ARE EMPOWERED EMPLOYEES BETTER TELEWORKERS?
A SELF-REGULATORY PERSPECTIVE ON WHY AND WHEN EMPLOYEES EFFECTIVELY WORK FROM HOME

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ABSTRACT

Due to the COVID-19 crisis, employees across various occupations have begun to work from home. In this article, I theoretically derive and empirically test a self-regulatory perspective on why and when employees engage in functional behavior (e.g., time management) or dysfunctional behavior (e.g., time theft) while working from home. Given the sudden and dramatic shift of most employees to work-from-home arrangements, I propose that these employees' work situations prior to the COVID-19 crisis influenced how effectively they adjusted to working from home. I introduce empowering leadership as a potential enabling factor and job ambiguity as a potential contingency factor in examining employee self-regulation and self-regulation failure. Applying arguments from seminal theory on resource-based self-regulation and the cost of autonomy, I suggest that empowering leadership is a double-edged sword that can stimulate either employee self-regulation (e.g., time management) or self-regulation failure (e.g., time theft) depending upon the level of job ambiguity. The results of a three-wave field study and an experiment, both utilizing full-time employees working from home due to the COVID-19 crisis, supported these ideas. Under low job ambiguity, empowering leadership had a positive effect on time management and an indirect negative effect on time theft via time management. In contrast, empowering leadership had a direct positive effect on time theft under high job ambiguity. Implications for professional practice and future research on empowering leadership and telework are discussed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To ensure business continuity in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (Heng et al., 2012), many employees across various occupations shifted to work-from-home arrangements. This massive "telework experiment" afforded managers and researchers the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the enabling and hindering forces of employees' successful adjustment to telework arrangements (Kniffin et al. 2020; Kramer & Kramer, 2020; Rudolph et al. 2020). The results of a recent global survey on telework in the current COVID-19 crisis indicated that teleworkers' self-control (i.e., self-discipline) represents the most important driver of successful telework (Kamouri & Lister, 2020). Given the importance of teleworkers' self-control in the current COVID-19 crisis, the aim of this study was to develop and test a self-regulatory perspective on why and when teleworkers effectively work from home.

The present study focused on two forms of self-regulation relevant to telework: time management and time theft. Time management may help employees function effectively in a telework context (Lapierre & Allen, 2012; Raghuram et al., 2003) and includes self-regulatory activities, such as setting and prioritizing goals, planning tasks, and monitoring progress (Macan,

1994). In contrast, time theft represents a form of self-regulation failure that refers to employees' dysfunctional behavior while working from home (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Lorinkova & Perry, 2017). Similar to the concepts of procrastination and withdrawal behavior, time theft includes activities such as spending too much time fantasizing or daydreaming, taking additional or longer breaks, and starting work late (Bennett & Robinson, 2000; Johns, 2001; Steel, 2007).

Within leadership literature, empowering leadership is discussed as an enabling factor of employee self-regulation and may therefore facilitate employees' effectiveness while working from home (Lee et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2003; Stewart et al., 2010). In contrast to traditional leadership models, a leader who pursues empowering leadership aims to transform followers into self-leaders by prompting them to develop self-control and act independently (Manz & Sims, 1987; Stewart et al., 2019; Vecchio et al., 2010). Thus, employees who experienced their supervisors as empowering prior to the COVID-19 crisis are expected to obtain self-regulatory resources (Bandura, 1991), which may enable them to engage in self-regulatory activities, such as time management, while working from home (Manz & Sims, 1980; Stewart et al., 2010).

