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Human Relations virtual special issue: Virtual Working

Human Relations virtual special issues bring together and highlight related research on a particular topic. Each collection is compiled and introduced by one of the journal's editors; here we have Kerrie L. Unsworth, Associate Editor at *Human Relations*.

Readers can access our virtual special issue on Virtual Working here: https://journals.sagepub.com/topic/collections-hum/hum-1-helping_virtual_work_to_work/hum

Introduction

Coronavirus has changed how we live and how we work. Many of us are now working from home, juggling home-schooling with zoom-bombing, dealing with uncertainty and loneliness, and trying to keep ourselves and our colleagues motivated. Over the years, *Human Relations* has published a variety of papers that have looked at several aspects of virtual work. In this Virtual Special Issue on Helping Virtual Working to Work, we have curated those we felt were the most useful and appropriate for all those who are trying to navigate the covid- and post-covid workplace.

There are eight papers in this virtual special issue each of which has valuable practical recommendations. We start with Lautsch et al. (2009) who examine supervisory practices. One of the key findings from their research is the importance of maintaining equity amongst employees even though this creates inevitable tensions for the supervisor. Although Lautsch and her colleagues compare tele-commuters with non-tele-commuters, the same results could be applied to the covid-workplace. For example, supervisors with staff who need to home-school their children must make sure that the staff without this caring responsibility are not placed under increasing burdens to take up the slack. This tension between equity and support places managers in a tricky situation; luckily, Lautsch and colleagues describe some specific ways that they can creatively deal with it.

Tensions are also apparent when we look at how individuals must manage their work at home. Shumate and Fulk (2004) look at how communication is needed to create boundaries between work and home, and how it can help us overcome conflicting expectations. When we consider their research through the lens of covid-19, we can see the importance of explicitly and clearly specifying the expectations for each member of the household (for home-based roles) and for each member of the team (for work-based roles). Once the expectations have been exposed, Shumate and Fulk (2004) suggest that you routinise them to remove the strain of constant negotiation. For example, you might communicate a shared team expectation that you will check in with the team at 9am, 12pm and 4pm; you could then set up a recurring calendar zoom/Teams/IT system of choice to automatically start a team chat. Such routines and rituals are useful to maintaining your well-being.

The solitary nature of the covid-workplace is unprecedented. At no time in our history have so many people had to work on their own, without actual face-to-face

communication, for so long. Luckily, three papers published in *Human Relations* can provide some recommendations for sustaining relationships in virtual teams. Setting the scene is work by Einola and Alvesson (2019) who look at how each team member, and the collective, have different trajectories of moving in and engaging with the team and of moving out and disengaging. These are ongoing processes involving both idiosyncratic and collective sensemaking and the overall pattern leads to vastly different outcomes in team effectiveness. Reinforcing the work of Shumate and Fulk (2004), they also find that both shared sensemaking and shared meanings are important, particularly because emotions are central to the making and unmaking of virtual teams. In our current covid-workplace, people are dealing with fear, uncertainty, frustration, loneliness, and other lockdown-relevant emotions, and it is likely therefore that this need for shared sensemaking will come to the fore. What do we learn then from Einola and Alvesson (2019)? We can't sit back when we think our team has settled into a covid-routine; instead, we must continue an ongoing process of collective sensemaking.

Communication in virtual teams is also examined by Gibbs (2009) who studied global virtual teams. Once again, tensions and uncertainty sit at the heart of her findings. She found three tensions that the teams faced: 1) autonomy versus connectedness; 2) inclusion versus exclusion, and 3) empowerment versus disempowerment. Some of these tensions were able to be resolved through transcendence communication strategies (embracing the complexity and finding the win-win), however some were not and led to either selection or withdrawal strategies (focusing on only one or neither of the sides). The work by Gibbs (2009) in a covid-workplace, therefore, would suggest that we recognise, acknowledge and be explicit about the tensions we face in virtual team-working; that we realise that some of these may be insurmountable and be dealt with in other ways; but that we work hard to transcend the polarisation as much as possible.

