



## How Family-Work Conflict Keeps Us Glued to Our Mobile Phones

**Torn between family obligations and work, many people can't resist working on their phones after hours, creating a downward spiral for their well-being and home life.**

For all the misery it has wrought, Covid-19 will also be remembered for triggering the “**Great Remote Working Experiment**” on a global scale. It has shown that it is entirely feasible for millions of people to do their jobs from home and spend more time with family while reaping the added benefit of avoiding the daily commute. But there is a price to pay: Many people complain about a blurred work-life boundary, struggling as they do to keep an eye on the kids while trying to keep up with meetings that drag beyond office hours.

Technology, of course, is the double-edged sword that has enabled and deprived at the same time. In particular, mobile devices have become indispensable as employees join Zoom meetings from their kitchen table or check emails on their couch. What might be the likely effect of anytime-anywhere connectivity in the age of remote or hybrid working, which looks **set to stay**?

In a new **paper** published in *Information Systems Research*, we investigate the extent to which people use mobile devices for work when they are supposedly off-duty, and how this affects their productivity and well-being. Our study is among the first to examine how the family environment affects individuals' mobile phone use for work-related activities and the associated consequences.

We found that, ironically, the more one's personal life encroaches into the work realm, the more likely one is to use mobile phone for work outside office hours. This boosts productivity in the short term, albeit at the expense of personal well-being and family relationships.

### **Burning the candle on both ends**

Our study was based on online surveys of 324 participants in the United States and their live-in partners. The subjects were mostly aged between 35 and 54, had at least a bachelor's degree and were about evenly split between men and women.

Participants were asked to complete two surveys two weeks apart. The first measured the extent of the conflict between their family and their work commitments as well as how competitive their workplace was. The second asked about their productivity (e.g. “I'm able to accomplish more work than would otherwise be possible”), whether they had experienced any somatic symptoms (e.g. headaches, stomachache), their need for recovery (e.g. feeling exhausted at the end of the work day) and whether they had been unpleasant (e.g. behaving in a critical or passive-aggressive manner) to their family.

Separately, their partners filled in a single survey

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about participants' mobile phone use for work-related activities outside working hours. Among the questions were, "S/he spends much of his/her time using his/her smartphone" and "How much time does your partner spend on his/her smartphone?"

Our analysis of the survey responses shows that participants who were experiencing family-work conflict (i.e. family demands made it hard for individuals to fulfil work-related ones) were more likely to use their mobile phones extensively for work purposes during non-work time. This was further exacerbated when their organisational environment was competitive.

While these employees reported significantly improved productivity, they also tended to suffer from stress-related physiological symptoms like headaches and have a higher need for recovery. Unfortunately, they were also obnoxious at home.

### Right to disconnect

If the above sounds like you, you are far from alone. Employee burnout has worsened during the pandemic, according to a survey of 1,500 US workers by the recruiting site **Indeed**. Predictably, **parents are struggling** to juggle work and family. **Women** and people of colour are disproportionately affected.

Yet a 2020 **survey** showed that only 36 percent of employees set a hard boundary between work and personal time. Most employers seem unperturbed: A mere 28 percent of the respondents agreed that their organisation had spelled out when and how to communicate during non-work time, and fewer still (24 percent) said their organisation adhered to these policies if they existed.

What's an employee to do if they wish to preserve work-life balance in the face of relentless connectivity? First, be aware that while mobile devices might help you catch up with work or be more productive in the short run, burning the candle at both ends in the long run is likely to cost you your health, not to mention being counterproductive.

The importance of a clear boundary between work and personal life cannot be underestimated. If you have been working from home, it might be a good idea to return to the office for one or two days a week, if it's safe to do so. When you're working at home, carve out space and time to focus on your job and ask your family to respect those physical and temporal boundaries. At the end of the workday, make it known to co-workers and clients via automated messages that you are not to be disturbed in your personal time.

### Setting the norm

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The "right to disconnect" is in fact enshrined in national legislation in several countries including France, Italy, and most recently, **Portugal**. But employers could do better than wait for government authorities to set minimum standards. Organisations can go a long way towards erecting healthy boundaries – if for no other reason than to retain and attract employees in a tight job market.

Supermarket operator Lidl Belgium, for example, announced in 2018 a **ban** on emails among employees between 6pm and 7am. A clutch of other mainly European companies has similar moratoriums in place.

Without culture and norms, however, rules are mere edifice. In fact, employees banned from accessing work email after hours could **experience more stress** if other aspects of their job, such as the level of competition among co-workers, remain the same. What leaders and managers could do is **lead by example**. They could start by logging off at the end of office hours and sending emails during work time rather than at all hours. At INSEAD, where the workday is spread across multiple time zones, staff emails state that messages are not expected to be read or acted upon outside the employee's office hours.

When we lay down boundaries and stick to them, others will take their cue from us. Remember: Work can often wait, but your physical and mental health and well-being can't.

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