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TELECOMMUTING AND THE CONTESTABILITY OF CHOICE

Employee Strategies to Legitimize Personal Decisions to Work in a Preferred Location

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This study examined the legitimization of work location choices at a government agency in the early stages of implementing a voluntary telecommuting program. Legitimization is a complex socially constructed practice and process within a given organizational culture. Three broad legitimacy lenses (pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy) provided the framework for analyzing interviewed members' discourse and described organizational messages. The analysis revealed a textured account of workplace justification that exposed significant challenges facing organizations attempting to implement new forms of work. The results show that although organizational messages focusing on employee well-being were largely supported and served to pragmatically legitimize employee choices, perceived degree of communicative interaction with stakeholders such as colleagues, clients, and family members served as claims that supported and contested various forms of legitimacy.

Keywords: *telecommuting; teleworking; organizational culture; organizational change; legitimacy; identity construction*

Since Nilles (1977) first used the term *telecommuting* to describe employees who complete a significant part of their work-related tasks at a location remote from the company headquarters, telecommuting, or teleworking, has been heralded as the wave of the future. Hill, Ferris, and Märtinson (2003) draw on Nilles to define *teleworking* as all forms of work that substitute information technology for work-related travel so that the work is moved to the workers as opposed to the other way around. Some of these workers may be given the opportunity to work "anytime, anyplace" as virtual workers, while telecommuters are generally designated as those employees who periodically work outside the principal office, whether that is at home, at a telework center, or a client's location.

Telecommuting offers opportunities for new forms of organizing; however, as Potter (2003) argued, "the prospect of fragmenting and shredding the workplace as the basis for both societal and corporate values" (p. 75) previously not experienced in modern societies. The potential for fragmentation is key to understanding alternative work forms. Many people are seeking community and belonging as opposed to deindividuation and fragmentation. For some, community may be sought out through organizational memberships, including work and employment. For others, community is found outside of employer or work-related organizational boundaries (Parker & Arthur, 2000).

Telecommuting (or other alternative work forms such as job sharing or flextime) presents a paradoxical relationship to community at work by questioning individual relationships to and possibly identification with employing organizations. If telecommuting appears to fragment core values at work, those enacting the work form may appear to be less valid or legitimate contributors to the organization than those who do not telecommute. If telecommuting rather than appearing to fragment core organizational values seems to support them, working on-site could become questionable. If telecommuters and on-site employees do not view each other's contributions as legitimate, they may not develop the cohesion necessary to function as a unit when needed even when essentially operating as a virtual organization (Mowshowitz, 1994; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1998). Similarly, work location legitimizes individuals' "situatedness" in their social networks, for example, by suggesting the type of socially sanctioned role that a particular working individual fulfills and how well that role is filled.

The purpose of the current study was to examine how employees in a telecommuting organization legitimize particular forms of work, be it in-house or off-site, and how they respond to key organizational messages. The investigation begins with a brief overview of different forms of legitimacy and the process of legitimation in the context of telecommuting. Legitimacy and the process of legitimation are then examined in relation to the current study conducted with telecommuters and in-house employees at a governmental agency located in Virginia. The results of the current study yielded important theoretical and practical implications that need to be considered for future research and organizing.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEGITIMACY AND TELECOMMUTING

Legitimacy has been defined as "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, or appropriate

within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 575). At a very basic level, it is a process of giving reasons for why something should be considered desirable (Francesconi, 1986) as in the case of choosing a particular work location.

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF LEGITIMACY

Most legitimacy studies may be divided into two related approaches: strategic approaches focusing on managerial attempts to manipulate organizational symbols to gain support and institutional approaches focusing on cultural interactions (Massey, 2001; Suchman, 1995). The two approaches, the strategic and the institutional approaches, may be divided further by focusing on three primary forms of legitimacy based on the form that the evaluations take—pragmatic legitimacy, moral legitimacy, and cognitive legitimacy—each of which may be further subdivided (Suchman, 1995).

The first category, *pragmatic legitimacy*, may be subdivided into dispositional legitimacy based on perceptions of shared values, influence legitimacy based on perceived organizational responsiveness to the needs of the employees, and exchange legitimacy based on the value that a policy has to its constituents (Suchman, 1995). The second category, *moral legitimacy*, may similarly be subdivided into consequential legitimacy based on validity of outcomes, procedural legitimacy based on the establishment of procedures to facilitate work processes, structural legitimacy based on evaluations of work-related categories and structures, and personal legitimacy granted by leaders as role models. Finally, the last category, *cognitive legitimacy*, is based on the ability of employees to understand the situation. Cognitive legitimacy is subdivided into legitimacy based on comprehensiveness based on the availability of cultural models that can provide plausible explanations and legitimacy based on taken-for-grantedness, or the ability of an organization and its members to absorb a phenomenon as unquestionable (Suchman, 1995).

