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Strategies for successful telework: how effective employees manage work/home boundaries

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Abstract

Purpose – *This paper aims to identify strategies used by successful teleworkers to create and maintain boundaries between work and home, and to determine how these strategies relate to employee preferences for segmentation or integration of work and home.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Forty in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with employees working from home either occasionally (occasional teleworkers), between 20 and 50 per cent of the workweek (partial teleworkers), or the majority of the time (full teleworkers).*

Findings – *Teleworkers use physical, temporal, behavioral and communicative strategies to recreate boundaries similar to those found in office environments. Although teleworkers can generally develop strategies that align boundaries to their preferences for segmentation or integration, employees with greater job autonomy and control are better able to do so.*

Research limitations/implications – *A limitation of this research is its potential lack of generalizability to teleworkers in organizations with “always-on” cultures, who may experience greater pressure to allow work to permeate the home boundary.*

Practical implications – *These findings can encourage organizations to proactively assess employee preferences for boundary permeability before entering a teleworking arrangement. The boundary management tactics identified can be used to provide teleworkers struggling to establish comfortable boundaries with tangible ideas to regulate interactions between home and work.*

Originality/value – *This research makes a significant contribution to practitioner literature by applying a boundary management framework to the practice of teleworking, which is being adopted by organizations with increasing frequency.*

Keywords *Work-life balance, Telework, Boundary management, Homeworking, Telecommuting*

Paper type *Research paper*

Telework as HR strategy

Despite high-publicity efforts from Yahoo!, HP and Best Buy to reduce the incidence of their employees working from home, telework is increasingly offered by employers. By enabling individuals to reduce commuting time and fit non-work demands more easily around their work activities, telework helps to attract and retain high-quality talent, contributing to a diverse workforce that includes caregivers, older employees and workers with disabilities (Beauregard *et al.*, 2013). By permitting employees to spend time away from the office to focus uninterrupted on tasks requiring higher levels of concentration, organizations can increase both the quality and quantity of their outputs. By reducing the requirement for dedicated office space and eliminating geographical restrictions on employee location, telework allows organizations to cut costs and build capability for flexibility and agility. Human resources (HR) has an important role to play in ensuring that the telework experience is positive for employees and organizations, and a key element involves preparing staff to work effectively in their home environment.

“By permitting employees to spend time away from the office to focus uninterrupted on tasks requiring higher levels of concentration, organizations can increase both the quality and quantity of their outputs.”

Boundaries between work and home

When work and home activities take place in the same physical space, physical, temporal and psychological boundaries between work and home can become blurred. For instance, research has found that teleworkers often work longer hours (Harker Martin and MacDonnell, 2012). This is due in part to the presence of work-related materials in the home that may prompt employees to continue working rather than spend time on personal or family pursuits. Boundaries are mental constructions of the borders between activities, such as work and personal life, and employees vary in the extent to which they prefer to keep these activities separate (segmentation) or have them overlap (integration) (Clark, 2000). Those preferring segmentation would ideally enact strong boundaries, which are less permeable: activities in one domain are less likely to be interrupted by activities from another. Employees who prefer integration of work and home activities are more likely to favor weaker, more permeable boundaries.

A limited but growing body of research examines strategies that employees use to manage boundaries between work and home. Four categories have been proposed: physical, behavioral, time-based and communicative tactics (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Teleworking presents a unique challenge to boundary management because many of the traditional physical and time-based boundaries associated with office environments are absent. The present research seeks to identify strategies used by successful teleworkers to create and maintain work/home boundaries, and to determine how these strategies relate to teleworkers' preferences for segmentation or integration of work and home activities. The study setting was a large public-sector organization in the UK, whose longstanding telework program yields participants with above-average productivity ratings compared to their office-based counterparts. Forty in-depth, face-to-face interviews were conducted with employees working from home either occasionally (occasional teleworkers), between 20 and 50 per cent of the workweek (partial teleworkers), or the majority of the time (full teleworkers).

What types of boundary strategies do successful teleworkers use?

The interviews yielded evidence that teleworkers employ physical, time-based, behavioral and communicative strategies for managing boundaries between work and home.

