MANAGING THE WORK-LIFE BOUNDARY IN THE HOME OFFICE

WHEN WORK BECOMES HOME AND HOME BECOMES WORK, MANAGING GETS TRICKY

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"Sorry about the bad video quality; I know it's very dark, but I'm sitting in my bedroom. My husband is having phone meetings all day in the living room and my daughter has online classes in the kitchen, so I had to choose between working from the bedroom or the bathroom. I thought the bedroom was the better choice for all of us…" [1]

COVID-19 pandemic disrupts work-life

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to lockdowns of organizations, cities, and societies. Instead of going to work, we are asked – or forced – to work from home. This rapid shift can be described as a work-life disruption, in which our "normal" work behavior is no longer available to us. Instead, we need to develop new ways of managing and leading work at a distance.

A consequence of the work-life disruption is that the trend towards increased digitalization has gained momentum. Rather than seeing digital tools and processes as optional, or something we can adopt at a planned pace, we must now embrace and rely on to do our work. This "crash course" in digitalization is likely to have profound implications for how we organize and think about work in the future, not least regarding how we manage the boundaries between our private and professional domains. By using the current situation as an opportunity to experiment with how we organize work, we can develop strategies that enable us to work better and smarter both today and in the future.

To gain a better understanding of how we organize our work from home, we can find inspiration in the literature on boundary management. But first, let us take a look at what working from the home office means in reality.

Work-life in the home office – connected but disconnected

As an effect of the lockdown of societies and organizations, many of us have been recommended or forced to work from home. Media has reported on how we creatively set up home offices in our kitchens, clo-

sets, guest rooms, bathtubs, etc., and use iron boards, ladders, and piles of books to create desks for our computers and video meetings. [2] As a consequence, the question "Where do you work?" has acquired a new meaning. When teaching online programs at SSE Executive Education, we often ask the participants in the first webinar: "Where are you located?" Normally, they answer that they are in their office in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Luleå, Berlin, San Francisco, etc. When asking the same question today, however, the responses are quite different. Now, the participants answer: "I am sitting in my living room, garden, basement, or in my parked car…"

Some of us share our home offices with other family members, who perhaps also work or go to school from home, are furloughed or have no jobs, or are ill. In these cases, we tend to make our home offices portable, and move around in our homes in search of a quiet place where we can work without disturbing or being disturbed. Some of us live in single households and spend our workdays alone in our homes, perhaps connected to our colleagues via digital tools, but without meeting them in person.

But while many cherish the flexibility that working from home can provide, others feel frustrated. Work is there when we wake up, have meals, spend time with our family and friends, exercise, and go to bed. And in a similar vein, home is always there too. When waiting for the next video meeting to start, we can always empty the washing machine, make a shopping list for groceries, or wash up the dishes.

Working from the home office also means that we no longer travel to and from work, to customers, suppliers, or other offices. Thereby, we lose time to mentally prepare ourselves for where we are going (e.g., to work, a meeting, or home), and we spend our workdays in a geographically much more confined area than we are used to. This has consequences for the social aspect of work life. When we are in our home offices instead of in our offices, we no longer accidentally bump into colleagues in the elevator, have a friendly chat in the corridor, a coffee together, go

[1] Video meeting with senior manager, manufacturing company, May 2020.

[2] "People Are Getting Creative with their Work-from-Home Setups," CNN March 19, 2020

to networking events, or meet with customers and suppliers. Instead, we interact only with a select group of people in video and phone meetings, or via email and chat conversations, and talk about job-related matters. For many of us, this creates a feeling of loneliness. Thus, while working digitally from the home office has made us more connected than ever, we still tend to feel more disconnected and left out. Why is that?

Blurred professional-private boundaries in the home office

An explanation can be found in the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated an already ongoing disruptive force – digitalization. Working from our home offices means that we increasingly must adopt and rely on digital tools to be able to perform our work at a distance. This, in turn, has made us overcome initial barriers towards technology, and contributed to increasing our own and our organizations' *technological readiness*, i.e., the "...propensity to embrace and use new technologies for accomplishing goals in home life and at work" (1). But while the increased use of digital technologies in our daily work may pave the way for a more rapid digital transformation of our organizations, it is not without challenges.

A central such challenge is the blurring of boundaries between the professional and private domains (2). The literature on boundary management has repeatedly shown that when these boundaries become too blurred or blur in the wrong situations, it can cause role conflict and negative spillover effects[3]. In brief, this means that we experience conflicting demands (e.g., working late to be "a good colleague" or picking up the children early from kindergarten to be "a good parent"), or that stress in one domain (e.g., risking not to meet a deadline at work) spills over into another (taking out negative emotions on family, friends or fellow car drivers). Using digital tools significantly contributes to the blurring of boundaries, as they allow us to perform our work anywhere

and anytime.