However, previous research has indicated that employee empowerment is not always beneficial (Cheong et al., 2016; Humborstad & Kuvaas, 2013; Lorinkova et al., 2013; Martin et al., 2013). Drawing on the notion of the cost of autonomy suggested by Langfred and Moye (2004), Cheong et al. (2016) argued that several undesirable reactions could result from the increased latitude of individual autonomy (i.e., job-induced tension), especially when it requires additional cognitive effort and distraction. Job ambiguity—the absence of certainty and clarity over various aspects of a job—is often viewed as a stressor that can divert focus and deplete energy (Breaugh & Colihan, 1994; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Accordingly, if increased follower autonomy leads to individual strain associated with a task or with work (i.e., through job ambiguity), then self-regulatory resources can be depleted and can thereby undermine the positive effects of empowering leadership on followers' self-regulation, increasing the possibility of self-regulation failure (e.g., time theft).

Given that empowering leadership can stimulate either teleworkers' functional behavior (e.g., time management) or their dysfunctional behavior (e.g., time theft), the purpose of this study was to resolve these contrasting views on empowering leadership by introducing job ambiguity as a potential boundary condition. Drawing on seminal theory on resource-based self-regulation and the cost of autonomy, I propose that empowered teleworkers are more likely to capitalize on empowering opportunities and engage in time management activities when they possess clarity with regard to various aspects of their jobs (i.e., low job ambiguity). In contrast, I also propose that empowered teleworkers are more likely to make dysfunctional use of empowerment opportunities and engage in time theft when they are acting independently but feel uncertain about various aspects of their jobs (i.e., high job ambiguity). Building on these proposals, I suggest that empowering leadership will have an indirect negative effect (reduction) on time theft through time management under low job ambiguity and a positive direct effect (increase) on time theft under high job ambiguity. Figure 1 presents a model summarizing the proposed relationships. I tested the model in two studies. Study 1 utilized data from a three-wave field study of employees' work situations before and during the COVID-19 crisis, and Study 2 involved a scenario experiment.

Figure 1 about here

METHOD AND RESULTS

Study 1. The sample consisted of 133 full-time employees who were working from home at Time 3 due to the COVID-19 crisis. Participants were recruited through the online platform Prolific Academic. Employees rated their supervisors' empowering leadership (Time 1), their levels of job ambiguity (Time 2), and their levels of time management and time theft (Time 3) with a four-week time lag between measurement points. Between Time 2 and Time 3, the lockdown due to the COVID-19 crisis began in most countries throughout the world. At Time 3, I assessed control variables specifically related to the lockdown, including the length of the time period since the lockdown, telecommuting tenure before the lockdown, the extent of face-to-face interaction before the lockdown, and the extent of virtual interaction since the lockdown. The hypothesized research model was tested by performing moderated mediation analyses, using path analysis and bootstrapping procedures and assessing indirect and direct effects at high versus low levels (mean ± 1 SD) of job ambiguity (Preacher et al., 2007). Model 8 of the PROCESS macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013) was used to perform these analyses.

Study 2. The sample consisted of 191 employees who were working from home due to the COVID-19 crisis. Participants were recruited through the online platform Prolific Academic. I ensured that none of the participants in Study 1 could participate in Study 2. The scenario for the online experiment was adapted from previous studies (Baer et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2011). This study employed a 2×2 design in which participants were randomly assigned to empowering leadership (high or low) and job ambiguity (high or low) conditions. I followed the same procedure as in Study 1 but used Model 59 (instead of Model 8) of the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2013) to perform the analyses in this study.

Results. The findings of the field study and the scenario experiment provided evidence that empowering leadership and job ambiguity (prior to the COVID-19 crisis) impacted employees' self-regulation and self-regulation failure while working from home. In both studies, time management was enhanced by empowering leadership and diminished by job ambiguity, while time theft was enhanced by job ambiguity and diminished by time management. The results of the moderated mediation analyses provided some support for the proposed conditional effects. Under low job ambiguity, empowering leadership had a positive effect on time management (shown in both studies) and an indirect negative effect on time theft via time management (shown in Study 2, when adding the interactive effect of time management and job ambiguity on time theft to the model; PROCESS Model 59). Under high job ambiguity, empowering leadership had a direct positive effect on time theft (shown in both studies, $p < .10$).

