'Throw Away that Telework Manual!' – the *Limitations* of Existing Telework Literature in the B2C e-Business Context

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Abstract. This paper presents critical limitations of existing telework literature, which views teleworkers as a homogeneous group and generalises research outcomes without limitations on applicability, thereby failing to consider the different circumstances of the individual teleworkers. This paper reports on the pilot study that examined telework in the business-to-consumer e-business application as part of a Ph.D. study. The reporting of this pilot data highlights factors, which are not in the existing telework literature, that are unique to the B2C e-business application. This consequentially gives future research a new direction by identifying factors of telework that acknowledge and take account of the heterogeneity of teleworkers.

Keywords. Telework, e-Business, Customer relationship management, Telework literature.

1. Introduction

The existing literature of telework has been criticised for the lack of control over extraneous factors and for treating teleworkers as a homogenous group (for example, Bailey and Kurkland, 2000; Duxbury and Higgins, 2002; Cooper and Burke, 2002, p.193). It is important to understand that there are differences in the circumstances of telework that may impact the outcomes being examined (Cooper and Burke, 2002, p. 193). Therefore, it is unwise to generalise, without limitations on applicability, research outcomes about telework and teleworkers beyond the research context.

This paper, a research-in-progress written as part of the author's doctoral studies, examines telework in the business-to-consumer (B2C) e-business application, drawing out success factors that will be applicable to teleworking organisations from similar contexts (such as industry or type of work) and determining the reasons for teleworking within this B2C e-business application. By comparing the elicited factors to the factors in the existing literature reviewed for this study, it is clear that a number of factors are unique to the B2C e-business, and therefore relevant only to teleworking organisations in this application. For the purpose of this paper:

- *e-Business* is defined as conducting business transactions between businesses and consumers and processing the key business processes across electronic networks, as carried out by organisational employees (DTI 2000);
- *Telework* is defined 'as a work arrangement where organisational employees work at home instead of their offices' part of their work time (Lim et al., 1997);
- *Telework in the e-business application* is defined as working outside the conventional workplace from a fixed work space located at home during regular office hours, handling and processing electronic business transactions between businesses and consumers across electronic networks.

This paper has five sections namely introduction, background study, method, results, and analysis and discussion. The *background study* discusses the limitations on existing literature. The *method* addresses the methodology used for the pilot study of this research. The *results* reports on the data gathered from the pilot study. Finally the *analysis and discussion* examines the results gathered from the pilot study and discusses the implications for future research on telework.

2. Background Study

The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of the literature analysis and criticism in the existing research, and an overview of the areas recommended by these researchers for exploration in future telework research. It also aims to demonstrate how this research overcomes some of the literature limitations.

Despite the long history of telework and the growth in the number of teleworkers, empirical research in telework is limited (Cooper and Burke, 2002). According to a study by Shin et al. (2000) 60 percent of telework publications reviewed were empirical and the rest were non-empirical. Among the empirical studies, many of them were exploratory in nature and relied on archival data such as census data, rather than **focused research data** (Shin et al., 2000). For the empirical literature, it is common to report on the major benefits and advantages of telework. On the other hand, a key problem exists in the case study reports of many researchers indicate favorable results due to telework but without indication of the methodology used. Instead only references to nominal discussions based on hearsay are indicated (Bailey

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and Kurkland, 2000; Shin et al., 2000; Cooper and Burke, 2002).

In a review of the academic literature on telework by Bailey and Kurkland (2000), no consistent and formal definitions of telework were found. Without a consistent and formal definition of telework, it is difficult to produce results which can be generalised, even if there is a similarity in research focus, as one researcher may use a different definition of telework from another. Since there are many variant definitions of telework, the most commonly agreed upon definition of telework (for example, Moorcroft and Bennett, 1995; Korte and Wynne, 1996; Nilles, 1998; Lim et al., 1997; Bailey and Kurkland, 2000; European Telework, 2000; Cooper and Burke, 2002) has been selected as the standard definition of telework to be used in this study: work carried out remotely by the employees of an organisation who work part of their regular working hours at home.

Another limitation found by Bailey and Kurkland in their study was that teleworkers were considered as a homogenous group by researchers because of the lack of control over extraneous factors in telework studies. Therefore, Bailey and Kurkland (2000) suggest that differences in the circumstances of telework should be taken into consideration in future research studies, which may impact on the outcomes being reported. For this reason factors such as level of participation in telework (telework performed on full-time or part-time basis) and job types are considered in this research.

In most non-empirical studies reporting telework success, success factor issues mostly focus on appropriate personality requirements and task characteristics necessary for successful telework regardless of telework types, industries or genders. Therefore such broad success studies have resulted in a paucity of research rigor and a lack of confirmatory studies (Duxbury and Higgins, 2002). Most available articles on this success topic are found in the practitioner press and largely rely on self-reported data, offering only cursory treatment of this topic, or are purely anecdotal in nature (Higa et al., 2000; Shin et al., 2000). According to Duxbury and Higgins (2002) future research studies should be focused, for example they should be based upon similarities and differences between different types of telework or cover a range of industries or sectors. Since academic interest is this area is on the rise, Bailey and Kurkland (2000) state that sound, well-designed research is needed to answer the most fundamental questions including:

- Who teleworks?
- What are the reasons which drive them to telework?
- Why do employees use the various types of telework programs?

Among all these fundamental questions, this research aims to answer *the reasons that drive them to telework*. The study of these reasons is relevant because the reasons establish the context, direction and purpose of telework amongst organisations within a chosen sector. By doing so, this research will be more focused and show the dynamics of the success factors at play in different contexts amongst organisations within a chosen sector.