THE LEGITIMACY OF TELECOMMUTING AS AN ALTERNATIVE FORM OF WORK

Examining organizational discourse about the legitimacy of alternative work options, such as the choice between telecommuting and in-house work, can reveal underlying tensions between stabilization and destabilization in existing organizational structures (Massey, 2001; Suchman, 1995). Telecommuting challenges the legitimacy of multiple social structures. First is the challenge that telecommuting presents to determining what constitutes work as a process. Second is the challenge that telecommuting presents to what constitutes an organization. Finally is the challenge that telecommuting presents to what constitutes boundaries between "home" and "work."

The challenge of telecommuting to what is considered work is grounded in the question of whether employees who are engaging in telecommuting or other nontraditional work forms (e.g., flextime, job sharing) are actually contributing to the workplace (Brocklehurst, 2001). Many employees working in organizations offering alternative work options are finding themselves challenged with questions of what constitutes legitimate work, legitimate membership in an organization, and how to construct the appearance of a legitimate identity as a productive, contributing colleague (Brocklehurst, 2001; Steward, 2000).

Next, telecommuting challenges what legitimately constitutes an organization, underscoring the question of whether nontraditional locations legitimately constitute acceptable places of work in the minds of telecommuters and coworkers alike, which may explain why telecommuting is not as available as it would generally appear (Potter, 2003). Clearly, although most research on telecommuting focuses on only those members of the organization that work off-site, in reality such alternative work forms require all members to engage in a process of legitimating new forms of work (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Watson-Manheim, Piramuthu, & Narasimhan, 2000).

Finally, in addition to challenging traditional work experiences, telecommuting calls into question the traditional bifurcation

between private and public spheres of life. Proponents of telecommuting often argue that there is little difference between completing tasks in-house or at home; however, telecommuting invariably threatens the boundaries between "home" and "work" (Shumate & Fulk, 2004). On one hand, what constitutes "real" work in and of itself continues to be called into question (Clair, 1996; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002). On the other hand, the ontological security of "home" as a place to escape the daily surveillance found in most workplaces (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998) becomes a concern. It is not surprising that telecommuters often go to great lengths to reify existing boundaries between home and work (Mirchandani, 1999).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Organizations developing telecommuting programs and their members participating in those programs are clearly faced with the challenge of constructing legitimacy for the different work forms offered. Suchman (1995) noted that all the described forms of legitimacy may coexist with one another, but that some forms are likely to be more salient to particular groups of constituents than to others. Hence the first set of research questions guiding the present study:

> *Research Question 1:* What forms of legitimacy do various organizational members seek? What types of communicative interactions and organizational messages do organizational members perceive as providing the foundation for different forms of legitimacy? What types of arguments do the members use to establish their own claims to legitimacy?

In addition to understanding the different forms of legitimacy to which employees and organizations may lay claim, Suchman (1995) observed that the different forms of legitimacy may not be exclusive to one another. One form of legitimacy may overlap with another. For example, normative claims suggesting that "home" and "work" be kept separate to allow people to rejuvenate (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Nippert-Eng, 1996) might be viewed as support-

ive of dispositional legitimacy; similar arguments effectively may be established to grant such boundary maintenance legitimacy based on "taken-for-grantedness". On the other hand, opposite claims may be made, where erasing boundaries between "home" and "work" appears to support employee needs to balance family and work through exchange legitimacy (Duxbury, Higgins, & Neufield, 1998; Hill et al., 2003), and telecommuting becomes normative to a point where it is taken for granted (Scott & Timmerman, 1999). Hence, the second research question:

Research Question 2: What is the relationship between the different forms of legitimacy? How do the different forms of legitimacy reinforce or challenge each other?

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

The data for the current study were collected at a federal government agency, Federal Systems Integration and Management Center (FEDSIM). Of 162 potential telecommuting and nontelecommuting employees at FEDSIM, 37 (23% of all employees) were able to schedule and participate in interviews in August and September 2000, at the convenience of the participants. Of 37 interviewees, 21 (59%) were men and 16 (43%) were women averaging age 46 years with a range of 24 to 60 years. Demographic information was collected at the end of the interview. It was limited to age, gender, and family status but did not extend to self-identified information related to ethnicity, religion, and other factors that might be salient to other studies. There were 13 participants (35% of the sample) who self-identified as full-time telecommuters per Hill et al.'s (2003) definition, whereas 24 (65% of the sample) were not a part of a formal, written contractual telecommuting agreement, though most indicated in their interviews that they telecommuted on an occasional basis.

