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Switching off when home is your office? A quantitative study of the relationship of telecommuting and psychological detachment from work

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Abstract

In times of increasing spread of telecommuting, it is essential to understand its impact on the well-being of employees. This study examines the relationship between the extent of telecommuting and psychological detachment from work during off-job time. Workload and autonomy were considered as mediators of the relationship and their relation with telecommuting and psychological detachment were assessed. An online questionnaire was used to gather self-report data from 300 home office workers. Results of regression analyses showed that the extent of telecommuting was not related to psychological detachment from work, workload or autonomy and that workload and autonomy were significant predictors of psychological detachment. Exploratory analyses showed a negative indirect effect of qualitative aspects of telecommuting on psychological detachment through workload and autonomy. For the extent of telecommuting no indirect effect on psychological detachment was found through these constructs. The results suggest that qualitative, rather than quantitative, aspects of telecommuting influence employee well-being.

Relationship Between Telecommuting and Psychological Detachment From Work

Telecommuting is defined as a work practice in which members of an organization use part of their regular working hours to work away from a permanent workplace, usually from home and using technology to interact with others (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015). The extent of telecommuting reflects how intensely employees perceive changes in work experiences due to working remotely (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). Previous research findings show that the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has increased the accessibility of employees even during non-working hours (Nübling et al., 2015) preventing them from detaching from work (Spath et al., 2013). Telepressure at work describes the combination of a strong urge to be accessible to people at work through message-based ICT and a concern for quick response times, which encourages employees to stay connected to work (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015).

Psychological detachment describes a person's state of not engaging in work-related activities or thoughts during non-work time and implies distancing oneself from work both physically and mentally (Sonnentag et al., 2010). Individuals with a stronger preference to separate work and personal life are more likely to psychologically detach from work, especially when they perceive that other

people at work are actively separating their personal life from work (Park et al., 2011). The following relationship is assumed:

Hypothesis 1: Telecommuting is negatively related to psychological detachment.

Workload generally refers to the volume of work that a person must accomplish (Spector & Jex, 1998). It is an aspect of the work situation that spills over into non-work time and continues to impact individuals after the end of the workday (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005), hindering recovery (Geurts et al., 2003). Telecommuting goes along with the use of ICT, which results in stronger attachment to work, thus creating the demand to work more hours (Madden & Jones, 2008). Being connected through ICT makes it possible to be accessible even during non-working hours and increases the likelihood of performing work-related tasks in individuals free time (Nübling et al., 2015). Therefore, the following relationships are assumed:

Hypothesis 2: Workload mediates the effect of telecommuting on psychological detachment.
Hypothesis 2a: The extent of telecommuting is positively related to workload.
Hypothesis 2b: Workload is negatively related to psychological detachment from work.

Autonomy refers to "the degree of control or discretion a worker is able to exercise with respect to work methods, work scheduling, and work criteria" (Breaugh, 1985, p. 556). When employees have more autonomy, they can perform work activities according to their preferences, which can reduce exhaustion (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). One advantage of telecommuting is greater independence, for example through flexible working hours. Telecommuters can decide themselves when to perform work-related tasks and thus better combine work with private life (Harpaz, 2002). The following relationships are assumed:

Hypothesis 3: Autonomy mediates the effect of telecommuting on psychological detachment.
Hypothesis 3a: The extent of telecommuting is positively related to autonomy.
Hypothesis 3b: Autonomy is positively related to psychological detachment.

Method

Sample and Procedure: A sample of 300 people participated in the online survey using Unipark, all of whom were employed. Since sociodemographic data are not available for 10 individuals, the sample description refers to 290 individuals, unless otherwise noted. On average, respondents were 30.7 years old (SD = 8.9 years); 62.3% of respondents were female (n = 187), 33.7% were male (n = 101), 0.7% assigned themselves divers (n = 2), and for 3.3% (n = 10) this information is not available. The average period of employment (n = 289) was 4.9 years (SD = 6.4 years). On average, respondents worked 31.1 hours per week remotely (SD = 12.0 hours per week), with individual responses ranging from five to 60 hours per week. Participants were recruited via the academic network of Deutsche Bahn, Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences, the career networks LinkedIn and XING, and through personal contacts. A requirement for participation was that individuals had also worked from home office during the Covid-19 pandemic. As an incentive for participation, half a subject hour could be obtained for students of Darmstadt University of Applied Sciences or the SurveyCode for SurveyCircle users.

