

# Working remotely: How organizational leaders and HRD practitioners used the experiential learning theory during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Marice Kelly Jackson 

Department of Business Communications and Legal Studies, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas 75965, USA

## Correspondence

Marice Kelly Jackson, Nacogdoches, TX, 75965, USA.  
Email: [Marice.Jackson@sfasu.edu](mailto:Marice.Jackson@sfasu.edu)

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic changed how organizational leaders managed their staff and handled operations. As those operational changes were implemented, the experiential learning theory (ELT) was practiced by the leaders, staff, and human resource development (HRD) practitioners. In general, employees' operational practices were created to work in a building and not remotely. The normalcy of driving to the workplace changed for many employees to work from any remote location. The purpose of this article is to highlight how ELT helped organizational leaders and HRD practitioners adapt during the COVID 19 pandemic. Many employees did not think that work in their profession could be completed remotely, but when a worldwide pandemic occurred, organizational leaders and HRD practitioners were ingenious and practiced ELT to stay open for business.

## KEYWORDS

adult learning, COVID-19, experiential learning theory, telecommuting, working remotely

The COVID-19 pandemic caused every industry to either shut down, suspend, or slow down its operations. Many industries postponed their operations, resulting in organizational leaders and human resource development (HRD) practitioners to indirectly practice the experiential learning theory (ELT) as they restructured their operational procedures for their employees to work remotely. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, selected industries permitted a few of their employees the convenience to work remotely (Dingel & Neiman, 2020; Miles, 2018; Robertson, 2001). Once the COVID-19 pandemic struck, over 70% of the US employee labor force was compelled to work remotely for their safety (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). The normalcy of employees driving to the workplace to complete a job task changed for many employees to work from their dining room table, a spare room, the bedroom, or any location where they could connect to the Internet.

Many organizational leaders were perplexed on how to operate during the COVID 19 pandemic because their contingency plans did not presume that over 50% of their employees would be working remotely (Benton & Mercier, 2020; Dingel & Neiman, 2020). Research has shown that employees working remotely may positively and negatively affect organizations (Dingel & Neiman, 2020). When detrimental situations occur, organizational leaders will rely on experiential learning to restructure their operational practices to stay in business. This article purposely highlights the innovative approaches that organizational leaders and HRD practitioners used to sustain their operations during the COVID 19 pandemic. Moreover, this article acknowledges the various unplanned ELT resourceful approaches that were beneficial for organizations.

## WORKING REMOTELY

I evaluated in-depth published articles between 2007–2020 to summarize the advancement of working remotely within the last 13 years. Working remotely is also known as telecommuting, coined by Jack Niles in 1973, an engineer who worked for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (Avery & Zabel, 2001). Working remotely is not a new practice and has been moderately implemented within organizations since the 1970s (Macrae, 1978; Rose, 2016; Toffler, 1980). Working remotely is considered a geographical dispersion of employees that are dependent on technology to communicate with each other to complete workplace job duties (Adam & Crossan et al., 2001; Raišienė et al., 2020; Robertson, 2001). According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2019), after the COVID 19 pandemic, there were 23.7% full-time and part-time employees who worked remotely, which increased from 16% in 2019 of employees working remotely before the pandemic.

The literature states that working remotely during a stable economy (preCOVID-19) can have positive aspects such as reduced energy consumption, decrease in traffic congestion, flexible work hours for employees that have small children, and caregiving responsibilities for elderly family members (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Noonan & Glass, 2012; Trinko, 2013). There are certain occupations where working remotely is common practice for some employees due to the advancement of technology (Frazis, 2020; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Noonan & Glass, 2012; Trinko, 2013). There are certain occupations where the employee is able to work from home such as professional and business services which rank at 54%, information technology at 26.9%, education and health at 9.4%, and other combined occupations at 9.7% (Frazis, 2020).

