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Cyberslacking, engagement, and personality in distributed work environments

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ABSTRACT

The modern workplace is becoming increasingly reliant on distributed work arrangements, in which employees work part- or full-time from home, coffee shops, satellite offices, and elsewhere rather than at a centralized location. There are questions about the role of personality in shaping work behavior during distributed work, particularly with respect to cyberslacking and work engagement as indicators of distributed work effectiveness. Cyberslacking can be viewed as an extension of typical counterproductive workplace behavior, and it involves distraction and putting off work to "surf the Internet." Engagement can be viewed as the intensity of physical, cognitive, and emotional involvement with work activities. We found that non-Big Five personality traits, Honesty and Procrastination, were important predictors of these outcomes. Moreover, we developed three sets of intermediary behaviors linking personality to distributed work effectiveness: regular upward communication, self-management tactics, and conscious socialization efforts. Finally, personality profiles were identified with latent profile analyses in order to determine which "types" of people are more successful than others in distributed work.

1. Introduction

Telework, mobile work, flex work, virtual work, remote work, and other terms have been used to describe the work arrangements in which employees spend at least some regular time working outside of the conventional workplace. We refer to this as "distributed work," as employees could work from any place at any time while keeping in regular contact with colleagues and remotely accessing organizational resources (e.g., Chattopadhyay, George, & Shulman, 2008). This new form of work has been made possible by the rapid uptake and widespread use of electronic communications in organizations, such as video calling, text messaging, teleconferencing, and e-mail. Indeed, estimates from the U.S. Census Current Population Survey indicate that 32–35% of employees with a college education or in managerial/professional positions engage in at least part-time distributed work (see Noonan & Glass, 2012). Concurrently, there has been a rising acknowledgment of harmful Internet use, addiction, and distraction potential in recent research (e.g., Bozoglan, Demirer, & Sahin, 2014; Lim, 2002), and the confluence of these issues is of central interest in the current study.

The rise of distributed work in modern organizations has been linked to benefits, such as productivity, performance, retention, and commitment (Martin & MacDonnell, 2012). Elsewhere, however, it has been noted that distributed work provides an environment ripe for cyberslacking, a phenomenon in which employees are distracted by non-work Internet browsing when they should be accomplishing work tasks (O'Neill, Hambley, & Bercovich, 2014). Cyberslacking has been considered mainly in office environments (Pee, Woon, & Kankanhalli, 2008), where it has been associated with valuable periods of respite as well as stress reduction (Coker, 2013; Lim & Chen, 2012) by allowing individuals to address non-work tasks such as planning vacations, online shopping, and non-work e-mailing (Blanchard & Henle, 2008). Our treatment of cyberslacking adopts O'Neill et al.'s (2014) view that it involves undesirable online distraction that interferes with work goal accomplishment, which may be particularly relevant during distributed work in which supervisors and peers cannot easily monitor employee behavior. Distributed work also introduces the possibility that employees will feel less engaged with their jobs by virtue of being removed from the physical work environment, office structure, and social atmosphere (O'Neill, Hambley, Greidanus, MacDonnell, & Kline, 2009). Engagement involves physical, cognitive, and emotional energy and connection with work activities (Kahn, 1990), and it is a means through which modern organizations seek to leverage a competitive advantage (Corporate Leadership Council., 2006). In the current research we treat both

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cyberslacking and engagement as indicators of distributed work effectiveness, given that these are top-of-mind issues for employees and their managers in distributed contexts. Moreover, this suggests that advancing knowledge of the antecedents of distributed work effectiveness could be valuable for theory building and practical application.

In our view, personality could be an important psychological factor influencing cyberslacking and engagement in distributed work arrangements (cf. Hertel, Konradt, & Voss, 2006). Theoretically, frameworks of person-job fit (Kristof, 1996) and trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003) can be invoked to suggest that effectiveness levels will be favorable if there is a strong fit between the employee's personality and the behaviors needed to work effectively. Specifically, person-job fit theory posits that employee attributes need to match the job environment to create high effectiveness levels, and distributed work may contain unique conditions that affect personality-job fit levels. Trait activation theory organizes the work environment features into *job demands*, *distracters*, and *facilitators* with respect to how they give rise to job-relevant trait behavior. These theories form the basis of the current research, as we investigated personality factors related to cyberslacking and engagement in a sample of distributed workers. In addition, we identified novel intermediary variables that shed light on how certain traits impact distributed work effectiveness.

1.1. Hypothesis development

In the hypotheses advanced below our focus is on identifying traits that relate directly and indirectly to indicators of distributed work effectiveness, namely, cyberslacking and engagement. In this vein, we attend to the unique prediction of personality rather than simple bivariate relations in order to assess the incremental prediction of traits relative to each other (cf. O'Neill, McLarnon, Schneider, & Gardner, 2014).

