The Malice of Maladaptation: Is Teleworking Enabling Behavioural Addiction?

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Abstract

Whilst the concept of addiction is predominantly related to substance abuse in academic literature, there is growing literature around individuals engaging in behavioural addictive practices such as gaming, gambling, food, sex, and work. This paper explores whether individuals who telework are more likely to exhibit maladaptive behaviours and consequently engage in non-substance based addictive practices. This paper aims to address both societal stigmas and gaps in existing current literature by identifying that behavioural addictions share the same patterns to substance-based abuse so that organisations can provide effective intervention and support strategies for employees.

Keywords: Teleworking, behavioural, addiction, wellbeing, maladaptive

Introduction

This paper aims to identify whether maladaptive behaviours influenced by increased teleworking are linked to increased behavioural addictions and how this affects productivity. This paper, which is part of a wider PhD project which aims to explores the current literature to highlight whether organisations can identify the signs of developing behavioural addictions earlier in employees and how organisations in general can begin to provide support for those with ongoing behavioural addictions problems, maintaining the employee's mental health whilst ensuring productivity simultaneously.

Whilst the concept of homeworking, which in literature is mainly referred to as '*teleworking*' or '*telecommunicating*' (Geschwhind & Messenger, 2016) has been debated amongst academic literature over the past 40 years, due to recent global events such as the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic, commonly known as COVID-19 (World Health Organisation, 2020),

advancements in technology and societal acceptance towards homeworking, organisations are now beginning to restructure their working practices to offer flexibility to employees, increase cost effectiveness and attract a higher calibre of candidates in the labour market (Moens et al, 2022), and the paper concerns one potential unintended consequence of this change.

The Current Context of Teleworking in the United Kingdom

The idea of teleworking has existed in the United Kingdom since the 1990's with the earliest reported 'teleworkers' consisting of less than half a percent of the UK's labour force (Huws, 1993). Whilst the UK has previously thought of ways to increase teleworking prior to the start of the millennium in the form of *'telecottages' (*a community-based facility with personal computers and other electronic devices) (Gillespie et al, 1995), only over the past two decades has teleworking in the United Kingdom increased, primarily due to advancements in mobile technology and legal flexibility.

More recently, a report from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD, 2020) identified that the growth in teleworking is a result of increased technological use in a multitude of different roles. The report identifies that compared to 1986, 75% of roles now require the use of a computer and that 93% of households in the UK have internet access compared to less than 10% in 1998. Furthermore, there has also been legislative progress to emulate recent societal challenges with the introduction of the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Bill (2022) which if assented will enforce employers to offer flexible working arrangements from the employee's first day of employment unless in circumstances where presenteeism is required (e.g. front line emergency staff) (Brione, 2022).

To evidence this further, recent statistics from the Office for National Statistics (2022) and Douglas (2022) identifies that the number of hybrid workers (those who split their working time between the office and home) has increased from 13% to 24% in 2022, where in contrast the number of individuals working from home entirely has fallen from 22% to 14% in the same period (February-April, 2022). Furthermore, the number of job advertisements with remote elements has increased by 28% (January-April 2022), this offering a broad overview as to how working practices are rapidly developing in the UK's labour force.

Whilst it is becoming clear that the UK is beginning to welcome teleworking practices into everyday working life, organisations now face several different challenges to ensure that employees continue to demonstrate the same or an increased level of productivity whilst supporting employees maintaining a healthy balance between home and work-related boundaries. Lausch, Kossek & Eaton (2009) argue that the transition from office to home work should be gradual but due to the sudden and severe impact onset of COVID-19 organisations found themselves unable to offer adequate support, training and adjustment which in turn led to increased levels of technostress (where an individual becomes overwhelmed with new technologies and work-related systems) and poorer productivity (Vaziri et al, 2020; Ragu- Nathan et al, 2022; Fisher et al, 2020). Furthermore, whilst the number of hybrid workers has increased only 48% of individuals state that this new method of working has improved their overall wellbeing and productivity. Taking this into account, the next section of this paper will concentrate on the role of maladaptation and how this impacts teleworkers.

Maladaptive Behaviours

According to Gray (2013) maladaptive behaviour is defined as a behaviour that interferes with an individual's daily living or ability to adjust to and participate in certain settings, this can range from minor behaviours such as nail biting or more extreme behaviours such as self-harm, oversexualised behaviours, and substance abuse.

