Negotiating Boundaries and Availability: Understanding how Email and Communication Practices are Changing in our Digital Society

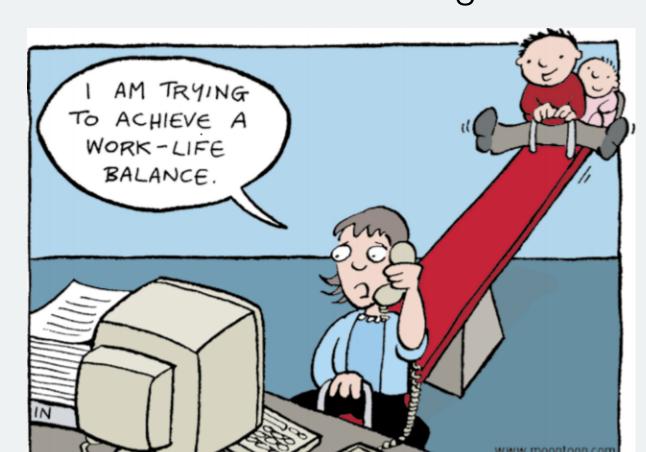Marta E. Cecchinato

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Overall Motivation

Mobile technology has allowed us to access work and personal information anywhere and at anytime. In terms of communication, this means that we can send, receive and check our emails on any device.

While on one side this is good because it allows work flexibility, on the other side it is associated with stress from being always available and having to handle these continuous cross-domain interruptions [1].

As the number of devices we own increases, and so is the number of emails exchanged [2] **how do our communication practices evolve? How do we negotiate work-home boundaries and our availability to be online?**

I AM TRYING TO ACHIEVE A WORK-LIFE BALANCE.

Overall Plan

☑ **STUDY 1. Email and Boundary Management Practices across Devices and Professions**

16 semi-structured interviews (9 academics (A); 7 professional services employees (PS) at the same university) and Work-Life Indicator Scale [1].

❖ How do people manage personal and work email accounts across devices?
❖ What are the boundary management strategies adopted for personal and work email accounts?
❖ Are there email and boundary management differences between two professional groups from the same university?

☑ **STUDY 2. The Potential of Smartwatches**

17 semi-structured interviews with early adopters and a 2-month autoethnography [3].

❖ What are the added value and downsides of smartwatches?
❖ How, if at all, do SWs affect work-home boundaries and cross-domain interruptions?
❖ Do SWs affect people's perceived expectation of always being available? If so, how?

☐ **STUDY 3. Communication Patterns and Practices**

Large scale survey and Work-Life Indicator Scale [1].

❖ What communication channels are used most frequently for work/personal reasons?
❖ How do users negotiate their availability through the different communication channels?
❖ Is there a correlation between the preference of communication channels and the type of boundary management style?

☐ **STUDY 4. The Value of Awareness Cues** (e.g. "last seen online at 15.44")

Diary study & ESM with follow-up interviews.

❖ How, if at all, does response expectation vary between work and personal communications as a result of awareness cues?
❖ How do we negotiate availability in CMC when we get 'awareness cues'?
❖ When is it good/bad to have these 'awareness cues'?

☐ **...and more (based on new findings)**

Study 1: Findings [4]

We identify two user groups, based on work and non-work interruptions and differences in when, where and how work and personal emails are managed.

1. Rigid Boundaries:

"I would never check my [work] email outside of work, purposely."
– P13, PS

2. Permeable Boundaries:

"The first check is [...] right after I woke up. [...] and once I'm in the office. Once I'm home I have a second work shift"
– P15, A

Participants also faced several challenges:

1. Negotiating availability:

"if we're in fron of the TV [...] I check my work email then that would irritate [my partner]"
– P5, A

2. Cross-device interaction:

"On my phone [...] I'll go into my work email at night and say 'I'll sort those tomorrow at work', but then I forget because they are no longer marked as undread"
– P8, A

To overcome these challenges, people created **micro-boundary practices**, which are *"a strategy to limit the impact of micro-role transitions caused by cross-domain technology interruptions"*

These can occur:
- **through accounts** (e.g. one account per role)
- **through devices** (e.g. personal email only on phone, work email only on laptop)
- **through software** (e.g. separate apps on phone for personal and work email)

Study 2: Initial Findings [5]

The Good. The added value of a SW is being able to receive **unobtrusive notifications** in **social situations**, hence reducing mobile phone dependency.

"I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that it has changed my life [...] I'm less rude, I don't take my phone out of my pocket when I'm with people"
– P5, Moto360

The Bad. Early adopters from this study are still **confused** as to what the real benefit SWs. When **compared to smartphones**, they still do not offer enough additional functionality in order for them to take off for mass adoption.

"They want you to keep your phone away [...] even though all that is promised, it still feels that it's half way"
– P6, Moto360

The Ugly? **Aesthetics desirability** of SWs highly depends on **personal preferences**. SWs have not entirely replaced traditional watches and users have different opinions on how SWs should look like.

Work in progress

"The Pebble is pretty unassuming looking [...] I'd be a bit uncomfortable with some of the Android watches though, because some of them are quite [ostentatious]"
– P1, Pebble

References
[1] Kossek et al. (2012). Work-nonwork boundary management profiles: A person-centered approach. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour*, 81(1), 112-128.
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