

## Investigating the Relationship between Telecommuting and Career Harm

Hayes McLeod

Patrick McCarthy, Ph.D., J.D.

Middle Tennessee State University

## Abstract

This project aims to examine how the use of flexible work arrangements influence career earnings and promotions at work. The study will focus on the flexible work arrangement of telecommuting because of telecommuting's surge in popularity over the last decade and the need for more studies assessing telecommuting's effects. Research shows many benefits are associated with flexible work arrangements like job satisfaction, increased productivity, decreased turnover, and organizational savings. Flexible work arrangements, however, have been shown to potentially impede wage growth and other career advancing opportunities (e.g. promotions). For example, the use of FMLA policies as a flexible work arrangement and its impact on wage growth is commonly referred to as a parenthood penalty. While telecommuting has become more common in the workplace, people are still reluctant to engage in this flexible work practice for several reasons with the potential for career harm being a major concern. However, there is limited research of the impact telecommuting has on career harm in relation to salary and promotions. A major hurdle for researchers assessing the impact of telecommuting on career harm revolves around data collection methods and proper documentation of telecommuting practices by organizations. Ideally, an entity or researcher would gather longitudinal data from respondents over several years to compare those who engage in telecommuting and those who don't. Additionally, many organizations have yet to maintain detailed records of an employee's use of telecommuting practices in their own organization. Consequently, the manager is often responsible for monitoring an employee's performance and it is usually up to the manager's discretion on whether or not an employee will be allowed to telecommute. This decision by the manager adds another variable to the relationship between telecommuting and career harm, manager support. The existing literature comparing telecommuters to non-telecommuters conflict. Some reports show the positive impact telecommuting has on career earnings, while many others show career dampening results. The goal of this study is to assess the relationship between telecommuting and career harm by gathering years of historical data from respondents concerning their salary, promotions, intensity of telecommuting, manager support, organization characteristics, type of job, and career ambition. The data will be analyzed through fixed effect regression and mediation analyses on manager support and career ambition.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The population of interest for the current study is full-time workers in the United States. Participants must meet the eligibility requirements of a full-time worker (minimum of 30 hours a week), length of full-time employment (minimum of 5 years), and age (minimum of 25 years-old). The restriction of full-time employment for a minimum of 5 years was chosen to reduce any impact of part-time work on salary. Much research has shown the effects of part-time work or reduction of hours as a signal for less career earnings. Regardless of the reason for less hours worked (e.g. family care, extended leave, etc.), people who work fewer hours generally earn less than full-time workers. The age requirement of 25 was chosen because participants will be asked to report salary earnings and promotions over different points throughout their career. Twenty-five years old was identified as a reasonable age where a participant would have enough time to progress in their career with the additional restriction of consecutive years of full-time employment (5 years).

### **Procedure**

An online survey will be hosted by Amazon's Mechanical Turk (an online platform used to facilitate research) to recruit participants for the survey. Participants who complete the survey in full will be compensated for completion of the survey based on M-Turk's suggested rate. The participants will be given an informed consent form with the purpose of the study, risks and benefits, requirements for eligibility, and primary investigator's contact information. The participants will be directed to a screening page and be asked to complete three questions regarding their eligibility for the study. If participants do not meet the eligibility requirements, they will be taken to the end of the survey with a message informing them that they did not meet the eligibility requirements for the current study. The participants who do meet the eligibility requirements will be directed to the beginning of the survey and continue by answering the survey items. At the end of the survey participants will fill out a set of demographic questions.

### **Description of Measures**

Participants will be asked to report their income, promotion history, telecommuting intensity, hours worked, telecommuting normativeness in the organization, organizational information, perception of manager's support for telecommuting, career ambition, tenure status, and job type. Participants will be asked to report the same information up to five times, relative to the corresponding year being asked in the survey. For example, a participant will be asked the same series of questions in relation to their employment in 2019, 2015, 2011, 2007, and 2003. If participants have only been working 10 years, they will report information from 2019, 2015, and 2011. Longitudinal data appropriate for assessing a causal relationship between flexible work arrangement use and career earnings are lacking within national databases. The current measures and methods will seek to rectify this issue within the literature and push for organizations to better document employees' flexible work arrangement use on career earnings.

### **Analysis**

Fixed effect regression will be used when collecting several time observations from the same participant. The fixed effect model controls for differences between participants that were omitted yet remain constant within an individual over time (Coltrane, 2013). Any change in the independent variables will be used to estimate effects of flexible work arrangement usage on salary and promotion. The fixed effect approach is beneficial because it controls for individual differences (career change, new company, performance, etc.) which could impact salary differences in an individual's usage of flexible work arrangements.