An Examination of the Boundary Between Work and Home for Knowledge Workers

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ABSTRACT

This article describes how knowledge workers no longer have physical and time boundaries between their work and personal lives. The boundary theory integration-segmentation continuum does not account for variations in both schedule flexibility and work and home boundary permeability. It is possible for an employee to have a flexible but not permeable boundary and vice versa. Furthermore, permeability may vary for the work boundary and home boundary. This article examines the impact of these three boundary characteristics (flexibility, permeability of home boundary and permeability of work boundary) on the work-family conflict of knowledge workers. Additionally, role identity is examined as a potential moderating variable. Practical implications and directions for future research are discussed.

KEYWORDS


INTRODUCTION

In the past, temporal (time) and physical boundaries existed for knowledge workers between work and home. Work was done in the office during work hours and not addressed when in the personal role. The ubiquitous nature of mobile technology devices has blurred these boundaries between work and home. This generation of knowledge workers are the first who can, literally, work anytime and anywhere and evidence suggests they are doing so (Prasopoulou, Pouloudi & Panteli, 2006). With over 64% of adult Americans carrying a smart phone (Pew Research), work is no longer defined to a time and place. Work is being done outside of the office and typical work hours. A 2012 study found employees were using their cell phones to work while vacationing (40%), at social events (27%), while exercising (14%), on a date (17%) and even in the bathroom (12%) (Richardson & Thompson, 2012). A 2015 survey conducted by CCS surveyed 1200 employees and found an astonishing number felt customers (62%) and colleagues (60%) expected them to be available during non-work hours. Another phenomenon, although less frequently studied, is the changing boundary that protects our work time from interference from personal responsibilities. Technology gives us the ability to shop, read, communicate and socialize from the workplace. D’Abate, (2005) confirmed in a small sample of semi-structured interviews that employees do engage in personal tasks while at work. When asked to rationalize why they are doing personal tasks while at work, employees list dealing with work-life time constraints and convenience as the top reasons (Eddy, D’Abate & Thurston, 2010). This is similar to what researchers have found about doing work in the home domain (Duxbury, Higgins, Smart & Stevenson, 2014). The fact that the technology exists such that it is possible, or convenient, to do work from home drives the decision to participate in that activity.

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Researchers have long addressed the role-conflict that occurs between work and family and the resulting exhaustion (Boles, Johnston & Hall, 1997; Golden, 2011), job dissatisfaction (Carlson, Grzywacz & Kacmar, 2010) and turnover intentions (Porter, Ayman, 2010). In an attempt to understand and reduce work-family conflict, researchers have examined the work-life boundary from both an organizational (Kirchmeyer, 1995), individual (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy & Hannum, 2012) and preference-fit (Chen, Powell & Greenhaus, 2009) perspective. Much of boundary management research focused on individuals has relied on the continuum between integration and segmentation (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Bulger, Matthews & Hoffman, 2007; Kossek, Lautsch & Eaton, 2006; Tremblay & Genin, 2008). Nippert-Eng (1996), credited with coining the term, defined segmentation as having low flexibility and permeability and integration as being high flexibility and permeability. Generally, researchers have found that segmentation is associated with less work-family conflict (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy and Hannum, 2012; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010). In an excellent summary of boundary research, Allen, Cho and Meier (2014) point out the disparate constructs and definitions boundary researchers have used and how this has contributed to a lack of cohesion. This research addresses one noted weakness by refining the integration-segmentation continuum by considering flexibility and permeability as separate and distinct constructs.

The problem with the dichotomous integration-segmentation classification so often used in the boundary literature is it fails to separate the concepts of flexibility, the ability to control when and where work is done, from boundary permeability, the extent to which demands intrude during non-role time. Should an employee who works from home two days per week but treats work time as sacrosanct, with no interferences from personal demands while working be considered an integrator or segmentor? While working from home is an aspect of integrating, keeping a firm boundary on work time is more aligned with segmentation. Additionally, the segmentation-integration continuum doesn’t consider that permeability can differ for the work and home boundary, which is just starting to be addressed by researchers (Fortado, Sobral and Peci, 2016). An individual could maintain a firm boundary when working (segmenting) but allow work demands to intrude during personal time (integrating) This research contributes to the boundary management research by separating flexibility from permeability and considering work and home permeability as separate constructs. When considering flexibility and the two dimensions of permeability, the dichotomous integrator/segmentor scale is expanded to eight different boundary types, which are outlined in Table 1. Exploratory research supports these boundary distinctions. In a sample of 65 professional employees, McCloskey (2016) found that the respondents were somewhat evenly spread out over the 8 possible boundary combinations. The largest segment (19%) was in the not flexible, home boundary not permeable and work boundary permeable category whereas the fewest respondents (8%) were in the flexible, home boundary not permeable, work boundary permeable category. The research examines the relationships between flexibility and work/home permeability on dimensions of work family conflict as well as the potential mediating impact of work/family role centrality. Given the prolific use of mobile technology, it is important for both individuals and organizations to be cognizant of work-life boundaries. The need to attract and retain knowledge workers is well documented (Casado-Lumbreras, Colomo-Palacios, Gomez-Berbis & Garcia-Crespo, 2009; Colomo-Palacios, Casado-Lumbreras, Misra, & Soto-Acosta, 2014; Rathore and Ahuja, 2015; Pandey and Sharma, 2016). Understanding the way knowledge workers are blurring the boundary between work and home and the associated work and personal outcomes is critically important in the retention of these vital employees.

**HYPOTHESES**

With the ubiquitous nature of mobile technology, knowledge workers no longer have a clear distinction between work and personal time. The blurring of these boundaries makes it important to understand the conflict that may occur. Work-family conflict (WFC) occurs when the stress or demands from one role interferes with the other. Our examination includes both the directionality and dimensions of this
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