



Exploring the positive side of personal internet use at work: Does it help in managing the border between work and nonwork?



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ABSTRACT

Many employees use the internet at work for personal reasons, and it has been suggested that this behavior can be understood as an attempt to manage the border between work and nonwork. Using data from 190 office workers, the study aims to test how well work/family border theory can explain personal internet use. The results only partly support work/family border theory, as only the amount of private demands and identification with work at work were significant predictors of personal internet use (which was found to be unrelated to work–nonwork balance). These findings suggest that work/family border theory offers only a limited perspective for the explanation of why people use the internet at work for personal business.

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1. Introduction

Think back to your most recent day at work: Were you focusing solely on your job or did you also check your private emails, surf news webpages, download music, or shop online? If the latter is the case, you are certainly not alone. Several studies (e.g., Henle, Kohut, & Booth, 2009; Liberman, Seidman, McKenna, & Buffardi, 2011; Lim, 2002; Vitak, Crouse, & LaRose, 2011) suggest that many employees use the internet for nonwork-related businesses during working time.

The personal use of the internet at work has mostly been described using terms with negative connotations (Richards, 2012) such as internet misuse (e.g., de Lara, Tacoronte, & Ding, 2006), cyberloafing (e.g., Jia, Jia, & Karau, 2013), non-work-related computing (Bock & Ho, 2009), or cyberslacking (e.g., Lavoie & Pychyl, 2001). The use of such negatively connotated terms is consistent with the widespread assumption among researchers (cf. Ivarsson & Larsson, 2011) that personal use of the internet during working time should be prevented to ensure that working time is actually spent on work. Sharing this negative view on personal internet use at work, several employers have implemented electronic use policies that aim at curtailing personal use of the internet (Henle et al., 2009).

However, not all people in the field share such a negative view of personal internet use at work (e.g., Coker, 2013; Ivarsson & Larsson, 2011). A central idea of this alternative viewpoint is that people's personal use of the internet at work can be considered as a response to the blurred border between work and nonwork

– as many employees are expected to answer work emails at home, they might reciprocate this by answering private emails at work. Thus, personal internet use at work can be understood as border-crossing behavior, and this border-crossing may be beneficial for the work–nonwork balance of employees (and this implies that it should not be restricted by employers' policies).

Given the dominance (see Ivarsson & Larsson, 2011; Richards, 2012) of the negative view on personal internet use at work, and as a response to Richards' (2012) call for more research in this area, this study aims to contribute to the literature on this phenomenon by exploring it from a more positive viewpoint, namely a work–nonwork border-crossing perspective. In particular, we use Clark's (2000) work/family border theory to argue for a particular set of predictors of personal internet use during work time.

2. Theoretical background

Achieving a healthy balance between work and nonwork has become a major challenge for many employees (e.g., Byron, 2005). People repeatedly complain that work interferes with their private life, for example because work duties make it difficult to provide the care that children need (often called work–family conflict, e.g., Allen et al., 2012, or work-to-family conflict, e.g., Byron, 2005), and such a work-to-family conflict is known to be negatively correlated with, for instance, job and life satisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998).

Clark's (2000) work/family border theory postulates that individuals are often proactive and try to manage the border between work and nonwork. Thus, not only can events in one domain affect the other domain (with people reacting to these events), but people can shape each domain in an active way through communica-

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tion and behavior depending on the needs of each domain. According to Clark, employees actively cross the border between both domains (work and nonwork) and shape each domain in an active way through communication and behavior depending on the needs of each.¹ One example of border-crossing is the use of the internet provided at work for personal reasons. For example, employees may use their work internet connection to arrange whether friends can pick up their children from school and enable them to do the shopping after work.

In her theory, Clark (2000) focuses on the interplay of variables: how many private demands an employee has (private demands), how strong the border between work and nonwork is (border strength), how far-reaching the influence of an employee is (influence), how much an employee identifies with work (identification), and how much the supervisor supports border-crossing behavior (supervisory support for border-crossing), which we will explain in the next sections. Clark's central assumption is that people engage in border-crossing behavior depending on the needs of each domain. Applied to personal internet use at work, this suggests that personal internet use at work is driven by private demands (which can be defined as obligations that people have towards others who do not belong to their work domain). If employees have many private obligations (e.g., being the main carer for a family or a trainer of an amateur soccer team), these obligations make it likely that the internet connection at work will be used to manage them. Consistent with this reasoning, we propose:

H1. Private demands will have a positive relationship with the extent of personal internet use at work.