Research has shown that more full-time employees work remotely than part-time employees (Be'langera et al., 2013; Dingel & Neiman, 2020; Frazis, 2020; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007). Research also revealed that college graduates at 24.6% work remotely more than noncollege graduates at 12.5% (Frazis, 2020; Noonan & Glass, 2012). Moreover, more men at 13.1% compared to women at 12.6% work remotely (Frazis, 2020; Noonan & Glass, 2012). Note that 15.4% Caucasian Americans work remotely contrasted to 11.4% African Americans, 9% Asian, and 5.1% Hispanic (Frazis, 2020; Noonan & Glass, 2012). Gajendran and Harrison's (2007) findings note that employees feel more autonomy over their work performance and have more work-life balance options with the choice to work remotely. Employees that work remotely are more prone to work overtime than when they do in the office (Frazis, 2020; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Noonan & Glass, 2012; Raišienė et al., 2020).

## EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING THEORY

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused organizational leaders to practice ELT in unconventional business methods to keep their businesses open. ELT is derived from 20th-century scholars, specifically John Dewey, Paulo Freire, William James, Carl Jung, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, and Carl Rogers who provided the theoretical foundation for humans learning from their experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Kolb (1984) explained ELT in a four-cycle learning model: concrete experience (CE) abilities, reflective observation (RO) abilities, abstract conceptualization (AC) abilities, and active experimentation (AE) abilities.

CE focuses on being involved in experiences and dealing with immediate human situations in a personal way. RO focuses on understanding the meaning of ideas and situations by carefully observing and impartially describing them. AC focuses on using logic, ideas, and concepts. AE focuses on actively influencing people and changing situations. (Kolb, 2014, p. 105)

ELT is grounded in constructivism, where an individual makes meaning of his or her individual experience (Fenwick, 2001; French, 2013; Kolb, 2014). The literature connects ELT to other philosophies (i.e., critical theory and feminism theory), but the constructivist view is the central focus of this paper. According to Fenwick (2000), constructivism is when “the learner reflects on lived experience and then interprets and generalizes this experience to form mental structures. These structures are knowledge, stored in memory as concepts that can be represented, expressed, and transferred to new situations” (p. 248). Under the constructivist philosophy, the learning environment undergirds the individual's construction of knowledge to foster reflection and a new synthesis of knowledge (Schcolnik et al., 2006). Guthrie (2013) states that “constructivist pedagogy requires learners to construct their meaning, and thus understanding, through problem-solving” (p. 126). It is suitable to review an employee working remotely through a constructivist lens because each individual has a different experience within his or her working environment.

## WORKING REMOTELY AND TECHNOLOGY

When the COVID-19 pandemic invaded the US society, many companies immediately required their employees to work remotely, and the typical workspace and operational procedures were spontaneously changed. Some employees did not have up-to-date computers/laptops and practiced ELT to find a suitable computer/laptop to complete their job tasks. Smit (2020) noted that “the challenges of accessing the technology required to work remotely can create forms of exclusion in the workplace for some employees” (p. 5). Some employees also had to act as their own IT technician to connect their computers/laptops to their employers’ computer server and used ELT to figure things out or worked with their organization’s IT support person or warranty service IT support in practicing ELT to get connected. Research has shown that a barrier to working remotely is when employees have to be their own IT support, which is frustrating to many employees, especially when they practice ELT with very little to no help from their organization (Noonan & Glass, 2012).

Employees also practiced ELT when selecting the appropriate Internet security software for their computers/laptops to connect to their organization’s computer server. Novice employees may pick inadequate computer security software that leaves them vulnerable to scammers, hackers, and malware. According to Mercier (2020), “cybercriminals are launching more attacks than ever as they take advantage of the influx of remote workers....business owners should be aware of any suspicious emails or websites trying to gather sensitive information and convince users to click links or download attachments” (p. 27). To help prevent cyber-attacks and assist with security measures, organizational leaders practiced ELT to develop policies and procedures to protect their computer system from scammers, hackers, and for their employees to keep a watchful eye for cybercriminals. Benton (2020) explained that organizational leaders need to adopt new information security policies and have their employees sign that they understand their expectations when dealing with confidential information.

