Chapter 33

Finding Work–Life Balance in a Digital Age:
An Exploratory Study of Boundary Flexibility and Permeability

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ABSTRACT

Mobile computing has changed when and where one works, necessitating an examination of the boundaries one maintains between work and home. Flexible boundaries allow for the shifting of work to alternate times and/or locations. Permeable boundaries allow for the integration of one role while present in the other role, such as scheduling dinner reservations on an app while at work or taking a work call while on vacation. This exploratory research examines the characteristics of employees who have different boundary types and whether these individuals experience different levels of work-family conflict as well as job and life satisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile technology has blurred the line between our work and home lives. In the past, temporal (time) and physical boundaries existed between work and home. We were in the office during work hours and were generally, aside from phone calls, in our work role. When we left the workplace, the work was left behind and we entered our personal role. Mobile technology has removed the temporal and physical boundary between our work and personal life. The transportability of computing means that work activities can now be done at alternate times and locations. Likewise, the ubiquitous nature of communication in a mobile world means that personal demands can be made while working. With the breech of temporal and physical boundaries, the psychological boundary that individuals maintain between their work and personal lives becomes more important. This research seeks to define those boundaries and explore the impact of boundary decisions on work-family conflict as well as work and life satisfaction.

Boundaries can be defined in terms of their flexibility and permeability. The concept of flexibility is how much control the individual has over when and where work is completed. Work schedule flexibility can be a formal program, such as flex-time or telecommuting, or an informal ability to change work hours as needed. Work flexibility has been found to be negatively related to forms of work-family conflict (Carolson, Grzywacz and Kacmar, 2010; Kattehbach, Demerouti and Nachreiner, 2010; Porter and Ayman, 2010).

Boundary permeability is the extent to which we integrate the obligations of one role when in the other role. Permeable boundaries allow one to be physically located in one domain and psychologically or behaviorally involved in another role (Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2006). Mobile technology and the ability to communicate anytime, anywhere has made the work-life boundary even more permeable. Whether responding to a client's email at the school's chorale concert or watching the concert via Skype while in the office, technology offers employees the ability to continually cross boundaries. Researchers have addressed the issue of boundary permeability and have found that using technology to do work outside of the traditional work time to contribute to increased work-family conflict (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Olson-Buchanan and Boswell, 2006). Conversely, individuals with strong (i.e. non-permeable) home and work boundaries experience less work-family and family-work conflict (Hecht and Allen, 2009).

Many researchers examined the concepts of flexibility and permeability simultaneously (Ashford, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000; Bulger, Matthews and Hoffman, 2007; Kirchmeyer, 1995; Kossek, Ruderman, Brady and Hannum, 2010; Tremblay and Genin, 2008) without considering that boundaries can be flexible without being permeable and vice versa. The failure to separate flexibility from permeability has contributed to difficulties in reconciling and integrating research results. This research explores flexibility and permeability as separate constructs and examines the impact of the various combinations of flexible and permeable boundaries on work and personal outcomes.

Figure 1 provides a graphical depiction of four combinations of flexible and permeable boundaries. Scenarios A and B represent inflexible borders between the work and home domain. In these scenarios there is a set, defined time for work that cannot be altered. From day to day, these employees know

Figure 1. Combinations of flexible and permeable boundaries
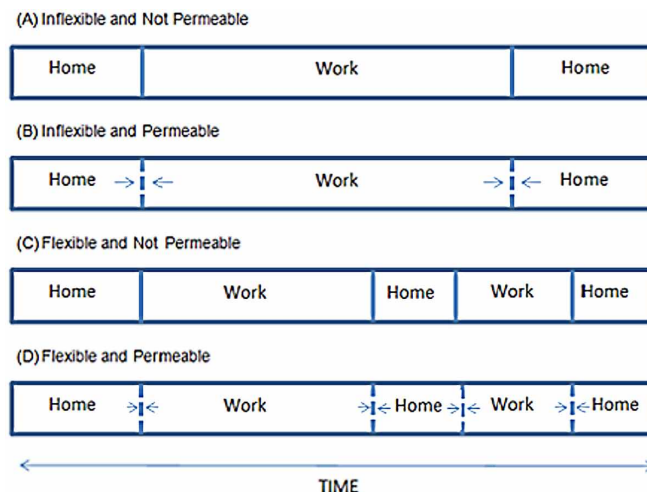
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