Based on the background survey, the participants who identified themselves as telecommuters indicated that they spent on mean average 85% (median 90%) of their working time away from the office. Only one person who telecommuted regularly indicated doing so less than 75% of the time worked (the individual worked 50% away from the main office). One person indicated working at a remote General Services Administration (GSA) facility while the rest telecommuted primarily from home. All telecommuters except one, who worked across the country, would come to the office on a regular basis for meetings or to pick up mail. Based on the interviews, it was clear that several of the in-house employees would work from home on an occasional basis, though they did not consider themselves to be actual telecommuters. For the purpose of the current study, ongoing telecommuters were considered to be those who identified as such (i.e., 13 participants), whereas in-house employees who telecommuted on an occasional as-needed basis but did not self-identify as a telecommuter were considered to be an in-house employee (i.e., 24 participants).

All employees who were part of the formal program telecommuted on a voluntary basis. Each individual telecommuter participating in the formal program did so per agreement with his or her supervisor. Telecommuting at FEDSIM has its roots in a Presidential Mandate that was developed by the President's Management Council (PMC) Interagency Telecommuting Working Group. This mandate sought to increase the number of telecommuters in the federal government to 60,000 by the end of 1998 (*National Telecommuting Action Plan*, n.d.). Telecommuting from home and working from satellite offices and telework centers had been options widely available to employees since approximately a year prior to data collection. At the time of data collection, 45% of FEDSIM's staff telecommuted either on a regular or occasional basis, although data was not available to determine the number of full-time compared to part-time telecommuters. That number remains high even as overall telecommuting appears to be on the increase in the corporate sector (Maher, 2004). A report from the federal government ("The Status of Telework in the Federal Government 2004," 2004) indicates that the number of actual telecommuters among eligible employees has increased only from 1.3% to 1.4% between 2000 and 2003 (figures for 2004 were not

available). Understanding the legitimizing challenges that FEDSIM's telecommuting and nontelecommuting employees have faced may yield insights into the challenges facing other government agencies and their employees in establishing alternative work programs.

In many ways, FEDSIM functioned as a hybrid between traditional bureaucratic government and the private sector in much the same way as they served to supply their governmental clients with needed expertise and tools from the private sector. FEDSIM did not have a budget provided by the government but gained its funds from competitively solicited contracts. The participants worked as project managers (22 or 59%), senior project managers (11 or 30%), or directors (4 or 11%) to provide information technology (IT) support to major government agencies. The project managers were responsible for competing with other government agencies similar to FEDSIM to acquire contracts for IT projects and follow through from inception to implementation, keeping track of billable hours along the way. Each project manager was expected to maintain a 70% billable hour rate. The directors were responsible for overseeing entire units by functional area (e.g., the Army, Navy, or the civilian sector). All participants had at minimum graduated high school, with significantly more than one half (22 or 59%) holding graduate degrees. As government employees, FEDSIM's project managers had a comparatively high grade ranking with most holding ranks of GS 13 or 14. The current salary range at the time of data collection was $29,000 to $110,000.

DATA GATHERING AND ANALYSIS

The respondents volunteered to participate in interviews. Interviews were chosen for the purpose of data collection because interview talk serves as part of the process of identity construction so that understanding of a phenomenon is discursively constructed during the course of the interview (Christensen & Cheney, 1994; Larkey & Morrill, 1995; Larson & Pepper, 2003). It is that process of identity construction that underlies discursive claims to social identity (Francesconi, 1986; Habermas, 1974).

An invitation to participate was sent to all employees by e-mail from the director of FEDSIM describing the study with directions to respond directly to the researcher. Each respondent selected a pseudonym to protect the individual's confidentiality prior to audiotaping of the interview. Following Silverman (1993), the interview questions used here were pretested with a similar population (individuals who had previously telecommuted at a different organization). The interview schedule contained mostly open-ended questions dealing with the organization as a whole, work-related tasks, the organization's culture, and the participants' experiences with telecommuting.

The 37 interviews averaged 45 minutes but lasted anywhere from 20 minutes to 2 hours and were followed with a brief written questionnaire designed to yield background information. Transcriptions of audiotapes yielded 423 pages of single-spaced text developed with the assistance of voice recognition software, ViaVoice for the Macintosh (Pogue, 2000). The software yields an initial accuracy rate of about 95% with increasing accuracy as the software continues to develop a voice model for the user (Pogue, 2000). Because speech software develops voice models based on individual speakers, the researcher listened to the audiotapes and repeated the interviews verbatim to record the text using the software. When the interviews were transcribed, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and compared these to the tapes and field notes from the original interviews.