Measures: The questionnaire consisted of 59 items measuring the extent of telecommuting with one item adapted from two items developed by Golden and Veiga (2005): "On average, how many hours per week do you telecommute (work from home)?". Telepressure was measured with four items of the Telepressure Scale (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015). An example item was "When I work from home, I feel a strong need to respond to others immediately". Accessibility through ICT was

measured on a scale from 1 = very rarely/never to 5 = very often (almost continuously) with three items developed by Day et al. (2012), an example item was "When I work from home, I am expected to be accessible at all times (e.g., through pager, cell phone, instant messaging". Isolation was measured with three items based on the items developed by Gil-de-Zúñiga (2006). An example item was "When I work from home, I feel less integrated with my team at work". Information undersupply was measured with three items based on the items developed by O'Reilly (1980) and the wording adapted from Weinert et al. (2015). An example item was "When I work from home, I receive too little information from my colleagues". Boundaries between work and personal life were measured based on two items developed by Mellner et al. (2014): "When I work from home, I manage well with separating work and personal life" and "When I work from home, I manage well with integrating work and personal life". Psychological detachment from work was measured with four items from the Recovery

Experience Questionnaire (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). An example item was "In my non-work time, I distance myself from my work". Quantitative workload was measured with four items of the Time Pressure Scale (Irmer et al., 2019) and one item from the ICT Demand Scale Workload (Day et al., 2012): "As a result of technology, I work longer hours at and away from the office" to measure technology-related workload. Autonomy was measured with three items developed by Breaugh (1985). An example item was "When I work from home, I am free to choose the method(s) to use in carrying out my work". Furthermore, the constructs role ambiguity, role conflict, feedback, social support (the items were measured on a scale from 1 = very rarely/never to 5 = very often/always), and Leader-Member Exchange were additionally measured, which are not part of this paper. Table 1 depicts the descriptive statistics and Cronbach's α of the study variables. An overview of the items used can be found in the appendix.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics and Cronbach's α of the study variables.

Variable	n	M	SD	α	$α_{improved}$
Home office equipment	300	4.41	0.74	.60	
Extent of telecommuting	300	31.05	12.02		
Telepressure	300	3.04	0.97	.77	.82
Accessibility through ICT	300	3.07	0.76	.53	.55
Isolation	300	2.95	0.99	.63	.70
Information undersupply	300	2.43	0.92	.87	
Separate work and private life	300	3.02	1.12		
Integrate work and private life	300	3.51	0.97		
Psychological detachment	300	3.17	0.95	.87	
Workload	300	2.79	0.81	.84	
Autonomy	297	3.88	0.65	.60	

Note. *Cronbach's α only was computed if a construct was measured by at least two items.*

All items presented were measured on a five-point Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, unless otherwise noted. The first question measured whether participants had also worked remotely over a period of several weeks during the Covid-19 pandemic. Two self-generated items were used as control variables to

measure how well participants can work remotely: "When I work from home, I can access all the information and documents I need for my work" and "My organization provides me with the necessary technical equipment (laptop, headset, information, and communication channels, etc.) to be able to work well remotely". Finally, the socio-

demographic data age, gender, highest academic qualification, main occupation, period of employment, and industry were measured.

Analysis: A total of 398 people participated in the online survey. During data cleaning, a total of 98 individuals were removed from the data set, of which 29 did not fulfill the requirement to have worked from home, for 11 individuals no data was generated, 53 persons terminated the questionnaire before answering items for psychological detachment which was necessary for data analysis, one individual showed central tendency error and four individuals showed an excessively fast response time. For the analysis the software IBM SPSS Statistics 27 was used and the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2018) to perform the mediation analyses.

