

Making Sense of Mobile Technology: The Integration of Work and Private Life

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Abstract

Mobile technologies have facilitated a radical shift in work and private life. In this article, we seek to better understand how individual mobile technology users have made sense of these changes and adapted to them. We have used narrative enquiry and sensemaking to collect and analyze the data. The findings show that mobile technology use blurs the boundaries between work and private life, making traditional time and place distinctions less relevant. Furthermore, work and private life can be integrated in ways that may be either competitive or complementary. We also observed an effect rarely discussed in the literature—the way personal and professional aspirations affect how work and private life are integrated. Implications include the need for researchers and organizations to understand the wider consequences that arise from the integration of work and private life roles.

Keywords

sensemaking, narrative enquiry, mobile technology, work–life balance, work–life integration

Introduction

The diffusion and appropriation of mobile technologies have made it possible for information, knowledge, and service industry work to be performed from almost anywhere and at any time. The ubiquity of these technologies has altered traditional boundaries between work and private life (Sadler, Robertson, Kan, & Hagen, 2006). According to the International Telecommunication Union, worldwide subscriptions to mobile phones reached 6 billion in 2012 (Liu & Wei, 2014). ComScore (2014), a leading digital measurement company reporting key trends in the U.S. smartphone industry, reports that 163.2 million people in the United States owned smartphones during the first quarter of 2014, which shows a 7% increase since November 2013. Similar remarkable increases in mobile phone use are reported in other parts of the globe; for example, as of February 2014, 75% of the South Korean population were using smartphones (Jung, Kim, & Chan-Olmsted, 2014). It is now commonplace for individuals to exchange work-related messages at home or personal communications at work. For many users, mobile technologies have extended work engagement beyond the period and locus of paid employment (Harmer & Pauleen, 2012; Schieman & Glaving, 2008). In so doing, mobile technologies have not only changed the pattern of work and private life but also perceptions about the role of technology in the home (Baillie, Benyon, & Jorgenson, 2008) and work–life balance (Roberts, 2007).

While mobile technologies provide opportunities for individuals to organize work tasks in resourceful ways to create more private time, the relationship is complicated and paradoxical (Boell, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Campbell, 2014). At one extreme, workers may use technology in a way that maximizes the amount and quality of time allocated for private activities. At the other extreme, technology-enabled mobility can facilitate an imbalance in which work dominates private life. Consequently, work–life balance remains an important concept for understanding the impact of mobile technologies (Golden, Kirby, & Jorgenson, 2006).

In our examination, the work–life balance is understood to be subjectively determined. Following Hattery (2001), we do not rely on an interpretation of *balance* as a zero-sum game where one activity (such as work) precludes the other (recreation or family life). Instead, we examine how the two spheres are integrated through mobile technology usage (Golden et al., 2006). Few studies have examined the impact of technology on the integration of work and private life, and

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we seek to make an important contribution to this research. Our guiding research question is as follows:

Research Question 1: How do users make sense of the impact of mobile technologies on the integration of work and private roles?

The article is organized as follows. After a review of the key literature in the area of technology-enabled mobility and work–life balance, as well as the broader social issues, we then outline our research approach used to collect and analyze the study narratives. We conclude with a discussion of our findings and related implications, outline limitations, and suggest opportunities for future research.

Mobility and Work–Life Balance

A growing body of literature has explored the broader social issues surrounding the mobile technology (Constantinescu et al., 2014; Gendreau, 2007; Roberts, 2007), including earlier research on telework (Ellison, 1999; Tremblay, 2002). Ellison (1999) identifies “employees isolation,” “boundaries between home and work,” and “the impact of telework on the individual and the family,” among others, as the major thematic concerns raised by telework research. As was the case with the emergence of teleworking, which altered the traditional approaches and policies concerning attendance, absenteeism, tardiness, and time off (Olson & Primps, 1984), mobile technology is redefining boundaries in the social and work contexts (Harmer & Pauleen, 2012). In the workplace, mobile technology affects various aspects of work and the workplace. Pink, Morgan, and Dainty (2014) show how occupational safety and health are interwoven with mobile media, and argue that the configuration must be considered in the design of effective policies and practices in the occupational safety and health field. Tremblay (2002) studies the impact of telework on working conditions and work–family balance and concludes that telework may lead to a gender-based polarization of working conditions that can be harmful for women by creating less attractive working conditions.

