



Commuting Related Problems In The Workplace

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Abstract

This study aims to discuss the daily routine of almost every employee, their daily trips to and from work, in organizational and human resource management contexts. Daily commuting routine is especially consequential in industrialized communities and across metropolitan areas, with its individual and organizational outcomes and environmental and economical externalities. Commuting distances and time spent travelling to work is clearly increased within recent decades along with increased costs to workers, organizations and to the environment.

Keywords: *Commuting, withdrawal, job satisfaction, organizational commitment.*

Introduction

The main target of this study is to create awareness about the problem of commuting and to provide an understanding about the commuting experiences of workers. Either pleasant or not; consequences of the commuting will be discussed with a focus on job satisfaction and withdrawal behavior. This study suggests that with the elimination of commuting related withdrawal behavior, organizations could conduct more stable relationships with their existing employees and costs associated with commuting can be avoided.

Even though allowing or helping employees reach their desired career and desired wage level at work; daily commuting experience has almost no direct positive outcome to speak of, and it is often a burden considering its monetary and time costs. Commuting is an important daily routine for the individual and it has various effects on commuters such as mood swings and stress and misconduct of monetary resources. It is the first hurdle to tackle for the current day and it is the first problem encountered concerning the location of the workplace among all other possible problems. Problems or perceptions of those problems usually lead to dissatisfaction and the personal responses to these problems are mainly of counterproductive nature, these responses may even be destructive.

In countries with severe unemployment and at least some degree of urbanization, commuting is almost inevitable and efforts to eliminate commuting by searching for jobs nearby or changing residences by the workers are rarely the solution to the problem. While skilled workforce is scarce and their commute is inevitably unpleasant, it is often tolerated by the workers themselves with all the consequences. In a job market where the unskilled workforce is plenty and cheap to hire, employers are usually indifferent or ignorant to such problems of the

“ordinary” employees. Beyond being indifferent to the commuting problem, living closer to the workplace is often a requirement imposed to the candidates. This study is among the few which commuting is discussed in a developing economy, where labor markets are relatively shallow and network of transportation is less advanced or almost primitive.

This study will also enable us to discuss about the actions can be taken by the employer to overcome any problems related to commuting. The study will discuss the possible effects of commuting on satisfaction and withdrawal behavior and will also try to provide some insight for the readers and for the future researchers, employers and organizational decision makers.

Commuter Individuals

Commuting has inevitable consequences for workers. Monetary costs of transportation outstands as one of the most important factors upon deciding the job search location, intention to change jobs and to quit, and evaluating the wage offered for job candidates. Besides wasting quality time, it may lead to stress and loss of productivity. It also drives the dissatisfaction from the residential location (Koslowsky, 1997). Even with the relative ease and density of car ownership, relatively low energy prices and frequent use of cars in the United States; a typical family spends about 20 % of its income on commuting costs, even more than it spends on food (Stutzer & Frey, 2008). Along with monetary costs, time wasted during daily trips should also be considered. Based on recent OECD reports, average amount of time spent travelling to and from work in OECD countries is 38 minutes per day. South Africa, Japan and Turkey has the longest daily commuting times as 56, 55 and 47 minutes respectively. Ireland, Denmark and Sweden on the other hand, have shorter daily commuting trips (OECD, 2011).

Long commuters experience problems related to quality of daily life and health. They report physiologic symptoms such as tiredness, stiffness in muscles and joints, lower back pain and various psychological symptoms such as anger, nervousness, tension, negative mood and difficulty in focusing attention. For users of public transportation, these problems mainly arise from unreliability of services and delays. For car users, these problems generally arise from traffic volume and driving behavior of other road users (Lyons & Chatterjee, 2008)(Koslowsky, Aizer, & Krausz, 1996). According to the work of Gatersleben & Uzzell (2007), while pedestrians and cyclists are found to enjoy their way of commuting, public transport users state their commute as the most boring, and car drivers are found to be affected the worst.

Commuting should be evaluated in several dimensions such as commuting mode, distance and speed. Individuals mainly assess their journey based on their travel mode (vehicle in that sense), but also holding distances constant, relatively high speed commuters are considered less stressful on their trips. But in some instances speed can increase commuting costs (Gottholmseder, Nowotny, Pruckner, & Theurl, 2009). While financial considerations play a major role in selecting the commuting method, according to Costa, Pickup, & Martino, (1988) availability of roads, public transport opportunities and geographical structure of cities are also important factors.

Along with increases in productivity; motivation level, financial savings and employment opportunities enhance according to the quality of the commuting. Individual time and monetary costs and individual consequences such as distortion of work-life balance, some health issues ,increased stress and environmental concerns such as carbon emissions and increased traffic congestions should also be considered (IBM Corporation, 2009) (Lyons & Chatterjee, 2008).

