Leeds University Business School - Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode number 67: The impact of technostress on remote workers

Speakers: Dr Matthew Davis and Afshan Iqbal

[00:00:00] **Matt:** Welcome to the Research and Innovation Podcast. In today's episode, we're gonna be talking about the experience of technostress and what this means for remote workers. I'm Dr Matthew Davis. I'm an associate professor here at the Business School, and I'm delighted to say that I'm joined today by Afshan Iqbal, also a researcher here at Leeds University Business School.

[00:00:27] **Afshan:** Hi there.

[00:00:28] **Matt:** Now Afshan, I'm really pleased we're gonna be talking today about the research that you've been conducting, looking at the experience of technostress. And you decided to look at remote workers in particular, because of the growth that we see in people working from home during the pandemic. And then the increase in numbers of people who've kept working from home as we come back to, let's call it life after Covid as well.

So obviously this is something that is really important to lots of people. People are working out how to work effectively from home, what this new way of working means. And you've been looking really in depth at how this can be both a positive thing, but also some of the stresses and strains that can come in from working remotely as well.

Could you tell us a bit more about what your research set out to do and what you were hoping to find?

[00:01:18] **Afshan:** Yeah. Thanks Matt. Before we go into the studies in a bit more depth, I just wanted to take it back a little bit to Technostress and explain to our listeners about what this means briefly.

And, in a nutshell, when we talk about techno stress, it's considering the inability to adapt to rapid changes and the use of technology in a healthy manner. So this can lead to people feeling overwhelmed and stressed because of this constant connectivity that comes with the technologies that we now have available. And there are multiple facets to technostress as well, and some of which I looked at in more detail within my research.

So I considered techno overload, which looks at how people feel compelled to work faster and harder to meet the demands of processing the information that they're receiving. I also looked at techno invasion, which is this expectation of feeling like you've got to work longer hours and get through lots of work in an extended period of time through constant connectivity with the use of like mobile technologies. We've got instant messenger, we've got text messages, emails, lots of things in various forms.

Then thirdly, I looked at techno complexity and this is the pressure to keep up to date with the latest technologies. And as we all know, the vastness of technologies and the softwares that are now available to us, there's a lot for us to learn as users.

And this can lead to end-users feeling as though their skills are somewhat inadequate, and it, again, leads to a bit of stress and difficulties in finding the time to keep up to date with these changes in technologies that we see. So that's techno stress and that's what, you know, my research has been looking at there.

[00:03:12] **Matt:** That's great. Thanks Afshan. That's really clear. And I guess actually technostress is important for people beyond just homeworkers as well. I know you, you're gonna talk to us about home workers in particular, but this idea of technology change and how it affects how we work. Now that's something that everybody, I think, can relate to.

[00:03:28] **Afshan:** Absolutely - spot on. I mean, especially when we think about mobile devices and everything is then at our fingertips. It's, you know, information is in our back pockets, basically within our mobile phones. So, yeah, absolutely relevant to us all in different areas of our lives as well, not just from working remotely.

So, going back to your original question then, Matt, just to set the scene in terms of what my research was actually looking at and how technostress plays a part in this. Well, research on technostress in remote workers has been rather scarce. So there's been limited work that's been done on this area when we're considering technostress and remote work.

And so, as you mentioned earlier that the onset of the pandemic just really changed the way that people were working and it just meant that long established practices of going into the workplace on a daily basis changed almost overnight. So it created this opportunity for us to look at how technology not only facilitates different ways of working, but as you mentioned, can also create lots of stresses as well.

And so it's some of these challenges that we need to be mindful of so that as we become more experienced with remote working, we can start to be more mindful of some of the stresses that come with it as well.

So, particularly with my research, I was looking at how daily work interruptions in the form of virtual meetings interrupt daily workflow which could then potentially lead to techno stress.

And then the research also examined the implications of these interruptions and technostress on further outcomes such as work/family conflict, job satisfaction, and performance.

[00:05:16] **Matt:** Wow. That's great. Thanks Afshan. Now, you just dropped a couple of new words on us there as well. So let’s, before we go on, can I just ask, so what do you mean by

work/family conflict? And also you talk about workflow there being interrupted. What do you mean by that?