Results

Mediation Analyses: Simple mediation analyses were performed using Ordinary Least Square path analysis for each mediator separately using the SPSS PROCESS macro. The indirect effect and confidence interval were estimated using bootstrapping. As can be seen in figure 1, the extent of telecommuting does not show a significant relationship for workload (a_1 = 0.007, p = .080) and autonomy (a_2 = 0.001, p = .662). Both workload (b_1 = −0.554, p < .001) and autonomy (b_2 = 0.319, p < .001) were found to be statistically significantly related to psychological detachment from work. Confidence intervals based on 5,000 bootstrap samples all included the value zero for the indirect effect of the extent of telecommuting on psychological detachment through workload (ab_1 = −0.004, SE = 0.002), 95 % CI [−0.009, 0.001] and through autonomy (ab_2 = 0.001, SE = 0.001), [−0.002, 0.003]. There was no evidence that the extent of telecommuting influenced psychological detachment independent of its effect on workload (c_1' = 0.003, p = .536) or autonomy (c_2' = −0.002, p = .693). The total effect of telecommuting on psychological detachment was neither significant for workload (c_1 = −0.002, p = .728),

nor for autonomy (c_2 = −0.001, p =.775) as mediators of this relationship.

A multiple linear regression was performed to test how well psychological detachment can be predicted by the combination of workload and autonomy. One case was identified as an outlier and excluded from the analysis. The model was significant, $F(2, 293)$ = 49.774, p < .001 and predicted psychological detachment, R^2 = .254, $R^2_{adjusted}$ = .248. Both workload (n = 299, B = −0.54, p < .001, SE = 0.06, β = −0.46, t = −9.00, 95% CI [−0.66, −0.42]) and autonomy (n = 296, B = 0.18, p = .018, SE = 0.08, β = 0.12, t = 2.37, 95% CI [− 0.03, 0.32]) were significant predictors of psychological detachment.

Post-Hoc Analyses: It could be argued that the extent of telecommuting only represents the quantitative aspect of remote work. In addition to the extent of telecommuting, telepressure, accessibility, isolation, information undersupply, and the abilities to separate and integrate work and private life were measured as individual aspects of remote work. These were combined into an index that depicts the qualitative aspects of telecommuting (N = 300, M = 2.93, SD = 0.48, α = .66). The predicted associations with psychological detachment were re-examined. Qualitative and quantitative aspects of telecommuting were uncorrelated (r_S = −.03, p = .297). Simple mediation analyses were performed separately for each mediator and rounded to three decimal places to ensure comparability. As can be seen in figure 2, qualitative aspects of telecommuting are positively related to workload (a_3 = 0.347, p = .001) and negatively related to autonomy (a_4 = −0.297, p = < .001), whereas workload (b_3 = −0.498, p < .001) is negatively and autonomy (b_4 = 0.231, p = .013) positively related to psychological detachment. Confidence intervals based on 5,000 bootstrap samples for the indirect effect of qualitative aspects of telecommuting on psychological detachment through workload (ab_3 = −0.173, SE = 0.054), 95 % CI [−0.280, −0.068] and through autonomy (ab_4 = −0.069, SE = 0.035), [−0.151, −0.013] were below zero. There was evidence that qualitative aspects of telecommuting

influenced psychological detachment independent of its effect on workload ($c_3' = -0.433$, $p < .001$) and autonomy ($c_4' = -0.542$, $p < .001$). The total effect of qualitative aspects of telecommuting on psychological detachment was significant for both workload ($c_3 = -0.606$, $p < .001$) and autonomy ($c_4 = -0.611$, $p < .001$) as mediators of this relationship.
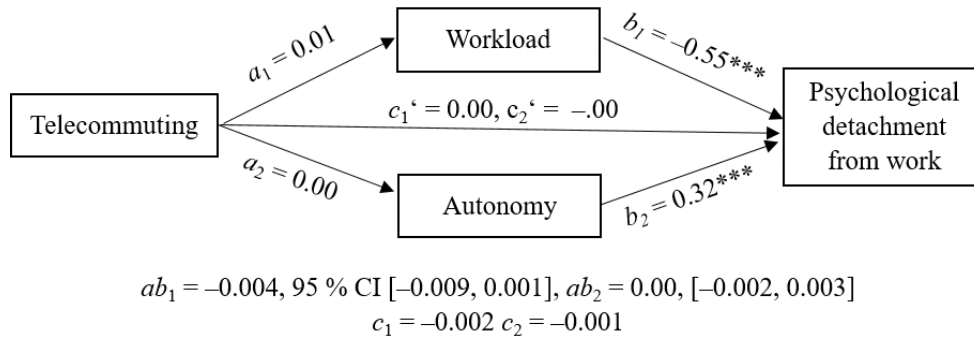

$ab_1 = -0.004$, 95 % CI $[-0.009, 0.001]$, $ab_2 = 0.00$, $[-0.002, 0.003]$
$c_1 = -0.002$ $c_2 = -0.001$

Figure 1 Graphical representation of the mediation models
Note. *** $p < .001$.

