

Teleworking is the New Normal. Understanding Employee Adjustment to Telework: A Coping Perspective

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Introduction

Telework refers to a work mode enabled by information and communication technologies (ICTs) and a managerial philosophy that focuses on the actual work done irrespective of where it is done (Baruch, 2001). It occurs when employees are authorized to use ICTs to perform their work-related operations and communications from a physical space other than the one their employers formally designated (Baruch, 2001). Although teleworking has existed for over four decades, it is rapidly becoming the new normal and socially accepted work mode for employees in many organizations, a change triggered by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Kakarika et al., 2022; Koch & Schermuly, 2021; Tønnessen et al., 2021). Prior literature highlights that distractions and inadequate work equipment at home, emotional issues, and techno-stressors make teleworking an unacceptable or unpreferred option for many employees (Carillo et al., 2021; Mandeville et al., 2022; Satpathy et al., 2021; Smite et al., 2022). Yet, practice and research claim that a high share of employees anticipates continuing teleworking permanently (Justina-Alexandra Sava, 2022). This implies they have found a way to cope with the challenges inherent to teleworking well enough to accept or prefer this new work mode. Therefore, managers need to understand the coping mechanisms adopted by their employees to forecast the organizational, technological, managerial, and social support they need to adjust to telework effectively. Thus, this paper focuses on understanding employees' coping processes and strategies to adjust effectively to telework. It attempts to enlighten researchers and managers on this phenomenon by answering the following research questions: *What are the most prevalent factors that affect employees' ability to cope with telework? What are the coping strategies that allow employees to better adjust to teleworking practices?*

Literature Review & Conceptual Model

Our research questions are investigated through the lens of Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) coping theory and of Baruch & Nicholson's (1997) four factors of teleworking.

Baruch & Nicholson's (1997) telework factors

Baruch & Nicholson (1997) propose four broad conditions that must be present

simultaneously to enable effective teleworking (also see Baruch, 2001). At the job level (condition one), available technology needs to fit the nature of work and specific work roles. At the organisational level (condition two), the organisational culture has to support home-working arrangements, including the ability and willingness of managers to trust teleworkers. At the home/family level (condition three), good quality of family relations, adequate physical spaces and facilities need to be available. At the individual level (condition four), teleworking has to fit personal attitudes, values, norms, qualities, and needs. In this research, we capture Baruch & Nicholson's (1997) telework factors in the form of: (1) *telework conditions* (home/family level) that is the degree to which an employee has favourable conditions to telework from home; (2) *IT complexity* (job-level): the extent to which an individual believes that using telework ICTs is free of physical and mental effort; (3) telework-related *organizational support* (organizational level) which refers to how employees perceive the climate and support their organisations provide to help them adjust to teleworking, and (4) *perceived isolation* (individual level): the extent to which an employee feels isolated from their organisation and co-workers.

Coping Theory

This study adopts Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) definition and conceptualisation of coping defined as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 p.141). Based on their seminal work, this theoretical lens suits the telework adjustment context because (i) it explains coping as a constantly changing process rather than a trait; (ii) it describes coping as means of adapting to psychological stress through the mobilisation of 'above usual' personal resources to meet demands, and (iv) it does not equate coping with mastering, making the theory highly relevant in crisis-related context which are characterised by uncertainty. Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) coping process can be simplified into three logical steps (see D'Arcy et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2019; Salo et al., 2020). The first step is initiated by awareness of a specific event necessitating change (e.g., awareness of a stressor or event). The second step is the situation appraisal. It begins with a primary appraisal during which the person assesses the event's relevance, significance, and potential impact (e.g., impact on their work and family life). If the event is considered relevant with potentially significant effects, the person proceeds to a secondary appraisal which involves estimating their control over the situation. The third step consists in adopting coping strategies. "Coping serves two overriding functions: managing or altering the problem with the environment causing distress (problem-focused), and regulating the emotional response to the problem (emotional-focused coping)" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 p.171). The secondary appraisal determines the individual's selection between problem-focused and emotional-focused coping. With problem-focused coping strategies, the individual tries to find tangible solutions to problems. In contrast, individuals who adopt emotion-focused coping strategies seek to deal with personal emotions associated with the incident.

Model Development

In the telework context, a coping strategy is a set of actions through which individuals and their families accommodate the co-existence of work and home, two culturally distinct conceptual spaces (Tietze, 2002). Baruch & Nicholson's (1997) four telework conditions provide a framework to logically connect the telework adjustment phenomenon with coping theory. Based on the theory, the switching to telework practices triggers employees' coping processes because it is an event that requires them to deploy cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific teleworking conditions that are appraised as taxing or exceeding their resources. As the primary appraisal, an employee would (implicitly or explicitly) evaluate the relevance and impact of telework practices on their work and personal life. At this stage, the employee cognitively investigates the extent to which and how they could be affected by the switching from regular work to teleworking settings. As the secondary appraisal, employees (implicitly or explicitly) estimate their confidence, self-efficacy, and control over job, individual, organisation, and home/family-related conditions to enable effective teleworking (Baruch & Nicholson's requirements for effective teleworking). There is thus not much an employee can do to manage or alter such decisions. Consequently, we can reasonably assume that they shall turn towards emotion-focused coping strategies at first. These strategies can be categorised as proactive or reactive. Proactive coping refers to deliberate efforts taken by an employee to build resilience against the emotional stress caused by the switch from conventional work to telework (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, reactive coping refers to instinctive emotional responses demonstrated by employees to minimise strain triggered by teleworking (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019). Over time, employees would finally accept the new work setting and alter their teleworking environment to adjust effectively to the new situation (problem-focused coping).