[00:05:32] **Afshan:** Okay. Good question. Thank you. So, in terms of workflow, so for instance, when we start our working day, we might have several tasks that we've got to do, or there might be ongoing tasks, ongoing projects that we're working on, and we've planned our day in accordance to those tasks that might be on our to-do list, for example.

However, since we've started to work more remotely and we're engaging more in virtual meetings through platforms such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, there's also this sort of sense that we're engaging in lots of meetings and our days can sometimes be taken over by these meetings. So it can interrupt our workflow. So those tasks that we had on our to-do list end up being pushed to the bottom or take a backseat because the meetings that we've, that have been scheduled into our diaries end up taking, most of our time and become front and centre of our working day.

So that's what I mean by interrupting workflow. So I hope that clears that up a little bit more.

And then you also asked about work/family conflict. If we consider how we have demands of our work life, but also demands in our personal and family lives, and all of a sudden they start to collide, or, you know, the demands of one are then impinging upon the time that we would dedicate to the other factor. So, for instance, when I mentioned earlier that, you know, some form of techno stress can lead to extended working hours.

So that can then spill over into work family conflict because if your working day is being extended and you're working longer, which is then typically eating into time that you might be dedicating to your personal life, to your family life, that could then lead to some conflict there. So that's what we mean when we talk about work/family conflict.

[00:07:31] **Matt:** Excellent. Thanks very much Afshan. So I think when you talk about meeting interruptions, I think a lot of those will be able to really identify with that, particularly the explosion in online meetings and calls that happen during the pandemic. And I think for lots of people, whether they're a hybrid worker or they're working fully remotely, I think they will, this will really resonate.

And when you were talking about this idea of meetings interrupting workflow, other tasks that you're trying to get done - again, I think lots of people will be able to understand where you're coming from with this and the motivation for this study. So I'm fascinated. I'd be really interested to hear what you found then.

What did you find when you were gathering data and analyzing your results?

[00:08:15] **Afshan:** Yeah. So some really interesting findings have come to light through this research. And so I'll give you a quick overview of some of the key findings and the first one

was that, well, the demands of these virtual meetings do significantly predict techno stress, and they predict all three facets of techno stress that I mentioned earlier.

So, techno overload, techno invasion and techno complexity are all affected, because of these demands of virtual meetings. So, you know, the more meetings that people are participating in, the more techno stress is then experienced due to the time that's being spent away from completing other tasks, and that can result to people feeling overwhelmed and working longer hours.

[00:08:58] **Matt:** That's really interesting Afshan. So that kind of, I think, kinda resonates with the idea that more meetings might be more stressful, I guess in, in this sense. Is there anything that you found that helped maybe buffer that or reduce the effective meetings? Or is it always bad for people?

[00:09:13] **Afshan:** No, it is interesting that you asked that actually, because a really interesting finding that came about was that peer support over time does buffer the impact of meetings interrupting this workflow particularly on techno invasion.

So what this suggests is that when we're receiving support from our colleagues, in any form during our working day, this can be a valuable resource in helping us manage our work related stressors, helping us manage our workloads, which can then minimize this perceived pressure to work extended hours to complete the outstanding tasks that might have you know, been taken a backseat due to these meetings.

So that was really interesting that came about from this research as well.

[00:10:01] **Matt:** So those kind of relationships we have with co-workers, investing time in that social support, checking in with each other, it sounds like that can be really valuable then That's probably good news for people who have been trying to get that going, keep that going during the pandemic.

[00:10:18] **Afshan:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:10:20] **Matt:** And I guess just one of the questions that I have, actually, I'm listening to you talk here, is often people talk about remote working, you know, being a really, enriching experience. Cause it allows people to manage kinda work and home. They've got flexibility. They can shape their day. How does that fit into to your research?