$ab_3 = -0.173$, 95 % CI $[-0.280, -0.068]$, $ab_4 = -0.069$, $[-0.151, -0.013]$
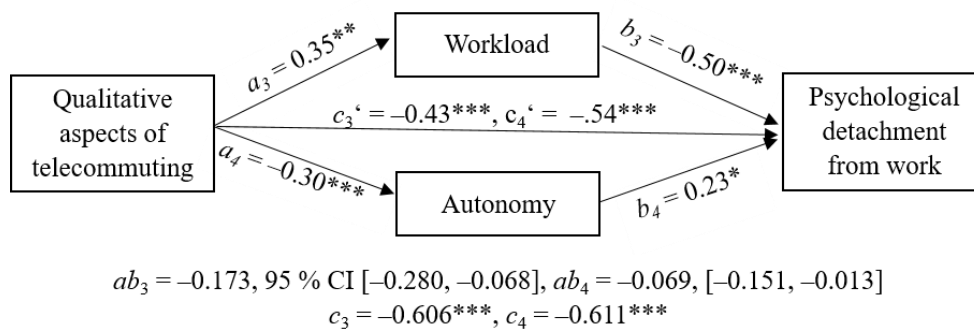$c_3 = -0.606$***, $c_4 = -0.611$***

Figure 2 Graphical representation of the post-hoc model
Note. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Discussion

Interpretation of the Results on Telecommuting: The results showed that the extent of telecommuting was not statistically significantly related to psychological detachment, thus not supporting hypothesis 1. A possible explanation is that the flexibility associated with telecommuting reduces the impact of certain strains and stresses, whilst creating new tensions in other aspects (Golden, 2012). Regression analyses found the extent of telecommuting to not be statistically significantly related to workload and autonomy, therefore not supporting hypothesis 2a and hypothesis 3a. The majority of participants in this study work in an organization where telecommuting was already established and used by employees, and furthermore, the control variables home office equipment showed high scores. Thus, possible negative effects of telecommuting may have already been remedied.

Interpretation of the Results on Psychological Detachment: The results of the multiple linear regression analysis showed that both workload and autonomy were significant predictors of psychological detachment from work, thus supporting hypothesis 2b and hypothesis 3b. This study supports previous findings which showed that high workload leads to individuals being less mentally detached from work during non-work time (Sonnentag & Kruel, 2006; Sonnentag et al., 2010). Telecommuters may feel that they can only manage workload by working longer or faster and that this pressure

causes them to remain mentally attached to their work (Sonnentag & Kruel, 2006). Autonomy can buffer the negative impact of job demands like workload on exhaustion (Bakker et al., 2005). This study shows that autonomy facilitates psychological detachment.

Interpretation of the Mediation Analyses: The indirect effect of the extent of telecommuting on psychological detachment through the constructs workload and autonomy showed very small values close to zero and all confidence intervals contained the value zero, which means that there is no mediation. Thus, no support for hypothesis 2 and hypothesis 3 was found.

Interpretation of the Post-Hoc Analyses: The results of regression analyses demonstrate that qualitative aspects of telecommuting are significant predictors of psychological detachment, workload, and autonomy. Workload and autonomy were found to mediate the effect of qualitative aspects of telecommuting on psychological detachment, as the confidence intervals of the indirect effects did not include the value zero. The direct effects for all mediation analyses were statistically significant, indicating that qualitative aspects of telecommuting also influence psychological detachment independently of their effect on the mediators. These results suggest that not the extent of telecommuting, but rather the accompanying qualitative aspects, such as isolation, telepressure, or blurring boundaries between work and private life, influence psychological detachment and work experiences. This supports previous findings that the way the job and telecommuting are characterized predict employee well-being (Vander Elst et al., 2017). Since the quantitative and the qualitative aspect of telecommuting are not statistically significantly related, each seems to exert its own influence.