Whilst traditionally there has been little research connecting maladaptation and work, over the past decade due to changes in organisational and societal attitudes towards wellbeing at work, there has been increased discussion surrounding employee self-regulation and how these impact on domains such as mental health and productivity (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Mark and Smith, 2008; Grant et al, 2019). One of the more recent frameworks to appear in HR literature surrounding this topic is Bakker and de Vries (2021) *'Job Design, Resources and Self-Regulation (JDRSR)* framework (figure 1) which identifies how an individual's adaptive or maladaptive behaviour impacts their relationship with work.
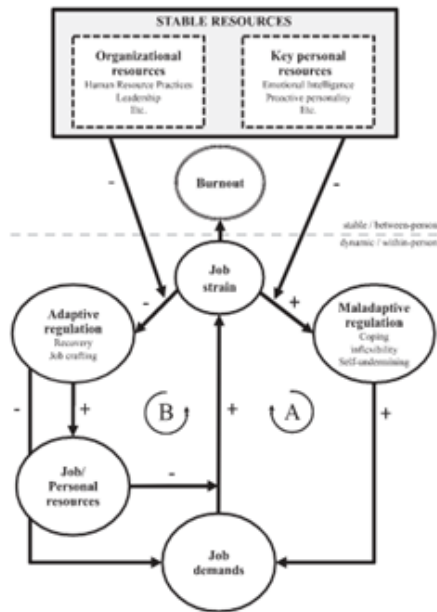
STABLE RESOURCES

Organizational resources
Human Resource Practices
Leadership
Etc.

Key personal resources
Emotional Intelligence
Proactive personality
Etc.

Burnout

stable / between-person
dynamic / within-person

Job strain

Adaptive regulation
Recovery
Job crafting

Maladaptive regulation
Coping inflexibility
Self-undermining

(B)   (A)

Job/ Personal resources

Job demands

Figure 1 - Job Demands, Resources and Self-Regulation (JDRSR) (Bakker and De Vries, 2021, pg. 6)

In Figure 1, Bakker and De Vries (2021) adapt the earlier *Job Design- Resource* framework (JD-R) (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which identifies that for an individual to maintain a coherent level of productivity, it is the responsibility of the organisation to provide a suitable working environment in combination with functionality to conduct the work adequately (e.g. relationship with managers, level of autonomy, correct level of access to systems). Whilst traditionally the JD-R framework identifies that an organisation needs to provide suitable resources and realistic timescales for work to be conducted, the JDRSR framework in contrast investigates the process in which individuals arrive or in some instances fail to arrive at expected outcomes and stipulates that whether an individual demonstrates adaptive or maladaptive behaviours is a key indicator for these outcomes.

Adaptive regulation with respect to work is where employees will psychologically detach themselves from work to re-energise and re-focus. Often, this involves finding ways to relax, taking up new challenges or hobbies and making decisions on their own accord (Sonntentag & Fitz, 2007; Bennett et al, 2018). Whilst there is no universal acceptance regarding methods to reduce stress, Grant et al (2019) implies that those who adopt adaptive behaviours will persevere with required tasks and craft their roles and activities to comply with their own talents and abilities, with Rudolph et al (2017) identifying that whilst limitations exist, this is a beneficial strategy for employees to adopt.

Maladaptive behaviours in contrast is where individuals who are experiencing higher levels of job strain demonstrate difficulty in concentrating and are more prone to work related errors (Van Der Linden and Eling, 2006). Within this framework, Bakker and De Vries (2021) refer to both *coping inflexibility* whereby the individual continuously changes behaviour to manage specific demands, which can lead to increased work-life boundary blurring where the individual exhibits signs of depression, lack of control and occupational fatigue (Vaziri et al, 2020). As a result of this, the individual may deploy two actions, approach coping, where an

individual makes continuous effort to solve the problem, or avoidance, where the individual ignores the demands of the workplace to negate stressors, leading to long term problems for the individual as they fail to grasp control of the stressor in question often resulting in increased job strain, poorer wellbeing and an increased likelihood in manifesting in alternate harmful behaviours (Bakker and Wang, 2020; Bakker & Costa, 2014).

To evidence this further, studies conducted by Quinones- Laveriano et al (2022) identified that individuals displaying a maladaptive behaviour led to poorer lifestyle choices. This is increasingly present in individuals under 40 particularly due to the habits of younger individuals who are increasingly exposed to toxic substance (e.g., tobacco and alcohol) whose usage increased during a period of homeworking due to *"A maelstrom of challenges causing strain for many remote workers"* (Jeske, 2022, pg. 394) identifying that the sudden onset of homeworking and the environmental challenges this brings has begun to alter individual behaviours. The next section of this paper will explore behavioural addiction.

Behavioural Addiction

There has been much debate within academic and clinical spheres regarding the word *addiction* due to the stigma that society associates with it. Usually, when we think of addictions, most literature explores drug and alcohol abuse whereby an individual is consuming a substance to illicit a chemical response. However, when we consider behavioural addictions, Hartney (2020) explains that whilst no substance is being consumed, the addiction in question, whether it be work, internet, shopping, gaming, or sexual behaviour, follows the same pattern as substance addictions in that the individual begins to prioritise this behaviour over other aspects of their life such as relationships, work, financial and overall physical and mental health.

Currently, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) only considers gambling to be a behavioural addiction, which is due to the high degree of medical research into this area. However, whilst gambling is currently the only recognised behavioural addiction, other addictions such as smartphone, internet and gaming addictions are becoming increasingly common due to advancements in technology.

