

Anytime, anywhere: Negotiating work life boundaries in a digital world

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we focus on examining how digital technologies affect our ability to manage rapid transitions ('switches') across work life boundaries, particularly in settings where working can take place anytime, anywhere. Using an innovative combination of research methods (video diaries and narrative interviews) with a group of social entrepreneurs, we show in a series of video extracts the complexity of these every day and ongoing transitions. We give examples of different types of switches and consider the benefits and challenges that digital technologies raise for this transition process.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.4.0 Computers and Society [General]

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Paper or Video: Digital technologies; boundary management; work life balance; video methods

1. INTRODUCTION

Work-life balance (WLB) has been a sustained research topic for several years [13]. It is argued that we live our lives within different social domains (e.g. work, family and community) and that we play different roles within these domains (e.g. breadwinner, parent, volunteer). Because of the complexity of these role identities, it is argued that we create physical, temporal and psychological boundaries or borders between them [5]. However, having created these boundaries, we then have to transition across them [2]. While we have developed rituals and practices to help this transition, such as dressing for work and the commute, this process is helped or hindered by the 'permeability' or 'flexibility' of the boundaries [11].

Previous research on these transitions has tended to draw on fairly lengthy periods where even micro-transitions are seen to be as long as a commute [2]. However, digital technologies and flexible or 'anywhere working' practices may make these transitions more

like rapid 'switches' and challenge work life boundaries [1]. The workplace may no longer be a discrete physical location [9] as we increasingly work from a range of locations [8]. Temporal boundaries may also be eroded as we feel required to 'stay connected' through multiple communication channels [7] and the increased use of 'always on' technologies.

There are both optimistic and pessimistic views about the role of digital technology as it may both create additional boundaries and erode existing ones [10]. We may experience frequent interruptions [12] and the volume of emails we receive can be both a cultural symbol of overload and a source of stress [3]. Research has usefully begun to look in depth at these issues in order to unravel these otherwise apparent contradictions [7].

Part of the wider Digital Brain Switch Project funded by the EPSRC, this paper focuses on how individuals negotiate these work life boundaries in a digital world.

2. METHODOLOGY

In this paper we present initial findings of video diaries and follow-up interviews with 15 social entrepreneurs. This is part of a wider, on-going study involving 45 participants from three different user groups selected to provide potentially contrasting experiences of both WLB and digital technologies (social entrepreneurs, university students and office workers). Social entrepreneurs were chosen because their particular WLB challenges might include financial insecurity, moral commitment to work goals, and lack of a defined workplace.

The aim of the video diaries was to capture real-time "switches": these could be between or within digital/physical worlds, and could be of seconds or several minutes duration. After a briefing session, each participant was asked to keep a video diary of any "switching" they noted across different aspects of their lives for a period of one week. As part of the briefing session, participants were shown examples of short videos from the pilot study; however, as part of our objective was to understand individuals' interpretations and experiences, they were left to make their own decisions as to what constituted a "switch" for them. We also asked participants to narrate a commentary as they filmed. At the end of the week, participants were debriefed and returned the video recordings.

Participants were then invited to attend an hour long recorded interview. The aim was partly to discuss excerpts from their video data but also to embed these discussions in a more in-depth understanding of the participants' lives, and to explore their own constructions of work-life balance, switches and technology use. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to review their videos. Meanwhile, the researchers also viewed the videos and selected 3 – 5 excerpts to discuss in the interviews as “critical incidents”. Interviews covered four main areas: occupational background and technologies used; work-life balance including strategies for managing this; switches, including triggers for switching; and methodological reflections on using the camcorder.

Video data and accompanying transcripts were imported into NVivo10. Recorded interviews were fully transcribed and also entered into NVivo10. Both video and interview data were then analyzed using thematic analysis [4].

3. FINDINGS

3.1 General

In this section, we present initial findings from our analysis. Digital technology is enrolled across the different social domains in the daily lives and routines of our participants. Being digitally connected is seen as an important tool for the participants, not just in relation to work – and in particular the ability to work flexibly - but for relaxation, self-motivation, hobbies and communication with family and friends. Often the same devices, software, and social media are deployed for multiple purposes. Being digitally disconnected is important too, to re-charge energy levels, to connect in person with other people, and to problem-solve.

Across our dataset, digital technology and being digitally connected was neither seen as all good or all bad. For some, it was an enabler: *‘It isn’t the digital issues for me. I think I’ve got those in balance, mainly ... it’s getting the rest of my life in balance, being a home-worker. The digital stuff makes my life easier, that I can go online as and when I want to, is brilliant for me. I know that isn’t right for some people, but for me, it’s brilliant’* (Jane, video). Here digital technology enables not just her ability to work where she wants (from home) but at times and in ways that suit this single mother.

For others digital technology and devices were a source of addiction: *‘I have an unhealthy relationship with my iPhone. You want to talk about work life balance? I want to talk about boundaries, like setting your own boundaries for your own good. I’ll take out my phone and I don’t even know why. I would have checked it two seconds ago, I’ll take it out again. I’ll be there, social media, nothing, oh email, maybe one email, reply’* (Mark, interview). Here the ability to be constantly connected is seen as having eroded this participant’s boundaries between work and non-work in a negative way.

Below we outline examples of some of the different types of “switches” we identified. We discuss these in relation to participant engagement with digital technologies and how this affects their ability to manage these often rapid transitions across work life boundaries. In doing so we begin to unpack both the benefits and the challenges that mobile communication technologies and social media raise for the transition process.