As being an equilibrium for workers in residential and financial decisions, the work of Costa (et al., 1988) states that the main cause of the daily trips of half of the commuters is the difficulty in finding close residences to the workplace. This difficulty may arise both from limited supply of

available houses or prices. Almost same proportion of commuters state that they would sustain their commuting status for current jobs or even travel further for prospects of finding more satisfying and well-paid jobs. Thus a commuter individual is likely to change jobs or to be in search of new residences, both in some instances (Gottholmseder et al., 2009).

Commuting for Employers and Organizations

Commuting has also consequences for employers, organizations, and the state. While majority of the urban traffic congestion is caused by commuting to and from work instead of ‘‘joy riding’’; location of houses and jobs at remote distances entail high transportation costs, expensive infrastructures, and environmental concerns due to high energy use. Commuting has externalities ranging from traffic congestion and accidents to depreciation (Rouwendal & Nijkamp, 2004). Commuting distances are generally related to the residential layouts of the towns and the residential preferences of individuals. People who face with long distances are generally living in the peripherals of the major cities. Shorter distances are also possible in rural areas and in concentrated metropolitan areas (Helminen & Ristimäki, 2007). Although residential location may be chosen according to the job location and availability of transportation, it may also be chosen according to income level. Longer distances may be compensated by lower housing prices in suburbs, by the employer as higher wages in some instances (White, 1988).

It is worth to mention the discrimination by employers based on residential location. According to Zenou, (2002), there are hypothetical red-lines beyond which firms do not recruit workers. This geographical red-line is drawn to a point where commuting long distances is thought to decrease the effort level of the employees comparable to those who live closer to work. According to the traditional trade-off between work and leisure, long commutes lead to reduction in work effort as it make less time available for leisure. As discrimination or red-lining being an undesirable option, these reductions in effort levels are compensated by wage variations (Ross & Zenou, 2008).

According to studies related to stress; job dissatisfaction and job changes are influenced by commuting factors (Novaco, Stokols, & Milanesi, 1990). Recent study in the United States report that 48 % of working adults reported their job dissatisfaction as an impact of commuting, 32% took commuting into consideration when deciding their current job, 27% of the respondents stated that they could perform their duties from home and 15% of the respondents reported they would change their jobs for a shorter commute (*Road Wage Survey*, 2011). Also as stated by Kluger (1998), long distance commuting can easily be associated positively with tardiness. Commuting, with its external effects, lays on the top of environmental concerns. Use of personal vehicles and travelling longer distances in vain, generates unnecessary carbon emissions and congestions. Given these environmental and productivity concerns, some major corporations initiate commuter-friendly approaches. They offer solutions to employees as a part of their social responsibilities and to strengthen their attractive employer roles. For example, Coca Cola Great Britain implements Cycle to Work Scheme (Coca Cola UK, 2012), a government initiative that allows employers to provide bicycles and safety equipment to employees as a tax-free benefit (www.cyclescheme.co.uk, 2012). Also there are tax deduction options available in various countries when employer transportation benefits are implemented.

For organizations, commuting may be the key to keep quality workforce. Some employers provide financial subsidies for transit passes, options to telecommute, and compressed work weeks. They promote car pooling and provide shuttles with wireless internet connections (Marketwatch, 2015). Also in terms of helping employees avoid rush hour traffic, employers

could schedule employees in an interchangeable fashion for early hours in the morning (*Road Wage Survey*, 2011). Allowing workers flexible starting and quitting times, might eliminate urgency and lower the levels of perceived driving stress (Lucas & Heady, 2002). Also, according to the work of Puigarnau (2011), company cars are widely used as a fringe benefit for employees in order to ease the commuting.

Government institutions, non-governmental organizations and businesses together can eliminate the costs and ineffectivenesses of commuting in collaboration. Michigan Department of Transportation implements a program called MiCommute, through creating a web-based portal for commuters. Along with encouraging ride sharing by car-pooling or van pooling, they try to initiate environmentally conscious commuting programs such as mass transit methods, bike commuting and walking by providing guides for commuters (Michigan Department of Transportation, 2012).

Commuting, Work Withdrawal, Job Satisfaction and Health

Commuting usually distorts the rational use of time, according to Costa et al. (1988), it affects the proper organization of time, often due to the variability of the commuting conditions. As a result of this invariability, whether it is public transport or private vehicle use, or even for walking distances, lateness is frequently the outcome of any commute. Since travel time is not easily predicted for the most of the commuting modes, with their dependence of environmental factors, commuters tend to arrive late.

Especially in service organizations where physical interaction is essential, or wherever the work performed by the employee is critical, lateness becomes an extremely important concern (Koslowsky, 2000). This concern is raised in almost a-century-old highly cited work of Motley (1926), and clearly lateness requires monitoring and control (Blau, 1995). Beyond concerns of labor productivity, it can be seen as a matter of punctuality and it is predecessor of future withdrawal behavior, all the way from shirking to absenteeism and finally turnover (Clark, Peters, & Tomlinson, 2005).

