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MANAGING ORGANIZATIONS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

Covid-19 and the Abrupt Change in the Nature of Work Lives: Implications for Identification and Communication

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> **Key Takeaways:** The coronavirus pandemic was an "environmental jolt" that altered work lives for workers around the world. We focus on how the abrupt transition to remote work for many organizational employees may have implications for organizational identification and communication processes within the organization. Managers need to understand these effects in order to keep employees engaged and cultivate resilient organizations.

The novel coronavirus (covid-19) and the need to protect people from falling ill in the Spring of 2020 created a sudden and massive change in the nature of work lives for many workers. This type of event is what is known as an "environmental jolt" (Meyer, 1982), a change that is so fast and so jarring that prior strategies and routines no longer apply and new ones have to be created in order for people and organizations to be effective. People and organizations, of course, vary in their ability to adapt effectively to such jolts (Meyer, 1982).

There are at least three categories of workers whose work lives have been affected by this public health crisis. Some workers have been furloughed or laid off and are hoping to re-claim their jobs when the economy re-opens. Other workers like health care professionals and first responders have found themselves working in unusually stressful and/or dangerous situations and have had to invent new ways of operating.

A third category of workers (the lucky ones) have retained their jobs (at least, in the short term), are generally not working in dangerous circumstances, but have had to deal with an abrupt transformation in how they work. Suddenly, these workers have to work remotely because of the requirement that all non-essential workers in most states stay home. We focus here on this third category of workers.

While the last couple of decades have seen large increases in the number of remote workers (Barley, Bechky, & Milliken, 2017), the coronavirus created an unanticipated and sudden surge in the number of workers who are working remotely. For many, including most teachers and college professors, the change in work occurred very abruptly and without adequate planning or training.

In the following paragraphs, we highlight some of the interesting and important questions about how work processes and outcomes may be altered by this shift to remote work. Past research done by psychologists, sociologists, management, and communication researchers can shed light on the answers to some of these questions. Other questions are so "novel" that they must await answers from researchers.

The Switch to Remote Work and Organizational Identification

We know that people have a need to create meaning for themselves and one way of doing this is to identify as a member of a group or an organization, whether this is a work organization, a religious organization, a school, a group that pursues a common interest together, or a family. Organizational researchers have studied identification with work organizations as a construct for years and have found that organizational identification is related to important outcomes like job satisfaction, productivity, and absenteeism.

Past research has found that physically isolated workers have lower levels of identification with their work organizations (Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Weisenfeld, 2012). One reason why is that people who are physically isolated from other members of their organization tend to feel less respected by their work colleagues than workers who work on-site (Bartel, et al., 2012). The argument that Bartel and colleagues (Bartel et al., 2012) made in their research was that the lack of respect perceived by workers who were physically isolated had to do with the fact that they were non-prototypical workers. That is, the prototypical worker in their research settings was one who worked in a central office most of the time.

In our current situation, physical isolation has become the norm and thus, an employee working from home is, in fact, the prototypical worker. What we do not really know is how the sudden switch to remote work that accompanied the emergence of the covid-19 pandemic will affect people's work identities when everyone is working remotely and in a physically isolated way. Future research is needed to help us to understand how physical isolation affects perceived respect and identification with one's employer when everyone is working remotely.

We also do not know how a potentially long-term switch to working remotely will affect how people will answer the questions: "Who am I and how is what I am doing meaningful?" Prior research on the changing nature of jobs (Galperin, 2017) suggests that people are resilient and will find ways to claim a new identity when an old one is threatened, although this may take time. One possibility is that increasing numbers of workers will see themselves more as independent contractors or consultants than as employees when they have no physical place that they share in common with other workers. This seems likely to reduce levels of organizational identification and suggests that organizations that want to maintain high levels of identification among their employees may need to take active steps to keep them psychologically engaged (e.g., having managers reach out to workers individually, having virtual "water cooler" events, etc.).

The Switch to Remote Work and the Quality of Communication

One challenge for organizations will be to try to maintain the quality of communication and knowledge sharing among their employees while using technology-enabled communication tools such as email, Slack, Zoom, WebEx, Skype, or FaceTime.

In prior work in face-to-face settings, researchers have found that employees often hesitate to speak to their bosses about issues or problems that they encounter while doing their work and that this is a common phenomenon across industries and work settings (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003). One of the most common reasons employees give for not speaking to their managers about issues or problems they are facing is that they fear that their manager might perceive them as being critical rather than as trying to solve problems or offer constructive suggestions. Another reason why employees do not speak up is that they worry that speaking up will not matter; that is; they do not believe that any action will be taken to address the issue (Milliken et al., 2003).

We would hypothesize that employees will find it even harder to speak up about issues or problems when their only means of communication is technology-mediated. In technology-

mediated communication, participants have to wait their turn to participate and may be more hesitant to speak up with their ideas, especially if they seem risky (Lowy, 2020). One reason why is that there is less "common ground;" that is, people are uncertain about what other people know about the issues under discussion (Cramton, 2001). Further technology-mediated communication reduces access to many of the non-verbal cues that are essential in interpreting communication (Cramton, 2001; Lowy, 2020; Moser & Axtell, 2013). This may make people feel less certain, and perhaps more fearful, about communicating ideas that they see as unusual or risky. Thus, there may be a loss of knowledge sharing that occurs when people are physically isolated from each other (Cramton, 2001).

Two important questions are: What factors could facilitate the sharing of information and the discovery of issues in an organization where everyone is working remotely? How do people build trust on a technology-mediated team? Past research suggests that it may be especially important to build early trust and to establish agreement on working norms and performance goals in order to achieve high levels of performance in groups working remotely (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013).

The Switch to Remote Work and the Nature of Communication Networks

One of the biggest predictors of who one speaks to in an office environment is whom one is physically close to in the building (Festinger, Schachter, & Back, 1950). Communication between people who work on the same floor in an office building is more likely than communication between people who work on different floors. Similarly, communication between people who work in the same building is more likely than communication between people who work in different buildings. Obviously, communication between people whose offices are located in different countries is even more difficult, made even more so by differences in language, in values, and in time zones as well as potentially by differences in the type of work being done.

Many workers who used to be co-located are now dispersed, sometimes in different time zones. In such a situation, will we rely on the networks we already have or will we be able to build new ones? How will networks be built in a world in which people are physically isolated from each other?

We know from prior work on networks that people's networks tend to be homogeneous (Marsden, 1987). Will our networks become more or less homogeneous as we work remotely? Will diverse virtual teams be better able to manage their diversity than face-to-face teams or is there a higher probability that "faultlines" will become activated on virtual teams (Lau & Murningham, 1998) as people stick to their established networks rather than reaching out to others who are not members of their in-group? Will existing status differences become even more embedded when employees are working remotely or will there be a loosening of status hierarchies? These are all important questions that await research.

Managerial and Research Implications

We have highlighted many questions about how the "environmental jolt" of the coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent abrupt change to remote work may be altering important individual and organizational behavior. Managers may want to pay special attention to the issues raised here and take active steps to keep their employees psychologically engaged as well as actively seek to understand and manage the emergent communication processes in order to help their employees and their organizations to be resilient during this uncertain time.

Managing Organizations in a Time of Crisis is a series of research briefs produced by the [Department of Management & Organizations](#) at NYU Stern School of Business.

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