Other recent studies, while outside the realm of work, reveal cultural issues that may soon have an impact on work and workplaces. Park (2014) argues that skill and use disparities in teenager mobile-mediated behavior are manifested based on race, and that the impacts of mobile technology remain embedded in social backgrounds. S. W. Campbell and Park’s (2013) work shows that mobile technology is redefining social boundaries (e.g., through enabling a new form of sexual expression among teens: adolescent sexting), which may be challenging and problematic for lawmakers and justice systems, as well as workplaces. Mobile-based privacy is another issue that may further alter the work–life balance. A study of privacy knowledge and skill among young adults showed that people may lack basic privacy knowledge, privacy skills, and awareness of risk associated

with commercial mobile environments, despite their frequent daily mobile use (Park & Mo Jang, 2014). Likewise, the disparity between technological access and knowledge about the technology use is raised by another study. Differences between young people’s and their older counterparts’ abilities to find content online are significant, which may be problematic when making policies to reduce inequalities in access to and use of information technologies (Hargittai, 2002). Wiring all people in the workplace, for example, does not mean that everyone has access to the Internet, as people may lack effective access due to insufficient knowledge of how to use the Internet.

People do appear to need a balance between work and home life, but studies suggest that there are barriers to achieving a satisfactory equilibrium (Musson & Tietze, 2004). Other research contends that organizations and families enact one another either as cooperative or competitive life environments (Golden, 2009). Perhaps at the heart of this idea of balance is what Perlow (1999) describes as a “time famine.” It is a sense that people “. . . have insufficient time to meet all of the demands on them from work and their lives outside of work” (p. 57). Thus, “their feeling [is] of having too much to do and not enough time in which to do it” (Perlow, 1999, p. 57).

While mobile technologies may allow employees greater flexibility in managing work boundaries (Castells, Qui, Fernandez-Ardevol, & Sey, 2006; Dal Fiore, Mokhtarian, Salomon, & Singer, 2014; Hill, Miller, Weiner, & Colihan, 1998), they can also blur our understanding of what is a healthy work–life balance. The influence of mobile technology on social relationships goes beyond business sector boundaries, in such a way that how mobile communication technology influences social networks has become crucial in policy making (Julsrud & Rolan, 2014). Information and knowledge are being digitalized, and reducing the need for workers to be where work and information are located (Dal Fiore et al., 2014). Concepts such as telework and the virtual office can complicate this balance as “employees attempt to deal with flexibility and sculpt the permeability of their own work and personal/family life boundaries” (Nippert-Eng, 1995, p. 48). Hill, Hawkins, and Miller’s (1996) study of mobile and nonmobile IBM employees showed that while some of the employees reported that mobility had helped them balance work and family life, a majority of mobile employees had mentioned that balancing their work and home life is “difficult” or “very difficult.” The newly found fluidity of space, time, and context creates an entirely new milieu in which individuals must scope new boundaries and new relationships to create entirely new forms of work and private life (Harmer & Pauleen, 2012). The concern for us is how people engaged in such transformations make sense of their experiences managing the perceived boundaries between their work and private lives.

The advent of mobile technologies has provoked discussion about whether technology that facilitates working at

home enhances work–life balance or just creates new forms of imbalance (Fleetwood, 2007). There is evidence that home-based employees have mixed feelings about its effects on work–life balance. While they are positive about their greater flexibility, they also note the blurred boundary between work and family (Townsend & Batchelor, 2005), increased workload, longer working hours, and the potential for burnout (Hill et al., 1998).

New technologies impose a host of pressures on individuals (Sadler et al., 2006). These pressures come from organizational and managerial expectations to be always accessible but can also be self-induced when individuals are reluctant to separate work and family commitments (Cavazotte, Heloisa Lemos, & Villadsen, 2014). By using technology to access work resources in personal time, individual employees strive to achieve personal objectives, even when the task is ostensibly for the organization. These objectives may relate to improvements to the employee's own position or enhancement of self-image (J. Campbell & McDonald, 2009). Workers permitted access to resources from beyond the employer's premises tend to believe that the use of mobile tools contributes to the development of their job, and, in turn, they assume more responsibilities (Isaac, Leclercq, & Besseyre des Horts, 2006).

