

Control over work-life boundaries creates crucial buffer to manage after-hours work stress

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Workers with greater boundary control over their work and personal lives were better at creating a stress buffer to prevent them from falling into a negative rumination trap, says a new study co-written by a trio of University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign experts who study occupational stress and employee well-being. From left, labor and employment relations professors YoungAh Park and Yihao Liu, and graduate student Lucille Headrick. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

When work intrudes after hours in the form of pings and buzzes from smartphone alerts, it can cause spikes of stress that lead to a host of adverse effects for workers, including negative work rumination, poor affect and insomnia.

But according to research co-written by a team of researchers at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign who study occupational stress and employee well-being, those who have greater "boundary control" over their work and [personal lives](#) were better at creating a stress buffer that helped protect them from falling into a negative-rumination trap.

Information communication technologies such as smartphones and tablets enable employees to work anywhere and anytime, thereby blurring work and nonwork boundaries. But that convenience comes at the expense of increased stress and mental health woes for workers unless they have control over the boundaries between work and nonwork life, said YoungAh Park, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois.

"Most people simply can't work without a smartphone, tablet or laptop computer," she said. "These technologies are so ubiquitous and convenient that it can lead some people to think that employees have to be always on or always available. Clearly, this kind of after-hours intrusion into the home or personal life domain is unhealthy, and our research shows that an always-on mentality has a big downside in the form of increased job stress."

In the study, Park and co-authors surveyed more than 500 full-time public school teachers in grades K-6 to measure their off-the-clock work intrusion via technologies on a weekly basis for five consecutive weeks.

"We asked about their weekly work intrusion involving technology, specifically their after-hours work—whether they were expected to respond to work-related messages and emails immediately, and whether they were contacted about work-related issues after hours," she said.

The researchers found that teachers' adoption of technological boundary tactics such as keeping work email alerts turned off on smartphones was related to lower perceptions of the weekly work intrusion.

The study builds on recent scholarship on how coping with off-hours occupational demands is becoming an increasingly important issue for workers, said Yihao Liu, a professor of labor and employment relations at Illinois and a co-author of the study.

"Managing your [work-life balance](#) through boundary control is not only helpful for you and your family, it also could be a benefit for your co-workers, because they also have to potentially read and respond to the back-and-forth messages that people are sending after the workday is done," he said. "Setting a good boundary between work and regular life is going to help more people and more stakeholders. Overall, it's critical that individuals manage their work-life boundaries for their own health and well-being, but also for their own productivity and their colleagues' productivity."

Moreover, the researchers found that teachers' boundary control softened the work intrusion-negative rumination link and that this boundary control was an important mechanism by which two "border keepers"—principals, who effectively functioned as supervisors in the study; and parents, who could be thought of as clientele—can affect teachers' weekly stress experiences.

In other words, the weekly strain symptoms involving work intrusion can be alleviated by a supervisor who supports employees' work-life balance,

Park said. Or conversely, it can be aggravated by clientele who expect employees to be always accessible and available.

"A really important point around the sense of boundary control is that stakeholders can influence employees' control," she said. "Our study suggests that school principals can play a positive role in that their support for work-life balance was associated with the teachers' greater sense of boundary control. When you have supportive leaders who model behaviors for work-life balance and work effectively with employees to creatively solve work-life conflicts, that translates into less stress for teachers through boundary control."

Although the study only included elementary school teachers in its sample, the findings about drawing clear boundaries after work ought to apply to most workers, especially now that more are working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researchers said.

"Our initial motivation was to study teachers because we tend to assume that their work and nonwork lives are separate and distinct," Park said. "Teachers have set schedules in a physical building, along with discrete blocks of free time over the weekends. But even with this working population, we found that after-hours work intrusion via technology can be really stressful for them. So although this finding is particular to teachers, a class of employees who we tend to assume have clear work-life boundaries, it's now an issue for everyone who is electronically tethered to their work after regular hours."

The paper will be published in the *Journal of Organization Behavior*.

More information: YoungAh Park et al. When work is wanted after hours: Testing weekly stress of information communication technology demands using boundary theory, *Journal of Organizational Behavior* (2020). [DOI: 10.1002/job.2461](https://doi.org/10.1002/job.2461)

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