

Guest Editorial

Telework research and practice: Impacts on people with disabilities

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1. Introduction

Advances in Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), particularly in the mobility of computing power and virtual private networking (VPN) capabilities, have provided unprecedented flexibility regarding how and where work is performed. Employees, particularly those in knowledge-based jobs, are no longer tethered to a specific location to complete work.

While technological advances provide the capacity for work from remote locations, the motivations for doing so are broad, encompassing legislated environmental considerations and perceived benefits to the employer and employee alike. The 1990 Amendments to the Clean Air Act mandated a 25% reduction in employee commutes for large organizations, and similar trip reductions for major cities [1]. The Clean Air Act did not specifically mandate telework as a required form of trip reduction; however, its role in reducing traffic and air pollution was explicitly detailed in the National Telecommuting and Air Quality Act [2]. Among the employer benefits for telework are the ability to recruit and retain talented employees, increase productivity, and reduce operation and real estate expenses [3,4], while employee benefits include increased productivity, job satisfaction, and flexibility [5–8].

Telework has been defined as the “practice of substituting communications and/or computer technology for actual travel to work or a central office” [9].

This definition encompasses a broad range of work practices, including: those who work solely from home [9–15], those who work from home to supplement other work modes [9–15], home-based or self-employment [9,12,14], flexible workplaces [9,11], work from community-based telework centers [9–11, 13,15], and work conducted while traveling [9–11]. While all of these work modes are considered to be telework, there are inherent differences between them and relative advantages to each of them, particularly to individuals with disabilities.

Telework has the potential to facilitate employment for people with disabilities by removing barriers presented in traditional work environments and replacing the need to be physically at a specific location with ICT [9]. This exchange removes architectural and transportation barriers for those with physical, sensory, and cognitive limitations by allowing them to work in their home environment which, ideally, has been optimized to their functional abilities [10,11,15]. Additionally, telework allows employees to control their own schedules, thereby accommodating fatigue, stamina, and pain-related barriers to traditional full-time work [10,15,16]. It allows access to medically-related personal care services during the workday [15, 16]. In many cases, these services are only covered by insurance if they are provided in the home. Finally, it is thought that telework may benefit employees with disabilities by reducing disability-related bias and discrimination [10].

Despite the increase of telework among the general population, and the relative benefits of telework for people with disabilities, there has not been an increase in employment for people with disabilities attributed to telework. The U.S Department of Labor, Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) examined telework practices of public and private sector employers, finding that 80% had employees with disabilities and 23% had employees who telework, but only 8% had employees with disabilities who telework [17].

Additional empirical information reveals that the practice of telework, despite its potential for alleviating barriers, falls short because of employers' perspectives and policies. The ODEP study found that only 25% of employers had positions dedicated to telework. Of these, almost half had policies requiring a probationary period of on-site work, and 25% required the employee to maintain an on-site work schedule while teleworking [17]. A related survey of 1200 "telework-friendly employers" found that only 10% of them were willing to hire new employees directly into telework roles [18], preferring established employees with a known work history to enter telework roles. These perspectives and practices are not discriminatory, in that do not differ based on the employee's disability status [17,18]. Rather, they create barriers to telework for those whose disabilities make traditional work schedules and commuting difficult or impossible.

Unfortunately, telework may present other barriers for individuals with disabilities. A study of work location and accommodation use for individuals with disabilities found that only 47% of those who telework reported that it was an accommodation for their job. Of those, three-quarters felt the accommodation was important to their job, but 43% were dissatisfied with telework as a job accommodation [19]. These facts suggest that individuals with disabilities have complex reasons for teleworking, and that telework as a job accommodation may not provide equivalent access to employment.

The apparent benefits of telework for those with disabilities have not resulted in its adoption, nor do those who have adopted it necessarily view it in a positive light. Additional data about telework practices in general, and telework for individuals with disabilities specifically, is necessary before we can begin to determine how to best implement telework programs to overcome barriers to employment for people with disabilities in ways that encourage the adoption of telework programs by employers and employees alike.

2. Special issue overview

This special issue is devoted to providing some of the information necessary to achieve this goal. To do so, it provides a cross-discipline examination of telework, tapping into theory and research from management and business arenas, disability research, disability policy development, and the provision of vocational rehabilitation services. The issue is arranged in 12 articles. The first three provide theoretical and empirical examination of the psycho-social impacts of telework for a general population. Higgins, et al, examines the differences in conflicts between work and family responsibilities between four work modes. Golden and Watt discuss factors which would promote a telework to seek help from co-workers when necessary. Finally, Duxbury and Halinsky explain how telework changes the perception of work and family role overload.

The next two articles examine telework practices as accommodations for people with disabilities based on emerging evidence. Moon, et al, updates an existing model of telework practice based on new research studies, while McNaughton, et al, report on the results of focus group discussions for teleworkers with complex communication needs.

Four articles voice the experiences of individuals with disabilities who are participating in telework. Through a case study, Quinton details the experiences of a woman who chose self-employment to overcome attitudinal barriers which lead to underemployment. Berg and Balassa-Myracle narrate their individual journeys from traditional employment to business owners. Finally, Gilman details a program successful at creating employment opportunities for people with disabilities.

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