To cope with this challenge, the literature has so far suggested that we use two different strategies. The first, *segmentation*, means that we draw strict boundaries between our professional and private lives. This enables us to uphold a certain role and focus on certain aspects when we are either in a professional or private setting. This can be done by wearing specific work clothes, using a workspace dedicated for work (a desk, a room, etc.), only discussing work-related matters with colleagues, and actively avoiding letting private matters interfere with work. The action of going to work, i.e., transporting ourselves from the home to the workplace, enables us to separate and transition between the professional and private domains. It also helps us leave one role behind and step into another one, e.g., by making job calls on your way to work but calling family and friends on your way home. The second strategy, *integration*, has become increasingly popular over the years, fuelled by digital technologies enabling "teleworking", and organizational cultures designed for "the whole person"[4]. In brief, this strategy allows the professional-private boundaries to become permeable and encourages employees to also bring their personal lives into the organizations. This can be done by bringing personal objects to work, e.g., photos of our family, discussing our private life with colleagues, or by bringing work home or sending job emails while on holiday.

A home office paradox

But while these strategies have until now been possible to distinguish between quite clearly, the work-life disruption caused by COVID-19 has posed us with a paradox, with strong implications for our professional-private boundaries. On the one hand, working from home leads to more permeable boundaries and *involuntary integration*. When we suddenly no longer need to transport ourselves to work, we miss the *transition* in which we prepare ourselves for the domain we are

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[3] See for instance the BBC interview with Professor Robert Kelly: https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-52050099/coronavirus-robert-kelly-whose-kids-crashed-bbc-interview-talks-about-working-from-home

[4] See for instance: https://hrblog.spotify.com/2017/02/03/social-at-spotify-whats-it-all-about/ or https://www.norrsken.org/our-houses/stockholm

about to enter. This makes it difficult for us to define when our workday starts and ends. The involuntary integration also means that we cannot keep our private life entirely private anymore, as we engage in video meetings from home and try to find a space to set up our home office. Although we can use filters and backgrounds for video meetings, we might still be interrupted by family members, pets, or neighbors. For many, it leads to increased stress, longer workdays, and potentially a higher risk for burnout.

On the other hand, we are facing *unintended segmentation*. While using digital tools like video meetings, webinars, and conference calls can increase efficiency and enable collaboration across locations, they also constrain both what is said in the meetings, and whom we meet with. As digital meetings tend to be planned, have a set agenda, and a list of attendees, they do not allow for spontaneous, informal conversations to take place. It also reduces the number of people we communicate with, as we only meet with those we want, need to, or should. The focus on formal activities and meetings – and the lack of spontaneous meetings and casual conversations – increases the risk of feeling left out, depressed, and isolated. It also makes it more difficult to perform informal leadership tasks, like testing new ideas and solving problems in casual conversation, catching up with team members, and "taking the temperature of the organization" (3). In short, working from the home office makes "management by walking around" difficult.

Managing the home office paradox

So, what can we do to manage the home office paradox? A first step is to be aware of the boundary management issues that the current work-life disruption has brought to the surface (2). We then need to balance the involuntary professional-private integration by segmenting wisely. This can be done by defining clear goals, work hours, and a place for our home office. It can also be supported by routines and attributes, such as taking a walk in the morning before opening the job mail (simulating going to work), wearing work clothes, using a specific coffee mug,

or, as a senior manager in a transportation firm explained: *"Well, I work from home, but before I start working, I always put on my necklace with my access card. Then I feel, OK, I'm ready, let's work."*

We also need to mitigate the unintended segmentation that meeting via digital tools instead of in-person leads to. This can be done by encouraging the social aspects of work, such as giving our colleagues a call "just to say hi"; inviting to social activities, like virtual coffee breaks; sharing pictures of our home offices; creating friendly competitions, etc. By stimulating the informal, social side of work, we can ensure that all aspects of work – not just the formal, planned ones – are carried over to the digital format.

Lastly, as the work-life disruption for many of us has led to a "crash course" in digitalization and increased our technological readiness, we can also see it as a kind of unplanned digital transformation of how we organize work. To prepare our organizations for the "next normal" that will follow the COVID-19 crisis, we are all well advised to use the learnings from the crisis and develop new work processes, new value propositions, and new strategies that fully take advantage of the new digital technologies. We are also well advised to connect our experiences and learnings from working and leading from the home office to our organizations' overall digital agenda and narrative. How can our take-aways from the COVID-19 crisis help us move forward in our digital transformation journey? And how can we use them to (re-)position our organizations after the crisis?

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