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Managing “after hours” electronic work communication

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It is an understatement to say that technology has changed the nature of work. Electronic communication and the mobility afforded via technologies with Internet capabilities have fundamentally changed when, where, and how work gets done. One substantive change is employees becoming more and more tethered to their workplace even when they leave the office for the day or during vacations and other non-working days. This has led to the phenomenon of “the new night shift,” when employees “log back on to work” (or never log off) to check and respond to email and texts. Research on this topic has evolved over the past decade along with the advances in these technologies. Much of the early work on communication technology focused on teleworkers (or telecommuters) as a specific group of employees who performed part or all of their jobs from virtual (typically, the home) rather than traditional offices. Yet with advances in and greater access to technologies (e.g., smartphones, tablets), more and more employees of all types are able (or required) to attend to work matters beyond the time and location constraints of the traditional workplace. These devices essentially blur the lines between what would typically be considered a teleworker versus any typical employee with a mobile device and/or Internet access. As such, work in this area has expanded to more generally understand the drivers and effects of employee work connectivity beyond the traditional boundaries of the workplace.

With work communication via mobile technologies only likely to proliferate moving forward, it is paramount that organizations better understand and manage the consequences of employee connectivity, both good and bad. On the one hand, connectivity provides flexibility for employees in addressing the many and often competing demands of both the job and home life. An individual can attend to personal matters such as attending a child’s activity or being away on

vacation while still being connected to the office. Yet with this flexibility comes the feeling and perhaps reality of never being able to disconnect from work. The question then becomes: does the greater flexibility and efficiency in managing competing demands offset the disruption and stress associated with no clear delineation of work and home boundaries?

AFTER-HOURS ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION: ANTECEDENTS AND WORK–NONWORK STRESS

Nearly a decade ago, the use of pagers, blackberries, and cell phones afforded employees a new opportunity to remain connected to work beyond the traditional physical and temporal workplace boundaries. The early usage of such mobile devices, particularly “after hours,” was typically viewed as volitional for employees because such technologies were not needed or at least not the norm across diverse jobs. Some organizations even began to wonder why employees would choose to stay connected, responding to and engaging in work-related correspondence, when it was not necessarily part of the job. Accordingly, an initial question of interest was “what drives employees to use communication technologies ‘after hours?’” We studied 360 employees, including 130 supervisors/managers. The latter group was also given a survey for their ‘significant other, defined as someone 18 years or older who is in a good position to assess the employee’s work and personal life (e.g., spouse, adult child, romantic partner), to complete. A total of 35 significant others completed this separate survey. Employee respondents were surveyed regarding their communication technology (CT) use to perform their job during nonwork hours (i.e., “after hours”) as well as regarding various individual

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difference variables (i.e., affective organizational commitment, job involvement, ambition), demographic factors (i.e., sex, marital status, dependent status, position), and work-to-nonwork conflict. The sub-sample of significant others also reported their perceptions of the employee's work-to-nonwork conflict as well as some supplemental information about perceptions of CT and their own work experiences. This research study occurred at the beginning of the introduction of smartphones; thus, the focus was reported frequency (never to very often/several times a day) of using electronic communication technologies such as cell phones, email, voice mail, pagers, blackberries, and PDAs.

The findings revealed that career-related attitudes were particularly critical in driving CT use after hours. Specifically, more ambitious employees as well as those indicating stronger identification with work (i.e., eating and breathing one's work) were most likely to report staying connected after hours. Interestingly, feeling emotionally attached to a company did not necessarily play a role in an employee's maintenance of connectivity to the workplace after hours. One conclusion is that staying connected after hours is driven more by the desire to get ahead and progress in one's career than by the inclination to reciprocate toward the employer.

These early findings on what drives employees to stay connected after hours offer some initial insight to managers as to who is most likely to use (or not use) electronic technology beyond the traditional boundaries of the workday – to the extent that is desirable, or conversely undesirable, to the organization. Indeed, a second critical question, one that much of our work has focused on, centers on the consequences of staying connected after hours. This same initial study focused specifically on the potential resultant work–nonwork conflict (i.e., an individual's belief that the demands of work interfere with meeting the demands of one's family and personal life), finding, as expected, that staying connected after hours was associated with a heightened sense of work–nonwork conflict. It is important to note that the effects of staying connected on work–nonwork conflict were over and above an employee simply working more/longer hours. This suggests that there is something unique about being connected electronically that facilitates feelings of work intrusion, most likely due to the potential for spontaneous interruptions during personal time as well as the potential for distractions *wherever* the individual may be. Relatedly, we also examined the perspective of the employee's "significant other," revealing that interestingly enough, such individuals reacted *even more* unfavorably than the employee. We speculate that an employee may derive some level of benefit or gratification from staying connected after hours, resulting in tempering the perceived stress of the experience, while significant others are likely to only experience negative consequences associated with the intrusion and disruption of the home life.

THE NATURE OF THE AFTER-HOURS ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION

Moving forward several years later, a lingering question has remained, asking what it is about being tethered to work that is particularly problematic. It is generally recognized that the flexibility and potential for staying on top of one's workload

that electronic communication offers to employees is a realized advantage. However, are there elements of such communication that are particularly deleterious? Understanding the complete continuum of positive and negative consequences would offer practical guidance to employers on specific ways to perhaps maintain the good aspects of after-hours communication while perhaps simultaneously reducing the bad aspects.

A recent study on this topic examined how the daily occurrences of particular types of electronic communication impacted employees' personal lives. Specifically, we collected data from 341 employees for 7 days immediately after they received an electronic communication from work after normal business hours when they had left the office. We focused on key elements of the communication message itself (i.e., time it took to read and address the correspondence and affective tone perceived in the correspondence) as well as characteristics of the sender and the receiver. The outcomes included employee emotional reactions (i.e., anger as a negative emotion and happiness as a positive emotion) to the electronic communication and work-to-nonwork conflict. Adopting a daily sampling methodology allowed us to examine how day-to-day elements of after-hours communications vary within-persons in relation to daily changes in their emotional reactions and work-to-nonwork conflict.

Findings from this study revealed that as electronic communication (email and texts) took longer to read and comply with, employees experienced more anger. That anger caused people to feel that their work interfered with being involved in their nonwork pursuits (e.g., family, social activities). The tone of electronic communication also had effects on employees in that when the communication was negative in tone, employees exhibited more anger. Conversely, when the message was positive in tone, they displayed more happiness. However, the happiness dissipated much faster than did the anger and did not carry through to impact work-to-nonwork conflict as anger did. One proposed reason for the stronger effects of anger is due to what is called the "positive–negative asymmetry effect." Negative events (and their associated negative emotional reactions) are processed more extensively and contribute more to a person's overall impression than do positive events and associated positive emotions.

In addition, we found that the effects of electronic communication elements on emotions and work-to-nonwork conflict depend on characteristics of the sender (who the communication is from, the nature of the relationship with one's boss) and the receiver (employee preferences for segmenting work from personal pursuits). Employees tended to display more anger when the electronic communication was from their boss with whom they had a poor relationship and when this boss used a negative tone. Employees who are deemed as "segmentors" (those who prefer to keep their work and personal lives separate) viewed electronic communications as more interfering and bothersome to their personal lives even when these communications required very little time. These reactions increased dramatically as the communication took longer time to read and deal with. "Integrators" (i.e., those who like to mesh their work and personal lives), on the other hand, did not perceive the time needed to read and deal with work communications as interfering with their personal lives.

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