Does Personality moderate Employee Engagement and Professional Isolation in the Remote Workforce?

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"More Connected, but Disconnected?"

There has been an increase in remote working availability for employees over the past two decades, influenced by increased technological advancements and the focus on work-life balance. Remote work is a workplace option that enables individuals to permanently work from an alternate location outside of the traditional workplace housing the organisation's offices (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). In the 12-month period to December 2019, there were 32.6 million people in employment in the UK. Of these, around 1.7 million people reported working mainly from home, with around 4.0 million working from home at some point in the week (Office for National Statistics, 2020). However, this growing trend raises the following question:

Has remote working made it increasingly challenging to keep employees engaged with their organisation and subsequently fostered the likelihood of professional isolation?

Although there is a perception that remote working will give employees benefits in terms of flexibility and autonomy, this is countered by questions regarding employee well-being (Charalampus et al., 2019). Literature on the association between flexible working practices and employee well-being has provided mixed opinions. Ter Hoeven and Van Zoonen (2015) claimed that increased flexibility around work locations would lead to greater work-life balance, job autonomy, and effective inter-employee communication, resulting in enhanced staff well-being. On the other hand, remote workers should not be allowed to become "invisible workers"; they may be very skilled at their job, but they do still require support from their organisation to be effective (Grant et al., 2013).

A wide range of factors, such as quality of working relationships with leaders, communication, and trust can all affect the remote workforce. These exterior factors are often discussed, but any insight into an individual employee's ability to adapt to the remote working environment would give a distinct advantage to the organisation. Employee's unique personalities, needs, and motives interact with organisational factors to influence engagement levels and isolation. Fulfilling these needs becomes more difficult outside a traditional working office. A remote worker may become detached and feel these needs are not being met remotely.

For some, remote working greatly improves their work life balance, enabling them to match, and potentially increase, their previous levels of productivity. This makes them more likely to remain with the organisation. For others, remote working can bring negative consequences, including feelings of isolation, lack of engagement and a drop in productivity. Conversely, this makes them more likely to leave the organisation. This will ultimately impact the performance of the organisation.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 has thrust the discussion of whether remote working will become the 'new normal' into the mainstream narrative. Organisations have been energetically evaluating the benefits of remote working, which include saving money on office rent, increasing employee productivity and providing a better work-life balance for their employees. Whilst these benefits are important, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the role that individual differences have on employees. The impact of these individual differences will have intensified when the workforce has been put into 'sudden remote working' by the COVID-19 pandemic. If organisations are going to take advantage of the opportunities provided by remote working, it will be of benefit to understand the personality characteristics of their employees and how they can affect employee engagement or feelings of isolation and aid in better employee performance.

The current research investigates the influence of personality traits in the context of remote working, with a focus on employee engagement and feelings of professional isolation.

This Research

The researcher employed a quantitative online survey design which incorporated the use of a personality assessment and established surveys measuring worker engagement and professional isolation (loneliness). One hundred and seventy-seven participated in the research, of which 75.1% reported some level of remote working in their average working week. The research provides a unique perspective on remote working because the data was collected during a four-week period of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. This is apparent by 66.1% stating they have been remote working for three months or less.

Personality

Personality traits play an important role in what kind of emotions individuals can experience (Yunus et al., 2018), suggesting that not all individuals would benefit to the same degree from remote working. It feels like common sense that someone who is extraverted or low on conscientiousness may face different and potentially more significant challenges when remotely working alone. Failing to take individual differences and environmental issues into account can risk poor performance and disengagement. Meeting the specific needs of different staff members will increase their feelings of connection with the organisation. The next step of the research was to identify a suitable assessment to measure personality.

Profile:Match2 (PM2; Trickey & Hyde, 2014) is a psychometric assessment developed by Psychological Consultancy Ltd. PM2 is based on the 'Five Factor Model' (FFM) of personality, which is the most prominent and influential model of personality in contemporary psychology (Barańczuk, 2018).