Turnover is the strongest form of withdrawal, and it is especially important as it might be a permanent, single and a final act of an ongoing series of withdrawal process (Spector et al., 2006). Although there may be benefits of turnover such as reduction of conflict, increased mobility, morale and innovation (Staw, 1980); these benefits are outweighed by more visible costs. According to the mentioned study, turnover is always associated with costs such as recruitment, selection and training, and possible orientation problems that makes turnover an organizational problem to be dealt with. Also according to the majority of studies, absenteeism is form of compensation for dissatisfaction (Brooke, 1986).

Costa et al. (1988) states that commuters and non commuters differ significantly on their levels of job satisfaction, only about 28% of the commuters were found to be satisfied with their jobs. As proposed in the work of Brooke (1986); the relationship between the predecessors and withdrawal behavior is mediated by job satisfaction and this mediating relationship is pretty much consistent throughout studies.

Physical or mental, any commute is an effort and expenditure of resources for the individual. As stated, it is not only time, but the way its allocated and individual differences that are important to interpret the outcomes. Van Hooff(2013) reports that psychological detachment from work during the commute is also important for commuters. According to the utilization of the commute or the subjective experiences about the process, commute from work can be the time for individual to relax and unwind from work. It is a transition between work and home and helps people change their mood and provides a transmission between roles. Depending on the

pleasantness of the commute, it can be considered a form of recovery. According to Gatersleben & Uzzell (2007), this might be the only part of the day when individuals have the chance to dedicate to themselves.

Discussion

Any employee weighs the costs and benefits of a particular job or a job opportunity in any given time. In the job search period, the candidate is in search for the jobs within the same city, among the jobs that are close to the residence and jobs that are easy to access every day. As van den Berg & Gorter (1997) stated, commuting cost is an important determinant of job search behavior. As costs increase, the job seeker becomes reluctant to accept jobs in remote locations, or prefers the ones that are relatively closer, even if those jobs offer lower wages.

This reluctance about faraway jobs continues even when the individual actually finds a suitable job opportunity. It is an obvious stressor and it generates the lowest level of positive affect and lowest level of enjoyment throughout the day. It is the most disliked activity even above the work itself (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004)(Kahneman & Krueger, 2006). In order to endure a long commute, individuals have to derive or at least expect a form of utility from it. There is a wide set of effects about the trips between home and work that are expected to result in physiologic and psychological responses, those that lower productivity along with increased absenteeism (Koslowsky, 1997) and lateness (J. N. van Ommeren & Gutiérrez-i-Puigarnau, 2011).

People often find themselves trapped in the long commute either from the fear of changing jobs or changing residences, or as a result of the non-availability of alternative transportation systems. Commuter status is imposed by environmental factors and clearly reduces the personal time, especially the time dedicated to sleep. Soon the avoidance from long trips exhibit itself as withdrawal behaviors, a subset of counterproductive behavior. Commuting distances still tend to increase in developing countries as cities are becoming overcrowded and spanning to larger areas in recent years.

Any obstacle in comfortable commuting can affect the decisions to participate the working life. As the job seeker lives in the far residential locations, faces increases the fixed costs of participating the labor force (Ben-David & Sharabi, 2009). These participation expenses are especially important for certain demographic groups, especially for women, families with children, dual career couples etc.

Clearly, it is impossible for all employees live close to work, since there are limited residential options around workplaces. In accordance with the argument that commuting behavior is related to the functioning of labor, housing and transportation markets (Rouwendaal & Nijkamp, 2004), the employee might want to compensate the reduced utility from any of these markets in the other markets. As a rational equilibrium decision, long trips are worth travelling only if compensated financially or intrinsically, through welfare gains from living in a pleasant environment, getting paid high wages or paying low commuting costs as these generate the same monetary outcome (Stutzer & Frey, 2008).

Paying higher prices to travel to work is an unpleasant experience; sometimes it is even as high as the amount paid for food. Car ownership and car using costs, gas expenses, ticket prices for public transportation, child-care expenses for dual career couples and families with children or maybe the high rates of rents or the costs associated with house ownership should be considered as direct and indirect costs of commuting to the individual. The majority of the trips are made by public transportation as it is relatively cheap for many people, but despite its lower

costs for some occasions, it generates discomfort as a result of crowding, noise, vibration, heat or cold and possible changes or transfer of vehicles (Costa et al., 1988).

