Chapter

Information and Communication Technologies and Work-Life Balance: Practical Recommendations for Employers and Individuals

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Abstract

For decades, the number and frequency of individuals who work from home has gradually increased, in many ways as a result of emergent Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This gradual increase, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has weathered away boundaries between work at work and work at home, with some positive and many negative outcomes. Currently, however, because of a global pandemic which necessitates ICTs for working from home, the impact that organizational technology assimilation has on the way that people engage with each other is increasingly important. This chapter reviews theory and research regarding organizational technology and concludes with pragmatic recommendations for individuals and organizations regarding work-related technology use at home.

Keywords: information communication and technology, organizational assimilation, work-life balance

1. Introduction

1.1 Information and communication technologies and work-life balance: practical recommendations for employers and individuals

An unprecedented number of full-time employees are working from home due to the global Coronavirus pandemic. Stay-at-home orders and encouragement to practice social distancing have forced individuals from all over the world to reconsider leaving their homes in order to reduce the spread of germs. What makes this point in time even more unique compared to similar previous situations is its intersection with the age of information and technology. With the emergence and development of technology, individuals are more accessible than they have ever been. In a time such as this one, these technological innovations can provide many individuals with the opportunity to fulfill their work obligations remotely.

Working remotely has increasingly become an option for individuals with the emergence of technologies that allow employees to communicate and be accessible at any time and any location. Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, more than 50% of

workers across the world were spending at least two and a half days a week working outside of the office [1]. The United States federal Bureau of Labor Statistics reported 25% of paid workers worked from home periodically between the years 2017 and 2018 [2]. Notably, less than 70% of these individuals were paid for the work that they were doing at home and 12% of these individuals completed both unpaid and paid work from home [2]. Additionally, individuals are offered flexible schedules by employers, which can be amended to fit the time and space in which employees need to work in accordance with personal or familial needs.

Global survey trends indicate widespread support and use of technologies that allow for more flexibility in work locations. One survey of over 15,000 professionals around 80 countries conducted by a flexible workspace company known as International Workplace Group (IPG) revealed that companies have recognized how preferable workplace flexibility is for employees. The survey results show that while 84% of Australian companies use workspace flexibility as a tool in retaining employees, 80% of German companies have already offered workspace flexibility or intend to implement flexibility and 82% of US companies use workspace flexibility to improve work-life balance [1]. Relatedly, 90% of the over 1000 respondents who participated in the 2019 Staples Workplace Survey indicated that their employee morale would increase with more work-related flexibility [3]. Some individuals even seem to believe that flexible work arrangements is a major contributing factor in evaluating job opportunities and that flexible work environments could even increase diversity amongst employees [1].

Flexibility in the workplace also appears to be connected to productivity according to recent research. For instance, 87% of Argentinian business people considered their companies to be more productive on account of the flexibility in working and 45% reported that their businesses were over 40% more productive [1]. Globally, 85% of employees believe that they are more productive due to their workplace flexibility and 65% of respondents believe that organizations with workspace flexibility are more productive than other less flexible organizations [1]. During the pandemic, 97% of North American employees and 88% of global employees who worked in offices were working from home more than once a week and about 70% of employees reported being satisfied working in both places and that they believed they had the tools to perform efficiently working from home [4]. These perceptions about performance appear to be corroborated by managers, 70% of whom indicated in the first work-from-home survey done during COVID-19 that working remotely has had the same impact or has improved team performance on average [4].

While working remotely offers numerous benefits to employees and improves performance according to employers, constant accessibility and bringing work home using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can have ramifications to work-life balance. Because organizational members learn rules and norms surrounding the use of ICTs through observation during assimilation [5], employers must be diligent about explicit and implicit messages from members of their organizations. When newcomers notice timestamps on emails from their supervisors that were sent past the close of business or when their coworkers comment about working on the weekends, they are absorbing messages from organizational members about where work-life balance falls on the company's priority list. Therefore, new employees should realize their individual actions in turn shape the organizational behavior patterns [6] and learn how to best manage ICTs within the context of work and work-from-home.

