The Japanese have a term,Karōshi (過労死), which can be translated literally as "death from overwork". The major medical causes of karōshi deaths are heart attack and stroke due to stress and a starvation diet. (Wikipedia)

In my paper, I will explore how we can maintain a work/life balance when more and more people are working remotely and the lines between work and home are blurred. We have become too easily accessible through our phones, computers, Skype, email, chatting, cloud computing and social media. Where do we draw the line when we are not at work? How will we maintain work/life and family balance? Will our managers and employers expect us to be “always on?”

We live in a world few could have imagined just a few years ago: People checking their emails on the subway commute into work, creating websites while sitting in a coffee shop, collaborating with co-workers via Skype from opposite ends of the planet, and causing lines between work and home to become increasingly blurry as technology allows us to be accessible 24/7.

We can connect with our work emails using our personal phones and computers by using the World Wide Web to connect with our jobs while at home, waiting for the dentist , even on vacation. The increase of mobile devices, cloud storage and better internet coverage allow people around the world to access their work files almost anywhere. According to the US Bureau of Labor and Statistics, one survey found that 75 percent of office employees in the United States want the ability or option to access the work files outside of the office. An estimated three million American professionals never step a foot in an office outside of their own home and more than half of these people say they are happier that way. ( [bls.gov](http://bls.gov))

Is it possible that allowing employees the freedom to work outside of the office will result in happier employees and more productivity? In 2013, Best Buy’s average productivity had increased 35% through its flexible work program. British Telecom estimates productivity increased 20% in 2013 through telecommuting. In the Unites States, around 90% of home-based workers say they are much happier with the work/life balance even though they tend to work harder and longer. ( [globalworkplaceanalytics.com](http://globalworkplaceanalytics.com))

It’s fair to mention that not every job allows people to work from home. Even though certain jobs will not allow a work from home option, the internet and smartphones has allowed the service industry to connect with their customers and clients in order to work more efficiently as far as scheduling, making improvements to customer service, etc. A recent interactive survey by Time magazine showed that 1 in every 4 people are checking their phones for work related communications every 30 minutes. One in 5 will check their phones every 10 minutes. More and more people are even sleeping with their phones next to them. ( [time.com](http://time.com))( [forbes.com](http://forbes.com))

According to Wikipedia, work- life balance was first introduced to the United States in 1986. The term work-life balance is commonly used as an expression to describe policies that refer to arrangements that allows employees to find working arrangements that provide a balance between work responsibilities and personal responsibilities . The idea is that this outside work may enhance employees’ contribution to work. This could mean working from home on days when an employee is sick, when an employee’s child is sick, while the internet is being installed, or simply a routine appointment to visit a doctor. The option to use cloud files and the internet to work from home can prevent the employee and employer a full lost day of productivity. ( [wikipedia.com](http://wikipedia.com))

Studies have shown that giving employees some level of flexibility, whether that is the ability to work from home a few days a week, to flex time, to a full-time home office is valued and considered an attractive benefit as it means they have more time to spend doing the things they love. For some this results in less commute time, less wasted time, more productive working hours, with less interruptions. Many would solidify that technology has given users the opportunity to spend less time in the office and more time with family and friends, it can also mean that people never log-off, which can be detrimental to business, let alone health.

In the study, *Work-Family Spillover and Daily Reports of Work and Family Stress in the Adult Labor Force* , researchers found that with an increased amount of negative spillover from work to family, the likelihood of reporting stress within the family increased by 74%, and with an increased amount of negative spillover from family to work the likelihood to report stress felt at work increased by 47%. This is especially true when it comes to taking full advantage of vacation days and remaining connected to work outside of normal business hours. Specifically, 42 percent of employees feel obligated to check in with work emails and text messages since they carry their smartphones with them while on vacation and more than a quarter feel guilty using all of their allotted vacation time without checking in on work. Part of the problem workers have in disengaging while on vacation is that many feel it helps them get back quickly into the swing of things when their time away from the office is over. (Grzywacs)

Jim Link, a human resources officer for Randstad, says helping employees balance work and personal life remains a pain point for many U.S. companies. "With technology blurring workday boundaries, employees can easily slip into a pattern of being always available, especially if their boss or co-workers engage in business after hours”. Given that managers now have 24/7 access to their staff, it is the responsibility of managers to be mindful that their actions set the tone about being "on" outside of normal work time. However, a lack of job security or a rocky economy can cause employees to feel obligated to work outside of normal hours. “Managers should clarify expectations regarding after-hours communication and encourage teams to develop daily routines that respect work and personal boundaries. Imbalance can easily lead to stressed and disgruntled employees, negative health and morale issues, and diminished worker productivity.” ([globalworkplaceanalytics.com](http://globalworkplaceanalytics.com))