[00:10:38] **Afshan:** That's a great observation there that you've made, Matt, because when we think about the discourse around remote working and a lot of positivity comes up in conversations about the flexibilities that are afforded from this, the fact that, you know, we get to avoid the rush hour traffic and the daily commute of having to go into the office every single day that, we get to do the school run, we get to spend more time at home with the family. You know, there's lots of positives there that, perhaps were a little bit challenging or harder to manage when you're having to factor in a daily commute. However, all is not what

it seems. Because what we're also seeing from our research is that it can be harder to switch off from work because it is still easier to work longer hours when we are working remotely. So it's easier to continue working for that extra hour because you think, oh, well, I don't need to rush off for the train, or I don't need to leave to miss the traffic, so I might as well just continue what I'm doing.

And before you know it, another hour, 90 minutes have already passed and you've already worked that extra time in your day. But also because the technology is there within your home, it's in easy reach. It's easier to check emails on evenings and weekends and just to keep an eye on things because you're not shutting down your computer and walking away from the office building.

I think your work is still accessible. So again, that temptation to continue to work makes it harder to set those boundaries.

[00:12:14] **Matt:** That's really interesting Afshan, and I know I've heard you talk in other places around the benefits of creating boundaries between work and home and things that that people can do to make that, feel more tangible feel like they've been able to disconnect and so on. Is there anything else that you'd draw from your research around.

This idea of physical boundaries, other things that people do to try and reduce that feeling of conflict between work and home and always being contactable. And so on.

[00:12:41] **Afshan:** Yeah, so I think. As I've mentioned, you know, it, it can be easier to work for longer. So people have struggled to create those physical boundaries between work and home, and largely due to lack of space as well. So not everybody has extra space that they can dedicate to a home office, so that can make it harder to switch off as well, because if you're working from communal areas within the home, It does make it difficult to separate or create a distinction between your work and your personal spaces.

But what we're also finding is that people are then being proactive in finding other coping strategies that help them create that physical boundary between their work and their home lives. So things such as you know, people are ensuring that they're going out for walks during the day. Again, so taking their lunch breaks that are away from their communal spaces, for instance, or, you know, ensuring that they are taking those regular breaks, that they're stepping away from their desks, and being able to create that separation there as well.

And this is really important because if we're continuing to work and live in the same spaces without taking those breaks or without creating that separation, it can lead to. Lower recovery times from one working day to the next because you're having less time to decompress between from the end of your working day.

And existing research in this area has already shown that, you know, this can result in poor sleep quality, it can enhance anxiety, and it can lead to burnout as well. So as we start to

work more remotely, it's really important that we're mindful of this and we're starting to find ways to help minimize these negative outcomes.

[00:14:32] **Matt:** Really interesting Afshan. I just wonder, so, thinking about virtual meetings, and I guess you, you mentioned peer support being important. So I guess some of the meetings actually might be a positive because they're providing the opportunity for peer support, but often it's probably not that, probably more transactional or it's more just very work related.

Or kind of procedural I guess as well that, that comes in. And I think I can certainly, if I think about virtual meetings, often it's you're getting them scheduled back-to-back, you're getting a barrage of messages coming in at the same time and requests to join a call or to link into a seminar, maybe that's being put on a lunchtime, session. And I feel that's quite stressful. It squeezes my time and jumping from one thing to another, you know? Were you seeing that in the research? Is there anything, any tips or advice you can give people who just are struggling with the volume of meetings or how often they're coming in.

[00:15:33] **Afshan:** Yeah, I think what you just said there, Matt, will probably resonate to a lot of our listeners as well. I mean, it resonates with myself. And again, with lots of conversations that I've been having with various people on this, and you're absolutely right.

You know, there's this, because of the technology that, it's so sophisticated now and it allows us to plan lots of meetings or arrange lunchtime seminars, for instance, because we don't have to factor in booking meeting rooms. We don't have to factor in travel time and so on and so forth. It allows us to schedule a lot more into our days, which is great on the one hand, but as you said, it just squeeze out, you know, all the other things that you have to do within that day as well.

So one thing that I would really mention here is that, a really important study that was done by Microsoft in the last year was that how. Introducing micro breaks can be a really good way to help people decompress from one meeting and find that time to then join the next one. So it allows for that mental preparation and to be able to leave the previous meeting behind and to just take a quick break a comfort break as well, even and just to be able to get mentally prepared for the next meeting that you're about to join.