Breuer et al. (2020) bring our focus more narrowly to trust. Can you trust people when you can't see what they're doing? Previous research has shown that trust is a key issue for virtual teams, much more so than for face-to-face teams, so Breuer and colleagues (2020) identified the factors most relevant for building trust in virtual teams. Those factors are ability, benevolence, predictability, integrity and transparency. So, for example, you might want to create a shared database listing each team member's specific expertise; a discussion board to allow for benevolent advice sharing; clear and explicit commitment to shared values (again, we see the importance of the shared expectations and shared sensemaking); and transparent workflow management systems.

And while we're talking about systems and practices that can support virtual teams, we can now turn to our last three papers. These papers look at how we can best design virtual teams. Although we know from Einola and Alvesson (2019) that the set-up is not the be-all-and-end-all for effective virtual teams, our last three papers show that certain factors can help put them on the road to success. The first issue to tackle is how large the teams should be. Voelpel et al. (2008) highlight the tension between having a lot of people involved to ensure a strong pool of

knowledge and having a small number of people to ensure a willingness to engage. They ran a pseudo-experiment by asking a specific question in 333 Yahoo!Groups (online communities comprising 197,419 people in total). They tracked the groups over a 34-day period and found that the highest quality of responses and most engaged groups were those with a membership of less than 100. Groups of between 100 and 250 members were more reticent to respond to the question, although that disappeared when the groups became extremely large. Given that most organisations affected by covid-19 lockdowns will probably not have these extremely large knowledge-sharing groups, it would appear that designing smaller groups of under 100 people would be best.

But what types of technology should you be implementing for your virtual team? Do you need technology that allows a lot of socialising and ‘seeing’ each other (i.e. presence awareness) or one that allows for project coordination, task assignment and collaborative document sharing (i.e. task knowledge awareness)? Malhotra and Majchrza (2014) looked at these two types of information communication technology and found that one was not better than the other, instead there needed to be a match between the job and the technology. They suggest that, for example, teams that regularly have non-routine tasks would do better with technology that enables task awareness. On the other hand, teams that require multidisciplinary working or boundary-spanning would do better with presence awareness technology. Given both the financial and learning costs involved with these technologies, it’s important to ensure that your needs are clearly identified first before jumping on to the latest collaboration platform.

Our last paper in this Virtual Special Issue on Virtual Work is by Van Dyne, Kossek and Lobel (2007) and they outline some practices that can be designed into virtual teamwork. Obviously having reduced ‘face-time’ is going to affect coordination and motivation. However, there are ways around this. First, collaborative time management processes can be designed in. If the team is comprised of generalists and shared decision-making is best, then team-centred coordination can be used; otherwise, each person can identify when they can work collaboratively and when they need to work individually so that the team can synchronise its interactions. Coordination can also be enhanced by asking all employees to engage in ‘proactive availability’. In other words, each person in the team must take responsibility for identifying any availability problems – for example, notifying others in the team when your home-schooling efforts will overlap with a scheduled team meeting and sending in ideas beforehand. Van Dyne and colleagues (2007) also look at practices that buffer motivation from reduced face time. First, they recommend redefining how we notice the contributions that others make. Instead of focusing on when people are and are not available, we can instead focus on specific events that occur at pre-specified times. This removes ambiguity and allows flexibility. Such flexibility can then be embedded into norms through other means such as focusing on outputs rather than inputs and will ensure the team stays motivated.

Here at *Human Relations* we recognise the difficulties and distress that many people across the world are living with now. Our working lives have changed, at

least for the near future, and we hope that these articles go some way to helping you (and helping you to help others) make virtual working work.

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You can access other *Human Relations* virtual special issues here: <http://journals.sagepub.com/page/hum/collections/index>

Contents

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