Much workplace personality research deals with the Big Five factors of personality and this work is beginning to emphasize cyberslacking. Jia, Jia, and Karau (2013) reported that Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Emotional Stability (i.e., the opposite pole of Neuroticism) were negatively related to cyberslacking, and O'Neill et al. (2014) found comparable results for Conscientiousness and Agreeableness. With respect to engagement, Langelaan, Bakker, Van Doornen, and Schaufeli (2006) found that Extraversion and Emotional Stability exhibited positive relations (see also Kim, Shin, & Swanger, 2009), whereas Inceoglu and Warr (2011) found support for these traits as well as Conscientiousness as positive predictors. Thus, it seems likely that the Big Five factors of personality could play a role in predicting distributive work behaviors related to cyberslacking and engagement. Although we examined this, we focus on Honesty and Procrastination in particular as they have been shown to be the most important personality traits for distributed work effectiveness (O'Neill et al., 2014).

1.1.1. Honesty, Procrastination, and distributed work effectiveness

It is often the case that traits other than the Big Five can provide additional prediction and understanding (e.g., O'Neill and Hastings, 2011). Indeed, recent research indicates that Honesty and Procrastination are important predictors of distributed work effectiveness when compared with Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Agreeableness (e.g., O'Neill et al., 2014). Invoking Tett and Burnett (2003) trait activation theory, the former traits are particularly susceptible to facilitators and distracters of the distributed work environment, respectively. Specifically, dishonest employees are known to engage in counterproductive work behaviors and shirk duties when possible (Ashton & Lee, 2008). Given that a lack of supervision and coworker proximity during distributed work may function as facilitators of these traits, insincerity and dishonesty would likely be even more important for predicting cyberslacking and reduced engagement.

Procrastination would appear to have a strong connection to the likelihood of distractions related to non-work Internet activity and reductions in engagement with work tasks given that these individuals are predisposed to avoid or delay work (Steel, 2007). Procrastination could be activated by distracters such as unimportant e-mails, Internet ads, and other online activities that have the potential to promote more sidetracking and challenges for engagement during distributive work than when working in the office. In the office, individuals could feel a stronger sense that they are in a place of work and that distractions need to be managed more than when employees are at home. At home, employees may feel that it is not inappropriate to participate in non-work related online pursuits because work can always be completed by making up time in the evening, though that might not ultimately occur.

Whereas O'Neill et al. (2014) found that Honesty and Procrastination were important, they did not evaluate the importance of these traits against the entire Big Five. This can be viewed as a shortcoming of that study given that Extraversion predicted engagement in Inceoglu and Warr (2011) research. Further, Openness to Experience was related to involvement and attachment to team members in a virtual environment (MacDonnell, O'Neill, Kline, & Hambley, 2009), which suggests that it might be related to increased acceptance of this relatively novel work arrangement, greater engagement, and reduced cyberslacking. Thus, examining Honesty and Procrastination in addition to the entire Big Five provides a more complete view of the interplay involving personality and distributive work behavior. Also worth noting is that O'Neill, Hambley et al. employed a convenience sampling procedure involving only two organizations, whereas the current research sample is more representative of U.S. industries, occupations, and positions in which employees currently participate in distributed work.

H_1. Honesty and Procrastination will account for variance in both cyberslacking (H_{1a}) and engagement (H_{1b}), beyond the Big Five.

1.1.2. Regular upward communication as a linkage variable

One intermediary variable linking personality and distributed work effectiveness is regular upward communication, which we define as "keeping one's superior informed of work progress and issues." In the context of distributed work, keeping one's superior informed and abreast of current developments while working from a distance would likely be associated with minimal cyberslacking and deeper engagement. This is because employees are aware of the strong likelihood that superiors will follow-up with, and be cognizant of, the particular milestones that were discussed and therefore expected. Thus, regular upward communication should reduce the likelihood of cyberslacking and promote job engagement during distributive work.

Personality-related antecedents of regular upward communication include Honesty and Conscientiousness. Honest employees who are sincere, virtuous, and forthright would likely feel an ethical and moral obligation to keep their supervisors informed while working from a distance, given that they value truthfulness, loyalty, and transparency (Ashton & Lee, 2007). Furthermore, Conscientious employees who are dutiful, achievement-focused, and responsible would also likely feel a need to update, communicate with, and be noticed by their superiors (O'Neill et al., 2009). Under trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003), the need for regular upward communication during distributed work may be viewed as a *job demand*, as special effort to communicate through technology and overcome barriers of distance and synchronization is required during distributed work (Hambley, O'Neill, & Kline, 2007). In addition, distributed work offers substantial opportunity