A proactive coping strategy known to help employees cope with stress is *positive reinterpretation*. Positive reinterpretation is *an individual's ability to give positive meaning to stressful situations*. Employees who report better work organisation due to increased flexibility (Hopkins & McKay, 2019; Smite et al., 2022) and an opportunity for caring and reconciliation with friends and loved ones (Oksanen et al., 2021; Prodanova & Kocarev, 2022; Yang et al., 2021) probably adopt this proactive strategy to see teleworking from the bright side. Meanwhile, other employees follow their instinct to react to emotional distress by complaining about the difficulties faced when teleworking, especially for employees who have never teleworked before (Prodanova & Kocarev, 2022). This reactive coping strategy is called *emotional venting*, which is about verbally expressing emotions during upsetting and stressful situations (Pirkkalainen et al., 2019). Emotional venting has been shown to help stressed individuals blow off steam and ease their frustration to restore emotional stability during stressful situations (Garcia & Rimé, 2019; Liu et al., 2020). Employees could also consider *emotional support seeking* as an effective reactive coping strategy. Emotional support seeking refers to *the act of actively searching for emotional support*. People generally turn to friends, family, and acquaintances for emotional support in stressful situations because it helps reduce stress (Saintives & Lunardo, 2016). Based on

this logic, Figure 1 presents the research model we propose based on Lazarus & Folkman's (1984) coping theory and Baruch & Nicholson's (1997) telework factors.

Method and Preliminary Results

The hypotheses will be tested using cross-organisational data collected from teleworkers in Canada. Data was collected using an online survey consisting of robustly developed and validated measurement scales found in the extant literature. The online survey was pretested and validated by 20 individuals, consisting of IS academics, PhD, and master's degrees. After eliminating incomplete and doubtful answers, the final dataset consisted of 3028 valid responses. We will followed Hair et al.'s (2021) recommendations to assess the measurement instrument. We are currently running analyses of the structural model using a PLS-SEM-based approach (SmartPLS 3 software). Preliminary analyses provide encouraging result as seen in Figure 2.

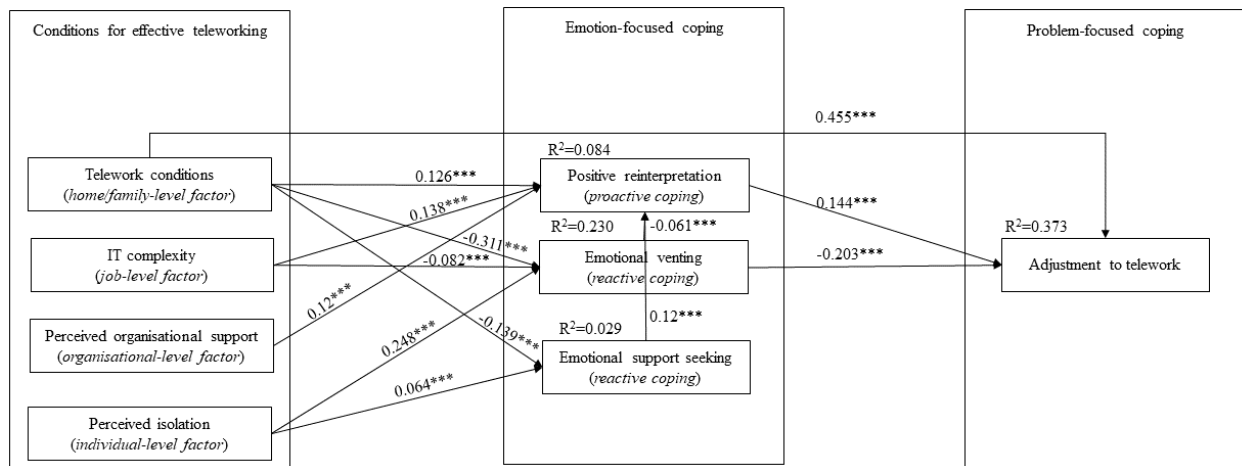


Figure 1. Research model and preliminary results (***) indicate $p < 0.005$ significance levels)

Discussion and Potential Contributions

This research complements the extant research on teleworking by explaining the divergent experiences of employees (favourable and unfavourable ones). It explains how employees deal with techno-stressors like techno-complexity (Satpathy et al., 2021), remote teamwork and collaboration difficulties, emotional distress, too many distractions at home, and poor home office environment and equipment (Misra et al., 2022; Smite et al., 2022). Furthermore, this study extends the extant research (Chong et al., 2020) by identifying emotional venting and emotional support seeking as other relevant emotion-focused coping strategies adopted by teleworkers. This research also helps researchers understand employees who adjusted effectively to telework by revealing how they dealt with some salient home/family-level, job-level, organisational-level, and individual-level factors necessary for effective teleworking. Thus, this research provides a framework to guide researchers in investigating other factors in each category that could increase employees' satisfaction and adjustment to telework, which is necessary conditions for crises-induced

telework continuance (Biron et al., 2022; Prodanova & Kocarev, 2022). On a managerial note, this research supports the argument that telework should be a shared responsibility between employers and employees (Kundu & Nag, 2021; Pluut & Wonders, 2020). Sharing this responsibility is a necessary contextual condition for effective adjustment to telework. Organisations seeking to proactively help their employees adapt effectively to teleworking need to understand the conditions necessary for effective teleworking and their coping mechanisms.

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