So, introducing something like a five minute micro break between meetings is really important and would be really helpful for that as well. And that could be quite challenging because especially when we're sort of thinking about how many people we have to consider when we're organizing these meetings and the volume of them.

But if we can start to think about ensuring that there is some time within. Each person's calendar every hour. That allows them to have a little bit of a break before the next meeting will be really helpful to reduce that cognitive load of these meetings.

[00:17:30] **Matt:** That's great. Thanks Afshan. And that's a really useful tip around how we can try and change our diary management to think about our scheduling to reduce that. I guess that pressure from the online meetings. Is there anything else you can, any other tips you'd share around boundaries and how to kind of keep that balance through other things we could do as workers?

[00:17:54] **Afshan:** Yeah, I think the first one, and it might seem like a really obvious point, but I think it's a really important one to continue to reinforce and emphasize on is when you have finished your work for the day, perhaps think about switching off those devices, switching off your laptop, your tablet, your mobile phone that's connected to your work emails. Switch them off. Put them out of sight because it reduces that temptation to quickly check your emails again to see what's come in.

Another thing would be to plan other activities for the end of the working day and make other commitments outside of your working hours.

And it could be something really simple as going to the gym or arranging dinner with friends and family and making that conscious effort to step away from work because you've got something else that you need to do. And again, that allows you to reinforce creating those healthier boundaries to help you manage that work-life balance a bit better as well.

[00:18:53] **Matt:** I love that Afshan. I love the idea of creating the really positive things that give you a deadline to stop working and that social pressure of other people are gonna be waiting for me. I can't be late. I'm gonna take that, I'm gonna make more use of that myself. So thank you. And I know talking to you, you got, there's loads of, contributions, kinda of implications for theory in terms of kind of the interruptions side of this boundary management work, design, techno stress. Loads of things we haven't got time to go into here, but really interesting.

But I wonder whether we could maybe finish up by thinking about top three tips maybe for employers, maybe things that they can do to help their workforce who you know, either new remote workers or maybe actually people who've been doing this quite a long time, things that can help them to keep this balance better.

[00:19:41] **Afshan:** Thanks Matt. Yeah, you're absolutely right. I could talk about this for hours on end. So my top three tips for employers would be: I would really encourage them to consider this idea of introducing micro breaks in between meetings. I think that's a really important one, and it'll go a long way in terms of helping with that mental anxiety and the stress of back-to-back meetings for one.

And secondly, a really simple tip but a really important one is for employers to encourage and support their employees to take regular breaks throughout the day, especially when they're working from home. Because as I mentioned earlier, it's so easy to just stay at your desk and not move for several hours on end, which is not great for your physical and mental wellbeing.

And then lastly, I'd say that, you know, we've talked a lot about virtual meetings and, the stresses of them and how to manage them. So I think it's really important for employers to offer some sort of training and support to help their employees manage these digital interruptions in the workplace, but also to empower people to make their own informed decisions in terms of what meeting invites they want to accept, and which ones they want to decline to allow people to decide for themselves whether they've got a valuable contribution to make to this meeting or whether there's more pressing things that they need to be getting on with.

And I think once people start to make those decisions for themselves, the stress of meetings will almost. Instantly be lifted as well because you're in control of how many meetings you're attending in that day as well. So I think that's really important too.

[00:21:20] **Matt:** That was great. Thanks Afshan. I really enjoyed that. I feel like I am much more clued up about what technostress is now, but also I think really importantly, I've got an understanding of some of the practical things that I can do that I could ask maybe colleagues to do to help us balance, maybe the demands that come from all these extra online meetings but also getting some of the healthy habits of positives from this as well.

So thank you so much. I've really enjoyed this conversation.

[00:21:48] **Afshan:** Thanks so much, Matt. It's been great talking to you too, so thank you so much for that. And if any of our listeners would like more information on this research or want to know more, all my details are in the shownotes and links to reports are also there as well. So please do get in touch if you have any further questions or would like to know more.