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Abstract

This paper presents research on the influence of organisational behaviour and workplace culture on the perception of teleworking success in the B2C e-business context in Australia and Singapore. This exploratory study, based on organisational theory and considering personal and situational factors, is qualitative using interview methods to determine success factors and gauge their proof. Four organisations participated in this pilot study and the outcomes highlight differences in the work-related values according to the respective cultural backgrounds of the management and employees. These findings create new possibilities for research on how telework success considers organisational issues, since a major existing limitation of the telework literature is that organisational theory has been largely ignored.

Keywords

Telework, organisational behaviour, cultural differences, perceived proof of success

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses the impact of cultural differences in Australia and Singapore on the perceptions that management and employees have towards success factors and perceived proof of success of those factors in teleworking in the business-to-consumer (B2C) e-business application. The rationale for this paper is that there has been little concentration in telework studies on the influence of differences in organisational behaviour and working culture on employee and management issues (Shin et al. 2002, Cooper and Burke 2002). This study examines various organisational theories, discussed in the next section as part of the literature review, in order to relate them to employees and management perception towards telework success and to understand the difference and/or similarity in the contribution of success factors.

This paper has four sections namely introduction, research method, results, and analysis and discussion. This *Introduction* briefly outlines the paper and gives an overview of organisational behaviour theories (how employees and management view success and failure, and the types of success factors to be contributed by the management and employees). *Research Method* addresses the research paradigm used in this study, that is, the scientific realism paradigm, describes how the case study research methodology used in this study enables the success of telework to be studied in depth, and discusses the techniques used to analyse the collected data. *Results* from this study indicates that organisational goals, individual employees needs and mode of work are seen as perceived proof of success and reports on how Australian employees and management differ from Singaporean employees and management in perceiving success factors. *Analysis and discussion* interprets the results and discusses and explains how the differences in work-related values and organisational culture plays an important role in perceiving proof of success and success factors and concludes with explaining the significant importance in understanding the work-related values and organisational culture for future telework studies.

Literature review

Organisational behaviour is the study of people's attitudes, actions and perceptions in an organisation (Gordon 1996, Cavana et al. 2001). In the organisational behaviour discipline, there are several theories that assist in

understanding the various aspects of organisational behaviour, and as this research examines aspects of organisations and individual perspectives within it, it is necessary to incorporate these theories into the research. Factors that influence the study of an individual in an organisation and the implications of the effects of those factors for this research are made explicit.

Personal factors and situational factors are presented in this paper as the two major types of telework success factors drawn out in this study. Personal factors include individual attitude, habits, personalities and employee aptitude. Situational factors include supervision, training, technological resources (hardware and software), and non-technological resources (finance and location) provided by the management.

Research indicates that individuals as 'actors' in a successful situation attribute success to personal factors whereas an 'observer' in such a situation would attribute situational factors as causes of the success (Jones and Nisbett 1971, Gordon 1996). However, in a failed situation, as an 'actor' the individual would attribute situational factors as causes for the failure while an 'observer' would attribute personal factors as causes for the failure (Jones and Nisbett 1971, Kelley and Michela 1980, Gordon 1996).

Research also suggests that individuals (employees) gain satisfaction when the way they work meets their needs (Gordon 1996, Speechley and Wheatley 2001). Individual needs are seen as a factor that would influence how an employee perceives success in the way they work and also assists in understanding individual behaviour.

Organisational culture plays an important role in developing performance criteria in order to judge how well an employee has performed in his or her area of work (Kotter and Heskett 1993, Gordon 1991, Harris 1994, Gordon 1996, Speechley and Wheatley 2001). Organisational culture also shapes the way the employees of the organisation make sense of events, and it assists in understanding how the organisation works (Harris 1994, Speechley and Wheatley 2001). Organisational cultures that are adaptable and effective have a positive impact on organisational goals and performance (Kotter and Heskett 1993).

