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How Does Personal Identification with Supervisors Affect Salesperson Performance?

Michael L. Mallin, PhD, Tyler D. Hancock, PhD, Ellen B. Pullins, PhD, and Bashar S. Gammoh, PhD

Wait Just a Minute: When to Ask for Online Reviews

Miyeon Jung, PhD, Sunghan Ryu, PhD, Sang Pil Han, PhD, and Daegon Cho, PhD

Staying Remotely Engaged: Interruptions and Breaks During Remote Work

Sara Jansen Perry, PhD, Dawn S. Carlson, PhD, K. Michele Kacmar, PhD, Min (Maggie) Wan, PhD, and Merideth J. Thompson, PhD

Surprising Syntax Sells!

Vineet Paidisetty, BBA

The Power of Self-Oriented Competitiveness

Wyatt Schrock, PhD, Douglas Hughes, PhD, Yanhui Zhao, PhD, Clay Voorhees, PhD, and John Hollenbeck, PhD

INSIDER: How to Listen with Intention

Andrew McElroy, BBA

INSIDER: Cleaning Up Your Mental Mess

Jude Enajero, MBA/MSIS



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Staying Remotely Engaged: Interruptions and Breaks During Remote Work

Sara Jansen Perry, PhD, Dawn S. Carlson, PhD, K. Michele Kacmar, PhD, Min (Maggie) Wan, PhD, and Merideth J. Thompson, PhD

Working from home has proven to be a unique challenge for many as companies have shifted toward remote and hybrid models of work in recent years. Frequent interruptions during work hours from spouses or children or frequent interruptions to family life from remote work can be significant causes of stress. Mental and emotional resources can be taxed by this overlap of family and work lives, resulting in a lower quality of work, greater stress, and lower overall satisfaction for the employee. Spouses may also experience stress from the employee's work arrangement, especially in terms of family overload. With this in mind, we conducted a study to see what types of breaks would best contribute to overcoming additional stress and resource drain while working remotely.

Challenge Stress vs. Hindrance Stress

In our study, we examined two different types of stress that employees face: challenge stress and hindrance stress. Challenge stress is associated with positive outcomes, as it encourages employees to work harder and improve at what they are doing. This type of stress typically results from doing work that employees enjoy and that challenges them in satisfying ways.^{1,2} Hindrance stress is associated with negative



outcomes and the attitude that remote work presents hassles, barriers, or threats to progress, which inhibit learning, growth, and/or goal achievement.³ In order to measure and draw conclusions about these types of stress among remote workers and their spouses, we collected three complete online survey responses from 391 couples (two from employees, one from spouses) during the early part of the COVID-19 pandemic response. In these surveys, we asked the couples to think about how remote work had affected them with regards to: interruptions from family during work hours, challenge and hindrance stress response in remote work, their use of breaks, their satisfaction with their work arrangement, family overload, and work engagement.

Study Findings

Through our study, we found that employees who use breaks for non-work goals (such as household chores, making plans with friends, or caring for children) and self-care (meditation, getting a massage, reading, eating a snack, engaging in a hobby, etc.) exhibited better overall views of their remote work stress (higher challenge, lower hinderance) than those who used breaks for neither. We also found that for spouses, hinderance stress carries over from the remote worker, while challenge stress does not, meaning that a remote worker's negative work stress is more likely to affect the spouse and family life than the positive stress.

In addition, we found that interruptions from family during remote work tends to have a negative impact on the remote worker and that those who are best able to minimize those interruptions through the day tend to find remote work more satisfying. One way to minimize interruptions is through the very same types of breaks (used for self-care or non-work goals). For instance, if an interruption through the day is needed to care for one's children, it may be more beneficial to take a break to focus on taking care of them, rather than doing half jobs as parent and employee. For this reason, it is important for companies that have remote employees to educate employees on the benefits of taking breaks for self-care and non-work goals and set normal expectations about how and when these breaks should be taken.

Real Estate Implications

For real estate agents, working from home has been the norm for much longer than in other industries. Thus, many in real estate may already feel comfortable and productive working remotely. However, by understanding the types of stress that one can face from remote work, especially family interruptions and how to deal with them, it is possible to greatly improve productivity and job satisfaction.

