I-O Psychology and the Rapid Transition to Remote Work During an Emergency

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced much of the country’s workforce, including the Federal Government, into remote work arrangements. With the need for social distancing, the ability to continue essential business functions through effective remote work arrangements is a key means for addressing the global health crisis. However, many organizations and institutions are unprepared to accommodate a remote workforce and likewise lack insight into best practices as to how to promote continued productivity and well-being of the workforce in such arrangements. As federal stakeholders consider programs and policy regarding the national response to these changes, the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) is ready to work with policymakers to ensure the application of evidence-based methods in industrial and organizational (I-O) psychology.

SIOP is a community of nearly 10,000 members worldwide with a common interest in promoting the research, practice, and teaching of I-O psychology to enhance human well-being and performance in organizational and work settings. SIOP provides a platform for scientists, academics, consultants, and practitioners to collaborate, implement, and evaluate cutting-edge approaches to workplace challenges across sectors. Given that continuation of work operations is critical to the nation’s economic stability and social distancing is imperative for the health of the nation, there is an urgent need for science-based recommendations on remote work. Below are some of the ways I-O psychologists can help in this space:

**CHALLENGE:** Many workers are entering into full-time remote work for the first time. Remote workers may face challenges associated with use of new technologies, feelings of social isolation, and fear of not meeting productivity demands. There is a critical need to identify factors that enable adjustment to this form of work.

**I-O IMPACT:** I-O psychologists have expertise on topics that help predict remote work adjustment. Research on factors such as individual differences, technological applications and use, and leadership can be deployed to develop strategies ease into virtual work.

**CHALLENGE:** Virtual meetings have become the new norm.

**I-O IMPACT:** The science of meetings developed by I-O psychologists can be used to develop best practices for virtual meetings in addition to those that involve face-to-face contact. Research on leadership, virtual teams, and organizational culture can additionally be used to develop best practices and expectations for employees in order to reduce uncertainties.

**CHALLENGE:** Remote work is requiring many workers to rapidly learn new communication and technology platforms.

**I-O IMPACT:** I-O psychologists have expertise in computer-mediated communication and worker technology use. In addition, the science of training developed by I-O psychologists can be used to engage best practices for rapid worker training. I-O psychology expertise on virtual teams can also play a key role in helping employees quickly develop new skills and use new tools.
**CHALLENGE:** Managers are facing the challenge of supervising employees via remote work for the first time. This shift in work style may be exceptionally difficult for managers used to managing via face-to-face contact.

**I-O IMPACT:** I-O psychologists’ knowledge of leadership development best practices is highly valuable to this context. Research on supervisor-employee trust, crisis and change management, and workplace communication can be used to provide best practice guidance to leaders to enable them to effectively and efficiently manage and support remote employees.

**CHALLENGE:** Faced with distributed remote work arrangements, maintaining work group cohesion and knowledge exchange can become an obstacle.

**I-O IMPACT:** The expertise of I-O psychologists in virtual and distributed work teams can be used to assist employees facing technology dependence for interaction and task completion. I-O psychologists’ deep knowledge on teams and teamwork can also help teams function effectively and optimally under these challenging circumstances.

**CHALLENGE:** Many workers are struggling with balancing work and personal life, such as caring for children who are home from school or daycare due to the pandemic. Similar problems occur when businesses and schools are closed due to weather events and other natural disasters.

**I-O IMPACT:** I-O psychologists have been at the forefront of examining the intersection of work and nonwork for decades. Their expertise in work-family issues and work-nonwork boundary management can be used to help identify ways that remote workers can maintain productivity and well-being while also juggling nonwork responsibilities.

**CHALLENGE:** Many workers are experiencing high levels of work-related stress. Employees in certain industries (e.g., banking, healthcare) are working much longer hours than usual to accommodate the demands of the pandemic, and many employees are dealing with the threat of layoffs and furloughs or additional workload.

**I-O IMPACT:** A large sub-discipline within I-O psychology is occupational health psychology, focused on the psychological and physical well-being of employees. Research in this area can inform best practices in stress reduction and management, as well as formal organizational initiatives aimed at reducing stress (e.g., employee assistance programs). Research on organizational change management can also inform best practices for communicating layoffs and facilitating layoff survivors’ well-being.

SIOP is a volunteer society with experts from several diverse fields within I-O psychology and we look forward to finding ways to support the work of policymakers to address the myriad of challenges facing the federal workforce during this challenging time.

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