Despite several decades of research, technology-enabled work and its impact on the relationship between work and private life remain little understood. Much of this research emphasized the duality of work and private life roles as embodied in constructs such as work–life conflict and in descriptions of the negative outcomes such conflict implies (Golden, 2009). However, in reality the empirical results have been mixed. These mixed findings suggest that the traditional conflict-based perspective of work and private life in technology-enabled work environments may not be entirely valid.

Method

This study uses narrative enquiry as the basis for data collection. Narrative enquiry allows researchers to collect participant stories about their experiences of new situations, and minimizes the directing of participants' responses that can occur through structured and semi-structured interview questions. Narrative methods give the researcher access to how the storyteller makes sense of the world as she or he experiences it (Boyce, 1995). The method is based on the premise that individuals communicate most effectively through the ordinary activity of telling stories. Narrative inquiry may be summarized as a technique whereby a researcher (or listener) first collaborates with a participant (storyteller) to turn one or more stories into a coherent narrative and thereafter engage in analysis to understand the lived experience embedded in the story. In our study, reflective accounts emerged from the stories told by the study participants on the integration of work and private life through the use of mobile technologies.

Sensemaking theory was used to gain deep understanding of the phenomena under study (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Stensaker & Falkenberg, 2007) by providing a lens through which to examine the process, whereby individuals come to terms with new and constantly changing situations. Although sensemaking theory is commonly used in a number of fields such as management and education, we found few examples of its use in information systems research. We find this somewhat surprising, given that technology is often an instrumental factor in altering work environments and consequently the way people work. We used sensemaking in this study to understand how workers comprehend, rationalize, and articulate the impacts of mobile technology on work and private life (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005), and to examine evolutionary changes in the nature of work (Bean & Hamilton, 2006) and particularly how the participants understand technology usage.

The authors used sensemaking both at the level of the single participant and collectively for the whole study. The four characteristics of sensemaking developed by Hales (2007) facilitated an analysis of narratives and provided a trace of how each individual made sense of their environment. Hales's four characteristics of sensemaking are as follows:

1. Environments are not passively experienced but are enacted through sensemaking. Individuals act as if their interpretation of the environment was real and correct according to the sense they make of it.
2. Problematic complex situations are made into specific problems according to the aspects upon which the individual focuses. A person may make different sense of a situation than a colleague, using a personally unique set of priorities and preconceptions.
3. Responses to problems are retrospectively rationalized through plausible stories that explain outcomes. Hence, sensemakers take a relative approach to truth where people not only believe what can account for experience but what is also interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and relevant.
4. Sensemaking activity attempts to sustain or enhance the individual's concept of self. Individuals attempt to make sense of their environment in ways that allow them to present themselves, and others with whom they identify, in the best possible light (Allard-Poesi, 2005).

Data Collection

We gathered stories in sessions with a convenience sample of 34 adults in New Zealand, Australia, and the United States (coded as Participants A through AH). The participants were recruited to address the specific research question raised in this study. They came from both the public and private sectors, held a variety of positions in technical and professional

fields, and used a range of mobile technologies. Beginning with a small pool of personal acquaintances in New Zealand, we expanded our sample using the snowball technique (Patton, 2002), that is, asking the participant who was being interviewed to recommend others in his or her network who were working with mobile technology, to include similarly qualified acquaintances regardless of their geographic location. This approach generated a set of active mobile workers and allowed us to examine the impact that a high level of mobile technology usage has on the integration of work and private life roles.

Participants were invited to give an account of a typical work day and, in particular, to recall the ways in which they encountered technology during the day. In early interviews in the spirit of narrative enquiry, we simply asked participants to talk about the way they interacted with technology from the moment they woke up. This provided insight into the typical daily use of technology in participants' lives. As we gained further insights into our participants and their use of technology (theoretical sensitivity), we asked more directed but still open questions (Glaser, 1978); for example, where appropriate, participants were asked to specifically address the effects of technology on work–life balance. Participants were encouraged to share their technological experiences in their own way through narrative, and transcripts were later returned to them for checking.

Data Analysis

While narrative can be analyzed in many ways (Mishler, 1995), it is important to recognize that the act of collaborating as a listener in the production of a narrative is a quintessential act of sensemaking (Boje, 2001). In this research, we draw on ideas about sensemaking originally advanced by Weick (1995) and operationalized by Hales (2007) to reach an understanding of how individuals make sense of their situations.

