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Challenges for Tomorrow's Management

Virtual teamwork and employee well-being: The Covid-19 effects

ESCP Impact Paper No. 2020-25-EN

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Abstract

This impact paper brings together concepts from the organizational psychology and information systems literatures to explore employee well-being in the context of virtual teams (VTs). The recent Covid-19 outbreak has led to a sudden transition into VTs for numerous workers around the world. Drawing on the job demands-resources (JDR) model, we argue that in the current context, newly formed VTs due to the lockdown face increased job demands and diminished job resources, potentially impacting their well-being. The paper presents a theoretical synthesis in this area and provides managerial and organizational implications.

Keywords: Virtual teamwork, Remote working, Employee well-being, Job demands, Job resources

Virtual teamwork and employee well-being: The Covid-19 effects

Teamwork is a key organizing principle in modern organizations. Most workers, particularly in industries characterized by knowledge intensive and complex tasks, belong to teams whose performance is dependent on effective communication and collaboration. Over the last two decades, teamwork has become increasingly virtual (e.g., Bell and Kozlowski, 2002). Virtual teams (VTs), contrary to traditional ones, need to work at a distance, often in different time zones, and across organizational boundaries by means of a range of digital technologies (Breuer et al., 2020).

Research into VTs shows that their unique characteristics (e.g., their different types of dispersion) often lead to discontinuities (Watson-Manheim et al., 2012) affecting team performance. Though not all of these issues have been explicitly investigated in the extant VT literature, it is likely that these discontinuities lead to feelings of isolation, misinterpretation, and ultimately, reduced employee well-being (e.g., Gilson et al., 2015). In fact, Gilson et al. (2015) argue that despite well-being having been seen as theoretically linked to team performance, and although VTs are ideal environments for creativity and innovation (Chamakiotis et al., 2020), we lack an understanding as to how VTs influence well-being, and then, how that may affect team performance within this context.

Following from the above, the key question we want to explore in this paper is: *How does virtual teamworking influence worker well-being?* The current context of confinement makes this question particularly relevant, given that nearly all knowledge work has become suddenly virtual due to the Covid-19 crisis. The immediacy of the pandemic has forced the rapid transformation of traditional teams into virtual ones. This expeditious change may pose additional, still under-explored, challenges to employee well-being.

This paper provides a theoretical analysis of employee well-being in Covid-19 emerging VTs building on the job demands-resources (JDR) model (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). In what follows, first we present the key elements of the theory. Second, we apply such elements to analyse the demands and resources experienced by teams transformed into VTs as a result of the Covid-19 emergency. Finally, we offer preliminary practical managerial and organizational insights.

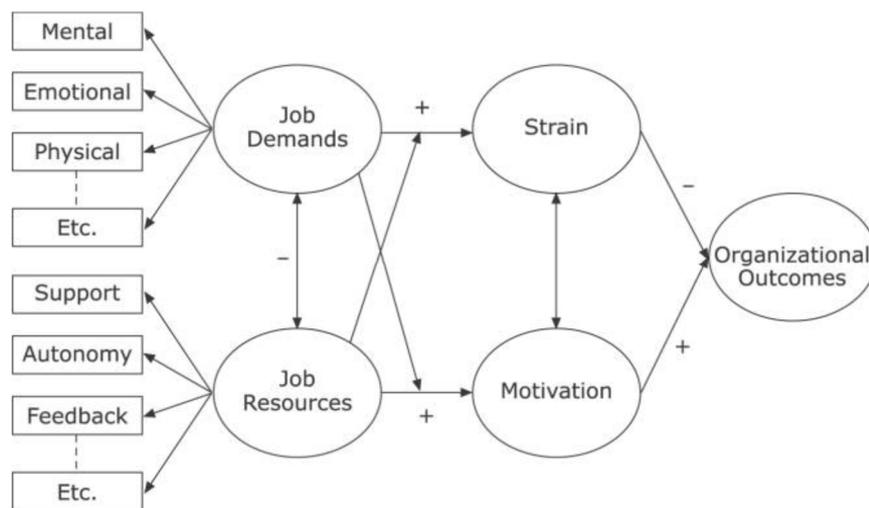
Job demands-resources model (JDR)

The JDR model was originally developed to explain how job characteristics are connected to employee burnout. This connection relies on two fundamental propositions (Figure 1). First, the JDR model claims that all types of job aspects (physical, psychological, social or organizational) can be categorized in one of two groups: *job demands* and *job resources*. Job demands refer to elements of the job that require continued effort, let it be cognitive, emotional or physical. Role overload, role conflict, urgency or uncertainty, exemplify job demands. Job resources refer to aspects of the job that are useful in terms of (a) meeting work objectives, (b) diminishing job demands and their associated cost or (c) encouraging employee learning and growth (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Job security, role clarity, autonomy or performance feedback are commonly cited job resources.

