

# Chapter 1

## The Impact of Personal Electronic Communications on Work–Life Balance and Cognitive Absorption

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### **ABSTRACT**

*E-mail and instant messaging (IM) are essential ingredients of workplace communication. The study examines how the hedonic use of electronic communications influences work-life balance and cognitive absorption. Data collected from white-collar employees in the United States show that work-life balance mediates the relationship between personal e-mail and cognitive absorption, and that personal instant messaging has no impact on work-life balance but has a direct influence on employees' cognitive absorption. The findings suggest that work-life balance may eventually increase cognitive absorption and reduce employees' productivity. The findings provide insight into how different types of personal communication can influence work-life balance as well as into how to manage non-work-related electronic communications in the workplace.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

E-mail and instant messaging (IM) are emerging options for employee communication within and beyond the workplace. While workplace instant messaging (IM) is relatively new when compared to the worldwide adoption of e-mail, it is becoming increasingly popular among employees.

Instant messaging (IM) requires communicating participants to install free downloadable client IM software from Microsoft, Yahoo, AOL, Skype, and so on. With the capabilities of enhancing workplace relationships and complement existing social networks, such information communication technologies (ICTs) offer the convenience, flexibility and efficiency of reaching anyone from anywhere in the world.

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Employees realize the benefits of these communication technologies. For example, employees can determine the suitability of their existing communication media when a rapid response is required or when a face-to-face meeting is inappropriate. Employees who use IM and other social networking activities with the intention of staying connected with their superiors have higher job performance ratings (Wu, Lin, Aral, & Brynjolfsson, 2009). Employees also find IM more efficient, less disruptive, and shorter than other forms of electronic workplace communications (Garrett & Danziger, 2008). Given employee self-control and adherence to proper usage policy, organizations may also reap the benefits of these electronic communication technologies by staying connected to their suppliers and clients.

However, given the obscurity of employees' workplace communications as to their utilitarian or hedonic use, several negative consequences may render information communication technologies (ICTs) less appealing to organizations, especially when employees utilize them for non-work-related or personal purposes. In 2006, the ePolicy Institute ([www.epolicyinstitute.com](http://www.epolicyinstitute.com)) and American Management Association ([www.amanet.org](http://www.amanet.org)) surveyed 416 U.S. companies and found that 26% of the companies had terminated employees for e-mail misuse. The survey also revealed that 35% of employees misused IM at work for sending or receiving improper file attachments (26%), confidential information about their employers (12%), offensive remarks (24%), and sexually related content (10%). Another survey recommends IM monitoring in the workplace, given that 57% of the employees use it at work for personal communications (Swartz, 2005). Because it requires users to download client software and due to its text-based message logging features, IM is less secure than e-mail and is susceptible to viruses and confidentiality problems (Primeaux & Flint, 2004). With ever-growing corporate mobility, employees tend to carry on their e-mail and IM conversations on work-related mobile devices.

Several IM client software vendors also offer IM-over-SMS services to mobile users. SMS (or Short Message Service) refers to asynchronous or semi-synchronous text messaging on mobile phones. Given e-mail and the convergence of IM and SMS, employees have various options for conversing across a variety of electronic communication channels.

The integration of e-mail, IM, and SMS will ultimately exacerbate the problem of personal usage of communication technologies in the workplace. Although some employees may achieve psychological gratification through the excessive use or misuse of the communication technologies (Davis, Flett, & Besser, 2004; Neo & Skoric, 2009; Ruth, 2008; Whitty & Carr, 2004), the study assumes that employees do not suffer from any form of Internet addiction or obsessive-compulsive behavior. However, at some point, personal electronic communications can enhance work-life balance as well as produce cognitive absorption, where *work-life balance* (WB) is understood to be a positive condition of well-being and relaxation at work, and *cognitive absorption* (CA) is understood to be a negative state of being highly involved in non-work-related activities.

The study suggests that personal electronic communications are necessary for a healthy work life, but that they must be managed to cultivate employees' productivity. The purpose of this study is to empirically investigate the effects of personal e-mail (PE) and personal instant messaging (PI) on work-life balance (WB) and cognitive absorption (CA) in work-related settings. The research seeks to examine the following questions:

1. Does personal usage of e-mail (PE) and instant messaging (PI) lead to enhanced work-life balance (WB) and/or cognitive absorption (CA)?
2. Can improving employees' work-life balance (WB) also lead to cognitive absorption (CA)?

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