In the next section, we use Hales's framework to look for evidence of sensemaking behavior in the construction of our participants' narratives concerning technology-enabled mobility in their work and private life.

Results

Complex problematic situations are often grouped by individuals into specific problem domains based on the situation (Hales, 2007). In this study, we focused on those aspects of narratives relevant to the impact of technology on the work–life balance of the participants. The following subsections explore the narratives of our participants using Hales's four characteristics of sensemaking to look for evidence of rationalization and reflection on the technology-altered balance between work and private life.

Environments are not passively experienced but are enacted through sensemaking.

We sought to make sense of participants' stories as explanations of how they interpreted changes to their work–life balance after adopting mobile technologies and how they interpreted these changes as real and correct. We used their stories as evidence of sensemaking activity of how technology transformed ways of working and living. For example, the following narrative demonstrates how one participant enacted and engaged with his working environment.

I think that technology that I'm using allows me to be much more productive. It's allowing me to choose when and where to work. It's allowing me to be much more flexible. However the trick here is to learn how to use it and not to become a slave of it or not [give in] to the compulsion like "do I have an email?" (Participant F)

This statement shows how this participant's work activities were recounted to create understanding of a sensible work environment that could then be addressed in manageable ways. Participant F has shaped his understanding of the technological environment to match his own perceptions and preferences, and then acted accordingly. The interplay of human activity systems in the performance of work tasks is an important area for sensemaking, as the performance of work tasks typically occurs in environments that are ambiguous and subject to continuous renegotiation between a variety of stakeholders. Other examples of how work and private life environments are enacted include the following:

Right from the first, I didn't fancy the idea of working 9 to 5 in office buildings. . . . I wanted to be able to work flexibly, which meant to me, being able to go out and do things like diving and spending time with my family, my children. So when the internet came along I found that to be invaluable. (Participant E)

Participant E has actively shaped his work environment to create what he perceived to be a symbiotic balance between work and private life. Many participants reported using technology not only for the organization but also for their private relationships with family and friends. However, participants achieved this in different ways. Participant E was able to do much of his administrative and marketing work from home, using technology to find and communicate with clients, and only needing to leave the house to engage with clients in contracted outdoor activities. Other participants achieved similar flexible work schedules that allowed them to work from home or office. However, it was clear that most participants felt, sometimes with overtones of guilt, that the balance had shifted to accommodate more work, rather than more personal or family life, and that this new state of equilibrium was in some sense predictive of their future work–life patterns.

There were numerous examples of how technology continued to transform work by allowing participants to expand the scope of what was possible to accomplish. Mainly, mobile-technology-enabled geographically distributed collaborations

that allowed participants to work from home or communicate with colleagues in other offices, cities, and countries. We see this as a step toward dispersed centers of calculation, or what Czarniawska (2004) referred to as “Action Nets.”

I sometimes find it a little bit difficult to switch off . . . particularly if it's a client who's held up with something on the other side of the world . . . It's the middle of their day and they can't continue using the system until I get a resolution from it. I have a sense of loyalty to them to see what I can do to solve it for them and I have been known to do that quite a lot . . . work at night in my own time which I wouldn't mind so much if I got paid for it but I don't. (Participant A)

Here, Participant A has made choices that reinforce his perceived model of work–life balance. Despite his professed irritation, he has a professional sense of obligation to others. Interestingly, his action to work late at night is driven by an unrewarded sense of loyalty. Some participants valued the ability of mobile technologies to facilitate work across temporal boundaries. Others used technology in a synchronous fashion to access information and services across international time zones. Paradoxically, many seemed both gratified by and resentful toward their ability to work asynchronously. In these situations, the melding of work and private life had perhaps not achieved a harmonious integration and were competitive enactments of one another (Golden, 2009). While the technology tended to blur temporal boundaries, the choice to allow this circumstance was more a consequence of role engagement and a need perhaps to be seen as a high-performing worker.

Problematic complex situations are made into specific problems according to the aspects on which the individual focuses and that person's conceptual framework around the situation.

