Working Away from Home, Coping Strategies, Quality of Working Life, Well-being and Performance

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

Background: There has been recent interest in the problems associated with studying or working away from home. A recent model of "working away" describes appropriate coping strategies across the time course from preparing to leave home for work, adapting to work away and returning home from work. Support for this model has come from studies of international students, and the aim of the present study was to extend this to workers from Asia who work in the service industry in the Middle East.

Aims: The study aimed to examine associations between working away strategies and quality of working life, well-being and performance efficiency. Established predictors of these outcomes were statistically controlled.

Methodology: The research was carried out with the approval of the School of Psychology, Cardiff University, ethics committee and the informed consent of the participants (N=216; mean age = 38.3 years s.d. = 9.2). An online survey was carried out, and regressions were used to examine associations between the working away strategies and the outcomes.

Results: Working away strategies were significantly associated with better quality of working life, more positive well-being and better performance. An unexpected result was that these strategies were also associated with more negative well-being. This possibly reflects negative factors leading to the use of working away strategies, which subsequently lead to positive outcomes.

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Conclusion: The results of this study confirm earlier research that shows associations between working away strategies and quality of working life, positive well-being and performance efficiency. The use of these strategies may initially be related to underlying stress, and their subsequent use then leads to beneficial outcomes.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Working Away from Home

The recent COVID pandemic has led to changes in working practices, with many now conducting their work at home. However, prior to the pandemic, there was also an increase in those working in locations that were distant from the home. In some professions, this is a defining feature of the job. A good example of this is the offshore oil industry and seafaring. In many cases, tours of duty are relatively short (e.g., 2-3 weeks and paired with long periods of leave at home). However, in other jobs, the work away from home covers most of the year. The study described in the present article is the first to examine strategies that can help cope with working away from home for long periods.

A review of working away and well-being [1] concluded that there is little research currently available on the topic. This was confirmed in a literature search using the PUBMED and PSYCINFO search engines. An exception has been our working away programme and this is now briefly summarised. The research started with a symposium which led to the development of a working/studying away model [2]. This has led to a review of the literature on the well-being of international students [3], followed by three studies of international students studying away from home [4-6]. The results from these studies show that having appropriate strategies for being away from home leads to improved quality of working life and better well-being.

1.2 Working Away Coping Strategies

The five-phase model covers each stage of being away and describes coping strategies to help workers maintain their psychological well-being:

1.2.1 Pre-departure planning

Appropriate pre-departure planning is often neglected because of our ability to use technology to communicate. Pre-departure planning should include:

- discussion of expectations
- saying 'goodbye' in an appropriate way and acknowledging that the separation is real
- setting up support networks
- agreeing to a main point of contact

1.2.2 Being away

Technology can only give an artificial sense of connectedness, and real-time connection can be frustrating and often counterproductive. Using less immediate communication such as a letter / long email may lead to a more meaningful experience.

News is not necessarily beneficial, especially when it cannot be managed remotely. Not being part of an event at home can have an impact on psychological well-being, which can lead to disengagement and distraction and can affect the performance of the organisation.

The ability to unwind after work is also very important. Indeed, the inability to do this has been linked with negative health outcomes. Work-related 'rumination' can impair sleep and result in chronic fatigue. In contrast, disconnecting from work can lead to positive well-being and low fatigue. Having a good work-life balance can be difficult when away from home as there is often reduced opportunity for leisure activities. The key feature is that leisure activity should be different to what is done at work. For example, if the day's activity involves screen-based work, free time spent on online social media connections is unlikely to help an individual unwind as compared to something different, such as taking exercise.

1.2.3 Preparing to return

As a worker focuses on returning home, they need to consider that this could have an adverse impact on their psychological well-being. An individual may change when they are away from home. Similarly, family and friends may not be the same. Going home and continuing 'as before'

may be difficult, and being aware of this in advance may help to manage expectations and the possible risk of disappointment. Some less intense work, or doing a different activity before returning home, may help this transition between the different 'away' environment and home.

