

New work-family research shows how team makeup, 'virtuality' affect social loafing

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Sara Perry, Ph.D., assistant professor of management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business Credit: Baylor University Marketing & Communications

Many people dream of working from home. And with today's technology—everything from phone calls and email to texting and videoconferences—maintaining 'virtual' communications with the team seems to be easier than ever.

But is virtual teamwork productive? Are managers really getting the most out of their teams when virtuality is involved?

A new *Journal of Management* study—"When Does Virtuality Really 'Work'? Examining the Role of Work-Family and Virtuality in Social Loafing"—argues that productivity and effectiveness of virtual teamwork centers heavily on the makeup of the team and how that affects accountability.

Researchers conducted two studies, surveying a total of 455 unique individuals (a mix of mostly nontraditional MBA students and upper-level undergraduate students) working on 140 team projects. Teams used varying levels of virtual communication to complete their projects.

Researchers used the data to determine which team combinations worked best together and which allowed for the least amount of social loafing, defined by researchers as "the tendency of individuals to contribute less in a team setting."

"Under the conditions of higher virtuality, you need people to hold you accountable, to prevent the virtuality from letting you stray or 'loaf,'" said study co-author Sara Perry, Ph.D., assistant professor of

management in Baylor University's Hankamer School of Business.

Researchers identified and analyzed four team combinations:

- "Busy teams"—made up of only individuals who have high family responsibility, or non-work obligations
- "Carefree teams"—composed of only people who have few outside obligations
- "High dissimilarity teams" with a majority of "carefree" individuals—a mix of "busy" and "carefree" people, with the majority being those who have fewer outside obligations
- "High dissimilarity teams" with a majority of "busy" individuals—a mix of "busy" and "carefree" people, with the majority being those with many outside obligations

The study shows that the two team combinations that best command accountability and reduce social loafing are: "Carefree teams" and High dissimilarity teams with a majority of 'carefree' individuals

"'Carefree' teams largely comprising individuals with few family responsibilities may actually benefit from increasingly virtual work modes, experiencing higher cohesion and psychological obligation to one another and lower levels of social loafing," researchers said.

For mixed teams, where the majority of teammates are considered "carefree," researchers said, "When an employee is 'busy' but works with mostly 'carefree' teammates, they may actually feel more socially connected as virtuality increases ... The 'busy' teammates learn from their 'carefree' teammates in making effective use of the flexibility afforded by virtuality, such that loafing does not increase as face-to-face interactions decrease."

On the flip side, mixed teams with a majority of "busy" teammates and a

minority of "carefree" teammates didn't fare as well when working virtually.

"'Carefree' individuals may not feel socially connected to their 'busy' teammates and, in turn, even perceive these 'busy' teammates do not contribute to the team effort as they should," researchers said.

So what tends to happen in the "busy teams"?

The study showed that "busy [teams](#)"—individuals who had high family responsibility and worked with others who also had high family responsibility—"reported more social loafing in the team as they increasingly worked in a virtual capacity."

"These individuals tend to form strong social bonds with each other, probably because they experience similar life circumstances and stress," Perry said. "But even when those social bonds are strong within the team, family demands seem to often take priority when there's no face-to-face accountability."

Based on their results, the researchers devoted space in the study to offer several suggestions for managers who wish to implement virtual policies. They include:

- Establishing clear accountability practices among virtual teammates, particularly when most members of a team have many family or other non-work responsibilities.
- Providing tools to help employees clearly separate their work and family lives when working remotely, including learning how to avoid family distractions (example: time management strategies) and setting clear boundaries between work spaces and family spaces.
- Considering that employees who have many [family](#)

responsibilities may actually work best with dissimilar coworkers when virtuality is high.

More information: S. J. Perry et al. When Does Virtuality Really "Work"? Examining the Role of Work-Family and Virtuality in Social Loafing, *Journal of Management* (2013). [DOI: 10.1177/0149206313475814](https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206313475814)

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