Next, the data were analyzed using the Non-Numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing software, or NUDIST, a software package developed for the purpose of analyzing qualitative data (QSR, 1999). Each transcript was examined several times by reading it and listening to the audiotapes. As the transcript was read, notes were added to code participant observations according to Suchman's (1995) legitimacy categories—pragmatic, moral, and cognitive legitimacy with corresponding subcategories—which were subsequently entered into NUDIST. Where applicable, multiple codes were applied to the data. For example, the same section (e.g., "good for people's mental health") could be coded as representative of dispositional and influence legitimacy. Each of the initial three categories were examined indi-

vidually and as a unified whole to appreciate the complexity of the legitimation process.[1]

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The first set of research questions guiding the current study focused on what the forms of legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) were that organizational members sought to achieve for their chosen different forms of work structure, whereas the second set asked what the relationship was between the different forms of legitimacy. Exploring the different discursive constructions of legitimacy forms revealed significant challenges for the overall legitimacy of telecommuting as an alternative work form at FEDSIM (see Table 1).

PRAGMATIC LEGITIMACY

The first legitimacy focused on the self-interests of the audience. Potential audiences for the claims presented by the interviewed employees included FEDSIM as an employer, its clients, colleagues, and employee family members.

Dispositional legitimacy. Work forms were granted dispositional legitimacy based on a shared value system among colleagues and supervisors. All employees embraced the organizational messages presenting the company as "employee-centric," which to Molly, an in-house director, meant that all employees would have "a flexible work environment, a flexible work schedule." Bing, in-house, noted the telecommuters felt, "that they can do their work off site just as easy as they can here. Their schedule of their work can be more flexible." Alternative work opportunities based on employee centrism served to unify employees around perceptions of dispositional legitimacy, because FEDSIM, following Suchman (1995), was viewed as having its employees "best interests at heart."

TABLE 1: Summary of Legitimation Messages

Form of Legitimacy	*Organizational Message*	*Full-Time Telecommuter Response*	*In-House Employee Response*
	Pragmatic Legitimacy ("This is practical")		
Dispositional legitimacy ("I share the values of my employer")	"Employee-centrism—choice and flexibility"	"Employee-centrism supports employee well-being"	"Employee-centrism supports employee well-being"
Influence legitimacy ("My employer really cares")	"We are a family-friendly organization"	"I can balance my family and my work obligations"	"I can telecommute occasionally; interacting with my in-house colleagues is important"
Exchange legitimacy ("We both have something to gain")	"No matter what, the client comes first"	"I am more available to the client by telecommuting"	"I need to consult with my colleagues from time"
	Moral legitimacy ("This is normative")		
Consequential legitimacy ("The outcome is worthwhile")	"Employee-centrism leads to improved mental health and productivity"	"I feel good, am more available to my client, and more productive"	"Telecommuting reduces interaction and communication with colleagues"
Procedural legitimacy ("The procedures make sense")	"The procedures are the same, regardless of work location"	"The boundaries between home and work remain when I'm telecommuting"	"Maintaining boundaries between home and work is important"
Structural legitimacy ("The structure makes sense")	"The work structures are the same, regardless of work location"	"The work structures are the same, regardless of work location"	"Work itself is losing meaning if you don't need to interact with colleagues"
Personal legitimacy ("My boss is doing it")	"Telecommuting is available to everyone"	"The option to telecommute is available to me"	"The option to telecommute is available to some"

Cognitive legitimacy ("This is logical")			
Legitimacy based on comprehensiveness ("It fits with our culture")	"Work is the same no matter where you do it"	"My in-house colleagues understand what telecommuting is"	"I have no idea what telecommuting is"
Legitimacy based on taken-for-grantedness ("Of course, why even raise the question?")	"Work is the same no matter where you do it"	"I believe in the company message, but must come in to the office to interact with my colleagues"	"I find telecommuters and telecommuting strange. In-house work is the only thing I really understand"

NOTE: Organizational messages and employee responses in table are composites based on interviewee statements.

Influence legitimacy. Similar to dispositional legitimacy, employees granted their employer's family-friendly organization influence legitimacy. Employees were presented with a message suggesting that the project managers could choose their work location in terms of their own relationships to significant others and their families (see Kirby & Krone, 2002; Rapoport et al., 2002). Many employees identified with that message.

However, some employees contested the validity of claims based on the availability of family communication concurrent with work. Oracle, an in-house employee, argued that for him, telecommuting "just wouldn't work" because his family would be around and would interrupt his work. Steve, a director who worked in-house, felt that "sometimes you need the interaction with other adults, other than your family, your neighbors, and those folks." Such concerns are not unwarranted. Research has shown that telecommuting can actually increase rather than decrease employee stress level by exacerbating the spillover effect of work on the home environment and vice versa because of competing identity demands (Bailyn, 1993; Hill et al., 2003).

For in-house employees, working at the central office meant the ability to connect and identify with friends. Frog and her friends viewed working in-house as participation in a "corporate family" that served as a significant target for identification and satisfaction (Casey, 1999; Gibson & Papa, 2000). The continued option to work in-house presented an important message indicating that the organization was concerned with the needs of some employees to continue to connect daily on a face-to-face basis.