It should also be considered that people actually can utilize their commute. Even further, according to Redmond & Mokhtarian (2001), J. Van Ommeren (1998), Lyons & Chatterjee (2008), Ory et al. (2004); people need an optimum commuting time rather than zero commuting and some individuals are willing to travel longer than their actual commute. Consistent with that finding, commuting time is not always a waste of time, it can be something that the commuter wants just for travel purposes, to catch up with daily reading, to conduct phone calls or for things that they do not want to allocate their time otherwise. This is also supported by Ory et al. (2004) with the concept of ‘subjective mobility’ explaining the individual differences in evaluating the commute. Individuals have different views about a bad a commute, according to their level of tolerance for stressors and their utilization of the commute or their experiences during the commute. According to (Mokhtarian & Salomon, 2001) only a few people find zero commuting desirable and study reported that the ideal one-way commuting duration is somewhere between 16- 20 minutes.

This study is important as it brings the topic of commuting to the attention of management and organizational domains. The majority of the studies about commuting, thus far, have transportation, city planning or labor market focus, few of them relates commuting with stress. The outcomes affected by the effort expenditure to go to work is still unclear and it is important to label or name them in order to eradicate the sub-optimal settings the employers or organizations might have beyond transportation or residential decisions.

Commuting deserves more attention than it already has in management and organizational behavior domain. Burnout as a result of a chronic long commute or as a mediator of a relationship as commuting is being a predictor will contribute to the well being of the workers. Commitment can be a mediator or a moderator of relationships between commuting and other organizational outcomes as it often defines the boundaries of resistance to stressors.

Directions For Future Research

This study has a few directions for future research on commuting in the organizational and managerial domain. Further studies should take concepts like stress and burnout into consideration upon investigating relationships that are affected by commuting. Job market and city structure is also important and should be taken into account before designing studies.

Job commitment is also one of the major determinants of withdrawal, and should be investigated as an outcome of commuting. It might also play a mediating or moderating role between commuting and organizational outcomes. Job engagement is should also be considered as one of the concepts that makes a terrible commute tolerable.

A longitudinal design should be preferred over cross sectional if possible. Reverse causality from job satisfaction to the tolerance of longer commutes rather than reduction in job satisfaction due to a long commute deserves attention by performing a longitudinal analysis. Also the longitudinal design is needed to understand both the initial impact of the stressors and the process of adaptation of the commuting and gradual aggravation of the stressor.

As previously mentioned, operationalization of withdrawal is an important issue for further research. Some forms of withdrawal are extremely salient and others might be invisible. For example, as mentioned in the literature review section; lateness is rarely detectable and not usually documented by the organizations. It can only affect the jobs that require personal interaction. On the other hand turnover is more salient and destructible. Research on withdrawal

can use separate measures for each withdrawal behavior and test individual effects of each behavior has its own characteristics.

Implications for Practice

Employers should implement creative and progressive strategies against possible negative effects of commuting regardless of the current situation in order to avoid long term stressor effects and productivity concerns. Flexible working hours and compressed work weeks would help workers to allocate their relatively more productive time to work. Commuting related problems should be a mutual concern for both parties rather than being an individual problem of the commuter.

Some employers actually putting efforts into reducing the burden of commuting for their employees. The majority of the blue collar workers commute with the company provided shuttles and this stands for an important fringe benefit on workers' behalf. Further study should include this fringe benefit into the design and investigate the possible effects of this benefit to organizational outcomes.

Results also show that there is no reason for employers to put residential neighborhood limitation in the job advertisements. Employers sometimes concerned about the applicants' distance from the workplace and tend to discriminate the applicants whom they think they will have a difficult commute if they are recruited. Results from this study have no support for this view and a tendency to select better commuters will only limit the applicant pool and lead to a worse selection.

Conclusion

Time spent and monetary costs are seen as a part of working life and employee has almost no discretion on the determinants. Monetary costs are dependent on the economic indicators and time spent during the commute is an outcome of infrastructure, leaving no room for the employee to adjust the behavior for a better outcome.

Commuting takes time and money, and do not use it in a productive way. It is considered one of the worst things to do in a day. A study by (Krueger, Kahneman, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2009), puts commuting among the most disliked activities, according to the study, even working itself is not as bad as going to work. At this point, there are more constructs out there to be associated with commuting in order to build an organizational literature around it.

It is important to note that commuters are all trapped with their commuting status. There are no better options for them to improve their commute or completely get rid of it. The majority of the possible improvements is beyond the employee discretion and the ones that the employees can adjust might need long term planning. Reducing the cost of the commute is almost always impossible, given the costs associated with the commute are often exogenous, leaving no room for employer to wiggle.

Avoiding a lengthy commute is possible if an employer changes residence or workplace. Either one is a major life changing event, requires many planning and takes time to implement. Thus, it can only work in the long term, but the effects of a lengthy commute are immediate. An individual suffering from a long commute, if planning to switch jobs, will probably face with more dramatic situations especially in job markets with higher unemployment levels. Even in the markets with lower unemployment rates, fixed investments of an employer towards his or her job will be an important factor upon deciding to switch jobs or stay.

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