



A trend toward Work–Life Fusion: A multi-generational shift in technology use at work



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ABSTRACT

In this coming year, there will be five generations co-existing in the work environment and we believe that how technology is utilized in both spheres of work and life is shifting with the advancements in technology. This study is designed to explore how certain technology patterns are shifting the relationship between work and life spheres and results show that the spheres are becoming fused. A scale is developed and used as a resource to explore the impact that using certain technologies at work has on Work–Life Balance Satisfaction, Job Satisfaction, and Psychological Job Control. In this paper, Work–Life Fusion is defined as the concurrent management of work and life demands while at work. Multi-group analysis across generations surfaces clear indications of a shift to a fused approach toward work and life management especially in younger cohorts (Millennials). Findings from this study would have implications for leaders and managers, as this increasingly diverse workforce would extend what we have come to know as Work–Life balance to what we call Work–Life Fusion.

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1. Introduction

Our current work environment will be experiencing shifts in how work and life are managed affected by advancement in technology and how such technology is being utilized by the five generations that will be co-existing in this environment. This paper explores how people manage work and life through the influx of certain technologies in the workplace. People continue to attempt to meet demands of both work and life on a daily basis even as boundaries are being blurred and there have been profound changes in the nature of work due to the development of sophisticated technology (Lewis et al., 2007). We put forward that the pace of change in work–life balance is essentially being affected by technology. Kossek and Lambert (2008) argue that there is indication from the field that research should focus on the relationship between work and

life in order to reconstruct the boundaries between the two. A study that looked at four generations (Traditionalists (born pre WWII), Baby Boomers, GenX and Millennials) in a library setting (Murray, 2011) showed that situations where Millennials supervise a multigenerational workforce is rife with conflict based on expectations of work, collaborations, and multitasking relative to the two domains of work and life.

Initial studies that highlight work and life as separate framed managing the two domains as boundary management (Bulger et al., 2007). These studies have their roots in the industrial revolution and the 19th century and assume that two distinctly different domains exist for the experience and activity related to work and life management (Golden and Geisler, 2007). The stream of research focusing on work and life has grown to be more broadly defined over the years as these two domains develop to be more complex from both a human and technological perspective. There is anecdotal evidence that technology is changing how people manage both work and life spheres and how younger generations are savvier with

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technology. Older generations are affected by behavior of younger generations around texting in meetings, and using other Social Media while at work. Employees, at the same time, are constantly available after work through technology. These examples are indicative of a shift in how work and life spheres are managed in today's work environment.

Contemporary studies have become more closely focused in the Work–Life balance literature where individuals seek equilibrium in their management of work and life issues and organizations seek to understand activities and needs of employees in order to develop successful policies and programs (Kossek and Lambert, 2008). With the work environment becoming more complex and diverse, creative methods and approaches emerged to deal with issues that were non-existent in the past. The shift from Work–Life balance to Work–Life Integration became common place and dominant scholars such as Schein (1984) developed Life-style as an a separate career anchor affecting consideration for work choices. With the advancements of technology and multiple generations co-existing with different behavioral norms, we propose that this is causing both domains to fuse and further re-landscape the management of face-to-face and virtual interactions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work and life domains: a history

The historic perspective of work and life has been well articulated by Lockwood (2003). Work and life spheres have been treated as two distinct domains sometimes suggesting a distinction between work roles and caregiving roles (Kossek et al., 1999b) or as aspects of culture and climate that need to be included in understanding these two domains (Guest, 2002). A review conducted by Kossek and Cynthia (1998) on the relationship between work and family conflict and that of job and life satisfaction highlighted the possibilities for better integration of HR policies particularly mentioning that spillover on roles related to work and family is negative. Some scholars have also proposed taking advantage of creative approaches such as flex-time to integrate work and life demands (Kossek et al., 1999a); others have highlighted conflict and interference as underlying contributing factors (Guest, 2002); and some delve deeper into fundamental values and demographical operating norms from a generational perspective (Lockwood, 2003). Although these scholars present approaches and underlying factors related to Work–Life balance others have looked at how this clash or dynamic would affect the experience of work. Kossek et al. (2005) focus on how work and life affect one's sense of psychological control especially when life circumstances may not be as predictable as work tasks. Other scholars have proposed that there are employees who see these two domains as having equal priority in their work (what they label as “Dual-Centric”) suggesting more of a Hegelian dialectic (Bourne et al., 2009). Bourne et al. (2009) show that Dual-Centrics experience more overall satisfaction and propose that employers need to embrace the whole individual in order to enhance employee well-being. While the approaches, underlying factors, experience of work and focusing on the employee as a whole individual with the Hegelian tensions are valuable and significant, we were

surprised to notice that most research conducted in this stream did not take into account the evolution of technology or how intrinsically tied technology has become to individuals' life-styles both at work and home.

2.2. Technology and a multigenerational work environment

From decision making methods to approaches to balance or integrate work and life, technology has not been considered as an extremely strong force shaping these two domains until recently. Research that focus on technology and its impact on work and life is only recently surfacing but scant. We hope to contribute to this stream of work with the intent to also revisit the dynamic of Work–Life balance as we feel that with the increase of technology having an impact on both individuals and organizations, this area deserves more attention. As academics and practitioners, we have engaged with and seen first-hand how a younger generation is constantly texting, instant messaging, and engaging in extensive conversations virtually (and silently) in class while attending courses or while attending meetings, implying that less face-to-face interactions are occurring. We argue that technology is fundamentally changing how we communicate with others and that such a shift is also drastically affecting our experiences in our current work environment especially when different generations with different expectations and behavioral norms are involved and begin to clash. This dynamic will only be exacerbated when, in the coming year, there will be five generations engaging and interacting.

Our effort to explore what work has been done in this specific area surfaced a few research studies. A recent study by Dorrestijn and Verbeek (2013) explored the relationship between technology and well-being and shed light on how user-influencing technology mediates human existence and well-being. Brodie and Rubin (2011) highlight that technology has shifted the work environment to a more 24/7 design impacting organizational commitment. Currie and Eveline (2011) also show that these shifts have affected participants (academics in their study) in managing both work and life creating a “24/7” commitment. A study done on lawyers (Thurston, 2012) shows that this shift to a 24/7 work environment coupled with accomplishing tasks and communications instantaneously affects personal responsibilities and health. It is evident that these studies are surfacing work commitment and personal responsibilities different from previous Work–Life balance research. Currie and Eveline (2011) further propose that technology has affected the very nature of work suggesting that it has caused both work extensification and work intensification. These studies also beg the question of what happens when younger generations take over as managers and leaders in this shifted work environment. The fact that people of different ages are immersed in different computing technologies to varying degrees (McMullin et al., 2007) would show where and how these generations are interacting in the workplace. At this point in time, four generations co-exist in the current work environment. As these generations collide in their work environment, could technology be affecting how these generations perceive the dual domains of work and life or are these dual domains collapsing and contributing to unexpected stress at the individual and organizational levels?

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