Clark (2000) also proposed that border-crossing behavior is restricted by the strength of the border (which can be defined as the degree to which elements from one domain can enter into another domain). An example of a strong border is that of an employee whose employer restricts the access to private emails (cf. Henle et al., 2009) or has established a policy describing acceptable and unacceptable internet use for personal purposes (cf. Jia et al., 2013; Strader, Fichtner, Clayton, & Simpson, 2011). Clark (2002) reported that the strength of the border between work and home is associated with the extent of cross-border communication (e.g., communication with family about work and communication at work about family). In the same way that this variable influences cross-border communication, it should also have an impact on employees' border-crossing behavior. First evidence for this hypothesis comes from the study of Garrett and Danziger (2008) who found the restrictions on computer use are negatively correlated with personal internet use at work.

Furthermore, having many private demands and experiencing a weak border should lead to a particularly large extent of personal internet use at work. Consequently, we propose:

H2. Border strength will (a) have a negative relationship with the extent of personal internet use at work and (b) moderate the relationship between private demands and the extent of personal internet use at work (i.e., the lower the border strength, the more positive the relationship between private demands and the extent of personal internet use at work).

According to the work/family border theory, two attributes of the border-crossers are most relevant: influence and identification. Clark (2000) defines influence as the power of the individual to negotiate and make changes to the borders of a domain. Each person's domain has elements over which the person can exert a given

degree of influence and to which the person can make changes, and also elements which are difficult to alter because of situational, organizational or family constraints (Clark, 2000). Jobs may, for example, limit the person's freedom to manage the borders due to the establishment of rules that prevent the individual negotiation between an employee and her or his supervisor regarding the extent to which personal internet use can be tolerated. However, many people have at least some control over aspects of the border in each domain (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000), such as the work schedule or the way of managing responsibilities. In her study focusing on cross-border communication, Clark (2002) found that influence at home is associated with increased communication about work in the home domain and influence at work is associated with increased communication at work about home. As a result, influence at work should have an important impact on border-crossing behavior in general and therefore also on personal internet use at work itself. Consistent with this, Reinecke (2009) found that people with more influence play more computer games during working hours than people with less influence. Furthermore, influence may interact with private demands: People who have many private obligations and who can exert a high degree of influence at their workplace may be particularly likely to engage in personal internet use at work (i.e., if there is a need to use the internet for personal reasons and also the possibility to do so, internet use is particularly likely). Hence, we propose:

H3. Influence at the workplace will (a) have a positive relationship with the extent of personal internet use at work and (b) moderate the relationship between private demands and the extent of personal internet use at work (i.e., the higher the influence at the workplace, the more positive the relationship between private demands and the extent of personal internet use at work).

The second relevant attribute of border-crossers is identification with work (Clark, 2000), which is the degree of importance the person attaches to the job in comparison with other life domains. People who identify strongly with their work are less likely to engage in home-related activities at work (see also Liberman et al., 2011). What is more, Clark argued that employees with high identification with work like to shape their work situation in a way that allows them to perform well, and such shaping may be particularly likely if private demands are high. For example, an employee with very strong work identification might not even think about engaging in any personal business (no matter whether she/he feels any pressure from her/his family situation). This would also be consistent with the results of Jia et al. (2013) and Garrett and Danziger (2008): Jia et al. found that people who consider their work as meaningful use the internet at work less for personal purposes; Garrett and Danziger found that people who feel loyal to their organization engage in less non-work-related computing. Therefore, we expect this variable to have an impact on the relationship between private demands and personal internet use at work, both directly and indirectly as a moderator of the relationship between private demands and the extent of personal internet use at work. Hence, we propose:

H4. Identification with the job will (a) have a negative relationship with the extent of personal internet use at work and (b) moderate the relationship between private demands and the extent of personal internet use at work (i.e., the higher the identification with the job, the less negative the relationship between private demands and the extent of personal internet use at work).

According to the work/family border theory (Clark, 2000), supervisors also play an essential role in facilitating or inhibiting border-crossing behavior because they are the main border-keepers:

¹ Although the theory speaks of the family domain, its arguments also apply to the nonwork domain in general (as a more general description that is also applicable to people who do not live within a traditional family context).

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