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<u>**Chapter 6**</u>

<u>**Boundary Management: Getting the Work-Home Balance Right**</u>

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Abstract

Agile working involves liberation from traditional ways of working, such that boundaries between work and home (both physical and temporal) can become blurred. In this chapter, we explore how boundary management preferences for integration or segmentation, and the fit between these preferences and agile working modalities, can influence experiences of the work-life interface, work-related attitudes and employee well-being. We go on to identify the challenges that agile working presents for boundary management, related to an increasingly 'always on' work culture. We conclude by discussing what organizations can do to support employees' management of work-life boundaries in the pursuit of satisfactory levels of performance and wellbeing in each life domain.

Keywords

work-life balance, work-family conflict, border theory, boundary management, integration, segmentation

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Introduction

Agile working allows employees to take control over the timing and location of their work activities. While increased control over work activities can help employees better manage their work and non-work roles, agile working can also blur the boundaries between these roles [15, 24]. For example, flexible starting and stopping times for work activities can result in employees working much later into the evening than they might with a fixed stopping time. Similarly, working from home may facilitate certain aspects of family life, but the removal of the physical boundary of an office location may result in constant reminders of and/or requests to work when engaged in non-work activities.

Boundaries are mental constructions of the dividing lines between different life domains, such as paid work, family and leisure. Managing boundaries can impact the extent to which work and personal roles conflict with or facilitate one another [1]. While research has increased substantially on the topic of boundary management over the last few decades, organizations are still struggling to find ways to support employees as they balance work and non-work roles. Central to this challenge is the impact of technology, which has enabled many organizations to espouse an 'always-on' culture, such that employees feel compelled to stay 'switched on' to work and are expected to respond instantly to technology-enabled communications [29]. In addition, organizations must be responsive to the different preferences held by employees regarding the types of boundaries they negotiate between the domains of work and non-work. For example, organizational interventions to promote agile working aim to help employees integrate work and non-work responsibilities and may lead to reduced work recovery time and decreased well-being, particularly among employees who prefer to keep work and non-work activities separate [20, 24, 32].

In this chapter, we explore key theories and research that contribute to our knowledge of work-life boundary management, discussing how boundaries influence experiences of the interface between work and non-work roles. We go on to identify challenges for boundary management arising from agile working practices such as remote working in an increasingly 'always on' work culture. We conclude by identifying some best practices for agile working that organizations can use to support employees' management of work-life boundaries in the pursuit of satisfactory levels of performance and wellbeing in each life domain.

Defining Work-Life Boundaries

Border Theory identifies three types of boundaries that individuals construct between work and non-work roles; physical, temporal and psychological [10]. Physical boundaries represent the actual spaces where work and non-work activities take place. For example, a remote e-worker might create a physical boundary in their home by having a separate room that serves as an office for work activities. Temporal boundaries use time to create borders between work and non-work activities [10], as when a worker sets a 5:00 p.m. deadline to end their working day because they need to collect their children from after-school care. Psychological boundaries are the rules that workers create regarding the emotions, behaviours and thinking patterns that might be displayed in one domain but not the other [1]. For instance, an employee may behave in a nurturing and caring manner when dealing with their children at home, but a more reserved and formal manner when dealing with colleagues at work.

The boundaries we create help us to navigate the extent to which our work and personal roles overlap. While some individuals seek to keep roles highly separate (segmentation), others prefer more overlap (integration), such that the experiences and events related to one role may frequently impact or disrupt the other [9]. These integrating/segmenting preferences span a

continuum, with few individuals maintaining fully integrated or fully segmented lifestyles [32]. Some research makes a case for the benefits of work-life integration; integration can lead to work and family roles enhancing one another, such that the greater the level of integration, the greater the impact of job satisfaction on positive home affect and marital satisfaction [20]. In addition, forms of agile working that foster integration, such as remote e-work, can help to reduce work-life conflict and lead to improved well-being [13] However, the converse can also be true; high levels of work-life integration can result in 'role blurring', which is also associated with higher levels of work-life conflict [15]. In addition, greater role integration may mean that individuals experience les recovery time from work activities leading to reduced well-being [39].

