

Chapter 56

Telework and People with Disabilities: Perspectives of Managers and Employees from Australia

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ABSTRACT

People with disabilities face unique challenges to access work and participate in a work culture and environment. The increasing uptake of telework is promising from a digital inclusion perspective for people with disabilities. This qualitative study explored barriers and problems of including people with disabilities through telework in Australia. The study focused on management and worker perspectives and findings indicate that both parties face unique challenges to accommodate and include people with disabilities in telework arrangements. Worker barriers to access telework relate to management attitudes, physical and infrastructure problems, social isolation misconceptions, lack of management trust, insufficient telework opportunities and inadequate management knowledge of IT support and reasonable adjustment for people with disabilities. Management issues involve cultural intolerance towards diversity and disability in general, as well as a lack of policies and processes that create a supportive environment for people with disabilities who wish to telework.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, there has been a major shift in thinking about ‘work’ regarding where and how work is conducted. New developments in Information Technology (IT) have greatly fostered a move towards more flexible modes of work commonly referred to as ‘telework’ or ‘telecommuting’ (Blok, Groenesteijn, Schelvis & Vink, 2012; Davison & Cotton, 2012; Maruyama & Tietze, 2012). Telework

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allows workers to work flexible hours in any geographical location beyond the normal office, using IT or telecommunication technologies to communicate and collaborate (Olson & Primps, 1984; Maruyam & Tietze, 2012). Telework as a new way of work holds great promise as the *flexibility* of work provides multiple benefits to different types of workers. This includes saving commuting time, achieving work-family balance by extending work hours to accommodate family demands, or embracing flexible work hours to facilitate caring for elderly parents (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Galvez, Martinez & Perez, 2012; Powell & Craig, 2015; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001). Also, prior studies indicate that access to telework increases employee wellbeing, which in turn increases productivity (Bosua, Gloet, Kurnia, Mendoza & Yong, 2012).

One of the advantages of telework is the ‘*digital inclusion*’ of workers who might otherwise be excluded from work, such as workers with disabilities. Disability can take many forms, be temporary, total or partial, lifelong, acquired, visible or invisible. In this study, ‘disability’ is the overarching term that covers impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions resulting from problems with body function and structure (impairment), limitations to execute tasks/actions (activity restriction), and individual involvement in life situations (participation restriction) (World Health Organization, 2011). Disabled people’s ability to engage in the workforce provides multiple benefits, including financial independence, a sense of self-satisfaction and improved physical and mental wellbeing (Randolph, 2004; Anderson & Douma, 2009; Stam, Sieben, Verbakel & De Graaf, 2015). Considering the benefits provided by telework, expectations are that this form of work opens up much more access to work for people with disabilities.

A recent report indicates that Australia has more than 4 million people (i.e. 1 in 5 people or 18.5% of the population) with disabilities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Also, only 53% of people with disabilities participated in the Australian workforce in 2013, confirming that little change has occurred in this area over the last two decades. Recently, a World Health Organization report (World Health Organization, 2011) confirmed very little change in global workforce participation by people with disabilities over the last 20 years. Considering this gap and that telework may be a mechanism to include more people with disabilities in the workforce, this study poses the following research questions: *What are the issues and problems that both managers and people with disabilities face with respect to access to telework, and how can people with disabilities be included in the workforce through telework arrangements?*

In response to these questions, this study followed a qualitative research approach to explore the relationship between disability and telework from both a manager and worker perspective. This chapter is structured as follows: the next section provides background literature on telework and disability followed by a description of the research approach, participants, and data collection. Findings follow in the form of quotes, based on key themes that emerged from a deeper analysis of the data. The discussion highlights important elements that foster a more digitally and inclusive workforce for people with disabilities. The conclusion discusses limitations of the study and avenues for further research.

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