Speechley and Wheatley (2001) argued that perceived success for management is based largely upon organisation goals and performance dimensions, which is correlated to and has positive impact upon, the organisational culture (Kotter and Heskett 1993). Consequentially, management tends to recognise success factors that fulfil those organisational goals and performance dimensions (Gordon 1996, Speechley and Wheatley 2001). Based on the existing literature, organisational culture is a factor that influences how management perceives success and assists in understanding the organisational goals and values.

This study considered the organisational theories discussed above in the context of attitudes and behaviour of employees and management towards telework and by doing so this research was able to demonstrate understanding of the idiosyncrasies of employees and management, and their perceptions of success. This research will contribute to a managerial understanding of employee views on telework and potentially facilitate an increased number of employees to telework. In addition, the research outcomes can be used as performance indicators by management to monitor telework in their organisations.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research paradigm used in this study is scientific realism (*post positivism*). Scientific realists believe in scrutinising the real world as closely as possible. Due to the complexity of the world, reality can only be imperfectly and probabilistically apprehended (Guba and Lincoln 1994, Godfrey and Hill 1995). This research involves the study of complex issues (people, relationships, work structure), therefore scientific realism is a suitable paradigm for this type of research.

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 through in-depth interviews, 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 the success of telework in the e-business application.

In the study, twelve interviews were conducted. Six of them were conducted in Australia and the other six were conducted in Singapore. The first, Case A, is an Australian international management consultancy company in telecommunications that provides expert advice and project management expertise involving detailed design activities. This organisation conducts telework among the consultants. The interviewees included two consultants and a senior manager. These interviewees will be addressed as *respondent T1, T2 and M1* respectively. The second Case B is an Australian company that manufactures and sells fishing lures. The company conducts telework among its sales representatives. The interviewees included two sales representatives and a manager (sales). These interviewees are addressed as *respondent T3, T4 and M2* respectively.

The third, Case C, 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 T5, T6 and M3* respectively. The fourth, Case D, is a large multinational insurance company based in Singapore, 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 T7, T8 and M4* respectively.

The questions that were asked for this study are listed in the appendix. Due to the page limitations, only the questions that were asked of the employees (teleworkers) are listed in the appendix, in order to give the reader an example of the type of questions that were asked during the interview.

Next, a brief overview of the various techniques used in this case study research for analysing the data will be given. First, all the collected data which was primarily in audio form was transcribed verbatim. Then, the analysis of the transcription begun by organising the data into themes, quotes, passages and developed notes are involved in displaying data in matrices and tables for examining the data. This approach is called *cross-cluster analysis* (Patton 1990, Yin 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) have discussed the use of cross-cluster analysis in activities such as tabulating the frequency of different events and putting the information in chronological order. For this research, cross-case analysis was undertaken where the cluster of cases compared and contrasted to determine if there were any variations or similarities in the data involved in highlighting the variables and concepts relevant to the research questions and the research problem (Eisenhardt 1989). Relevant documents obtained from the respondents were also consulted for triangulation purposes.

RESULTS

The data gathered from all four organisations examined the success factors and the proof of success of those factors based on management and employee perspectives. All the cases agreed on the accomplishment of management goals as one way of proving the success of teleworking in the B2C e-business application. For example, with Case A, automated workflow systems were not sufficient to eliminate micro-management. Through the introduction of telework, micromanagement is no longer feasible since the employees work at home so results-based management is more sensible. For this organisation telework has accomplished an organisational goal, and thus is perceived as a proof of success.

All the employees (*T1-T8*) added that they also see proof of success if teleworking in the B2C e-business makes it possible to satisfy individual employee needs such as lowering work-related costs and fitting work with the individual employee lifestyles. *Respondents T5, T6, T7 and T8* of Cases C and D indicated that having to accomplish reduced work-related costs had definitely been a perceived proof of success for them.

Respondents M1 and M2 from Australian Cases A and B considered achievement of management goals as proof of success; whereas the respondents *M3 and M4* from Singaporean Cases C and D tended to consider achievement of management goals and also to some extent individual employee needs for proving success.