Limitations and Future Directions: Since a correlational design was used, no conclusions about causality can be drawn. Moreover, most participants worked in the transport, logistics and warehousing industry, so results may not be fully transferable to employees in other industries. The extent of telecommuting was measured in hours per week, following the operationalization by Golden and Veiga (2005). To enable better comparability, future studies should measure the quantitative aspect of telecommuting as the percentage of weekly working time spent working from home. Future research should focus on the qualitative aspects associated with telecommuting that predict psychological detachment and examine their influence more detailed. If individuals do not mentally detach themselves from work, it does not necessarily impact their well-being negatively. Especially if they have had positive experiences at work, such as successfully completing a project, their well-being can be increased if they are constantly thinking about work (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). This indicates that the content of work-related thoughts may be crucial in determining the impact of psychological attachment to work and should be further investigated.

As a practical recommendation, psychological detachment should be promoted as a work design strategy that reduces the expectation of having to respond quickly to ICT and be constantly available (Santuzzi & Barber, 2018). Moreover, employees should learn coping strategies, for example through mandatory online training. When telecommuting is implemented in work teams, employees should jointly develop guidelines for handling telecommuting.

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Appendix

Table 2 Overview of the items used in the current study

Qualitative aspects of telecommuting

Telepressure (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015)[1]
1. When I work from home, it's hard for me to focus on other things when I receive a message from someone.(strongly agree – strongly disagree)
2. When I work from home, I can concentrate better on other tasks once I've responded to my messages.[4]
3. When I work from home, I feel a strong need to respond to others immediately.
4. When I work from home, it's difficult for me to resist responding to a message right away.

Accessibility through ICT (Day et al., 2012)[2]
1. When I work from home, I am expected to be accessible at all times (e.g., through pager, cell phone, instant messaging).
2. When I work from home, technology enables people I work with to contact me at any time.
3. When I work from home, I'm contacted about work-related issues outside of regular work hours.

Isolation (Gil-de-Zúñiga, 2006)[1]
1. When I work from home, I feel less integrated with my team at work.
2. When I work from home, I feel poorly informed about relevant issues by my team at work.
3. When I work from home, it is more difficult for me to use corporate services or utilities at home.[5]

Information undersupply (O'Reilly, 1980, wording adapted from Weinert et al., 2015)[1]
1. When I work from home, I receive too little information from my colleagues in the office of my employer.
2. When I work from home, it is difficult to receive relevant information from my colleagues in the office of my employer.
3. During my time at home (telecommuting), the amount of information I receive from my colleagues in the office is very low.

Abilities to separate and integrate work and private life (Mellner et al., 2014)[1]
1. When I work from home, I manage well with separating work and private life.
2. When I work from home, I manage well with integrating work and private life.

Extent of telecommuting (Golden & Veiga, 2005)
1. On average, how many hours per week do you telecommute (work from home)?

Psychological detachment from work (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007)[1]
1. During off-job time, I forget about work.
2. During off-job time, I don't think about work at all.
3. During off-job time, I distance myself from my work.
4. During off-job time, I get a break from the demands of work.

Workload (Irmer et al., 2019)[2]
1. How often are you pressed for time?
2. How often do you have to work faster than normal in order to complete your work?
3. How often is a fast pace of work, required of you?
4. How often must you finish work later because of having too much to do?
   ICT Workload (Day et al., 2012)[2]
5. As a result of technology, I work longer hours at and away from the office.

Autonomy (Breaugh, 1999)[1]
1. When I work from home, I am free to choose the method(s) to use in carrying out my work
2. When I work from home, I have some control over the sequencing of my work activities (when I do what).
3. When I work from home, I have some control over what I am supposed to accomplish (what my supervisor sees as my job objectives).

Control variables (self-generated)[1]
1. When I work from home, I can access all the information and documents I need for my work.
2. My organization provides me with the necessary technical equipment (laptop, headset, information, and communication channels, etc.) to be able to work well remotely.

Note. Items were responded to on a five-point Likert scale from [1] 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree, [2] 1 = very rarely/never to 5 = very often (almost continuously). The item was removed from the index to increase reliability [4] from $\alpha = .77$ to $\alpha = .82$ for telepressure [5] and from $\alpha = .63$ to $\alpha = .70$ for isolation