Exchange legitimacy. Many claims to pragmatic legitimacy were based on the value individuals saw that their chosen work location would have to others. The organizational message embraced by the employees made it clear that the client came first and any work arrangement had to support the client's needs. Grizzly, a senior project manager who telecommuted while supervising a few junior project managers, observed,

> I can call up their clients sometimes, and ask them if they're happy, if the work is getting done quickly. If the client is satisfied and he is

sending in more money, and the person is involved, but what else is there to measure?

Exchange legitimacy based on arguments supporting client availability was relatively easy to claim for telecommuting employees because the organizational context specifically assisted clients who were temporally and spatially dislocated (Brocklehurst, 2001; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). What appeared to be missing was a conversation between telecommuters and in-house colleagues.

Several in-house employees argued that working in-house meant participating in a necessary collegial process of working together in an ongoing exchange of communicative interactions (see Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Hart, Miller, & Johnson, 2003). Soccer felt that telecommuters "may not get enough peer interaction" to do their jobs well, whereas Alpha suggested that it was "difficult to [problem solve] over the phone because you can't point here and there on the phone." Remaining in-house meant continuing to have valuable informal communicative exchanges with colleagues on an ad hoc basis.

Finally, for many employees, the choice of work location was based on the exchange legitimacy that the arrangement had to their families (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; Hill et al., 2003). For example, Soccer worked in-house to be close to her daughter's school so she could "zip over to her school at the end of the day if I need to go to a meeting or something." For many employees, the employee-centric option to work in alternative and alternating locations meant that their work location choices could also be granted exchange legitimacy based on the needs of their families.

MORAL LEGITIMACY

Moral legitimacy challenged employees to evaluate their chosen location of work based on the consequences of their choice, appropriate procedures, particular categories of workers (e.g., in-house employee or telecommuter), and the personal legitimacy presented by leaders.

Consequential legitimacy. Many employees also granted FEDSIM's employee-centric message consequential legitimacy because alternative work forms made employees feel happier. However, when employees described their perceptions of the outcome of multiple work locations, it became clear that consequential legitimacy was contestable. On one hand, the employees embraced messages supporting telecommuting by arguing for positive benefits on mental health. On the other hand, they challenged the consequences of each other's choice of work arrangement by questioning impacts on productivity and work processes facilitated through colleague interaction.

All telecommuters pointed out that a consequence of telecommuting was increased availability to their clients for consultation and increased productivity. For some of the telecommuters, productivity was the result of unofficially working longer hours. For example, Clint noted, "I don't even charge clients sometimes for the work that I do. If I'm working after hours, that's my problem." By doing so, Clint and other telecommuting employees supported their claim that telecommuting exceeded normative production levels and expectations of availability for client communication established by in-house employees (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Watson-Manheim et al., 2000).

Still, FEDSIM's employee-centric message was distancing colleagues from one another, reducing perceptions of consequential legitimacy for colleagues who were telecommuting. Although full-time telecommuters saw themselves as more productive, their in-house coworkers viewed telecommuters as less available for needed collegial consultations. Many employees emphasized the need for face-to-face interactions to solve problems and to develop personal relationships to "build a better bond that way" (Grunt Man, in-house). Telecommuters were often left out because in-house employees felt "reluctant to call a person at home" (Cowboy, in-house).

Procedural legitimacy. The overall embraced organizational message was that the procedures for work could easily be replicated at home. Tigger, a telecommuter, described how easily her work location changed from the East Coast to the West Coast

because her supervisors felt that it was procedurally legitimate: "We sat down and went through the different things that would need to be done, and the powers that be said that that was fine, and they agreed to let me do it." Yet working in-house remained normative because it meant leaving the private sphere to enter the public by "going to work" somewhere else (Nippert-Eng, 1996). Telecommuting challenged employee assumptions about legitimate boundaries between "work" and "home" (Brocklehurst, 2001; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Mirchandani, 1999; Steward, 2000). In-house employees such as Money and Grunt Man pointed to the daily rituals they enacted in dressing for work and coming to the office, which served to uphold established identity boundaries. Being at work as opposed to home meant that the employees were able to take on a different social identity and adhere to norms expected of them at work (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000).

Many telecommuting employees went to similar lengths to retain the boundary between home and office (Mirchandani, 1999). The employees' actions served to communicate boundaries to themselves and to significant others. Family members would often gain access only to telecommuters such as Diana, Goldfish, or DS, if they followed appropriate communicative procedures, such as knocking on a door or calling an office phone. When they were in their workspace, family communication was no longer part of the telecommuters' reality. Creating work environments reflecting a traditional office context meant that the in-house environment was reaffirmed as a legitimate procedural choice, which all other work arrangements were called on to replicate (Brocklehurst, 2001; Mirchandani, 1999).