Respondents T1, T2, T3 and T4 from Australian Cases A and B considered accomplishing both business goals and their personal needs as equally important for proving success. However *respondents T5, T6, T7 and T8* from Singaporean Cases C and D considered accomplishing business goals most important in proving success and the accomplishment of their personal needs a secondary issue.

In addition to organisational goals and individual employee needs, both Singaporean Cases C and D identified extent of telework involvement as another proof of success. *Respondents M3 and M4* indicated that employees' ability to increase the level of telework gradually, for example from a few days in a week to a few weeks in a month, is perceived as a proof of success because the employees conduct their business electronically and demonstrate that they know how to utilise telework fully in order to carry out on-line business transactions. This signifies successful implementation of telework among the employees by the organisation specifically in this e-business context.

All the respondents of Singaporean Cases C and D (*T5, T6, T7, T8, M3 and M4*) indicated mode of work as another proof of success. *Respondents M3 and M4* perceived that being able to conduct the business solely on-line when the employees telework is something that needs to be maintained and sustained when telework is performed in the e-business context. If the employee still has to function within the traditional way of work while teleworking, it means that telework has not been implemented well enough to be able to properly fit into the e-business infrastructure.

It is noted from these interviews that managers from Singaporean Cases C and D (*respondents M3 and M4*) provided situational factors, such as the provision of training provided by the management, as success factors. Australian managers from Cases A and B (*respondents M1 and M2*) provided situational factors and as well considered personal factors such as employees' capability in managing time as success factors. Australian employees from Cases A and B (*respondents T1, T2, T3 and T4*) provided personal factors mostly and provided

situational factors rarely when asked to draw out the success factors. The findings also show that the Singaporean employees from Cases C and D (*respondents T5, T6, T7 and T8*) apart from providing personal factors also identified situational factors such as IT resources, provided by the management, as equally important in drawing out the success factors.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Two issues emerge from this study: the difference in perception of proof of success is due to the differences in work-related values; the difference in perceived success factors is due to the idiosyncrasies of the respective organisational cultures. These two issues are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

Differences in perceiving proof of success

The management (*respondents M1 and M2*) from the Australian Cases A and B felt that the employees make the individual choice to telework. In addition, the management stated that it assumes that the current employees who are teleworking are doing this because they wanted to and they are satisfied with the work style. Therefore the management considers accomplishing individual (employee) needs is not how the management sees proof of success. In addition, it was stated by the management that if the employees encounter some problems they would raise it with the management.

The employees (*respondents T1, T2, T3 and T4*) from the Australian Cases A and B on the other hand, felt that accomplishing both business goals and personal needs were equally important, especially in an e-business infrastructure. When asked about the management view on not considering employee's personal needs, the respondents (*T1 and T2*) replied that even if the reasons (personal needs) get fulfilled there are always other problems to resolve: such as email management, data-management (constant information flow from the e-business infrastructure). The employees stated that personal needs did not disappear just because the initial reasons for teleworking had been satisfied, but that the employees had to continually overcome new problems throughout the employees' teleworking experience. This would only be possible with management support and recognition of employee personal needs that arise through being a teleworker. They state that they do raise these problems with management but management believes this is something workers can solve themselves, as the management has already provided the technology and infrastructure needed.

The management (*respondents M3 and M4*) from the Singaporean Cases C and D felt that the employees are teleworking because the management promoted teleworking to them, and also to some extent feel responsible if their employees are not able to enjoy telework as they thought they would. Here the management chooses for teleworking, employees with many years of experience selling insurance, as they believe that they will be more disciplined and trustworthy. The management then provides training to these workers before the workers begin teleworking on their own. The way they promote telework to them is by stating that they want to implement telework because it provides the organisation with various benefits and aims the organisation wants to achieve, which is promoted to them through brochures and seminars. The irony is that it would be expected that organisations that impose telework on employees would not care about the employees feelings but in these cases the management to some extent at least felt that if the chosen employees do not gain anything at a personal level, the success would be questionable even if organisational goals were met.

