

We can never truly separate our work and personal lives—and that isn't necessarily bad

April 6 2023, by Marcello Russo



An image of the first season of the TV series Severance. Credit: Apple TV

Acclaimed by critics and audiences alike, the Apple TV series "Severance," released last year, centered around a group of employees working at a firm called Lumon Industries who are truly able to split their work and personal lives. When they are at the office, employees do not remember anything about the outside world and when they are at home, they don't remember anything about work.

It's an extreme version of a concept that applies to most of us—managing the boundary between our private and [professional lives](#)—and is a preoccupation for academics working in the field of work-family research.

In the series, employees undergo a mind-wiping [medical procedure](#) called "severance." In the work-family literature it's less literal but is called "[separation](#)." Separation is a boundary management technique that sees us split our work and family roles without any overlap.

The other side of this coin is "integration," which sees individuals looking for synergies and overlaps between the multiple roles in their lives in order to experience better performance in all roles.

A good example of this would be Indra Nooyi, former Pepsi-Co's CEO for 12 years who, during some of her time off, assumed the "consumer" role and tasted some products as a real customer, using the knowledge acquired to propose some innovation to core business products.

A complete separation between work and family is impossible. We will always be tempted to think about our family when handling work issues and it's rare for people to be able to escape work communications when at home. This boundary between our two lives is [permeable](#).

The literal "severance" experienced by employees in the TV show is undoubtedly an inviting prospect for some employers. Cutting off all thoughts of the outside world would certainly reduce non-work distractions and should, in theory, increase productivity. It could also be a desirable condition for some employees who might finally be able to stop ruminating about work when at home.

Cross-pollination

Even in the fictional world of "Severance," we see that total separation is not a sustainable long-term option. And hoping for our lives to be perfectly segmented can foster false beliefs about the impact that these areas of our lives have on each other. This is especially true when the separation is motivated by the idea that our work and family roles are permanently in conflict. We come to believe that separating the two is necessary to avoid negative spillover.

The [literature has widely shown](#) that professional and [private lives](#) can be [allies](#). When we experience positive emotions in one of our roles, it can influence the other. This concept of "[work-family enrichment](#)" invites us to integrate our different roles as much as possible based on the premise that they can benefit each other.

A post-pandemic reality

The COVID-19 pandemic has made segmentation even less achievable. During this period, many of us experienced a complete and irreversible blurring of work and home boundaries. This led some work-family scholars to create a new term: zigzag working.

Attending work meetings with the kids doing their homework on the same desk, sat on one's lap, or preparing dinner while FaceTiming with a colleague has been normalized. Some people are quite reluctant to give this up. Not only does it make home life more manageable—some feel it is brought radical change and more humanity to the workplace.

While it is still early to draw conclusions, it is possible that the prolonged and forced integration between work and family roles could have prompted the need for an alternative and more sustainable work-home ideology.

We need to move away from the idea that a [worker has to be devoted to](#)

[their job](#) or that [ideal workers](#) are those available 24/7.

During the pandemic, many senior executive saw, as they had never before, the reality of their own daily life as they tried to help [family members](#) juggling across the multiple [daily activities](#). This forced and prolonged exposure to both family and work roles could have prompted the idea that participating actively in the family dynamics and day-to-day operations is rewarding at an emotional level, aside from being beneficial and productive.

It might also compel managers to become more respectful of the [personal lives](#) of their colleagues as they had experienced directly how demanding it could be to try to "[have it all](#)".

Having it all—the possibility of experiencing a rich life in all their multiple domains—is a difficult goal to achieve. These considerations have led some scholars to add an adjective to this idea: "imperfect." This means [we have to accept the idea that our lives can be imperfect](#)—especially when we do not want to give up anything. The key is to accept this idea and seek for help, focusing only in the activities we perform at our the best—if we are not great cooks, it should not be problem to eat take-away food in times of need.

While, as we've said, incorporating work into our private lives in a healthy way can help us develop [positive emotions](#) that arise from a job well done into our family lives and vice versa, we can see no advantages in receiving work emails demanding our attention while being at home with our families.

That means that overlapping one role with the other can be beneficial if it's always done in a healthy and respectful way, not in an intrusive fashion.

And here is where the TV series (and many companies) are wrong: a boundary management system is effective only when it matches the individual preferences of the employees regarding their work/family balance. Before proposing a management system, companies should verify that it matches the preferences of their workers.

We of course already know that the mindwipe procedure in "Severance" is not possible in practice but perhaps we are also finding that it is not desirable either. We are not going back into a world that makes separation even remotely possible, so better to move towards a reality that benefits us rather than makes the two sides of our lives harder.

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