1.2.4 Returning

A staged return can help relaxation and allow the person to enjoy leisure time which then becomes a way of unwinding in a more normal environment before going home.

1.2.5 Being back

It can take much longer than the physical journey home to feel back at home psychologically. It is important to allow time for adjustment to prevent a potential disconnection between being back and feeling back. After a long period away, a 'welcome home' celebration may have a greater impact on psychological well-being if it occurs once the person feels that they are back.

1.3 The Well-being Process Models

The starting point for the current approach was the Demands-Resources-IndiVidual Effects (DRIVE) model [7]. This model included predictor variables such as job demands, job resources (e.g. control and support), and coping styles. Research [8,9] demonstrated that these variables had significant main effects on mental health outcomes, but there was little evidence of interactions between them. The next development of the well-being model [10,11] included positive outcomes (e.g., life and job satisfaction, positive affect and happiness). Measures of individual differences now included psychological capital (self-esteem, optimism and self-efficacy). This led to two new measuring instruments, the Well-being Process Questionnaire [12-14], which has been used with general worker samples, university staff, nurses, blue-collar workers and general worker samples [15-18]. Results generally show that the model applies to different jobs and to workers in different countries. Generally, positive predictors (e.g., psychological capital, social support, and job resources) are associated with positive affect, happiness and job or life satisfaction. The absence of negative factors can also have a weaker effect on positive well-being outcomes. Negative factors such as job demands and negative coping strongly predict stress, anxiety and depression, whereas the absence of positive

factors may have a smaller association with these negative outcomes. Health and safety outcomes (e.g., work efficiency; absenteeism, presenteeism and accidents) were also added, as were questions about a healthy lifestyle (the Smith Well-being Questionnaire, SWELL, [19-21].

1.4 The Present Study: Aims and Objectives

The aim of the present study was to examine associations between the use of working away strategies, quality of working life, well-being and performance efficiency. Established predictors of the outcomes were controlled in the statistical analyses.

2. METHODOLOGY

Online survey methodology was used (the Qualtrics platform), and data were collected in 2019 before the COVID pandemic.

2.1 Participants

The present study was the first to examine this topic in a sample of staff working for Sodexo in a different country (a Middle Eastern country) from their home (an Asian country). These workers provide services related to catering and housekeeping. For some sites, they may also have had additional roles like maintenance services. For every site, the structure is one Site Manager and supervisors for each service line – catering/cleaning/laundry/maintenance - and then front-line staff. Most of the employees are basically skilled employees in a specific trade and will be front line staff (e.g. cook, cleaner, laundryman, technician, kitchen helper, waiter, driver, butcher, pastry chef, storekeeper, etc.). The majority of the employees are from the Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. A few are from South-East Asian and African countries like the Philippines, South Korea, Egypt etc. The general norm in Middle East countries for these jobs is that every employee gets one month of vacation per year. There can be intermittent field breaks or days off, but the employees do not generally go to their home countries in between.

Volunteers were recruited by Sodexo, and 216 employees completed the survey. All but 1 were male, and the mean age was 38.3 years (s.d. 9.2; range 20-64 years). 33.8% were frontline

staff, 57.4% junior management, 6.5% middle management and 2.3% senior management.

2.2 Measures

The full survey can be seen in the Appendix. The data were transferred to the IBM SPSS version 27 statistical package for analysis. The survey included questions about working away strategies, quality of working life, and the Smith Well-being Questionnaire [SWELL, 20-22]. Initial analyses examined the factor structure of working away strategies, quality of working life, and the well-being outcomes. Performance efficiency was measured using a single item with a ten-point rating scale. The covariates were established predictors from SWELL (healthy lifestyle; positive personality; job demands; and job control and support).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Factor Analysis

Missing data were rare, and most questions showed variability in the responses made, suggesting that the questionnaire was a sensitive measuring instrument. Factor analyses showed that the working away questions loaded on one factor (i.e. individuals responded in the same ways to all questions relating to working away; Eigenvalue =6.11, accounts for 43.6% of the variance) as did the quality of working life questions (Eigenvalue =2.87, accounts for 47.8% variance). The well-being outcomes loaded on two factors, Negative outcomes (Eigenvalue = 3.97, 33.1% variance) and positive outcomes (Eigenvalue = 2.87, 23.9% variance). These factor scores were used in the analyses. Performance efficiency was measured by a single question, and that was used in the analyses.