Nigel Marsh, in his Ted talk, said that work-like balance is too important to be left in the hands of your employer. It is up to the employee to set boundaries with the employer and to learn to say no to projects. ( [ted.com](http://ted.com)) In a recent surprise, Google CFO Patrick Pichette publicly resigned a few weeks ago to have more work/life balance. He wrote in his resignation memo to employees, "I was always on -- even when I was not supposed to be.” (Pichette)

A new initiative recently passed in France banned work email communication past 6pm , and currently Germany is considering the ban in 2016. Should the United States consider doing the same? (Poppick). The average European workweek ( which includes emails, texting, working on smartphones and remote work) is 47 hours while is US is at 90 hours and growing . Some managers in the US report being on their smartphones 7.5 hours of the day. (Forbes). According to the Mayo Clinic, too much work and not enough self-care can have some detrimental health effects: fatigue, loss of time with loved ones, increased workload, back pain, depression. ( Mayo)

According to Tricia Harris in her thesis “*The impact of smartphones on work-life balance*”, there were significant relationships between smartphone intrusion and stress levels. This means that more and more people are beginning to feel that using their smartphone was intrusive on their personal life. Lastly, a lack of work life balance was significantly related to stress, life satisfaction, and job satisfaction. (Harris).

As technology continues to spread, will we lose anything as a society? Will this have an effect on work relationships? With smartphones, e-mail, and the cloud-based software, how do we keep the sense of community that working in the same space provides us?

Work can be much more than just a paycheck. It is a place to cultivate friendships, brainstorm, and build a community. A lot of press has been given to Marissa Mayer’s, CEO of Yahoo, recent decision to eliminate the work-from-home option for her employees. Her internal memo to employees stated, “"To become the absolute best place to work, communication and collaboration will be important, so we need to be working side-by-side," the memo said. "That is why it is critical that we are all present in our offices.” (Pepitone).

There is always the risk of management mistrust, worker isolation, data security, and co-worker jealousy in telecommuting, according to the Global Workplace Analytics. The major benefits to working in an office: Employees get to know the company and culture and it’s easier to communicate and collaborate with colleagues. ([globalworkplaceanalytics.com](http://globalworkplaceanalytics.com))

Perhaps the solution is some time in office, some time at home. The numbers of hours spent commuting, the cost of those hours in money and time, and stress do subtract from productivity. Telework Research found that in major cities, people can spend 15 days a year sitting in traffic commuting to and from jobs. Most families with children do not have full time nannies and a nursery next to their office. Just getting kids off to school (at any age) can be time consuming. In short, companies need to have discussions about who and when one needs to be in the office building. (Forbes)

For some, the social time and office formalities may be extreme. The lost time and frustration of being interrupted may be counter productive to creative thinking. According to the Microsoft whitepaper, *Work without Walls*, “Business leaders assume employees who work remotely and take advantage of the policy are not really working. This is because of the loss of control. Employers lose direct oversight and cannot witness productivity firsthand.” ( [microsoft.com](http://microsoft.com) ) If a manager doesn’t set specific, measurable goals and outcomes for an employees job, they are unaware of employee production. Grzwacs argues managers may think they are witnessing productivity when a worker sits in her cube, but they are really just witnessing presence. If managers can establish precise goals, effectively communicate expectations, they would know whether someone was being productive or not, regardless of where the person was physically sitting. (Grzywacs)

As technology allows us to become more and more accessible, the question of who is responsible for establishing boundaries keeps popping up. Is it the individual, the employer, or the government? Flexibility and moderation might work better in the future for most companies by implementing the following:

1. Track your time
2. Leave work at work
3. Take advantage of flexible work arrangements if possible
4. Learn to say no
5. Leave work at work
6. Manage your time
7. Bolster your support system
8. Nurture yourself ( eat right, get enough sleep set aside time every day to do something you love to do.)

([mayoclinic.org](http://mayoclinic.org))

In closing, there have been times where I have experienced my own version of Karoshi. My health, personal relationships, and things that mattered to me the most took a backseat to my job. There have been times when I have considered throwing my iPhone into the Puget Sound, but I won’t because I’m an addict. Hopefully, I will someday find my balance too.