Here, we are concerned with how participants reinterpreted complex and problematic situations, events, and interactions into specific problems that were accountable and made sense to themselves and others. Consider the following:

When I'm on holiday I get the odd work call but that's okay because the people who I leave behind who are covering me aren't going to know everything they need to know and so it's valuable to them and to me just to have a real quick call. Those calls are quick and then they're on their way which is really good. (Participant B)

Participant B made sense of this situation as a quick solution to an immediate problem. He did not report any adverse effects from work-related calls interrupting his holiday. For many participants, the quality of work and work–life transformation appeared highly dependent on their ability to manage both the technology and themselves. Part of this challenge was learning how to develop and manage relationships with others via technology. Mobile technology allows constant

accessibility, and some participants felt self-induced pressure to be more accessible for work. They seemed to find it difficult to turn off the technology or use it solely for private life. Work–home boundaries were again blurred, and many participants indicated an uneasy sense of the need to separate the two spheres as technology allowed any time that remained between home and work to become “up time.”

In the following example, Participant P reflects on the impact of instant messaging:

I use instant messaging even to talk to people who are sitting on the opposite pod from me. Sometimes there are conversations that you would ideally go off into a meeting room to have with them. And rather than distracting them from what they're doing we'll just use instant messaging to [ask] “what do you think of this, how do you think of that, here I'm sending you a document tell me what you want.” (Participant P)

In describing his complex work environment, Participant P rationalized instant messaging as being less distracting than face-to-face interaction. He imposed his own conceptual framework on those with whom he communicates and deemphasized sometimes intrusive elements of instant messaging technology. A similar attitude comes through in another example concerning the use of email:

Yes; because quick communications tend to fly back and forth very quickly over the email . . . if we gave considered thought to what we are doing, using email in particular, we might do things or say things differently. If I had to sit down and write a letter with a pen and paper, I suspect that I would have put a lot more thought into how I communicated and how the recipient will be able to understand this. Whereas when you are doing so many emails per day you don't feel like you have the ability to take the time, you know they're expecting a response very quickly. And so the time factor goes out the window and with it goes some of the context and some of the wisdom. (Participant Q)

It has been shown that email communication can have significant impact on human interpersonal relationships (Ducheneaut, 2002; Sheer & Fung, 2007; Waller & Ragsdell, 2012). In particular, email communication in a work context is less effective in building and sustaining close social relationships than face-to-face communication (Cummings, 2002). However, Participant Q reduces the shortcomings of using email technology to the issue of terse communication only. However, the use and misuse of email was a recurring theme. Email was identified as a terse communication medium that could provoke intemperate responses, with potentially detrimental effects on relationships.

Responses to problems are retrospectively justified by the creation of a plausible story that explains the outcomes.

Our participants' demonstrable commitment to work raises important managerial issues not only about productivity but also about profound private life choices and personal expectations. Participant T has a retrospective explanation of

the way his personal life has been shaped by his technological choices:

I think [our adoption of technology] has contributed to us not having kids. We made a conscious decision not to have kids and to dedicate ourselves to having a good life . . . and good careers and had the freedom to do stuff so if we don't want to do a job, then we wanted the freedom to be able to give that up. My wife changed her career and went to law school and is now a lawyer. For myself it's allowed me more freedom in my career and to do different stuff. (Participant T)

Part of work–life balance revolves around the increased flexibility that technology allows. Both employees and management need to understand this flexibility and how it can be managed. Flexibility was frequently identified as the freedom to trade time between work and leisure, particularly in favor of family obligations. However, the tradeoffs between technology, family, work, and leisure were not always clear, and the participants struggled with the effect of technology on their lives.

[My employers] pride themselves on a healthy work life balance but that doesn't actually exist. We preach this but we are terrible at putting processes and procedures in place. So people are rewarded if they work themselves to death practically. So I make a conscious decision . . . in the weekends I may check my email on Sunday night: that's all. And a lot of the time I think it's accepting that many things are out of their control so it's a moot point trying to worry about it on Sunday versus worrying about it on Monday. (Participant M)

After experiencing the environment for a while, Participant M has constructed a plausible explanation of the realities behind her employer's espoused position regarding work–life balance. The tradeoffs that technology allows may be positive or negative: It is not always clear. Part of the problem has to do with how carefully individuals monitor their use of technology. While this monitoring needs to be at the personal level, equally importantly issues surrounding technology use outside the office need to be recognized and managed by organizations. This may be difficult to achieve in circumstances where work and private life are fully integrated.