In one recent pre-pandemic study, full-time employees reported working a 44-hour work week plus an additional five hours and 30 minutes working at home using ICTs [7]. The introduction of ubiquitous work-focused technology has shifted traditionally conceived work schedules [7], increased employer expectations of employee productivity and accessibility [8–10], and increased levels of individual

distress [11, 12] and work-life conflict [7, 8]. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed these effects, and strained professional and personal boundaries as millions of employees rapidly shifted work to home.

The obscured boundary between home life and work due to COVID-19 has broad impacts on the intersection of work productivity, especially among employees with parenting and caregiving responsibilities, and those with employment uncertainty [13]. In one study during COVID-19, working Italian mothers significantly shifted work hours to devote attention to work before and after parenting [14]. Indeed, the early research on employment during the pandemic suggests that a shift to remote work at home may exacerbate gender inequalities in paid [15] and unpaid work [14]. These impacts are in direct opposition with recent prescriptive research conducted on tools that are conducive to efficiently working from home during the Coronavirus, which concluded that the three most impactful drivers of performance success include self discipline, high quality remote collaboration, and work-from-home well-being (e.g., sleep, exercise, etc.; [4]).

These tensions that exist when lines between work and home are blurred necessitate a comprehensive review of existing literature with the aim of creating theoretically grounded and applicable guidelines for employees and employers alike. Therefore, this chapter offers a review of existing literature on the integration of organizational technology and work-life balance and a research-rooted acknowledgement of positive and negative aspects of organizational productivity technologies outside of working hours. From this review, conclusions with evidence-based best practices are presented on using work-focused technology at home.

2. Literature review

Organizational technology use has changed workplace behaviors and altered the approaches that many take to working. In the digital age of "constant contactability" ([16], p. 109), individuals are expected by their employers to be available and productive outside of the originally conceived eight-hour workday [8]. These habits, though unhealthy, are not unpreventable.

The purpose of this paper is to address this issue by connecting the findings of relevant literature with theoretically grounded recommendations for managing work while prioritizing life. In doing so, it is important to start at the beginning of where patterns of behavior are observed within the organization by new members. Employees joining organizations are both modeling after existing norms while also using technology to seek information [17]. Thus, this review of literature will begin with a discussion of the assimilation phase of newcomers into technologically integrated organizations, focused on the mutually influential relationship of organizations and technology in Orlikowksi's structurational model of technology [18, 19] and the constitutive communication of organizations model (CCO; [20, 21]). Following the theoretical foundations for organizational technology integration, we acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of ICTs and offer practical recommendations aimed toward individuals and organizational managers.

2.1. Assimilation processes

Organizational assimilation, defined here as the process of a newcomer learning about and acclimating to the organizational culture, values, and norms [22], is dynamic in nature and requires role negotiation as an individual becomes a member of an organization [23]. During this process, a newcomer simultaneously adjusts to a new group of individuals and plays a new role in an unfamiliar environment. Since uncertainty is

such a fundamental experience in this process, individuals are predisposed to reduce or manage their uncertainty by engaging in information-seeking behaviors [5]. Organizational newcomers use official and unofficial mediated sources of organizational communication channels to learn about norms and to adapt their technology use to their organization's [17].

One of the most common information-seeking behaviors that newcomers engage in during the assimilation phase is observing their surroundings and the people around them [5] and to model behaviors that they observe, both positive and negative [5, 24]. For instance, based on their influence and legitimate power, supervisors are likely to be perceived by their subordinates as role models [5, 25]. Based on this logic, seeing other organizational members prioritize their work-related roles and responsibilities during and after work hours utilizing ICTs could influence a newcomer to do the same. One important factor to consider for newcomers observing the patterns and habits of their colleagues regarding use of ICTs while outside of work is how technology-focused the organization is.

2.2 Role of technology in organizational assimilation

As previously mentioned, the process of assimilating into an organization is centered around a new organizational member becoming entrenched in the organization's culture. One facet of an organization's culture contains the group's orientation surrounding technology, and in response, ICTs. Leonardi and Jackson [26] developed the notion of *technological grounding*, or a spectrum on which all organizations fall that denotes how central technology is to the fabric of the organizational culture. For instance, companies that produce technology have brands that are either closely connected to or reliant on technology for sustenance. According to Leonardi and Jackson [26], organizational members of these technologically grounded organizations communicate and behave in accordance with their cultural values, which, not surprisingly, are technologically centered.