The Cronbach alpha scores for the measures were:

- Working away (alpha = 0.88)
- Quality of working life (alpha= 0.77)
- Positive wellbeing (alpha = 0.79)
- Negative wellbeing (alpha = 0.88)

3.2 Correlations

It was predicted that the use of working away strategies would be correlated positively with quality of working life, positive well-being and performance efficiency. These correlations are shown in Table 1. All of the correlations were significant at the $p < 0.001$ level. A surprising result was that working away strategies were also associated with negative well-being.

3.3 Multivariate Analyses

Multivariate linear regressions were then carried out. Separate analyses were carried out for the four dependent variables. Healthy lifestyle, positive personality, job demands and job control were included as covariates. Regressions were used because the main aim was to determine whether the working away variable had a significant effect when established predictors were included as covariates. Previous research has shown that the established predictors have independent effects with little evidence of moderation. The intention here was not to model the wellbeing process but rather demonstrate the independent effect of working away strategies.

The first regression showed that Quality of Working life was associated with the use of working away strategies even when established predictors were included as covariates (see Table 2).

The results showed that the use of working away strategies were associated with a better quality of working life. Job demands and control/support were also significantly associated with the quality of working life.

Table 1. Correlations between working away strategies, quality of working life, well-being and performance efficiency

	Working away	QWL	PW	PE	NW
Quality of working life (QWL)	0.70	1			
Positive well-being (PW)	0.61	0.62	1		
Performance efficiency (PE)	0.58	0.55	0.45	1	
Negative well-being (NW)	0.57	0.38	0.00	0.33	1

Table 2. Regression examining associations with quality of working life

Coefficients						
Model		**Unstandardised Coefficients**		**Standardised Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
		B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
1	(Constant)	-2.714	.817		-3.323	.001
	Working away strategies	.484	.079	.502	6.090	.000
	Age (years):	.006	.005	.063	1.222	.223
	A healthy lifestyle	-.009	.030	-.020	-.295	.768
	Positive personality	.013	.043	.021	.309	.758
	Job Demands	.123	.031	.220	3.962	.000
	Job Control and Support	.132	.038	.210	3.431	.001

The next regression examined positive well-being. The results are shown in Table 3. The results showed that the use of working away strategies were associated with higher positive well-being. Job demands, control/support and a healthy lifestyle were also significantly associated with positive well-being.

The next analysis examined associations with performance efficiency (see Table 4). The results showed that the use of working away strategies was associated with better performance efficiency. Job control and support were also associated with better performance efficiency.

The final analysis examined negative well-being (see Table5).

The results showed that working away strategies were associated with negative well-being. A healthy lifestyle, positive personality, and job control and support were also associated with negative well-being.

Table 3. Regression examining associations with positive well-being

Coefficients						
Model		**Unstandardised Coefficients**		**Standardised Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
		B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
1	(Constant)	-5.093	.821		-6.202	.000
	Working away strategies	.195	.080	.187	2.446	.015
	Age (years):	.010	.005	.090	1.880	.062
	A healthy lifestyle	.062	.030	.130	2.044	.042
	Positive Personality	.035	.043	.053	.824	.411
	Job demands	.091	.031	.150	2.919	.004
	Job Control/Support	.334	.039	.489	8.630	.000