Technology can be used to improve productivity, allowing easier access to people, information, and more efficient ways of working. Both employees and organizations must manage their expectations. Managers who participated conceded that organizations should help employees learn how to manage work commitments. Gains in productivity often lead to increased expectations not only on the part of employers but also among employees. Indeed as one participant indicated, if management wants to get the best and brightest people working for them, then it is going to have to not only allow the flexibility that employees need to organize their lives but also proactively encourage it.

What we see in the examples above concurs with Hale's third characteristic of sensemaking: Individuals retrospectively justify responses to problems, take a relative approach to the truth, and tend to focus on what is interesting, attractive, emotionally appealing, and relevant.

Sensemaking activity attempts to sustain or enhance the individual's positive self-image and to present themselves, and those they identify, in the best possible light. In the narratives, mobile technology was often seen as an enabler. It enabled participants to work as they wish and structure life accordingly. This enablement sometimes manifested as *ennoblement*. For several participants, a positive self-image about their technology expertise and their overriding commitment to work enhanced their sense of importance to the organization. Some participants were proud of the extent to which they sacrificed their home life in favor of work roles. Other narratives revealed a sense of self-enhancement through intelligent use of technology, making them more productive than others even while on the road.

Participant F's narrative reveals his sense of self as being unusually productive through intelligent use of the capabilities offered by mobile technology. Participant K was similarly satisfied with her approach to technology:

I then went to my computer, plugged a wireless connection there, so then I went to my emails and in more than half a dozen words, I replied to those emails. Then I actually wrote the review that I had scribbled during the flight then I went to my fourth meeting and I needed to get some information back to the person on my third meeting. So within an hour after our meeting I was already sending an email to this guy with a couple of papers he asked for. (Participant F)

Our observations of participant attitudes in this context suggest that they combine self-belief with technological competence, thereby generating a self-reinforcing perception in which their value as uniquely productive and essential members of the organization is enhanced.

Discussion

Having used Hales's (2007) four characteristics of sensemaking to analyze our data, we now summarize our findings and place them in the body of the literature on work–life balance. We also discuss the implications of technology-enabled work practices for individuals, families, and organizations.

Our findings support the widely understood contention that technology allows individuals to conduct work activities at any time and in any place. They further suggest that certain kinds of users will find themselves with work and private life integrated in such a way that supports more time spent working. There is evidence that telework may exacerbate workaholism (Olson, 1988; Pratt, 1984). This suggests that, for many of our participants, work and private life mutually enact one another as competitive environments with work demands

frequently impinging on private roles and relationships (Golden, 2009). Consequently, there is a need for viewpoints other than the dominant themes found in the literature of work–life balance. These new perspectives need to place less emphasis on notions of work–life balance and instead recognize the diversity of individual experiences with mobile technology, and seek methods for individuals and organizations to negotiate the integration of work and private lives in complementary ways.

Users equipped with mobile technologies appear to be choosing to use technology to adjust their work–life balance. We suggest that the key word here is “choosing,” and it is consistent with our earlier definition of balance as a “self-determined and subjective experience” with human agency being fundamental to understanding what “work–life balance” means. Individual aspirations regarding both the use of technology and the enactment of work–life integration were apparent. Our findings support the notion of balance as a subjective experience and respond to criticism from some researchers who argue for the need to frame work–life balance in ways that better encapsulate changes in contemporary society (De Bruin & Dupuis, 2004).

Our participants were not just high users of mobile technology, but were also fulfilled by the exercise of their technological expertise. As Swart (2007) puts it, they are “employees who apply their valuable knowledge and skills (developed through experience) to complex, novel and abstract problems in environments that provide rich collective knowledge and relational resources” (p. 452). Based on some of the narratives analyzed, we believe that technology has the potential to transform or empower the individual far beyond the expectations of workers from earlier epochs. Nevertheless, these individuals operate in the “present” that contains varying expectations from other stakeholders—employers, families, and the public at large—on what is, or is not, appropriate when it comes to the impact of mobile technology on work and private life boundaries.