Given that our research and previous studies support the idea that breaks make workers happier and more productive, it would also be beneficial for the vast majority of remote workers to take breaks regularly and deliberately. Previous research shows that two-thirds of remote workers take very infrequent breaks, and that half are working longer hours than they would in the office.⁴ In an environment like real estate where there aren't likely to be strict limitations on working hours or styles, it is important to remember that breaks are a good thing and will improve the quality of work in the long run.



Recommended Reading

Perry, Sara Jansen, Dawn S. Carlson, K. Michele Kacmar, Min (Maggie) Wan, and Merideth J. Thompson (2022), “Interruptions in Remote Work: A Resource-based Model of Work and Family Stress,” *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 38, 1023-1041.

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4. Radulović, Azra Huršidić, Roko Žaja, Milan Milošević, Bojana Radulović, Ivica Luketić, and Tajana Božić (2021), “Work from Home and Musculoskeletal Pain in Telecommunications Workers During COVID-19 Pandemic: A Pilot Study,” *Archives of Industrial Hygiene & Toxicology*, 72, 232-239.

About the Authors

Sara Jansen Perry, PhD

Associate Professor of Management and Ben William Endowed Professor, Baylor University

Dr. Sara Jansen Perry (PhD – University of Houston) teaches courses in HR Staffing & Employee Relations, as well as Negotiation & Conflict Resolution in both the online MBA program and undergraduate levels. She conducts research on employee stress and well-being, including factors involved in remote and hybrid work. In 2023, she won the Brent Clum award for scholarly productivity among tenured faculty in the Hankamer School of Business. In 2017, she won the Outstanding Scholarship Award for research productivity among tenure-track faculty at Baylor University and the Young Scholar Award in the Hankamer School of Business. She publishes in high-visibility journals, such as *Journal of Applied Psychology* and *Journal of Management*, in addition to a book published by Oxford University Press titled “Organized Innovation: A Blueprint for Renewing America’s Prosperity.” Dr. Perry serves on the editorial board for *Journal of Management*, *Human Resource Management*, and *Human Resource Management Review*. She is a member of Academy of Management, Southern Management Association, and Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology.

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Dr. Dawn Carlson's (PhD – Florida State University) research focuses on the intersection of work and family life, including work-family conflict, enrichment, and balance. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management*, *Computers in Human Behavior*, and *Human Relations*, among others. Dr. Carlson has co-authored the book “Beyond Juggling: Rebalancing Your Busy Life.” Additionally, she has received several significant accolades and awards including Florida State University's Distinguished Doctoral Alumna for 2018, the Graduate Business Association's Outstanding Academician award, multiple Outstanding Professor awards, and multiple Best Publication awards.

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Dr. Michele Kacmar's (PhD – Texas A&M University) research interests include impression management, organizational policies, ethics, and work family conflict. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organizational Management Journal*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Social Psychology*, and *Human Relations*, among others. Dr. Kacmar also co-authored the strategic management textbook “Human Resource Management: A Strategic Approach.” Additionally, she has received several significant accolades and awards including the Michael J. Driver Best Careers Paper award, the Mays Distinguished Doctoral Alumni award, and the Best Doctoral Student Paper award, among others.

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Dr. Maggie Wan's (PhD – University of Wisconsin) research interests include Work-Life Issues, Employee Well-Being, and Cross-Cultural Human Resource Management. Her research has been featured in journals such as the *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, and *Human Resource Management Journal*. In the classroom, she teaches subjects such as International Business, Organizational Behavior, and Managing and Negotiating across Cultures. Dr. Wan has won awards such as the Presidential Distinction Award for Excellence in Scholarly/Creative Activities and Presidential Distinction Award for Excellence in Teaching from TSU, the Teaching Award of Honor from the Texas State Alumni Association, and a nomination for the Rosabeth Moss Kanter International Award for Research Excellence in Work and Family. She has also served as a reviewer on a number of journals and other publications.

Merideth J. Thompson, PhD

Professor of Management, Utah State University

Dr. Merideth Thompson's (PhD – Vanderbilt University) research focuses on two main areas: bad employee behavior and the work-family interface. She is particularly interested in how abusive supervision and workplace incivility cross over to affect an employee's family experiences. Dr. Thompson's current research also investigates the impact of toxic workplaces on employee health and healthcare costs. Her research has appeared in leading academic journals including *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management*, *Personnel Psychology*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Human Relations*, and others. Dr. Thompson has been interviewed and quoted by leading news outlets including *The New York Times*, ABC News, Fox News, *Harvard Business Review*, *USA Today*, and *Business News Daily*.



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