Table 4. Regression examining associations with performance efficiency

Coefficients						
Model		**Unstandardised Coefficients**		**Standardised Coefficients**	**t**	**Sig.**
		B	**Std. Error**	**Beta**		
1	(Constant)	5.839	1.431		4.082	.000
	Working away strategies	.729	.139	.517	5.244	.000
	Age (years):	.001	.009	.007	.119	.906
	A healthy lifestyle	-.093	.052	-.145	-1.773	.078
	Positive personality	.043	.074	.048	.582	.561
	Job Demands	-.066	.054	-.080	-1.210	.228
	Job control/support	.201	.067	.218	2.990	.003

Table 5. Regression examining negative well-being

Coefficients						
Model		Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-.383	.948		-.404	.687
	Working away strategies	.494	.092	.495	5.362	.000
	Age (years):	-.005	.006	-.051	-.873	.384
	A healthy lifestyle	.076	.035	.169	2.198	.029
	Positive personality	.109	.049	.172	2.215	.028
	Job demands	.019	.036	.033	.534	.594
	Job control and support	-.167	.045	-.257	-3.754	.000

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to extend research on being away from home to consider Asian workers in service industry jobs in the Middle East. Previous studies have examined studying away strategies of international students and shown that the use of these strategies is associated with better quality of student life and more positive well-being. The studies with students have shown that it is important to control for other factors known to influence well-being (e.g. stressors, resources, personality and health-related behaviours), and this approach was continued here.

Initial univariate analyses confirmed that working away strategies are associated with positive well-being and greater quality of working life. These effects remained significant when established predictors were statistically controlled. The present study also examined the effects of the use of working away strategies on the efficiency of working. The results demonstrated that greater use of working away strategies was associated with more frequent perceptions of high efficiency at work. Again, this remained significant when other established predictors were controlled for. Unusually, working away strategies were also associated with greater negative well-being. This could be a chance effect although other research has demonstrated similar effects in studies of students studying away from home [22]. One plausible explanation of this is that negative states such as stress may lead to the need for working away coping strategies. Once these have been adopted, they then lead to the beneficial effects described above. This view can be tested in a longitudinal study where the first time point examines the extent to which stress leads to the adoption of working away studies. The possible beneficial effects of these studies can then be examined using a cross-lagged analysis with the well-being outcomes being measured at a second time point.

The five-phase model presented in this paper offers a new and practical way to think about and manage potential adverse impacts on psychological well-being while away in order to reduce risk. The present study has shown that working away strategies are very important for people working away from home. Further research is required to extend the present findings, and some suggestions for future research are given below. These are largely based on the limitations of the present study, namely a cross-sectional design and specific jobs carried out for a very long time.

The sample studied here spend most of their time away from home, and it is important to determine whether the present results are also seen in those with shorter tours of duty (e.g. those on installations, ships or working in mines where the time away may range from a few days to a few weeks). The research with students has also shown that longitudinal studies are preferable to those which just look at one-time point or ask about life and work in general. Such a study could measure the associations between well-being and pre-departure strategies, adaptation to work and return home strategies as they occur. The present study has also shown that working away strategies are associated with greater efficiency at work. This could now be extended using other samples of workers and students. There is also the issue of the impact that working away strategies have on the family and friends of those working away. Finally, a study in progress with international students examines the effects of a training package to increase the use of studying away strategies.

This approach could also be used with those working away.

5. CONCLUSION

This present study was the first to examine working away strategies in a sample of workers in a different country (a Middle Eastern country) from their home (an Asian country). Analyses confirmed the effects of established predictors and showed that working away strategies were associated with positive well-being and greater quality of working life. The results also demonstrated that greater use of working away strategies was associated with more frequent perceptions of high efficiency at work. Again, this remained significant when other established predictors were controlled for. An unexpected finding was that the use of working away strategies was also associated with negative outcomes such as stress. Negative states may initiate the use of working away strategies which may then have a beneficial influence on well-being, quality of working life and performance.

CONSENT

The present research was carried out with the informed consent of the participants.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Research was approved by the Ethics Committee, School of Psychology, Cardiff University.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDIX

Appendix available in this link: https://www.bookpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Appendix_2021_JESBS_80237.pdf

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