Of interest to organizations, we conclude that for many individuals the use of mobile technology reinforces positive self-perceptions. Many of our participants sought to demonstrate an exceptional ability to use technology for organizational purposes, and tended to display a willingness to exercise that ability above and beyond normal working hours, and regardless of location or context. They aimed to demonstrate high levels of commitment and reliability, and in some cases, demonstrated ways they could be seen as being unusually valuable to their organizations. This supports previous findings that contemporary work, especially knowledge work, is a major source of status and identity (Harmer & Pauleen, 2012; Wise & Bond, 2003). These outcomes are only possible in the presence of two organizational attributes: a management style that assumes employees can be trusted to deliver valuable outputs without the need for traditional bureaucratic models of supervision (Riemer, Steinfield, & Vogel, 2009; Sørensen, 2004), and a technology infrastructure

that provides reliable and secure access to organizational resources.

Our participants’ narratives demonstrated that the opinions of family, friends, peers, and workgroups are all important to the participants in differing degrees and at various times. While the influence of these relationships may vary with context, the stories obtained during this research leaned more on influences from business rather than home. Again, there are implications for the organization. Idiosyncratic working hours and the intrusion of business into domestic situations can impose a strain on domestic relationships with spouses, children, and other dependent relatives (Hewlett & Luce, 2006). It seems obvious that there must be a *quid pro quo*. Employees who work late into the night, or while on vacation, might reasonably expect to be rewarded for their devotion, if not monetarily, then at least with the freedom to take compensatory time off from what are conventionally regarded as normal business hours. This is perceived by some working women as an issue of special relevance (Wise & Bond, 2003). It might also be expected that an employee could make use of the mobile technologies provided by the organization for reasonable personal purposes (Isaac et al., 2006). This last point suggests an important area of future research: To examine how mobile technology can be used to better integrate work and private life in ways that have positive and valuable outcomes for both organizations and families.

Conclusion and Implications

Our research question asked, “How do users make sense of the impact of mobile technologies on the integration of work and private roles?” We apply descriptive narratives and sensemaking to assess how our participants made sense of their working and private life environments as modified by their adoption of mobile technology, and how they responded to the prioritization dilemmas that followed. Generally, these effects are positive for the organization and for the individual’s self-esteem, but perhaps are not always in the long term best interest of either. Work and private life were often described by our participants as competing spheres of activity, and mobile technology as the means by which extra work was achieved at the expense of private time and home relationships.

Our data suggest that technology is having an influence on how our participants view themselves in the context of work. We conclude from their stories that, although most users believe that their use of mobile technology has given them more freedom to choose how to integrate work and private life, the majority of our participants have used this freedom to accommodate more work. The fact that even relatively low-level employees—not just the “extreme” exceptionally high-paid employees referred to in Hewlett and Luce (2006)—are so strongly committed to work that they are willing to give it precedence over opportunities to do other

things, even at some cost to their other relationships, begs further research.

How might management cope with this new breed of highly motivated employees who are working in places and at times of their own choosing? We suggest that employers become aware of the issues that accompany an “anytime-anywhere” employee. These obviously include work–life balance issues as discussed in this article but extend to other issues such as technology allocation, 24-hr information access, and information security.

Further research should focus on management implications of these emergent, fluid, quasi-autonomous, anywhere–anytime employees, and whether these changing patterns of work spell the beginning of a dramatic shift away from the traditional centralized Weberian bureaucracy and the “factory model” of work, toward what Czarniawska (2004) calls the “Action Net.” The seamless integration of work and private life also has implications for society with the potential to significantly alter the human experience.

Technology presents individuals with options. Individuals have many relationships that are affected by their technology adoption choices and work practices. Each individual has to make sense of the impacts of these choices on whatever relationship is salient at the time, and on life as a whole. Individuals need the knowledge and skills to be able to understand and manage the increasing complexity inherent in contemporary work practices (Harmer & Pauleen, 2012). Exactly what this knowledge and skill comprise and how they can be learned are additional important areas for further research.

Several limitations to this study are apparent. This is an interpretive study, and although the number of participants is sufficient for such a study, the results and conclusions while suggestive of greater relevance are, in fact, limited to the group studied. Moreover, as snowball sampling was used, the participants are self-selecting, which may result in a possible bias in the findings. The conclusions we have drawn from this study should be tested in a valid survey. This study was not situated in what may be understood as a critical management study. Many factors—cultural, social, gender, power, organizational—were thus not explicitly explored in this study. No doubt, these factors will have various degrees of influence on the effects of mobile technology on the integrations of work–life balance and should be explored in future studies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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