

## Chapter 52

# Out of Work, Out of Mind?

## Smartphone Use and Work–Life Boundaries

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### ABSTRACT

*Smartphones are now ubiquitous and valuable in many professions and yet have also been blamed for creating an ‘always on’ culture, blurring boundaries between work and home. Research has shown that checking e-mails out-of-hours via computer makes workers feel more overloaded with work but also increases their sense of coping. A total of 94 participants completed a survey exploring whether the same pattern would emerge for accessing e-mail on smartphones, showing that those who use smartphones for work e-mail experienced lower levels of overload, but not coping, and push notifications were associated with greater use of smartphones for e-mail. However, there were no significant correlations between coping or overload and e-mail use or quantity, suggesting that lower overload is not due to the ability to processes or read more e-mails outside of work.*

### INTRODUCTION

Mobile technologies have played an indisputably important role in improving the level of flexibility open to workers. Employees are now better able to time journeys around rush hours, contribute to workloads while in other locations and perform important tasks outside of working hours. This contrasts sharply with the workplaces of even a decade ago, which relied much more heavily on geographic location and access to equipment or information that would only be available in the office. Some have argued that this necessity created a clear temporal and spatial separation between work and home contexts (David, Bieling, Böhnstedt, Jandt, Ohly et al., 2014); one could not simply reply to messages from colleagues

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while at home in the evening, as there would be no way of knowing this message had even been left. Now, however, technological advancements in terms of the availability, capabilities and uptake of mobile and internet enabled devices have meant that there are very few tasks that cannot be completed from home, or indeed any other location. The devices themselves are also crossing boundaries, and have become integrated in both work and home contexts, with laptops being used for both PowerPoint presentations and for contacting friends (Towers, Duxbury, Higgins & Thomas, 2006). While this improvement in technology has occurred across a number of devices, the one that has arguably had the largest impact is the rise of smartphones, which have been revolutionary in their ability to provide perpetual contact for employees needing to be contactable wherever they are.

However, this also challenges the extent to which the boundaries of work and home can be enforced by factors such as time and location, which were once much more rigid. Smartphones not only allow access to work related information and e-mail from any location and at any time, but they also actively alert users to incoming information through notifications, potentially interrupting other activities. Many have argued that this results in a blurring of boundaries and a collective re-evaluation of working hours (Makinson, Feldhaus, Hundley & Fernandez, 2012). With approximately 64% of the UK population owns smartphones (ComScore, 2013), and almost half of these users report using their smartphone for work-related purposes (MacCormic, Dery & Kolb, 2012), constant connectivity is fast becoming the norm, creating an environment that may not be conducive to maintaining boundaries.

Far from simply being an annoyance, several have argued that this permeability of boundaries may have several negative consequences. For instance, interruptions from one domain while in another may create confusion about what role should be being performed, resulting in a lack of disengagement and problems immersing oneself in the current role (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000). Hall and Richter (1988) argue that non-distinct work-home boundaries also results in having to feel present in both work and home contexts simultaneously, despite the different expectations and responsibilities that come with each. Unsurprisingly, this has been posited to create problems with work-life conflict, in which the stresses and worries of one domain transfer to another (Fenner & Renn, 2004). This has been supported by research specifically focusing on mobile technologies, which has argued that owning such devices makes maintaining boundaries more difficult and that using mobile phones may encourage more negative spill-over from work into the context of home (Chesley, 2005).

While smartphones can be used for a variety of work (and non-work) related purposes, one of the functions that receives the most attention in the area of work-balance is e-mail. E-mail is now the main method of communication (Hole, 2008), and the vast majority of knowledge workers check their e-mails frequently due to the volume of messages they receive (Davenport, 2008). This pattern extends to e-mail on smartphones, and as many as 63% of surveyed users report that using a smartphone has caused an increase in the demands in their work communicated by e-mail (Towers et al., 2006; Madden & Jones, 2008). Just over half of smartphone owners report to check their device at least once every hour (Lookout, 2012), indicating that not only are smartphones widespread, but they are also heavily engaged with. The fact that having e-mail on smartphones enables colleagues to contact employees at any time of the day has led to workers feeling that they are expected to provide instant responses to any e-mails they receive, whatever the hour (Mazmanian, Yates & Orlikowski, 2006), and consequently, it has been argued that it is e-mail in particular that often blurs the boundaries between work and home (Capra, Khanova & Ramdeen, 2013) and make it harder to disconnect from work when at home (Madden & Jones, 2008).

This is possibly unsurprising considering how well integrated the use of mobile technologies has become in the home domain. Many workers report that the first thing they do when they wake up is

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