DISCUSSION

The primary contribution of this study lies in developing and testing a self-regulatory perspective on why and when teleworkers effectively work from home. The COVID-19 pandemic represents a critical contextual factor for the hypothesized research model, as a work-from-home policy was mandated from one day to the next. Given this sudden and dramatic shift of most employees to work-from-home arrangements, I propose that supervisors' leadership styles and followers' job ambiguity levels prior to the COVID-19 crisis interacted to influence teleworkers' at-home work effectiveness. The findings of this study suggested that empowering leadership is a double-edged sword that can enable either teleworkers' functional behavior (e.g., time management) or their dysfunctional behavior (e.g., time theft) depending on the level of job

ambiguity. More specifically, the results indicated that job clarity (i.e., low job ambiguity) represents a necessary condition for empowered teleworkers to effectively self-regulate their behavior. If this condition is not provided (i.e., high job ambiguity), then empowered teleworkers are more likely to fail in self-regulating their behavior. Thus, in the context of the sudden shift to work-from-home arrangements due to the COVID-19 crisis, empowered employees were only better teleworkers (i.e., better at self-regulating their behavior) when they possessed job clarity.

This research has important implications for managers. First of all, when encouraging employees to work effectively from home during the COVID-19 pandemic (and beyond), leadership does matter. Specifically, the results suggest that empowering leadership has the capacity to positively influence employees' time management, an important element for effectively working from home. Therefore, if managers are worried whether their employees are working efficiently in an unsupervised work environment, they should rather empower than monitor them. However, managers should be aware that empowering followers necessitates clarifying their roles in order to encourage employees to engage in functional instead of dysfunctional behavior while working from home.

Although I attempted to account for external and internal validity by using data from a field study and an experiment, this research has limitations that should be addressed in future studies. The data collected through this research were solely with self-reports from employees, thereby raising the possibility of same-source bias. Future research could use multiple sources of data, for example, when examining teleworkers' behavior in the context of virtual teams. Moreover, I encourage further longitudinal studies that examine longer time frames and investigate the possibility of temporal changes within the variables of interest during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In conclusion, I believe that the investigation of teleworker self-regulation processes represents a promising research area of theoretical and practical importance, as some organizations have already stated that they intend to permanently shift some or even all of their employees to telework after the pandemic ends (McLean, 2020).

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR

FIGURE 1
Summary of Proposed Relationships
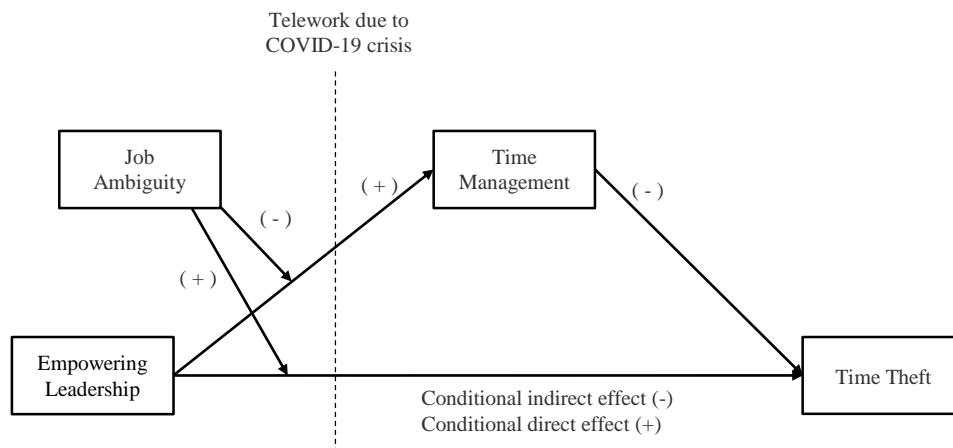
Notes. Plus signs indicate proposed positive effects, and minus signs indicate proposed negative effects. For Study 1: Empowering leadership was measured at Time 1; job ambiguity was measured at Time 2; time management and time theft were measured at Time 3.