In technologically grounded organizations, technology use by newcomers and existing organizational members is embedded into daily communication practice. For newcomers, ICTs are almost as important as face-to-face communication and function as conduits to organizational socialization [27]. As previously stated, the process of organizational assimilation is one that involves negotiations both on the side of the newcomer and on the side of the organization and its existing members [28]. The notion that individuals are developing their organizational roles while existing within and constituting their organizations during assimilation [27–29] is meaningful in the context of the organizational integration and impact of ICT on individuals' work-life balance.

2.3. Communicating technological norms and rules

New employees and organizations reciprocally influence one another during the assimilation process, as newcomers define their roles and the organizational culture and structure continuously adjusts with its members [27–29]. The aforementioned definition of assimilation as a mutually influential process between organizations and organizational members lends itself to the notion that an organization is both formed and informed by its members.

2.4 Structuration theory and organizational technology

Giddens' [6] original theory of organizational structuration posited that individuals' everyday actions are organized by structures which serve as the fabric of

society. These structures, embodied by rules and norms, are produced and reproduced by those who act within them, as actors' inclinations to behave in accordance with norms often result in actions taken in accordance with rules [6]. Patterns of interactions within organizations create a duality of structure in which employees who abide by organizational norms communicate meaning and power through their interactions with other organizational members.

Regarding the availability and use of ICTs for remote work, structures in the form of cultural norms and employer expectations for employees to work outside of work hours [8] are created when work permeates the spatiotemporal boundary of home [30]. The employee who consistently uses ICTs to communicate with others outside of the bounds of typical work hours reinforces these structures. That employee's role or status within the organization may be influential in the assimilation process for newcomers who look for meaning and organizational norm structures modeled from existing organizational members. This structuration lens is particularly helpful when suggesting practical recommendations, as individuals can make choices while using technology to manage work-life matters that both reinforce and challenge existing organizational structures.

2.5 Norming workplace ICT use

Orlikowski's theorizing [18, 19] integrated technology into structuration theory, both as a means for humans to communicate and as a product of such human interaction and relationships. The structurational model of technology recognizes that technology can play a facilitating and constraining role in organizational communication, but that institutions shape how people use technology. "When users conform to the technology's embedded rules and resources, they unwittingly sustain the institutional structures in which the technology is deployed" ([18], pp. 411-412). Individuals within organizations select mediums for communication appropriate for the goals of the organization. In the earliest forms of electronic organizational communication, scholars assert that mediated communication was primarily used for formal, both internal and external communication (e.g., electronic letters and memos; [31]), but as structuration theory suggests, the functions and genres of mediated communication quickly evolved to include a variety of formal and informal methods of communication in organizations.

As organizations and people shape one other, people and technology also shape one other and, in turn, shape the rules and norms of the organizations that they constitute. Organizational discourse is the avenue through which these technological norms are passed. As stated by Orlikowski [19], "enacted structures of technology use, which I term technologies-in-practice, are the set of rules and resources that are (re)constituted in people's recurrent engagement with the technologies at hand" (p. 407). Technologies-in-practice, then, are constituted and reconstituted also through the shared organizational discourse of ICT use. Under the perspective of the communicative constitution of organizations [20, 21], a theory that stemmed from structuration theory, communication functions not as the result of organizing with others, but as the precursor.

As the mechanism through which organizational norms, rules, and values are developed and solidified [32], communication plays the most significant role in organizations. Based on this premise, the way for individuals to defy the norm of bringing work home that has thus far been discursively reproduced would be to communicate about it with their coworkers. In doing so, other organizational members have the opportunities to also communicate, evaluate this norm, and, perhaps, commit as a community to a more balanced work-life schedule.

Organizational technology permeating the spatiotemporal boundary of home and life outside of work is growing into a more significant issue with the emergence of more ubiquitous work-centered technological modalities. In order to recognize how newcomers develop or reinforce these imbalanced habits, a review of existing research regarding the role of ICTs in organizational assimilation and for newcomers acclimating to organizational culture was presented. In the situation of individuals who bring their work home, particularly during the global Coronavirus pandemic, organizational technology use was introduced as a ubiquitous opportunity to work from any place at any time but in practice is employed to work from all places all the time. As individuals experience this phenomenon more, either by executing it themselves or by witnessing it by a coworker or supervisor, the norm is discursively re-produced and the structure is bolstered. As working from home emerges into an organizational cultural norm, investigating the use of technology and its challenging yet beneficial role in work-life balance is imperative. In the following section, both sides of the role that technology plays in work-life balance is discussed.