The FFM of personality consists of the five broad domains of 'Neuroticism' (emotional instability vs. stability), 'Extraversion' (vs. introversion), 'Openness' (curiosity or unconventionality), 'Agreeableness' (vs. antagonism), and 'Conscientiousness' (constraint vs. disinhibition) (Widiger & Crego, 2019). PM2 translates the five FFM factors into ten scales (two per factor) (see Table 1). This enables the assessment to provide a more detailed analysis of personality and more nuanced interpretation in its reports.

Table 1. FFM of Personality Traits and PM2 Structure of Scales

Five Factor Model	Profile:Match2 Scale
Openness to Experience	Imaginative
	Studious
Emotional Stability	Composure
	Self Esteem
Conscientiousness	Compliance
	Perfectionism
Extraversion	Assertiveness
	Sociability
Agreeability	Dependence
	Sensitivity

Employee Engagement

An engaged workforce is important for organisational effectiveness. When remote working, it can be difficult to gauge whether an employee is engaged because of the distance between employee and employer. If an employee is engaged there is a strong direct association with affective commitment and a strong inverse association with turnover intention (Saks, 2006). Employee engagement has also been linked to increased productivity, financial returns, and sales (Lin et al., 2016). This research hypothesised that employees who are more extraverted will be more engaged in the remote working environment. Extraverts' need for social interaction will lead to them seeking out engagement with colleagues, despite not being in physical proximity.

The 17-item 'Utrecht Work Engagement Scale' (UWES; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003) was used to measure the participants engagement at work. This questionnaire consists of three subscales measuring 'Vigour' (energy), 'Dedication' (commitment), and 'Absorption' (concentration). Participants rated their level of agreement with seventeen statements using a 7-point scale ranging from 0 ('Never') to 6 ('Always') (e.g. 'At my work, I feel bursting with energy').

Professional Isolation

Remote working is often a solitary task completed by the employee within the home or whilst commuting between numerous office locations. Research has shown that working mainly from the office resulted in an increased experience of inclusion in their departments, compared to employees working mainly from a home, a satellite, or a client based office (Morganson et al., 2010). Organisations need to monitor feelings of professional isolation within their remote workforce, as ignoring this issue may be detrimental to their job performance (Golden et al., 2008). It was hypothesised that people scoring lower on the 'Emotional Stability' scale were more likely to experience loneliness as a remote worker. Low scorers on 'Emotional Stability' are likely to be self-critical and generally more worried, leading them to feel anxious and isolated when working remotely.

Professional Isolation was measured using Russell et al.'s (1978) 20 item UCLA-Loneliness Scale in a work context where participants indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with each statement using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 ('I Often Feel This Way') to 4 ('I Never Feel This Way') (e.g. 'I am unhappy doing so many things alone.')

Findings

The purpose of this research was to investigate whether individual personality traits moderate workers' engagement and professional isolation. The results from the analysis suggests that there are significant relationships between individual personality traits and employee's feelings of engagement and isolation.

Both PM2 scales within the Extraversion factor – 'Assertiveness' (0.229) and 'Sociability' (0.190) – were found to have significant positive correlations with employee engagement. Employees who score high on these scales are achievement oriented and energetic (assertiveness) and are outgoing and attracted towards opportunities for social interaction (sociability).These results support previous research findings that certain personality traits are determinants of employee engagement (Akhtar et al., 2015) and suggests this is still the case in remote workers.

Both PM2 scales within the Emotional Stability factor – 'Composure' (-0.308) and 'Self-Esteem' (-0.337) – were found to have a significant negative correlation with loneliness and isolation. The findings show that employees who scored lower on the Self-esteem and Composure scales of PM2 reported feeling more worried and anxious, and experienced higher levels of loneliness in a remote working environment.

An interesting additional finding also emerged at the analysis stage. The professional isolation analysis, combining PM2 'Imaginative' and 'Studious' scale to re-create FFM trait of Openness to Experience (0.224), reported a significant positive correlation with loneliness and isolation. Employees who scored higher on the Imaginative scale (0.233) of PM2 suffer higher levels of loneliness while remote working. These individuals will be curious and innovative about the way things work, which may lead to them feeling isolated and restricted if they are remote working.