Structural legitimacy. Even as the employees were questioning the procedural legitimacy of telecommuting, they were all in agreement as to what telecommuting was structurally—"just located somewhere else" (Alison, in-house) and with "fewer interruptions" (Rose, telecommuter). Beyond the basic definition of *telecommuting*, in-house employees were inclined to grant the arrangement structural legitimacy again only in terms of being a lesser form of work. Work location was associated with task appropriateness: Only tasks that did not require communicating with oth-

ers were suitable. Susan, in-house, felt that telecommuting would have been perfect "if we did something that was simple, repetitive. . . . But much of what we do involves a personal touch."

In addition to finding telecommuting problematic as a work form, many in-house employees were beginning to question the structural legitimacy of their own work. Some in-house employees were concerned that the organization's emphasis on telecommuting presented them with a message that speed and quantity were privileged over quality. Frog, who worked in-house, felt "people are more interested in getting it done quickly and for as much money as they can make, they don't really care about the quality." No longer did it seem that they needed to draw on the skills each of them had to solve problems as a group. The move toward speed and telecommuting meant that where employees used to take pride in their work, in-house employees sometimes expressed a feeling similar to Susan's, "nobody here is special."

Personal legitimacy. For telecommuting to be granted personal legitimacy, the directors would need to legitimize the arrangement through their discursive consent and their own practices as organizational leaders. Telecommuting was something most people at FEDSIM believed "was offered to everyone" (Cowboy, in-house). Diana (a telecommuter) noted that when the option first came up, "there was an announcement saying, who wants to work at home? You can volunteer, and we will support it." Directors such as Steve, who worked in-house, agreed, saying, "Yes, absolutely, everybody has the option if they want to." In reality, not all managers supported the practice. For example, Pete (in-house) noticed that people who worked in the contracting department potentially ought to be able to telecommute, "but as I understand it, their manager said that they couldn't telecommute."

Although most of the other managers were comfortable supporting the practice of telecommuting for their subordinates, they were less comfortable with possibly enacting off-site work for themselves and remained in-house. Food Guy felt that he was too set in his ways to change: "I need to be getting out of the house environment. I have empty rooms in my house that I could use, but I drive here. My office is here. You know, old dogs." The directors' dis-

course focused on supporting the appropriateness of in-house work for people who had achieved their rank in the organization. They all avoided the possibility of granting telecommuting personal legitimacy by justifying their choice to stay in-house by arguing that their work location was necessary for the organization to retain order and maintain open lines of communication with the employees.

COGNITIVE LEGITIMACY

FEDSIM had to justify telecommuting as part of an existing organizational environment that was logical to the point of seamless. Were they able to do that, the employees at FEDSIM would be able to accomplish a unified cultural environment where telecommuting, in-house work, and any in-between option would be holistically integrated. However, although cognitive legitimacy was relatively easy to claim for in-house work, it was difficult to claim for telecommuting.

Legitimacy based on comprehensiveness. Because FEDSIM presented work arrangement choices, all options had to appear as coherent and consistent. From the perspective of structural legitimacy, there was clearly a lot of agreement as to the organizational message of consistency. Many telecommuters felt validated by their coworkers who remained in-house because the colleagues "have been very understanding and they know that people telecommute" (Rose, a telecommuter). Still, at the time of data collection, many people at FEDSIM felt that they were going through a state of chaos, signified by a lack of interaction with colleagues because of a recent reorganization that included the opportunity to telecommute. Soccer, who worked in-house, described it as, "people are out pretty much doing their own thing, and . . . you don't get as much communication sharing." Scott and Robert, both telecommuters, felt that everyone was functioning as a "feudal lord system," where "everyone's an island," and Oracle suggested, "You have no idea" what the telecommuters were doing. Because there appeared to be little ongoing communicative interaction between

telecommuters and in-house employees, the underlying enigma continued to be whether telecommuters really were working in the sense that FEDSIM's employees really understood work to be.

Legitimacy based on taken-for-grantedness. Working in-house remained the taken-for-granted form of legitimate work arrangement for most of the employees at FEDSIM. Although telecommuting was considered normative in terms availability as an option, few people took telecommuting for granted as a work form. Frodo, who telecommuted, raised the question, "How many companies are doing telecommuting the way that FEDSIM is doing telecommuting?" To Frodo, FEDSIM was sending an important strategic message (Suchman, 1995) to its employees and to other government agencies about the future of organizing and the value placed on workers; however, there was nothing for the employees to compare telecommuting to.

