therefore dissatisfied with the telework environment?

As such, employees may or may not be receptive to working in a partial or full telework situation depending on their perceptions of this environment in terms of their ability to

stay connected and communicate with other employees, customers or vendors. In addition they may miss the face-to-face interaction. They may feel the technology-enabled interactions may be insufficient and leave them feeling that they are isolated from others in the company such as their managers and co-workers and therefore are missing important information or passed over for promotions or other job-enhancing opportunities.

Previous research findings report that professional isolation is a concern for teleworkers in public and private organizations (Cooper & Kurland, 2002). Our research questions focus on the telework environment and teleworkers and the relationship between social networks, and professional isolation. Is professional isolation a concern of teleworkers? Does social networking help reduce the perceptions of professional isolation?

Telework/telecommuting

The term Telework/telecommuting was first introduced in 1975 by Nilles (1975) and became very popular in the 1980's with the rise of oil prices and other economic problems. Telecommuting has been described as any work done outside of the workplace where telecommunication and/or computer-based technologies are used (Bailey and Kurland, 2002).

However, today as companies are aggressively pursuing creative methods of sustaining agility and competitiveness, telework is enjoying renewed interest. One reason for the renewed interest is the grueling economic challenges that exist today and continue to persist in conjunction with steady and continuous improvements in information and communication technologies. Some organizations are adopting a combination of telework and in-office work where they are allowing some employees to work at home while other firms are going totally virtual, where all employees work outside the office and there is no brick-and-mortar office building.

Telework may help employees by reducing interruptions and allowing them to focus on one task. It can reduce commuting time and save gas and reduce traffic and traffic accidents, employers save on office space and equipment, flexibility with work and family schedules (Bailey and Kurland, 2002).

Social/Professional Isolation

However for all the benefits associated with telework, there are some areas that can be problematic. For one, many employees feel disconnected from the organization due to lack of human contact. Findings from previous studies indicate many teleworkers

experience feelings of social and professional isolation, (Tomaskovic-Devey & Risman, 1993; Bailey and Kurland, 2002). Social isolation is when workers feel disconnected from the informal, day-to-day contact and information from co-workers. Professional isolation, which is associated with employee development (Bailey and Kurland, 2002) is when workers feel they are out of sight and forgotten by managers and others and feel their chances for career growth and development such as promotions and job opportunities suffer.

Drawing on previous work from (Bailey and Kurland, 2002) we focus on three areas of professional isolation which can impact formal and informal (day-to-day) development. Three areas of development include: interpersonal networking, informal learning and mentoring.

Interpersonal networking - informal interactions such as office and work-related gossip, impromptu discussions which help establish relationships and office politics. Informal learning – impromptu skill building or informal knowledge sharing that can occur in the office

Mentoring – experienced workers work with less experienced workers to help in career and skill development.

Social Networking

Therefore, professional isolation may leave employees unhappy with their telework environment. The use of social networking may help as a way to encourage a richer level of interaction and connection with co-workers and other work-related individuals.

As social networking continues to grow in popularity, more varied uses of social networks are being explored by businesses as well as individuals (Hempel, 2009). For example social networks are being used more to communicate with employees to encourage organizational interaction and information sharing such sharing human resource information; training and development virtual teams, and group collaboration.

Social networking may help reduce feelings of isolation which lead people to feel they will be left out and may miss out on important knowledge as well as opportunities for promotion because they are no longer in the in-group because they are working outside of the traditional office environment. The Technology acceptance model and the perceived interactivity theory are used in this research to help explain why social networks may help with social and professional isolation.

Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) – The technology acceptance model is based upon the theory of reasoned action which helps explain technological factors associated with the use of social networking websites. TAM argues that an individual's use of a technology is influenced by their perceptions of the usefulness, usability, and ease of use of the technology.

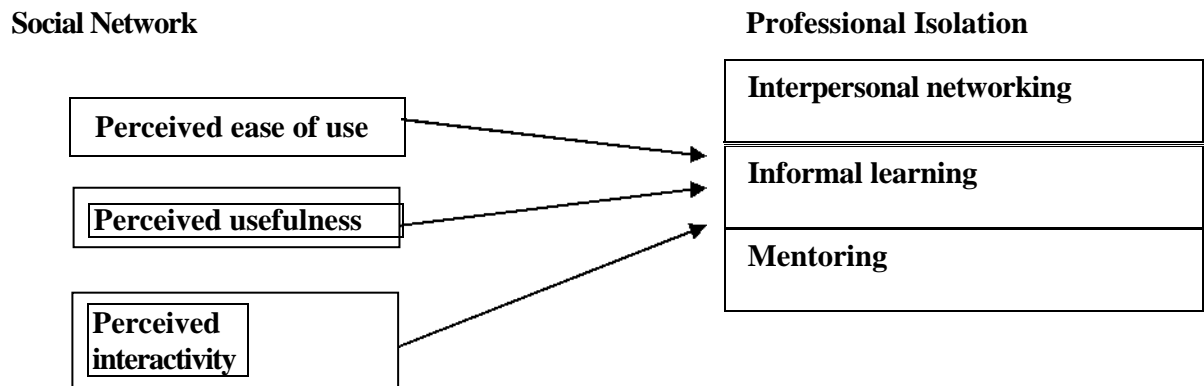
Perceived Interactivity theory

Social networks involve online interaction. Social networking sites allow interaction or communication in a one-to-one or one-to-many online situation. The perceptions associated with interaction using the websites relating to communication and quality of

the message may impact the use. According to telepresence theory (Steuer, 1992) and interactivity theory (Rafaeli, 1988), the message and the mediated environment are associated with perceptions of interactivity.

Model

Previous research regarding Technology acceptance model argues that attitudes toward technology will affect the use of the technology. We posit that there is a positive relationship between the use of social networking sites and social/professional isolation. The conceptual model presented was developed to help explore the relationship between the use of social networks and professional and social isolation.



Constructs:

Professional/Social isolation

Interpersonal networking - informal interactions such as office and work-related gossip, impromptu discussions which help establish relationships and office politics.

Informal learning – impromptu skill building or informal knowledge sharing that can occur in the office

Mentoring – experienced workers work with less experienced workers to help in career and skill development.

Perceived ease of use – the degree to which the user expects the social networking site to be free of effort

Hypothesis1: perceived ease of use of social networks and professional isolation has a positive relationship.

Perceived usefulness – The degree to which the user expects the social networking site to be useful in job-related tasks and assessments.

Hypothesis2: perceived usefulness of social networks and professional isolation has a positive relationship.

Perceived interactivity – relates to communication, control, and responsiveness of the social networking site.

Hypothesis3: perceived interactivity of social networks and professional isolation has a positive relationship.

Methodology

In this study we plan to evaluate the telework environment regarding professional isolation and social networks by first interviewing 10-15 teleworkers in different fields. The information from the interviews will be used to enhance the conceptual model. Second, after the interviews are evaluated a survey will be developed based upon responses to interview questions.

Summary

In conclusion, as virtual organizations and telework continue in popularity, there is a need to address telework issues that may impact the telework experience. This research seeks to explore the relationship between professional and social isolation and teleworkers who work away from the office. This is an exploratory study which uses theory from social identity theory, technology acceptance model and interactivity theory. This research can be valuable to organizations seeking to increase or improve telework environments or for people working in virtual teams or in the development of organizational social networks that will be used for outside workers.

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