The findings from this research demonstrated that personality traits have a significant relationship with an employee's level of engagement and feelings of isolation. Subsequent regression analyses indicate that that these personality traits account for 6.8% and 20.9% of the variance in engagement and isolation outcomes respectively. These are significant results, especially when a regression analysis of both indicators – engagement and isolation – found that combined personality predicts 29.0% of the variance between individuals. These findings also suggest that there are other factors affecting variances in engagement and isolation in the remote workforce. For example, the age of an employee predicted 4.1% of the variance of an employee's engagement.

This study ultimately aimed to investigate if personality, focussing on extraversion and openness to experience, has a moderating effect on the relationship between engagement and professional isolation. For personality to have a moderating effect, it must either change the direction and/or the strength of the relationship between engagement (independent variable) and professional isolation (dependent variable). This research found that the extraversion trait did not moderate the relationship between the two variables. There was a significant negative linear relationship between engagement and professional isolation, but this did not significantly change in those with higher levels of extraversion. However, openness to experience trait did have a moderating effect between engagement and professional isolation when remote working The coefficient of the interaction term high in openness and engagement (b = 4.521, SE = 1.9) was statistically significant (p < .05). This indicates that individuals scoring higher on openness to experience are more likely to demonstrate the negative effects of being professionally isolated compared with colleagues scoring lower on this factor.

The result that openness to experience is shown to have a moderating effect between engagement and professional isolation is interesting due to a large body of previous research on engagement and personality mainly has focused on extraversion, emotional stability and conscientiousness (Bakker et al., 2008). Though studies have excluded openness to experience because it is perceived as a weak predictor of work outcomes (Griffin & Hesketh, 2004), this study has found openness to experience to have significant moderating interaction between engagement and professional isolation.

This shows the engagement levels of those high in openness are impacted harder in relation to how they perceive their professional isolation while remote working.

Practical Implications

Employee engagement has a positive relationship with a variety of organisational measures of performance (Saks, 2006b). Evidence points to engaged employees being four times as likely to recommend their company's products or services (Harmeling et al., 2017; Temkin Group, 2016). Golden et al. (2008b) found that professional isolation among teleworkers was negatively associated with job performance.

While personality is not the sole factor in predicting engagement and professional isolation, these results suggest that incorporating personality assessments as a diagnostic tool in a company's remote working strategy could provide valuable knowledge about their employees to assist in intervention decision-making.

Specific actions include the following:

• Whilst personality assessments like PM2 have long been used to improve recruitment processes (e.g. Hogan & Holland, 2003), this research also demonstrates additional predictive power. The information they provide **can help target** early interventions that limit deterioration of employee well-being.

• To prevent those who feel intense emotions from suffering from isolation (i.e. lower on the PM2 composure scale), the organisation can adopt the **SHARE approach** to managing your remote employee. SHARE is a psychologically informed approach designed to support remote working by recognising the risks for physical and psychological health and addressing these, understanding diversity, and using flexible approaches as every situation will be different, providing support and ensuring people feel appreciate (BPS, 2020).

• **Focus on results rather than activity**. People managers should set clear expectations about the way employees should deliver and receive communications throughout the working day. This approach will help those higher on the PM2 assertiveness scale to keep engaged, and help alleviate the pressure and anxiety associated with isolation, on those employees lower on the PM2 self-esteem scale (CIPD, 2020).

• Employees high on the PM2 Imaginative scale enjoy discussing and debating issues and may become jaded if tasks are narrow and repetitive. Organisations can help them feel less isolated by building **communication-enhancing mechanisms** into the team environment (SIOP, 2012).

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• To maintain engagement from employees scoring higher on sociability, organisations should be encouraged to create **social support networks** between remote workers, colleagues, and supervisors (Charalampus et al., 2019b). Maintaining high-quality interactions with managers and co-workers is important for workers' performance and well-being within remote work situations (APS, 2020).

In the remote workforce, psychological assessment could provide a distinct advantage in managing and understanding the individual differences in employees and how to get the best out of their performance whilst protecting their mental well-being.

About the Authors

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