Second, the JDR model proposes that these job characteristics are connected to employee well-being through two differential psychological mechanisms (Bakker and Demerouti,

2007). On the one hand, the health-impairment process posits that excessive sustained job demands (for example ongoing uncertainty) deplete employees of energy, leading to exhaustion and strain. On the other hand, the motivation process assumes that job resources contribute to employees fulfilling needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Ryan and Deci, 2000). For instance, receiving constructive feedback can help individuals see the purpose of their effort, motivating them to engage further. In addition, the model postulates two interactive mechanisms: (a) job resources may mitigate the positive relationship between job demands and job strain (for example, having a supportive boss may reduce the negative influence of uncertainty); and (b) job resources have a stronger influence on motivation when job demands are high (receiving constructive feedback is more beneficial for those who deal with ongoing tight deadlines) (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007).

Figure 1: The JDR model



(Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; p. 313)

Virtual Teams (VTs) and well-being

Demands and resources may change significantly as a result of alterations in work design and organization. The Covid-19 crisis has abruptly pushed organizations around the globe to embrace new ways of working which entail changes in the when, where and how work is conducted (Van Steenbergen et al., 2018). Millions of workers are now working remotely, obliged to transform their homes into productive work environments, engaging with their teams at a distance, while facing potential illness. Some are surrounded by their families, facing interruptions, noise and increased housekeeping work. Others are confronted with enduring solitude. For most, boundaries between work, family and personal time have virtually disappeared. Although there are important lessons to be learned from the extant VT literature which offers useful accounts as to how working remotely may influence traditional management, the current lockdown has introduced additional challenges, yet to be explored. In this unprecedented context, demands and resources may have drastically shifted. In the following subsections, we analyse how this shift has occurred and its consequences.

Job demands in Covid-19 VTs and the health-impairment process

First of all, Covid-19 has generated role conflict, which occurs when individuals experience incompatible demands (Ilgen and Hollenbeck, 1991). This is often the result of simultaneous demands emerging from two or more role senders with incongruent requirements. Work-family or family-work interference are examples of role conflict. During the lockdown situation, this type of demand has rocketed. Individuals have been obliged to attend to different roles simultaneously (e.g., worker, caregiver, housekeeper). Whereas before, these could be separated into different physical spaces and times of the day, at the moment they co-exist with diffused boundaries. These roles can pose conflicting demands, which undermine the individuals' capacity to perform any of them satisfactorily. For instance, it is very likely that trying to teach an online higher education class while caring for a toddler results in unsatisfactory performance at both tasks, engendering feelings of frustrations and anxiety. If in normal situations telework can increase role conflict when all life is mandatorily confined at home, such conflict is likely to be exacerbated.

Second, there has been an increase of role overload. Role overload happens when a person feels incapable of properly fulfilling the requirements of their various roles (e.g., employee, parent, etc.) because of the collective demands such roles impose on them. In other words, individuals can be saturated from having too much to do in too little time (Duxbury and Halinski, 2014). During the crisis, many people have had to assume new roles (such as teacher for home-schooled children or shopper for elderly parents) that they may not be trained for and require significant effort. Moreover, in the work sphere new tasks resulting from the use of distance communication technologies (e.g., learning how to use digital tools) create additional demands. It is plausible that the assumption of new roles and tasks makes individuals feel they have insufficient time and energy to fulfil them all, resulting in work overload. Moreover, being unable to leave work at work, having severely diminished boundaries may pose problems in terms of detachment, rendering psychological recovery more difficult.

Third, employees may be facing increased role ambiguity. Role ambiguity exists when the expectations and steps that need to be fulfilled in order to perform a role are unclear or dubious (Ilgen and Hollenbeck, 1991). The sanitary crisis has demanded companies to adapt drastically to attend to their clients' needs (e.g., increased online services, new interaction methods, etc.), potentially modifying the roles of many employees. At the same time, opportunities for role clarification have decreased. For instance, context and the informal conversations that take place at work can help people clarify their roles. Observation of colleagues and work dynamics may shed light on expectations and requirements that may otherwise be missed or misinterpreted. In combination, new or evolved roles and decreased opportunities to learn from contextual interactions increase the likelihood of role ambiguity.