Rather, telecommuting remained a controversial work arrangement while working in-house continued to be culturally given. Even telecommuters such as Clint recognized, "you do most the work at home and then you come here and see the people that you have to see." It was seeing their colleagues that provided FEDSIM employees legitimacy as "real" workers and obvious membership in the organization. Only by interacting with one's colleagues did the organization achieve a sense of cohesive seamlessness. The telecommuters, who did not appear to interact with their colleagues as obviously as the in-house employees, were regarded as deviants (see Dunlop & Lee, 2004).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The examination of FEDSIM's employees' discursive constructions of their different work forms revealed a complex situation with multiple experiences and interpretations. Changing the organization from a traditional office-based structure to a workplace based at least in part on individual choice meant that established

legitimacies and shared expectations had to be renegotiated. Although all employees embraced the organizational message of employee centrism and viewed the organization as family friendly, the lack of available collegial interaction led many of the employees to experience that the legitimacy of their work had been reduced as a result of the alternative work program. These results support previous research arguing that with the implementation of alternative work programs, all employees must engage in sense-making processes (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Brocklehurst, 2001; Mirchandani, 1999).

The results point to the importance of examining the implementation of alternative work programs as changing organizations and the legitimacy of relationships between employers and employees (Shumate & Fulk, 2004). Participant discourse revealed that the opportunity to support various identity constructions through employee centrism might present organizations with multiple challenges to ongoing legitimacy at least at the onset of new work programs. Some of the strategies enacted through organizational messages and employee responses served to sustain relationships in a context of change. Participants in the current study pointed to multiple sources of identity construction (see Larson & Pepper, 2003), supporting the employee-centric organizational message embraced by the employees that the organization seemed to have their best interest at heart. It was because of employee centrism that the participants felt they could choose to work where they wanted to and interact with the people that they wanted to when they wanted to do so.

The challenge presented to the organization was the contesting forms of legitimacy. Employees struggled negotiating their targets of identification and their perceptions of limited availability of others for colleague interaction, possibly to clients needing support, and potentially to family members expecting more availability than appeared feasible. That challenge did not appear to be easily resolved and is more likely part of an ongoing dynamic presenting organizational members with a continued communication challenge underlying all legitimation strategies for alternative work forms (Brocklehurst, 2001; Shumate & Fulk, 2004; Steward, 2000).

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The current study adds to the existing organizational legitimacy literature by examining how different forms of legitimacy serve to support and challenge each other in a particular context. Rather than examining each of Suchman's (1995) forms of legitimacy independent of each other, the results revealed the complex and multifaceted nature of legitimation by viewing an organization as a nexus of communicated messages where legitimation strategies simultaneously coexist, contest, undermine, and support each other. For example, lack of personal legitimacy by nontelecommuting supervisors could potentially undermine an entire program even when that program appears to have pragmatic legitimacy overall. In short, the results reveal the importance of a deeply textured analytic framework taking multiple forms of legitimacy into consideration when examining legitimation processes in organizations.

The current study of alternative work forms at FEDSIM further contributes to the current literature by revealing how legitimizing processes may reify rather than challenge and may force existing organizational structures to change in a situation where personal choice is encouraged. Employees working in most "traditional" organizations where set work hours and fairly structured work processes are the norm may find themselves questioning whether that is really the best way to work. However, the option to choose one's work environment continues instead to privilege traditional work forms over the offered alternatives (Mirchandani, 1999). For FEDSIM's employees, privileging took place by reifying the idea of "going to work" as a way to separate "home" and "work."

"Going to work" in a purposely designated location became the accepted arrangement for most employees, reifying established boundary maintenance practices between what constitutes "home" and "work." Where it became challenging for employees to fulfill the reification process, members turned inward and devalued their own work and their perceived legitimacy for the organization overall. Examining the complexities of legitimacy construction provides a theoretical framework questioning how employees discursively continue to construct boundaries between home and work (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Exploring legitima-

tion processes can serve to identify and help us understand the ways organizational messages serve to support or contradict claims to legitimate boundary maintenance established by members (Ashforth et al., 2000; Shumate & Fulk, 2004).

It is in the context of constructed value of work that Suchman's (1995) legitimacy categories may be particularly useful. In particular, we can better understand why different forms of legitimacy may be harder to claim. For example, the results showed that many arguments created and presented by the participants in the current study, at least during their interviews, focused on worthiness and rationality. In-house employees questioned whether the work anyone in the organization did was valid and, therefore, structurally legitimate because it could be completed anywhere without the support of their colleagues. Telecommuters argued they were more available to their clients as a way to gain exchange legitimacy for their work form; however, because they were not adhering to organizational cultural in-house work norms, they had a harder time gaining legitimacy overall.