On the other hand, the employees (*respondents T5, T6, T7 and T8*) do consider fulfilling personal needs as proof of success but the accomplishments of business goals are seen as the most important proof of success. They feel that the organisations trusted and chose them; therefore the most important proof of success is to achieve the goals the organisation entrusted them to achieve. When further probed about raising issues with management that bother them at a personal level, there seems to be no avenue for it. Surveys are taken from the employees who telework but these fail to reflect whether they are able to accomplish individual needs.

The differences on perception of proof of success are largely due to the difference in work-related values. Countries and areas such as the USA, Canada, UK, northern Europe and Australia are examples of individualistic cultures (Rodrigues 1995, Herbig and Genestre 1997). 'In individualistic society, managers seek input from others, but individual decisions are seen as better' (Herbig and Genestre 1997, p.1). This could explain why the management felt that individual employees have choices in the matter of telework and that if the employee is not satisfied with telework they could choose to discontinue teleworking. This also explains why the management prefers the individual employees to make their own decision to solve problems. However in Case A this individualistic stand taken by the management has caused the employees to think that management is not giving sufficient support for the problems they may or may not face throughout their telework experience. In an individualistic society, there is more emotional independence from the company (Herbig and Genestrie 1997), therefore this would explain why the employees from the Australian cases see accomplishing both business goals and individual needs as equally important for perceiving proof of success.

On the other hand countries such as Hong Kong, China and Singapore are influenced by a Confucian cultural dimension (Rodrigues 1995). Individuals in Confucian-based organisations adhere to rigid, informal group norms and values (Rodrigues 1995) and subordinates are passive, preferring a “big boss” to make decisions for them (Herbig and Genestre 1997). Therefore the Confucian virtues of loyalty and obedience to authority (Rodrigues 1995) explain why the employees from the Singaporean cases considered accomplishing business goals as the more important priority, rather than their own individual personal needs. The management from the Singaporean cases did consider accomplishment of individual employee personal needs as proof of success, and this pattern of behaviour conforms to the pattern found in Confucian-based organisations where the central authority figure looks out for the subordinates as the employees in Confucian-based organisations expect the central authority figure to make decisions for them.

Differences in perceiving proof of success

The management (*respondents M3 and M4*) from Singaporean Cases C and D recognise many situational factors as success factors. The employees (*respondents T5, T6, T7 and T8*) from the Singaporean Cases C and D recognise some of the resources provided by the management and personal factors. The management (*respondents M1 and M2*) from the Australian Cases A and B recognise both situational and personal factors. It was found from the Australian cases that the employees (*respondents T1, T2, T3 and T4*) affirmed that the management did provide them with resources, but stated that it was the employees themselves who utilise these properly to perform their work efficiently. They are quite reluctant to give credit to the management, as the management does expect the employees to manage the problems themselves if the management believes that the individual employees can manage it.

The differences are due to the organisational culture, where in countries like Hong Kong, China and Singapore, the practice is autocratic and centralised power structures predominate, in which the subordinates respect the leaders and do what they say, and are also reluctant to openly give ideas and opinions for fear of disagreeing with their seniors and possibly appearing disloyal to organisational authority (Kivela and Go 1996). This could be why the employees from Singaporean companies also recognised the resources provided by the management, the situational factors, when drawing out the success factors, using such recognition as an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty towards their management. Management based on this style of leadership would also see itself taking a paternalistic influence over its subordinates (Kivela and Go 1996), which explains why the management in the Singaporean cases fails to identify employees’ contributions instead concentrating on the resources it has provided for its subordinates.

Participative management practices are far more common in countries like Australia, and as a result the belief in the importance of cooperation and teamwork between employees and management is widely held, and employees are often free to contribute their own ideas (Kivela and Go 1996). In the Australian cases such as Case A, even though there was an element of individualism, there is a participative environment in existence. This would explain why the management from the Australian cases acknowledged the employees’ contributions, as they might have perceived the whole business process as teamwork.