Role conflict, role overload and role ambiguity increase the degree to which employees experience their jobs as burdensome. They can drain a person's mental and physical energy and may spark a negative self-image with employees doubting their ability to perform sufficiently. As a result, they have been connected to poorer health and well-being (Duxbury and Halinski, 2014).

The fourth growing form of demand is job insecurity, which involves uncertainty regarding potential involuntary job loss. For many workers, the current situation has brought about doubts regarding their organization's capacity of surviving the crisis and preserving their jobs. Others may expect decreased opportunities to advance their careers. There is

substantial evidence to argue these forms of uncertainty can induce serious strain, particularly for young workers with strong career orientations (Cartwright and Cooper, 2009).

Having explored the changing nature of job demands in the current context, we now turn to discuss how job resources may have changed due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Job resources in Covid-19 VTs and the motivation process

Job resources can be offered to employees at three different levels: organizational, interpersonal and individual (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). At the organizational level, crises have the potential to undermine participatory decision-making processes. For example, Spain has declared a state of emergency, restricting the autonomy of its regional, autonomous communities and centralizing administrative power and decision-making for the duration of the lockdown. Organizations may well be tempted to follow suit, first, in order to make quick, efficient choices and second, because they do not have the channels to engage in distant participatory processes. However, participation in decision-making has been argued to be a relevant job resource because it enables employees to raise their voice and craft organizational roles and routines.

The emergence of Covid-19 has the potential to particularly affect interpersonal resources such as support from colleagues. Although digital technologies are keeping VTs connected, as noted earlier, informal interactions that happen at the interstices of work can easily decline both in quality and quantity due to physical separation. The exchange of supportive tacit or sensitive information may particularly suffer if all communications are mediated by technology. In addition, the increase of job and non-job-related demands may hinder overloaded colleagues from helping out.

Similarly, performance feedback may be reduced at the individual level. It is possible the lack of face-to-face interactions between employees and their direct supervisors might decrease opportunities to ask for and to give informal feedback. As far as discretion and control are concerned, both an increase and a decrease are plausible. On the one hand, teleworkers have reported increased autonomy in deciding when they work. Employees now working from home may be better able to decide when to start and finish work than they were previously when working from the office. On the other hand, employees working remotely in these unusual circumstances may feel more controlled by technology. For instance, because of decreased on/off work boundaries, some may feel pressured to answer e-mails in the late evening or during weekends.

A reduction in job resources is likely to affect employees' ability to fulfil their basic psychological needs (Ryan and Deci, 2000). For example, reduced social support will probably affect the realization of relatedness. Similarly, lower levels of performance feedback may influence feelings of competence. In addition, following job-demands-resources theory, it is probable that the impact of demands on well-being worsens. Indeed, if employees have fewer resources available to them, they cannot mitigate the negative effect of demands. This is particularly problematic in a context where demands seem to be on the rise.

Practical managerial and organizational insights

The analysis provided in this impact paper highlights the changing nature of both job demands and job resources in the context of formed newly VTs due to the Covid-19 lockdown. Drawing on relevant literature, we suggest that employee well-being in this context may be

menaced by increased job demands and diminished job resources. Organizations can work at three different levels to palliate the situation.

- **Reinforcing job resources:** Given that there are less resources in the current context, organizations can allow more flexibility so that employees can create their own temporal boundaries and work at their own pace. Maintaining a close connection between VT leaders and members can help mitigate feelings of isolation and reinforce their sense of belonging. Similarly, it is equally important that the right systems be put in place to enable and protect employee voice.
- **Developing VT specific job resources:** Transitioning into virtual working suddenly means that most workers converted without the relevant technical (e.g., infrastructure) and social (e.g., training) preparations. Organizations should invest in their information systems by, first, providing the relevant technology to support adequate operations. They should also invest in people's training to ensure that workers develop familiarity with, and ultimately expertise in, the required digital technologies. Further to formal communications, it is important that a social context be maintained to allow for informal conversations to take place among co-workers. For instance, workers can be encouraged to allocate time for social interactions before or after scheduled meetings. Organizations should also be explicit about respecting their employees' privacy when interacting through the company's systems. Finally, organizations should explicitly advise their employees on issues relative to work-life balance within this new context.
- **Prioritizing job demands:** To avoid the risk of being overwhelmed, employees who have gone virtual should be given strategic direction as to which objectives are essential and which ones peripheral, so that they can prioritize accordingly. Issues of role clarity and how roles may have been modified to accommodate the lockdown situation are particularly important. Lastly, organizations should revisit which projects should continue, which ones should be modified and how, and which ones may be non-essential and thus postponed, in order to ensure that job demands remain manageable.

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