## ELT AND WORKPLACE BEHAVIORAL CHANGES

As employees adjusted to their new normal of working remotely, their job duties may have changed or remained the same, which brings up two important workplace-related questions: how will employees stay connected to their organizations, and how will their job performance be appraised? Let me address the first question. Working remotely usually means that an employee is working alone from a remote location. The employee will not have the convenience to walk to a colleague’s office or a cubicle for assistance with a situation. The employee is now challenged with figuring out complex problems independently, which leads to the ELT. Employees that work remotely have to take the initiative to connect to their organization, team, or department through email, video conference sessions, or telephone conference calls to discuss situations. Suppose a supervisor or HRD practitioner does not initiate a conference call to discuss workplace situations, the employees can ask for one or conduct a conference session among each other to discuss positive and negative situations they have experienced or are experiencing. Usher and Solomon (1999) stated that “the educational discourse of experiential learning intersects happily with the managerial discourse of workplace reform, in the cause of shaping subjectivity in ways appropriate to the needs of the contemporary workplace” (p. 162).

Second, the supervisor and HRD practitioners need to adjust the job performance review standards to ensure employees are fairly evaluated. Research has shown that working remotely can positively and negatively affect employee job performance (Allen et al., 2015; Golden et al., 2008). Golden et al. (2008) findings showed that the relationship between supervisor and employees could affect job performance. The isolation of working remotely can have an increase or decrease in job performance. Suppose there are new job performance standards established because of the COVID-19 pandemic and working remotely. In that case, employees need to be given the latest appraisal standards and have a conference session to discuss the new standards. All organizations and industries have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are currently at an unprecedented time when ELT is being used to help establish new policies and procedures to keep the organization running and employees satisfied. More importantly, if the methods of evaluating employees are not working, HRD practitioners should make adjustments and keep practicing ELT until fair job performance measures are in place.

## CONCLUSION

All organizations and industries face unprecedented times as employees work remotely. Kolb’s (1984) four-cycle learning model of ELT is a practice that allows employees and organizations to experience situations, reflect on

those experiences, develop new logical models or ideas to do things differently, and implement new policies and procedures based upon those experiences actively. In other words, ELT allows organizational leaders and employees to develop new approaches to complete their job tasks during a pandemic and possibly permanently. HRD practitioners can utilize ELT in establishing new standards that reflect working remotely for job performance appraisals. The COVID-19 pandemic caused organizations and working professionals to practice ELT in unthinkable ways, and more research is needed to show the usefulness of ELT during these unprecedented times. Thus, the continued practice of ELT through working professionals inspires innovative approaches to previous business practices that will help organizations thrive in years to come.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

## ORCID

Marice Kelly Jackson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8314-543X>