3. Method

The data collection for this Ph.D. study has two phases. The first phase is a pilot study of six in-depth interviews with employees and management. The second phase is the on-going main data collection of forty-two in-depth interviews with employees and management. This paper reports on the first phase of the data collection, the pilot study. The research paradigm used in this pilot study is scientific realism (*post positivism*). In the existing telework literature, the heavy dependence on perception surveys poses a problem for research because of the significant gap between popular perception and actual behaviour (Shin et al., 2000).

This problem is overcome in the scientific realism paradigm by using case study research, which allows for the study of both observable and unobservable factors (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) such as idiosyncratic behaviour and attitudes, which may contribute to an identification of factors unique to telework in the e-business application. The six pilot in-depth interviews conducted were face-to-face with the respondents. Each of these interviews lasted for about forty-five minutes. This pilot study was done in order to refine the issues and the interview protocol. Both the management and employees were interviewed in order to reduce response bias. This research will be examining companies belonging to the insurance sector in order to obtain a focused study, limit extraneous variations and sharpen external validity.

Two insurance organisations were chosen for this pilot study. The first, Case A, is a large Singaporean insurance company which conducts telework among its insurance advisors. The interviewees included two insurance advisors and a manager in-charge of the telework program. These interviewees are addressed as *Respondent T1, T2 and M1* respectively. The second, Case B, is a large multinational insurance company, which likewise conducts telework among its insurance brokers. The interviewees included two insurance brokers and a manager in-charge of the telework program. These interviewees are addressed as *Respondent T3, T4 and M2* respectively. All the employees (T1, T2, T3 and T4) in both insurance companies are teleworking on a full-time basis.

4. Results

The pilot study data gathered from Case A and B were used to determine the reasons that drove them to telework, and to draw out the success factors of telework in the B2C e-business application. Firstly, both the managers (M1 and M2) and the employees (T1, T2, T3 and T4) agreed on the importance of their firms providing *IT resources*. That is, IT resources such as the provision of Intranet, the need to create web pages for each employee, e-mail systems and ADSL lines all play an active role in facilitating the employees teleworking at home.

Secondly, the managers (M1 and M2) considered the *provision of motivational talks and software training* as important success factors but the employees (T1, T2, T3 and T4) did not.

Thirdly, the individual employees (T1, T2, T3 and T4) identified the ability to *build rapport through customer interaction on the Internet* as an important factor since this

factor facilitates the improvement of client satisfaction, an important reason for adopting telework for both management and employees. The respondents (employees) added that this factor determines whether it is worth working from home. The employees do not have face-to-face contact with clients, therefore the ability to build rapport on-line with the customers makes it easier to work from outside the office.

Fourthly, the employees (T3 and T4) and manager (M2) of Case B identified the importance of a *Customer Relationship Management* (CRM) strategy in their e-business for effective telework to occur as this factor facilitated the building of customer loyalty, another important reason for adopting telework for both management and employees. The employees are able to access the database of customer details and information from home in order to study their customers' data and behavioural patterns and to respond to customer needs effectively. The respondents (employees) telework in a business-to-consumer e-business environment where customer knowledge is crucial, and stated that a database of customer information which is integrated with other applications across the company such as the accounting system and other back-office systems was extremely important as it allowed customer information to be better utilized when dealing with customers on-line.

5. Analysis and Discussion

Three conclusions can therefore be drawn. First, one of the factors identified in the reviewed existing literature, *IT resources used*, was also identified in the e-business context. Second, management (M1 and M2) identified *provision of motivational talks and software training* as a success factor, which was also identified in the literature, but the employees (T1, T2, T3 and T4) did not prioritise it as an important factor. This is supported by the fact that the Case A management was not aware that the motivational talks and software training were seen as fruitless by the employees. As a consequence, the management turned to *excellent rapport skills with the clients through the Internet*, which had already been identified by the employees as a critical factor for their success.

The *provision of motivational talks and software training*, though it does not fulfill the criterion of being identified by both management and employees, cannot be immediately dismissed as a success factor, as this factor is only based on the pilot study findings so far. Furthermore the literature has stated that there is a relationship between teleworker self-efficacy and training programs, and suggests that organisations should provide adequate training programs to educate both employees and managers about telework (for example, Staples et al., 1998; British Telecoms 2000; Nortel Networks 2000; Pinsonneault and Boisvert 2001). The importance of this factor can only be decided upon after the data analysis of the main data collection.

Third, Case B identified *CRM* as an important success factor, as customer knowledge is crucial for teleworking in a business-to-consumer e-business context. The employees stated that a customer information database integrated with the company network allows for easier on-line client interaction and strengthens customer loyalty by enabling employees to utilise all available customer information. It is clear that two

telework success factors identified as idiosyncratic to the business-to-consumer e-business context, *CRM* and *rapport built through customer interaction on the Internet*, are not discussed in the existing literature of telework reviewed for this study. Determining the reasons for teleworking helps to more clearly understand why factors such as CRM are deemed success factors, and therefore helps to analyse the factors of telework within the context of organisations within a chosen sector.

This discussion has indicated that knowledge of the success factors of telework in a business-to-consumer e-business application in the extant literature is limited. As a consequence of this limitation, factors stated in the existing literature are unable to be generalised beyond the original research context. Therefore, teleworkers cannot be treated as a homogenous group because they can be from different circumstances. This difference in circumstances is important as this can result in factors relating to telework, in this case success factors that differ widely. Therefore this literature gap reveals new directions for research. Future studies should attempt to provide a clearer and more in-depth understanding of factors of telework within a focused context so that practitioners or academics will be able to generalise these factors within the same context. By approaching telework research in this manner, practitioners will be able to deploy telework successfully, with the certain knowledge that the success factors they have based their decisions to telework upon are relevant to their own individual circumstances.

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