It is significant to note that the fabric and overall cognitive and structural legitimacy of the organization was contested as a result of offering telecommuting as an option because FEDSIM appeared confusing to the employees. Employees claimed alternative work options reduced the opportunity for telecommuters to fully participate in ongoing development of shared organizational discourse, thereby challenging exchange and cognitive legitimacy. Understanding the types of arguments made by people in organizations may serve to assist in our understanding of why different forms of legitimacy claims may thrive or fail.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

First of all, information about organizational expectations of all employees needs to be made explicit. Policies need to stipulate how, when, and where colleagues can get in touch with each other. Colleagues need to be made aware that the same standards for evaluating work are in place regardless of where the employees choose to work. Such information should be available in employee manuals and could be discussed at informal, yet at times, required, small

group meetings such as brown bags. Such meetings could also serve as important reminders for employees that it is the communication and interpersonal relationships among them that will keep the organization strong over time.

Second, leaders in the organization need to support telecommuting practices more directly. None of the managers telecommuted at the time of data collection, except on a very occasional basis. Most employees look toward their supervisors for direction and role modeling (Hart et al., 2003; Jablin, 2001). If the directors appear not to enact various work forms, the likelihood that others will do so may decrease with reduced legitimacy for the practice as a result. Directors could elect to work from home certain days while retaining full availability to their employees through technological means or be more open about their use of flextime. By doing so, they would grant alternative work forms much needed personal legitimacy that would likely spill over to other employees.

Third, members could be challenged to question the effects of their own reification of in-house work as normative. For example, are they all contributing equally to the organization when some members are only working in-house, a location most employees agree is detrimental to productivity? What dangers might they encounter long term by only working on-site? Just as telecommuters need to be made aware of the potential harm of constructing full-time off-site work as legitimate, so do in-house employees who insist on never taking work home.

Finally, it is imperative for organizational cohesiveness that all organizational members get the opportunity to interact under enjoyable forms. FEDSIM offers its members the opportunity to get together for all-hands meetings and company picnics, events that could be used more extensively as means to gain knowledge and bond among members. Because employees often resist losing personal time, it is important that these events be held during normal working hours. Holding events during normally scheduled work times also means that the events can be made mandatory to support interactions between people who would otherwise not get to know one another.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Looking at the challenges presented to organizations implementing alternative work options provides insights for future research. Examining the discrepant legitimation of in-house work and telecommuting may yield new insights into the relationship between work and home (Bailyn, 1993; Kompast & Wagner, 1998; Mirchandani, 1999; Nippert-Eng, 1996). Similar work could also address relationships between gender, ethnicity, class, disability, and the experience of alternative work form practices (Phizacklea & Wolkowitz, 1995) or the possibility for additional targets of identification that might affect employee legitimacy strategies (Scott & Timmerman, 1999; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001). For example, one's profession, union membership, or work group could affect the legitimation process and the types of arguments made by employees.

Research needs to explore various forms of telecommuting and teleworking in greater depth. The current study examined legitimacy within the broader context of telecommuting vis-à-vis in-house work. Future studies could develop our understanding of legitimation processes further by exploring differences between individuals telecommuting from home part-time or full-time, teleworking from remote centers, working in a client's office, and other forms of virtual organizing (Hill et al., 2003; Scott & Timmerman, 1999; Wiesenfeld et al., 2001). Such studies could also focus on direct-paired relationships between in-house and telecommuting employees who are working together on various projects. Similarly, the impact of different forms of communication technology on legitimation processes, such as Web-based cameras or instant message systems, needs to be explored further.

Additional insights can also be gained by examining legitimation processes over time. The current study was based on data collected at one point in time, when telecommuting was still relatively new to the organization. The current study presents an important contribution to the telecommuting and alternative work literature in the context of early stages of implementing organizational change. It would be interesting to see how the discourse changes over time and whether the different legitimacy forms would be functioning in

similar ways. Finally, it would be useful to examine alternative work in comparative contexts to explore the range of legitimation processes that are likely to arise. Such studies could be based on organizations coexisting in one national context or explore international differences with the use of research teams with in-depth localized cultural knowledge of the different national contexts.

CONCLUSION

The examination of employee discourse in response to organizational messages at FEDSIM regarding choice of work location revealed multiple forms of legitimacy claims competing with one another. The organization had implemented alternative work-form options including telecommuting on a full-time basis 18 months prior to data gathering for this research. Although organizational messages about the unilateral availability of alternative work options and the lack of differentiation between work locations were granted legitimacy by the employees, the actual implementation of the telecommuting program and working as a telecommuter were contested. Insights into that challenge lead us to new understanding about virtual organizations, telecommuting, organizational cultures, and legitimacy processes.

NOTE

1. The results that are presented here are based on one qualitative researcher's interpretation of events recounted by the study participants (Chell, 1998). Although quantitative studies would expect calculations for intercoder reliability to determine agreement among observations made by multiple independent coders, most qualitative researchers agree that intercoder reliability is a challenge for interpretive research (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Silvester, 1998). Rather, qualitative researchers attempt to present a coherent narrative that has face validity (it makes sense) and is shared publicly by discussing interpretations with colleagues and through publication to enable critical appraisal (Chell, 1998; Silverman, 1993).

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