

Do you use your work phone outside working hours?

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Credit: University of Jyväskylä

Nowadays many work duties can be dealt with by means of mobile devices at home, a situation which blurs the boundary between work and other daily life. This blurring of boundaries between work and non-work domains may both be challenging and beneficial to employees and their organizations.

A study at the University of Jyväskylä reveals that the mixing of work and other [daily life](#) may have more benefits than previously assumed, and points to the importance of boundary-spanning communication.

A smartphone enables [phone calls](#), email and file transfers from the comfort of home. The question is, therefore, how to balance work and other life when technology blurs the boundary between these.

People easily think that by restricting employees' working hours and their use of work phones we can mitigate the negative consequences of technology use. A recent study at the University of Jyväskylä shows that there may be more effective ways to maximize the benefits of smartphone use, without diminishing employees' flexibility and use of these technologies.

"People often forget to talk about positive effects, such as autonomy and freedom the employees gain when they have the flexibility to schedule their work," says Postdoctoral Researcher Ward van Zoonen from JYU, who with his colleagues examined the use of smartphones for work matters outside working hours.

Supportive interaction makes people commit themselves to work

The study paid special attention to the benefits that flexible work and talking about domestic matters with the immediate supervisor outside working hours give to an [employee](#).

"This reduces the conflict between work and other life," van Zoonen says. "If people in an organisation strive for more dialogue between employees' different life domains, it is possible to create a functional environment where people can talk about different matters."

The research findings show that when employees communicate across boundaries and talk at work about their life in other respects, they can receive new kinds of support and understanding from their immediate

supervisor.

"This kind of communication creates a low threshold for contacting one's supervisor, which helps employees build a balance between the different domains of their lives and strengthens their organisational identification," says Professor Anu Sivunen describing the findings.

This means that tight working time restrictions to protect employees might not be beneficial after all, if they hinder reaching the positive results indicated in this research.

Supervisor plays a pivotal role for the success of flexible work

The data for this research were collected by two surveys, both answered by the same 367 employees from a Nordic company. They were asked, for example, how much they talk about their work with their family, and how much they talk about their family with their immediate supervisor.

"Both supervisors and their employees answered the surveys, and the study actually focused on their mutual communication," Sivunen says.

"Usually people at workplaces are interested in how communication within the work community is succeeding. It is often forgotten how an immediate supervisor can take an employer's other life into account and thereby help the employee gain work-related benefits."

According to van Zoonen, there is a need for this kind of research in today's working life.

"The use of a work phone in one's free time can be decreased, but such measures are challenging to put into practice in our current global

environment," he says. "For example, in international organisations different time zones may render it impractical to work solely from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m."

In addition, due to the current exceptional situation with remote working because of the coronavirus, many work communities are faced with a setting where there are no daily face-to-face meetings at the workplace.

"Communication with one's immediate supervisor during flexible working hours, also on matters other than work, could ease the daily lives of many employees if they could share the possible challenges of their family life or free time with their supervisor in these settings," Sivunen says. "This would also make the [supervisor](#) better aware of the employee's situation working from home and the related impacts on work performance."

More information: Ward van Zoonen et al, Boundary communication: how smartphone use after hours is associated with work-life conflict and organizational identification, *Journal of Applied Communication Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/00909882.2020.1755050](https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2020.1755050)

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