## REFERENCES

- Adam, F., & Crossan, G. (2001). Teleworking in Ireland: Issues and perspectives. In N. J. Johnson (Ed.), *Telecommuting and virtual offices: Issues and opportunities* (pp. 28–49). Idea Group Publishing.
- Allen, T. D., Golden, T. D., & Shockley, K. M. (2015). How effective is telecommuting? Assessing the status of our scientific findings. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 16(2), 40–68.
- Avery, C., & Zabel, D. (2001). *The flexible workplace: A sourcebook of information and research*. Quorum Books.
- Be'langera, F., Watson-Manheim, M. B., & Swan, B. R. (2013). A multi-level socio-technical systems telecommuting framework. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, 32(12), 1257–1279. <http://doi.org/10.1080/0144929X.2012.705894>
- Benton, M., & Mercier, M. (2020). Work-at-home world faces increased data security risks: Protect your business and workers from hackers, data loss, and scams. *New Hampshire Business Review*, pp. 26–27.
- CDC. (2018, August 10). *Past pandemics*. Centers for disease control and prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/pandemic-resources/basics/past-pandemics.html>
- Dingel, J., & Neiman, B. (2020). How many jobs can be done at home? *Journal of Public Economics*, 1–8.
- Fenwick, T. (2000). Expanding concepts of experiential learning: A review of the five contemporary perspectives on cognition. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 50(4), 243–272.
- Fenwick, T. J. (2001). *Experiential learning: A theoretical critique from five perspectives*. Ohio State University: ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education and Training for Employment.
- Frazis, H. (2020). *Who telecommutes? Where is the time saved spent?*. US Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- French, J. A. (2013). Practica: Practical learning outside of the classroom. In K. D. Kirstein, C. E. Schieber, K. A. Kelly, A. Flores, & A. S. Olswang (Eds.), *Innovations in teaching adults: Proven practices in higher education* (pp. 35–52). CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Gajendran, R. S., & Harrison, D. A. (2007). The good, the bad, and the unknown about telecommuting: MetaAnalysis of psychological mediators and individual consequences. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(6), 1524–1541. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.6.1524>
- Golden, T., Veiga, J., & Dino, R. (2008). The impact of professional isolation on teleworker job performance and turnover intentions: Does time spent teleworking, interacting face-to-face, or having access to communication-enhancing technology matter? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(6), 1412–1421.
- Guthrie, B. (2013). Next-generation teaching and learning: Adopting and adapting web 2.0 to pedagogy. In K. D. Kirstein, C. E. Schieber, K. A. Flores, & S. G. Olswang, *Innovations in teaching adults: Proven practices in higher education* (pp. 117–148). CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2009). Experiential learning theory: A dynamic, holistic approach to management learning, education, and development. In S. J. Armstrong, & C. Fukami, *The SAGE handbook of management learning, education and development* (pp. 42–68). SAGE Publications.
- Kolb, D. A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Prentice-Hall.
- Macrae, N. (1978). How to survive the age of telecommuting. *Management Review*, 67(11), 14–19.
- Miles, S. (2018, August 07). Are you ready for the third option? Find out if virtual work is the right choice for you. *Personal Excellence Essentials*, pp. 5–7.
- Noonan, M. C., & Glass, J. L. (2012). The hard truth about telecommuting. *Monthly Labor Review*, June, 38–45.
- Raišienė, A. G., Rapuano, V., Varkulevičiūtė, K., & Stachová, K. (2020). Working from home—Who is happy? A survey of Lithuania's employees during the COVID-19 quarantine period. *Sustainability*, 12(13), 5332.
- Robertson, R. E. (2001). *Telecommuting: Overview of potential barriers facing employers*. US General Accounting Office.
- Rose, L. M. (2016). The human side of virtual work: Managing trust, isolation, and presence. *ProQuest Ebook Central*. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.brenau.edu:2040>
- Scholnik, M., Kol, S., & Abarbanel, J. (2006). Constructivism in theory and in practice. *English Teaching Forum*, 44(4), 12–20.
- Smit, M. (2020, May 29). The future of workplace flexibility. *New Zealand Management*, pp. 4–5.
- Toffler, A. (1980). *The third wave*. William Morrow.
- Trinko, K. (2013, March 3). How telecommuting could rejuvenate family life in America. *The Washington Times*. <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/mar/3/trinko-how-telecommuting-could-rejuvenate-family-1/>
- US Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019). *Economic news release*. US Bureau of Labor Statistics. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.t06.htm>

Usher, R., & Solomon, N. (1999). Experiential learning and the shaping of subjectivity in the workplace. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 31, 155–463.

**How to cite this article:** Kelly Jackson, M. (2022). Working remotely: How organizational leaders and HRD practitioners used the experiential learning theory during the COVID-19 pandemic? *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 34(2), 44–48. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nha3.20351>