

# The myth of the disconnected telecommuter

May 24 2012, By Laura L. Hunt

---



Kathryn Fonner

(Phys.org) -- The assumption that employees who regularly telecommute will feel less attached to the organization they work for due to feeling isolated and disconnected is a myth, according to a study led by a communication researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM).

The study examined how teleworkers' use of various forms of communication was related to their feelings of closeness to others as well as to feelings of [stress](#) due to interruptions. The study also tested how

these outcomes of communication were associated with teleworkers' sense of identity as part of their organization.

Findings indicated that more communication does not equal more organizational identification for teleworkers. In fact, the opposite was true, says Kathryn Fonner, UWM assistant professor of communication.

“It is often assumed that teleworkers need a lot of communication and contact with the organization in order to diminish their sense of distance and to develop a sense of belonging,” says Fonner. “But we found that the more teleworkers communicated with others, the more stressed they felt due to interruptions, and this was negatively associated with their identification with the organization.”

The study, co-authored with Michael Roloff, professor of communication studies at Northwestern University, appears in the June issue of *Communication Monographs*, published by the National Communication Association.

Although feeling a sense of closeness with others during workplace interactions was associated with positive organizational identification, the study found that the negative relationship between stress from interruptions and organizational identification was stronger.

One possible reason, says Fonner, is that teleworkers consider fewer interruptions as being one of the perks of their remote work arrangement. “When teleworkers feel they are constantly interrupted, this may decrease the value of organizational membership for them, and diminish their attachment to the organization,” she says.

The study evaluated differences between teleworkers and [office workers](#). Teleworkers regularly worked at least three days a week from a location other than the office, and office workers worked at least three

days a week in an office or shared workspace alongside their colleagues. Each set of employees used various modes of communication, including face-to-face, phone or email contact, instant messaging and videoconferencing.

Other outcomes of the study:

- The benefits of frequent communication with others were minimal and not significantly related to teleworkers' or office workers' sense of closeness with others in workplace interactions, regardless of the communication mode used.
- Office workers reported significantly greater levels of stress due to interruptions compared to teleworkers, but their organizational identification was not affected by this stress.
- For teleworkers, stress from interruptions was associated with increased face-to-face communication, email, instant messaging and videoconferencing. For office workers, stress was only related to increased face-to-face and email communication. Results indicate, however, that phone communication generally did not induce the same degree of stress as the other modes.

Fonner says the study findings emphasize a need to address the stress and time pressure associated with the constant barrage of workplace communication for everyone

“Teleworkers should strategically manage their connectivity in order to balance the benefits and

drawbacks of communicating with others,” says Fonner, “while organizations should focus on streamlining [communication](#). This may include limiting mass emails, diminishing the number of weekly meetings, creating information stores and fostering an environment where employees can schedule uninterrupted time to work.”

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Citation: The myth of the disconnected telecommuter (2012, May 24) retrieved 15 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-05-myth-disconnected-telecommuter.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.