Managing Boundaries

Individuals adopt boundary tactics that allow them to manage work and non-work roles according to their preferences for segmentation or integration. Segmenters tend to build strong boundaries between work and non-work roles, while integrators tend to have weaker boundaries that allow for frequent transitions between roles [24, 32]. Research has identified physical, behavioural, temporal and communicative strategies to strengthen the boundaries between work and personal activities [25], likely to be more appealing to those with a segmentation preference. For example, remote e-workers, who favour segmentation, often recreate the physical boundary of an office environment by conducting work activities in a designated space in their home where personal or family activities do not take place. They may also make commitments to spend time with non-work colleagues, and take part in scheduled activities, in order to create a temporal boundary between working time and personal time [5]. Behavioural tactics might involve workers not checking personal emails or text messages at the office, in order to keep that time focused purely on work activities [18]. Communicative tactics could also relate to setting expectations with

co-workers and clients about one's hours of availability for work-related communications, in order to avoid interruption of family time [18].

The strength of boundaries between home and work roles is determined by individual differences in flexibility, and the permeability of boundaries [3, 9]. Flexibility can be measured by the extent to which a worker is both able and willing to modify the temporal and physical restrictions of their work environment [9]. An employee who can adjust their working hours to suit their family needs has high temporal boundary flexibility-ability, but if they prefer to work a standard 9-to-5 schedule then they have low flexibility-willingness [27]. Boundary permeability can be measured by the extent to which individuals experience frequent physical or psychological transitions (or interruptions) between roles [3, 10, 27]. For example, if an employee has argued with a family member at home before work, they may experience frequent psychological interruptions in their workday, thereby increasing the permeability of the work-home boundary.

The management of permeability and flexibility is a reciprocal process. While individuals have preferences for integrating or segmenting their roles, organizations also supply resources, or make demands, that affect employees' ability to execute their boundary management preferences [15]. Organizational resources and demands are influenced by organizational culture, national culture and industry constraints [8]. For example, in societies that tend to be more collectivist, both individuals and organizations may place more emphasis on family and community well-being and therefore, offer more forms of agile/integrative work [35]. In addition, industries are often constrained in their ability to offer forms of working that suit all employee preferences. For example, manufacturing jobs typically require a physical presence in the workplace, which enforces role segmentation, while technology-based jobs may allow remote e-work that increases the integration between work and family roles. Another consideration is the distributive justice

associated with levels of integration; if an organization allows flexibility for personal responsibilities to interrupt work, to what extent might the organization then expect that work responsibilities can cross non-work boundaries [22]?

There is no clear indication that either segmentation or integration leads to better outcomes for well-being and performance; it is the fit between an employee's preferences for integration/segmentation and their organization's supply of integrating/segmenting policies and practices that has the greatest impact [24]. In the context of boundary management, fit occurs when organizations supply employees with environments that are congruent with their segmentation/integration preferences [24]. For example, a study of offshore workers found that misfit resulting from an oversupply of segmentation relative to employee preferences - in the form of lengthy rotations away from home, followed by long periods away from work – reduced employee well-being; in this case 'misfit' led to conflict between work and family roles and reduced employees' commitment to the organization [6].

Agile Working Challenges to Boundary Management

Our evolving work environment presents several challenges to the management of work-life boundaries. Two central concerns are technology use that leads to an 'always on culture' and the significant rise in alternative ways of working including agile working practices, such as flexible work, remote work and gig work.

Research has identified the paradox of technology use in organizations; technology is credited with both supporting and harming work-life boundary management [22]. Technology use can increase boundary flexibility by giving individuals greater control over working hours and location [12]. In addition, technology can be used to build and manage boundaries between work and other roles; research suggests that individuals can use technology to ring-fence non-work time,

which involves actions, such as turning off technology-enabled links to work (phones, laptops) when they do not want to be interrupted, as well as to manage transitions between home and work life [17, 28]. However, technology has increased our ability to be available for and responsive to organizational needs. The more technology is used to connect to work, beyond the temporal, physical and psychological work domain, the stronger the culture of being 'always on' becomes [30]. A large body of research demonstrates that the interference of work in the home domain, created by constant availability, can (i) negatively impact work-related outcomes such as work satisfaction, organizational commitment and job performance, and, (ii) negatively impact family-related outcomes, such as marital and family satisfaction. The negative impact on individual wellbeing has also been shown across categories such as reduced life satisfaction, poor sleep quality, physical and mental health problems, and psychological strain [2]. In effect, technology use may be a new form of a role boundary that moderates the level of connectivity between the employee and the organization.