Conclusion

This discussion has indicated that the knowledge of work related values and organisational culture plays an important role in understanding the organisational consequences of telework. Since telework is an organisational phenomenon, the success of telework will be influenced by the attitude of the management and employees. In order to properly study those attitudes, an understanding of the work-related values and organisational culture is necessary. Having to study the success of telework using organisational theories facilitates the gaining of a comprehensive understanding of how telework programs fit into an organisation’s culture and work-value system.

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APPENDIX

Organisational Demographics

Interviewee's position in organisation _____

Organisation's name _____

Organisation's address _____

Main function performed by your organisation: _____

Number of employees _____

Head office/ Branches _____

Now I have some general questions to ask in order to understand your function and main role in this organisation

Please tell me about the main business function in your organisation.

Years of experience in this industry _____

Years with the firm _____

Could you tell me about the hierarchical structure in your organisations e.g. whom do you report to about your work?

Do you have any documentation available that outlines this structure?

You conduct business transactions with clients electronically from home part of your workdays, correct?

How often do you perform this?

Are you not afraid that this might affect your future job promotions? Please explain your answer.

How do you handle your fear of resulting in loss of over time or pay for choosing to telework?

Based on your experiences, describe your typical workday at home, where you conduct business entirely on-line with your clients.

Can you share your experiences with me of how telework has been specifically useful in the area of conducting your B2C e-business transactions?

Research issues

Did the management choose you or did you volunteer to work from home part of your work time, i.e. telework?

Why? Is it something to do with the nature of your personality e.g. creative person, self-disciplined and an introvert?

What personal goals/aims do you expect for yourself through performing telework in this B2C e-business work setting?

So can I also interpret them as reasons for you to telework in this B2C e-business setting?

Do you think this new style of work (i.e. working from home) fits into the current organisational culture?

If yes, please explain your choice of answer in detail.

If no, then do you think that the management is trying to transform its cultural scope to fit into this new work style?

If yes, then tell me how telework fits into the new cultural scope. Please explain in detail.

Do any of these personal goals/aims that you have mentioned reflect this organisational culture?

If yes, can you tell me which ones are they?

Would you say that if you were able to achieve these personal goals/ aims would you consider yourself successful in conducting your e-business transactions from home?

Do your achieved personal goals act as a proof of success in teleworking? If yes, please explain why.

If no, please explain why.

Are there any other factors that may act as a proof of success in teleworking in this e-business setting?

Were you able to achieve these personal goals/aims that you have just stated?

If yes, generally what factors assisted you in achieving each individual aim? If no, explain why.

Is there anything the management might have contributed in achieving these individual goals/aims of yours? (E.g. IT resources, management style/ supervisory technique, training and establishment of goals with the employees).

Are there any other issues, or any other factors you could think of?

What role does your management expect telework (work from home programme) to play in conducting e-business today and in the future?

Can I interpret them as the management goals that you need to achieve through teleworking in your e- business work setting?

Do you share these management goals with your organisation?

If yes, does this mean these management goals are also part of the reasons why you telework? Explain why.

If no, can I say that these management goals are only part of your management's reasons for you to telework in this e-business setting? Explain why.

Which management goals do you think reflects the organisational values/culture?

Am I right to say that achieving these management goals will make the management feel successful in allowing the employees to conduct e-business transactions with clients from home for part of their work days? Please explain your answer.

Do the achieved management goals act as a proof of success for the management in conducting telework among its employees?

Would you perceive the same success when you achieve these management goals in addition to the personal aims mentioned above?

If yes, would you consider it correct to say that you perceive proof of success in terms of the personal aims that you have mentioned, and the management goals? Please explain your answer.

If no, please explain your answer.

Were you able to achieve these management goals?

If yes, generally what factors assisted you in achieving each individual management goal? If no, please explain why.

What are the other factors you have contributed personally to achieve each individual management goal? (E.g. individual attitude, having knowledge in web design and e-marketing, better control over time and developing good rapport with clients on-line).

Is there anything the management might have contributed in achieving these individual management goals? (E.g. IT resources, management style/ supervisory technique, training and establishment of goals with the employees)

Is there anything else or are there any other factors you could think of?

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