3.2 Examples of “switches”

We present examples from the data that illustrate our findings. We describe the contents of excerpts from the video data that will be presented at conference.

3.2.1 *The non-switch: Mobile digital technology creates a new virtual environment eroding the boundaries between the social domains of work and personal life e.g. ‘all my online stuff’*

Our data suggest that technology gives rise to a new, virtual environment in which what have previously been viewed as domains pertaining to either work or personal life now co-exist. This new domain allows for both personal and work activities to occur in the same virtual environment with little separation; we observed several of our participants engage in both work and personal emails simultaneously using the same digital platform. For example, in the following video the participant describes what she has been doing on her iPad:

Video extract 1: Shot of participant’s iPad on her kitchen table at home:

“I wrote those ideas for the blogs [part of the participant’s work role as a social entrepreneur]. Then I just thought, oh I’ll just email Judy [her client], let her know, and then checked my emails and deleted everything. And there was an offer on Mountain Warehouse and I bought myself some new walking boots because my walking boots are rubbish and it’s my birthday on Saturday, so they’re being delivered. And then I went online and sorted out [an event] for Saturday night followed by a meal for a group of us. So that’s all my online stuff done now hopefully for the day. I’ll probably just check-in, I don’t know, Facebook, Twitter, something like that later on.” (Jane, video)

The participant’s use of the term ‘all my online stuff’ to refer to a mix of work, personal and social activities suggests a potential lack of salience regarding the concept of switching between the domains of work and personal life. Rather than see these domains as separate, digital technology has created a new domain ‘online’ which creates new roles and tasks to be enacted that span what might otherwise be seen as the different domains of work and personal life.

3.2.2 *The ‘enabled’ switch: Mobile digital technology creates physical boundary permeability enabling anywhere working e.g. ‘in the bathroom...’*

One of the roles an online domain creates is that of ‘email manager’. Digital technology erodes the physical boundaries that have previously confined some work tasks to particular locations, allowing these to be performed in almost anywhere, as illustrated in the following video.

Video extract 2: Participant is standing in his home/office, a multi-purpose room in a shared house in which he both lives and works:

“Yesterday I kind of had a sense that I’d managed to get on the right side of keeping on top of my emails although I haven’t checked, well I have checked this morning. Actually when I was, when I was showering I took my mobile phone with me and I did

check some emails whilst I was in the bathroom and I got rid of about 20 junk emails so I have a sense of how many new ones have come in.” (Michael, video)

Mobile communication technology here erodes the physical boundary of the bathroom as a non-work space, enabling switching from showering to email checking. Interestingly this is not described as a switch; its ease has possibly been enabled by appropriating attributes of the role performed in one domain (the cleansing and purging ritual of the bathroom) to the role of email manager (clearing junk from the inbox).

3.2.3 The extended switch: Digital technology creates both physical and temporal boundary permeability: e.g. ‘Getting sucked in’

Whilst the permeability of boundaries between these domains through digital technology can be seen as useful and convenient, participants also described getting sucked in to work on their computers for longer than they had intended. For example, in the following video the participant describes what he had intended to be a short switch from his domestic to work role.

Video extract 3: Shot of laptop, separate monitor and other computer accessories on the desk in the participant’s home office:

“So, I was going to write down a couple of things but I’ve actually been a bit more absorbed and ended up doing a bit of the work that I thought I was going to do tomorrow. So, that’s good. It’s ...I’ve got it out the way but I suppose it demonstrates having your work in the house like this, it can be quite easy to get sucked into it, even when you’re trying not to be.” (David, video)

Particularly for those who have a home office, the digital technology therein enables a switch from domestic to work but one for which is difficult to set a temporal boundary.

3.2.4 The irresistible switch: Attempting to create a temporal digital boundary: ‘Itching to look at my phone’

Many participants spoke of their attempts to resist looking at their emails on their laptops or mobile phones, particularly early morning or at weekends. These attempts at a temporal boundary were often unsuccessful, as in the following video, with participants switching from non-work to work given that the devices were set up with both work and personal email accounts.

Video extract 4: Shot of participant half-sitting, half-lying in bed; she is dressed, holding her mobile phone and twitching her legs as she describes what is happening:

“Here I am this morning, I’ve been itching to look at my phone because it’s Saturday morning and my phone has obviously got all my emails on. I’ve started to get up and tried not to look at my phone but I’m going to have to and I’ve put on the radio to try and relax me a little bit so that’s on in the background. Sounds really silly, but interesting recording it and my feelings and stuff. So I’m just going to check my phone and yes I’ve got 5 emails on there...” (Fiona, video)

Here her physical movements suggest nervous energy as she attempts to distract herself from looking at her phone. She can only access her non work emails by looking at her phone but this will reveal her work messages too. The flexibility of having multiple accounts on one device erodes the temporal boundary.

4. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

Our initial findings support the idea of ‘dynamic’ boundary management [6] where the same individual may sometimes favour work-life segmentation and sometimes integration depending on context. This paper also makes a methodological contribution in the visual capturing and reporting of ‘switches’. At conference we would wish to share these video excerpts to demonstrate their efficacy in contributing understanding of how the adoption of digital technology affects the negotiation of work life boundaries.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Digital Brain Switch project (<http://digitalbrainswitch.co.uk>) is funded by the EPSRC (EP/K025201/1).

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