To emphasise this further, works conducted by Shi et al (2023) identifies that individuals use their smartphones for emotional regulation to overcome unpleasant feelings that they are currently experiencing, further validating earlier works by Rozgonjuk and Elhai (2019) who suggest that individuals are using their smartphones to alleviate stress, which could lead to increased usage and subsequently lead to smartphone and other addictions such as video gaming and video streaming services (e.g. TikTok, YouTube) in particular (Brailovskaia et al, 2020) This also resonates with the earlier mentioned JDRSR framework in which individuals engaging in more maladaptive behaviours will identify methods to avoid work related stressors.

Taking this into account, there is further evidence that those who possess increased maladaptive personality traits are increasingly likely to experience emotional dysregulation whereby an individual will internalise symptoms of depression and anxiety and will actively seek alternate methods to regulate their emotions in a variety of different methods leading to more extreme manifestations and addictions as earlier mentioned (Hyatt et al, 2020). With this in view and due to the increased notion of teleworking, a key question that remains to be answered is how organisations can recognise the signs and symptoms of the earlier stages of behavioural addiction and what support mechanisms can be offered to improve wellbeing and employee productivity.

How do Organisations Identify Addictions?

As mentioned earlier, the literature surrounding this topic explores substance abuse as opposed to behavioural addictions, which is also exemplified in current health and safety guidance set out by Health and Safety Executive (2020). However, with respect to behavioural addictions whereby symptoms often remain hidden (Kuss and Griffiths, 2011) there is much debate as to whether organisations are responsible for identifying signs of behavioural addictions in individuals and whether they have both the financial and operational capacity to identify and support individuals.

CIPD (2022) argue that organisations have a duty to provide and incorporate well-being practices within the central HR strategy and by doing so should offer several support domains ranging from walking clubs, yoga, and healthy menu choices to promote good lifestyle choices and ensure good line management, appropriate work demands and a positive work

environment to promote inclusion and clarity over activities. In addition to this, there is also a greater need for mental health awareness and training in organisations following the findings of Mind (2021) '*Workplace Wellbeing Index*' which identified that 58% of individuals were experiencing poorer mental health whilst working at their current employer with 74% stating that this affects their levels of concentration and putting off tasks.

To support this further, Sinclair & Suff (2022) identify that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 81% of organisations are now taking more pro-active steps to focus on employees' mental health with 72% offering increased support for working from home. However, the same report also identifies that only 23% of organisations are offering targeted support for specific mental health issues and 26% offering stronger virtual health services. What these statistics do imply is that organisations are incorporating mental health as part of their wider strategy but implementing support services for day-to-day utilisation has proven challenging.

Furthermore, as organisations are reliant often on regulatory or medical schemes to provide prevention and intervention programmes, as most behavioural addictions are unrecognised formally, this often results in employers overlooking signs and symptoms that would have been identified if the addiction was substance abuse related (Starcevic et al, 2018). Consequently, as these types of behavioural addictions are yet to be recognised Atroszko et al (2019) identifies that the long suffering of individuals will continue leading to greater employee sickness and absence in the long term.

Method

This paper aims to identify whether individual maladaptive behaviours in a teleworking context are increasing the likelihood of behavioural addiction. For this paper, there will be an increased focus on males between the age of 18-30, primarily due to this age range being one of the highest groups to engage with teleworking (Nolan et al, 2022).

To address this research gap, two questionnaires will be completed simultaneously. First, this research will utilise Smith and Smith's (2017) '*Wellbeing Process Questionnaire*' in which participants can rank their overall life satisfaction, stress, happiness, efficacy at work, perceived conflicts, and overall health. The aim of this questionnaire is for participants to

identify where they believe their overall well-being is most effected and how their working conditions could be adapted to suit their needs.

The second questionnaire is Mastropietro et al (2022) '*Behavioural Addictions Questionnaire*' which is used as a possible screening method for multiple behavioural addictions (e.g., shopping, food addiction, sex, work, smartphone) and to identify whether those who display more maladaptive behaviours engage in higher levels of behavioural addictions.

To attract prospective participants, social media sites such as Facebook, Linkedin & Twitter will be utilised in the form of snowball sampling. To address issues surrounding representativeness, submissions to the survey will be gradually monitored to ensure that participants from all ethnic groups are participating. If it is identified that a certain subgroup is not participating, social media posts advertising to those subgroups will be shared to attract engagement.

Both questionnaires will be anonymous and managed through Qualtrics to ensure that those participating do not have their Internet Protocol (IP) addresses tracked, this also complying with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) as no personal information will be recorded. Furthermore, to ensure ethical principles are maintained participants will be provided links and contact numbers to national counselling services.

Conclusion

This paper aims to identify whether maladaptive behaviours in the context of teleworking are increasing the likelihood of behavioural addiction. As current literature surrounding addition is primarily focused on substance abuse, due to the emergence of technology and alteration of working practices in the UK because of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is an opportunity to explore how organisations can identify the signs of behavioural addiction in employees so that appropriate intervention and support strategies can be implemented.

To address the research gap, two questionnaires aimed at males between the ages of 18-30 will be provided to identify if there is a correlation between maladaptive behaviours and increased non-substance based addictive practices. As this research highlights the importance

of behavioural addictions in relation to work, by conducting this study it will offer both society and professional industries an opportunity to reflect on their working practices and overall wellbeing of employees.

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