

It's Important For Remote Work To Maintain Boundaries Between Personal And Professional Lives

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The remote working that became widespread during the Covid pandemic has had a well-documented impact on the work-life balance of employees, and especially of female employees, who have recorded working longer hours on top of additional domestic chores, such as homeschooling children and caring for relatives.

It's a narrative reaffirmed by [research](#) from the University of Turku in Finland, which highlights the blurred boundaries between work and family responsibilities during 2020. The researchers examined the work-life balance of Finnish parents during the first lockdown in 2020.

The researchers found that women, in particular, were struggling to effectively draw boundaries between their work and family life, especially if they were unable to effectively negotiate an equitable distribution of work and childcare responsibilities with partners.

The new normal

An interesting study from the University of Jyväskylä, also in Finland, explores whether this blurring of boundaries between our personal and professional lives was the "new normal".

Our digital devices are hugely powerful due to the tremendous range of apps they contain. Long gone are the days when they would 'just' provide calls and emails, and we can now transfer files, work on documents, collaborate with colleagues, and all manner of other work-related tasks from our phones. Striking a balance is still important though, right?

Some employers have attempted to assist our work-life balance by restricting access to work systems outside of office hours, fueled by understandable concern that people are working too much, and not getting the rest their mind needs to function effectively. The Finnish research suggests there are better strategies available, however, that allow employers to maximize the flexibility afforded by the smartphone, while not over-burdening the employee.

As with much in life, the researchers believe that a problem shared is a problem halved, and having a discussion about work-life balance with employees can help managers get more out of their team because they can co-create solutions to the inevitable challenges that are presented during this unprecedented time.

Managerial support

Research from Baylor University examines how a better balance can be struck when working remotely. The researchers worked with around 400 couples to examine how they managed remote working, particularly in terms of striking a balance between personal and professional lives.

They believe that taking regular breaks is crucial, not least as they help people to buffer the negative consequences of the various unintentional interruptions that litter our day. This is especially important for women, as research has shown that they are more likely to be interrupted when working from home than men are.

Preventing our work-life boundaries from eroding entirely remains a challenge, however, which is why a recent study from Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations advocates for a clear work schedule to be agreed upon with one's manager, and no work to take place outside of those contracted hours.

Regular schedule

The researchers examine the difference between working from home during regular work hours (referred to as "replacement work-from-home") and working from home outside of those hours (referred to as "extension work-from-home").

Using data from a survey of 7,857 employees at 814 German establishments, the authors found that "extension work-from-home" is linked to lower psychological well-being, higher intentions to leave the company, and more conflict between work and family.

In contrast, "replacement work-from-home" leads to greater engagement and does not result in more conflict between work and family or higher turnover. Furthermore, their research suggests that "extension work-from-home" has a more negative impact on women's well-being and work-family conflict.

Specifically, psychological well-being is 11% lower for women who do "extension work-from-home" compared to women with similar characteristics who do not work from home. However, well-being is 5% higher for women whose work from home is limited to their regular workday, as compared to women with similar characteristics who do not work from home.

"Given the evidence that remote work can bring benefits to workers and to employers, but only when work from home is bounded and not extended, an important next step is to determine how new labor standards and management practices may help guard against extension work-from-home," the researchers explain.

The right management

Research from Swinburne highlights the importance of adapting managerial practices to make the most of remote working while also making it work for employees themselves.

"In an increasingly global world, it's important that managers recognize the need for balancing personal and professional lives," says Sheila Flavell CBE, COO, FDM Group. "Strict policies that stifle flexible working can deter women and those from disadvantaged backgrounds from entering and maintaining a career of their choice."

While some countries have passed legislation giving workers the "right to disconnect", it is surely better for all concerned if this trust is built into the relationship between managers and their teams so that the boundaries between the professional and personal lives of workers are not unduly blurred.