3. Positive and negative aspects of technology and home work

3.1 Positive

There are many considerations of the use of ICTs at home that are positive in nature. Perhaps most salient is the notion that telework reportedly offers greater flexibility, which many view as a remedy to having a healthier work-life balance [33, 34] and which is associated with greater job satisfaction [35]. Along with this, people who believe that communication technologies are convenient for completing work at home report less conflict between work and personal life due to technology use [7]. Individuals may also use ICTs to be more productive [8]. Those who use ICTs as an extension of work from home perceive that they are more productive [36], albeit distressed, which we discuss in the following section.

From the organization's perspective, ICTs are positive in that the communication channels allow newcomers to seek information and socialize with other organizational members [27]. ICTs have also been shown to increase frequency and duration of organizational communication while promoting cohesion, improving group performance, and providing a forum for information exchange [27]. As noted previously in this chapter, in light of the Coronavirus, data supports that managers believe that working from home has made their teams more productive, in some cases significantly more productive [1]. In spite of these positive aspects of organizational technology use for employers and employees, there are noteworthy drawbacks.

3.2 Negative

Although increased productivity is one of the primary determinants for organizational adoption of technology modalities [22], organizations may not truly realize these enhanced results. Pre-pandemic, most employees who brought work home reported having done so to catch up on unfinished work, yet productivity measures did not indicate that workers with extra at-home work hours experienced increased productivity for the additional hours worked [37]. Distractions, faster-paced interactions, and multi-tasking may be explanations for why the hours worked at home have historically seemed less productive [38]. Thus, the *perception* of greater work productivity may compel employees to continue to

bring work home and create expectations among employers that completing work on evenings and weekends is normative [8]. This expectation for additional work time beyond the standard workweek is especially evident among salaried employees [10].

Beyond the heightened expectations of productivity, there are negative personal and professional consequences when the boundaries between work and home are blurred through ICTs. The spillover effect of work into home life has a negative effect on attitudes toward work [39] and family satisfaction, especially among women [40]. Employees can also experience "technostress" due to the use of ICTs [11, 36]. Additionally, having greater expectations for work hours and productivity contribute to work-life conflict [8], job dissatisfaction, and employee burnout [7]. For employers concerned with employee retention, these longer-term consequences of expecting employees to complete work at home are especially costly.

These consequences of work-life imbalance rooted in the overuse of organizational ICTs may carry significant implications in the aftermath of the work from home incited by Coronavirus. During COVID-19, research has shown that organizational technology reliance can contribute to increases in cyberbullying [41], intensified work environments [42], and more surveillance measures [43]. The COVID-19 pandemic may further reinforce perceptions of work and productivity differences between parents and childless employees that were already present [44], as many parents negotiate the role conflict of acting as homeschool teachers and working as full-time remote employees. However, while research about these ramifications are salient and grounded in application to the lives of workers, employee retention, and job satisfaction, individuals may justify supposed temporary imbalances or negative consequences because of the uncertainty of employment.

3.3 Conclusions

Research indicates that there is evidence for both positive and negative aspects of employees using ICTs to perform work from home. As the boundaries that separate work from home are blurred, the balance between the "bidirectional permeability" could have both positive and negative aspects, as "employees will likely expect to do family-at-work if they are expected to do work-at-home" ([19], p. 120). While employers and employees mutually benefit from more flexible scheduling and more easily accessible technologies for work tasks and communication after traditional work hours, employees may find that working from home expands the number of hours worked by relocating them to home rather than in an office in practice, as a breadth of research suggests [10]. The following section offers research-based, practical recommendations for a wide variety of individuals, including employees and employers, which are especially relevant due to the current climate of necessitated work-from-home strategies and the imposition of organizational technology on personal boundaries.

