Chapter 97

Exploring the Impact of Flexible and Permeable Work–Life Boundaries in a Mobile World

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ABSTRACT

Work-life boundaries are often studied on a segmentation-integration continuum, which fails to consider that boundaries can be multidimensional. A flexible boundary allows work to be completed at different times and locations, whereas a permeable boundary allows for the integration of work and personal demands. This chapter examines boundary flexibility, home boundary permeability, and work boundary permeability as separate constructs, positing eight possible boundary configurations. In this exploratory research, differences in demographics, technology usage, work-family conflict, and work and life satisfaction for 65 knowledge workers who maintain different levels of boundary flexibility and permeability are examined. This research offers a new boundary configuration framework, which should guide future research and organizational policy.

BOUNDARY FLEXIBILITY AND PERMEABILITY

In the past the line between work and home was defined by time and location. During work hours and in the office, employees were in their work role and outside of that time/place, were in their personal life. The advent of mobile technology has all but eradicated those temporal (time) and physical boundaries. The transportability of computing means that work activities can now be done at alternate times and locations. Likewise, the ubiquitous nature of communication 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 further define those boundaries and explore the impact of boundary decisions on work-family conflict as well as work and life satisfaction.

The vast majority of the boundary literature utilizes a segmentation-integration continuum, positing that employees have preferences for either keeping their work and personal life separate or allowing them to overlap (Ashford, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Bulger, Matthews & Hoffman, 2007; Kossek, Ruderman, Brady & Hannum, 2010; Tremblay & Genin, 2008). This construct may be too simplistic. 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 (Den-Nagy, 2014). Recently researches have acknowledged that flexibility and permeability of boundaries should be examined as distinct constructs (McCloskey, 2016; Methot & LePine, 2016). This research does that by examining differences in demographics, technology use and work and personal outcomes based on boundary flexibility and the permeability of the work and home boundary.

One dimension of the work-life boundary is flexibility. 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 adjust work hours as needed. Work flexibility has been found to be negatively related to forms of work-family conflict (Carolson, Grzywacz & Kacmar, 2010; Kattehbach, Demerouti & Nachreiner, 2010; Porter & Ayman, 2010) since it allows employees to balance conflicting demands.

Permeability is another dimension of the work-life boundary. 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 & 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 & Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006). Conversely, individuals with strong (i.e. non-permeable) home and work boundaries experience less work-family and family-work conflict (Hecht & Allen, 2009).

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 when they need to be in their work role and cannot readily alter their schedule. There is, however, a difference in the permeability of the borders. In Scenario A the borders between work and home are not permeable; there is little to no personal contact or tasks during work time and, likewise, little to no work contact or tasks during personal time. Conversely, in Scenario B while the work and home hours are set, there is a significant amount of communication or tasks that infringe from the other domain. Scenarios C and D represent flexible boundaries between the work and home domain. In these scenarios individuals have some control on when work is done. Called split-shift or flextime, employees can take time during the day to meet personal or family obligations and then make that time up, whether at work, home or an alternate location, at another time. In Scenario C the boundary between work and personal time are not permeable. So although the timing of work and personal tasks may shift, when engaged in one role, there are boundaries in place to limit the interference from the other role. Scenario D represents the flexible and permeable boundaries depicted by Ashford, et al. (2000) which constitutes a high level of integration. The timing of work and personal tasks may shift and due to the permeable boundaries, individuals can change their focus from one role to another.

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