Research suggests that both segmentation/integration preferences and organizational norms and expectations can play a role in how technology disrupts boundary management [34]. Preferences for segmentation and stronger workgroup "segmentation norms" (e.g. visibility of colleagues practising segmentation) have been found to increase employees' ability to psychologically detach from work [34]. Detachment from work helps to promote recovery and increased well-being [39]. However, when segmenters face organizational expectations for after-hours work via ICT use, this incongruence between their segmentation-integration preference and their work environment can lead to lower job satisfaction and organizational commitment, and increased stress and work-life conflict [24, 34]. Similarly, there is evidence that the relationship between after-hours smartphone use and work interference is stronger among employees who

perceive high supervisor expectations for after-hours availability than among employees who do not experience these expectations [11].

Compounding the impact of technology that enables constant contact with work are alternative work arrangements that blur the physical boundaries between work and personal roles. Working from home has numerous benefits; organizations see gains in employee productivity related to both extended working hours [7, 22] and reduced distractions [4] as well as positive well-being outcomes including increased employee job satisfaction, commitment and engagement [21, 22]. For many employees, the opportunity to work from home can facilitate work-family balance through reduced commuting times [7] and improved relationships with family members [4]. However, individuals and organizations need to weigh the costs and benefits of bringing work into the home environment; research on flexible working practices demonstrates both a positive and negative impact on employee well-being [38]. Without the physical boundary of an office setting or the temporal boundary of set working hours, the unintended results of agile working may include increased role interruptions and work intensification, which can be harmful for both segmenters and integrators [22, 38]. Research on remote e-workers has identified that boundaries between work and personal roles can be more difficult to establish and maintain when the temporal and physical markers associated with in-office work are removed [31]. Self-employment and the newer models of gig work (work that is sourced and performed remotely via online platforms), may further complicate our ability to create healthy boundaries [26]. Because these practices involve increases in part-time work, work via a third-party agency and precarious contracting [37], even more complexity is created in terms of boundary management. For example, self-employed homeworkers are often 'always-on' for both work and family obligations; in addition to being

primary caregivers, these workers may experience increased pressure to be available 24-7 for clients in order to generate income [19].

How Can Organizations Provide Boundary Management Support?

Interventions to support boundary management during agile work must be flexible enough to accommodate individual differences, while simultaneously ensuring that the options on offer do not disrupt work performance or inhibit wellbeing. Organizations can consider three levels of interventions: individual, supervisory and organizational. First, organizations can attempt to design job roles that provide workers with autonomy and control over where and when work is performed. With greater autonomy, employees can pursue the level of integration or segmentation that matches their preferences. In a study of high-tech workers, agile working was associated with lower levels of work-life conflict when employees felt they had scheduling flexibility and job autonomy [16]. Further research has found that while computer-use outside of work hours does increase work-home conflict, conflict is lessened when employees perceive low organizational norms for integration [14]. This suggests that when integration is self-driven and voluntary, it may be less disruptive to employee well-being.

Next, organizations should ensure that supervisors support employee choice through their actions and communications. Supervisors who enact segmenting behaviours are more likely to be perceived as work-family friendly role models, encouraging employees (particularly segmenters) to build boundaries between home and work, resulting in less conflict, exhaustion and disengagement [23]. Supervisors also need to consider the preferences of integrators and ensure that enough flexibility is built into work schedules to allow integrators to make the necessary transitions between work and non-work roles. Finally, organizations should set clear expectations and policies related to working beyond the scope of a traditional workday. In a recent survey of UK professionals, almost 60% reported that their employers provided no guidance on managing

technology use outside of traditional work boundaries [29]. This is worrying when the distribution of work extendable technologies has been found to increase the likelihood that employees engage in work activities during personal time [36]. The adoption of clear and consistent organizational guidance related to technology use and expectations of availability may give workers more clarity and reduce anxiety associated with the need to feel 'always-on', and thereby improve satisfaction with the balance between work and family roles.

Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed research on work-life boundaries and boundary management practices to better understand the challenges faced and support needed by agile workers. Drawing on Border and 'Fit' theories, this chapter identifies important considerations for agile worker boundary management, including individual preferences, institutional and cultural constraints and demands, and organizational justice. In particular, the role technology plays in building and disrupting boundary strategies was highlighted. This chapter also identifies individual, supervisory and organizational interventions which can facilitate the ability of agile workers to construct healthy work-life boundaries that match their preferences. Greater recognition for the importance of supporting agile workers in the construction of healthy work/home boundaries will help to facilitate more positive work and home outcomes.

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