Physical strategies

I am one of the lucky ones, I actually have a dedicated office. I've got a door and a lock. So I didn't have to do the mental changing of shoes, it's a case of switching my computer off and closing the door. I know some of my colleagues have a work space in their living room. It is switching off the phone and all those stress factors of having it in plain sight. I don't have that.
(Sarah, full teleworker)

The most commonly reported method for those working from home for the majority of the workweek was recreating the physical boundary of an office environment by designating areas for work activities. Teleworkers without the ability to create separate space for work activities often struggled. Work-related materials occupied space used by family members on a daily basis and hindered employees' efforts to “switch off” and devote their full attention to non-work commitments outside of work hours:

So I worked in the dining room for two years. [. . .] I had to convince my new wife-to-be that it was a good idea. So for two years whilst we had dinner, tea, lunch, the computers and my files sat next to us. It was far from ideal especially if the children had time *off*. (*Henry, full teleworker*)

Time-based strategies

I have dogs to walk. So there is always at least a natural break around five o'clock where I meet up with friends and we walk the dogs. So that signals that it is the end of the working day for me. It doesn't mean to say that is when I elect to stop working but it does give me that focus of, "this is the end of the day". (*Kate, partial teleworker*)

Although many of the teleworkers often worked beyond their contracted hours, most still developed tactics to create boundaries between working time and home time. These tactics frequently involved commitments to other people, either imposed – as with teleworkers whose end of the working day was signaled by children returning home after school – or self-initiated, as with employees who arranged to meet others at an appointed time on a daily basis. Being accountable to others appears to produce stronger boundaries than being accountable only to oneself.

Behavioral strategies

I wouldn't answer the phone after close of business time because the danger with that is then that people think you are available 24/7 and those calls become later and later and later. I actually switch the phone off so that I am not even tempted to hear it. (*Kate, partial teleworker*)

Behavioral strategies were primarily related to the use of information and communications technology (ICT). Often, these mimicked routines that might be found in an office environment: logging off computer systems, shutting down one's laptop, turning off the ringer on work-issued phones. Removing the temptation to check messages or pick up work tasks after hours helped teleworkers demarcate work and non-work periods of time.

Communicative strategies

I have to have a rule with my children that if they are at home and I am working then they have to knock on the door and then if they come in to the room and they see I am on the telephone they just don't start babbling away. That can be a very hard lesson for them to learn. (*Jack, full teleworker*)

Teleworkers also reinforced boundaries between work/non-work activities by using communicative tactics. Many of these involved setting expectations with spouses and children about issues such as household noise and the use of space designated for work activities. Family members sometimes used communicative tactics themselves to introduce or reinforce boundaries when teleworkers allowed work activities to extend beyond their purview:

I only get around to taking a lunch break because my husband comes up and goes, "eat some food". He literally physically removes me from my seat and sends me on my way down so we have something to eat but that's because I become focused and I have no track of time at all, absolutely no track of time. (*Imogen, full teleworker*)

I suppose the other thing is your personal support network. I happen to be married to someone who gives me a severe telling off if I switch the Blackberry on over the weekend. (*Mohammed, occasional teleworker*) (Table 1)

“Teleworkers without the ability to create separate space for work activities often struggled.”

Table 1 Effective boundary management strategies

<i>Work/home boundary management strategies</i>	<i>Examples of tactics</i>
Physical	Dedicated work space in separate room Closing door between work space and living space Separate computers and/or phones for work and personal use
Time-based	Finishing work when children return home from school Walking dogs at the same time every day
Behavioral	Making appointments to meet friends at end of day Shutting down computer Turning off phone
Communicative	Not entering work space during non-work time Setting expectations with family members regarding interruptions during working time Setting expectations with colleagues or clients regarding contactability after working hours Family members enforcing limits on working time

How do teleworkers' preferences for integration or segmentation of work and home activities influence their boundary management strategies?