4. Practical recommendations for organizational technology use at home

For Employers:

1. Communicate cultural values and expectations--verbally and nonverbally. Technology-centric values are inherently and fundamentally rooted in the cultures of organizations that are more technologically grounded [26]. Organizational expectations, particularly ones centering around technology use

and work-life balance, should be communicated upfront and repeated often. Existing research [16] has recommended that organizations ensure work-life balance or principles of reciprocity for newcomers through the introduction of an "acceptable use" policy. This method explicitly outlines guidelines on appropriate and inappropriate uses of organizational technology and is a useful option that employees can refer to when necessary. Another option here is to engage in the "discourse of reciprocity" ([16], p. 118), where organizations offer personal flexibility in exchange for employees being flexible with their work schedules. Regardless of what approach is employed to convey cultural values and expectations, direct communication is most important.

2. Provide training on ICTs and guidelines for their use to newcomers during onboarding. When an individual joins an organization, they are the most likely to seek out information on cultural rules and norms [5]. During these times, managers should provide training on both the available ICT itself while also covering the established guidelines on its use. This ensures that newcomers who may not be previously familiar with the technology are provided with instructions to utilize them. But, in addition, training should include expectations on its use, such as response time, availability timeframes, and security guidelines. Training of this kind should help organizations leverage the socialization and collaboration functions of ICTs [27] while also minimizing the negative aspects that have been outlined in earlier research [8, 11].

3. Enact a top-down approach in displaying positive technology behaviors. Structurationally speaking, agents and actions are necessary for structures to be enacted [6]. The more power and influence that the agents who are enacting organizational structures and shifting cultural norms have, the more effective and influential they are at modeling change. In addition, supervisors act as role models for newcomers after whom newcomers adapt behavior [5, 24, 25]. If supervisors and employers demonstrate behaviors that promote better work-life balance, those values will be adopted by newcomers, and employees who feel organizational support to pursue commitments unrelated to work will feel more committed to their organizations [39]. Therefore, there are benefits that both organizations and their members can realize when work-life balance is practiced.

For employees:

1. Create and reinforce the boundary between work and life. Existing research has suggested that greater connectivity leads to greater boundary permeability [8, 30] and that role conflict is directly influenced by boundary permeability [45]. However, that does not have to be the case. Disengaging personal devices from professional accounts when possible outside of work hours or regulating use of organizational apps outside of work hours or during time away from work are helpful steps in creating and reinforcing the separation that can exist between the work and home spheres. Remember that structures cannot take form without agents taking action [6], which requires coordinating and organizing.

2. Monitor working from home habits (and counterbalance, if necessary). Existing researchers support the notion that individuals who bring work home with them also bring home to work with them and recommend that employees develop structures to counteract the presence of work at home [16].

Relatedly, other research recommends substituting (not adding!) hours worked at home for hours worked on site [10].

3. Own the balance. Behaviors lead to the development of habits, which lead to the creation of norms and expectations. In order to achieve balance in the amount of ICT work from home, start by discussing realistic expectations with colleagues and family members about fluctuations in work projects or family commitments. There may be times when blurring the lines of work and home are unavoidable but having clear expectations about positive and negative technology behaviors may help eradicate bad habits. Norms of organizational technology use are the mechanism through which individuals permeate the boundary of home [16], so taking control of the habit and resisting the norms are the most important pieces to mitigating work-life imbalance.

5. Conclusion

The use of technology to communicate in organizations has become crucial in the midst of the global Coronavirus pandemic as the only feasible way for people to engage with one another without compromising the social distancing and stay-at-home orders. As more individuals are tasked with navigating the balance working from home, both organizations and employees are looking for practical recommendations based in previous research. Although there is much research to be done within the realm of organizational communication in this global pandemic context, we can still find ways that existing organizational and business communication research on organizational technology integration and work-life balance work to inform this once-in-a-century scenario.

It is essential that the risks and rewards of work-centered technological advances are considered and that the implications of merging them with other components of life are addressed in reviewing research and developing conclusions about the role of ICTs in the work-from-home transition during Coronavirus. For this reason, the purpose of this chapter has been to review existing literature on the integration of ICTs in organizations and during the process of working from home as a means to develop some theoretically grounded recommendations for both individuals to better balance their work and home lives and for employers to intentionally create a culture in which this is achievable. Although the current climate for organizations is one of turbulence and uncertainty, research reviewed here supports both employees and employers prioritizing individual well-being and employing healthy work habits throughout the integration of and reliance on information communication technologies.

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