

Could teleworking benefit organisational neurodiversity?

The type of communication used in teleworking might benefit employees on the autistic spectrum, write Esther Canónico and Daniela Lup



The current pandemic has shed light on the inequalities encountered by women and racial minorities and raised serious questions about the impact of working from home on organisational diversity. However, not all may be negative. If teleworking is likely to become more widespread in the post-pandemic world, then a world where working from home is commonplace might, under certain conditions, have a positive impact on the work experiences of neurodiverse employees, such as those on the autistic spectrum.

Individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face numerous employment challenges, despite having the skills, capabilities and knowledge required for a wide range of jobs. Most of these challenges are the result of general misunderstandings regarding what ASD is, unsupportive work environments, or discrimination.

The negative impact of these challenges on the rate of employment of this group of people is staggering: while employment is lower for individuals with a disability than for the general population (only 47% of adults with disabilities are in some kind of paid work according to the National Autistic Society), it is even lower for individuals with ASD (32% of adults with ASD are in work but only 16% in full-time employment). Even if they are employed, adults with ASD are more likely to have jobs for which they are over-qualified. There is an urgent need to address the unemployment rate for this group and this has been acknowledged by the UK government, which set an employment target of 64% for adults with ASD by 2020 (National Autistic Society).

One of the main reasons that teleworking may be particularly beneficial to workers with ASD is that it allows them to have the flexibility to work in their own physical space. Employees with the flexibility to work from home generally report being more productive and satisfied than office-based employees, partly because they work in their private physical environment which gives them an increased sense of autonomy and control. Teleworking has also been associated with higher productivity as employees working from home do not have the distractions of the office. This could be particularly important to individuals with ASD who tend to be more sensitive to physical stimuli than the general population. Working remotely would allow them to have more control on aspects of their workspace (e.g., noise and light level) than they would otherwise have at the office.

The type of communications used in teleworking may suit better workers with ASD, sometimes more than their neurotypical counterparts. First, when teleworking, communication (e.g., emails, video conferences) is mediated by technology and thus tends to be more formal and less spontaneous than at

the office. Virtual meetings typically require clear planning and preparation and, as a result, communication is more specific and explicit than face to face communication. This could benefit individuals with ASD who may understand things literally and require more precise communication. Second, virtual communication relies less on visual cues (e.g., direct eye contact) than face to face interactions. This aspect could be beneficial for individuals who are less effective in interpreting and using non-verbal signals (a trait consistent with ASD). Third, remote work removes much of the informal interactions that happen at work, such as chatting by the coffee machine, participating in office banter or after work drinks – activities likely to exclude atypical individuals such as people with ASD who are not particularly keen and/or do not fare well in informal interactions.

Another factor that could contribute to teleworking being advantageous for individuals with ASD relates to the way in which performance is appraised. Successful teleworking practices require a performance management system based on output (e.g., results) rather than input or effort (e.g., number of working hours). Individuals working from home have usually the flexibility to choose where and when they do the work as long as they meet their objectives. With teleworking, a performance management system that uses results to evaluate employees is likely to reduce the constraints on working time. This could be beneficial for individuals who need to take breaks during tasks, including those with ASD. Moreover, performance appraisals driven primarily by output reduces the importance of soft / social skills. As individuals with ASD are less likely to excel in soft/social skills, a performance evaluation based on results may be more favourable and fairer than the alternative.

For all its benefits, teleworking could also backfire and perpetuate discrimination of minorities at work. If teleworking is not fully embedded in the culture of the organisation or its use is not extended to a significant number of employees, it may be perceived as a practice suitable mostly for atypical employees, who do not have the commitment and ambition to advance their career within the organisation. As a result, employees using flexible working practices may be side-lined in the organisation for rewards and promotion. This is one of the main barriers to the adoption of teleworking as employees feel they would be marginalised and miss out on professional opportunities if they telework. For teleworking to bring about its advantages, it has to become an accepted practice for all, not one that is normatively acceptable for a minority only. This could be a reality much sooner than ever expected as organisations and individuals have been compelled to make use of teleworking more extensively during the current pandemic and some are seriously considering whether teleworking should be the default work arrangement moving forward.



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