Although teleworkers often experience blurred boundaries due to the elimination of physical demarcations between home and work, findings from these interviews suggest that effective teleworkers may develop strategies that align their enacted boundaries to their preferences for integration or segmentation:

I just prefer that way of working [segmentation]. So if I am enjoying myself in my private life I don't want work to encroach on that but similarly if I am concentrating on work I don't want to be taken away from that. That is just how I am. Some people don't like flitting. I like boundaries. (*Rachael, partial teleworker*)

I am a butterfly. I go backwards and forwards. I quite like that actually, switch on, switch off. (*Charlie, occasional teleworker*)

Perceived levels of job-related autonomy and schedule control helped teleworkers align their enacted boundaries to their preferences. Teleworkers reporting greater autonomy and control over their work agenda were better able to implement integration or segmentation strategies to match their boundary management preferences:

I liked the quiet of working from home and the fact that it was easier to plan your day out. [...] [I]f you'd got to a point of well I've had enough for now, I really do need to take a break, you could take that break but still come back and get your work done. (*Kate, partial teleworker*)

To a certain extent it could still be if I chose, maybe, to have a long lunch hour on a Friday afternoon and then do some work on a Saturday morning but it would be my choice. (*Grace, partial teleworker*)

These findings support the idea that individual differences are a core determinant of boundary management styles. Recognition of individual differences is important because research by [Kreiner \(2006\)](#) demonstrates that higher congruence between boundary preference and ability to enact that preference can lead to better outcomes for employees, including reduced work-life conflict and stress, and higher job satisfaction. The organization in the present study did not have a long-hours culture, and teleworkers were generally able to enact their preferred boundary management style. In organizations where after-hours communications, early meetings and weekend working are the norm, employees preferring segmentation will have difficulty establishing and maintaining boundaries between work and personal time. Any ensuing misalignment can produce negative psychological and attitudinal outcomes for these individuals and ultimately for their employer.

“This paper highlights the important effect of boundary management strategies on teleworking experiences by demonstrating how boundary management tactics can reduce the permeability of work/home boundaries.”

Implications for HR

This paper highlights the important effect of boundary management strategies on teleworking experiences by demonstrating how boundary management tactics can reduce the permeability of work/home boundaries. Whereas popular jokes about working in one's pyjamas suggest that teleworkers' personal lives frequently interrupt working time, research consistently demonstrates that the danger lies in work activities spilling over into home time. What can HR do to better prepare employees to work from home?:

1. Proactive assessment of employee preferences for boundary permeability and the demands and resources associated with their work and home environments can flag potential problems prior to entering a telework arrangement:
 - HR can then design interventions such as training for effective telework, using the boundary management tactics identified in the present study as suggested strategies for new teleworkers, or implement a trial period during which new teleworkers are coached through their new working arrangement.
2. The strategies identified in this paper can be used prescriptively by HR to assist teleworkers who are struggling to establish comfortable boundaries:
 - These strategies can provide teleworkers with tangible ideas to regulate the interaction between home and work.
3. Building autonomy into teleworkers' jobs, along with greater control over their work schedules, will empower employees to create and maintain boundaries that fit their personal preferences for integration or segmentation of work and home activities:
 - Given the increased job satisfaction and well-being associated with alignment between boundary preferences and boundary enactment, a “good fit” scenario will help organizations reap the full benefits that telework can bring to staff retention and productivity rates.

Conclusion

Successful teleworking has established effects on retention and productivity (Harker Martin and MacDonnell, 2012), yielding measurable benefits for the bottom line. As ICT continues to develop, the prevalence of telework will only grow. By applying a boundary management framework to the practice of teleworking, this research identifies ways in which HR can better prepare employees to participate in this form of flexible working and thus better reap the benefits of a diverse and agile workforce.

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Kelly Basile holds a PhD in Organizational Behavior from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Her research interests focus on the boundary conditions between work and non-work activities, as well as more recently on global leadership. She currently is engaged in a global, multi-method research project with senior leaders within a leading multinational technology organization. In addition to her academic research experience, Kelly worked in commercial research and consulting for over a decade, and she was involved in the design and implementation of hundreds of qualitative and quantitative research projects across a range of public and private industry sectors.

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