Working hard or hardly working: A study of individuals engaging in personal business on the job

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ABSTRACT   This exploratory study examined how the relationships and meshed boundaries among work, home and leisure life realms are enacted in human behavior. Specifically, it assessed the types of leisure- and home-oriented activities that people engage in at work and examined why such personal activities are performed during the workday. Semi-structured interviews with individuals from a variety of occupations provided qualitative data that were coded to identify the types of personal activities that take place on company time (e.g. personal phone calls, e-mails to friends, office betting pools) and the underlying factors behind engaging in personal business on the job (i.e. the balance between work and personal life realms, the various rationale or meanings people construct to rationalize this behavior, and the meaning or importance that people place upon home, work, and leisure). These findings have implications for (i) future researchers by increasing understanding of the behavioral manifestations of the overlap between work and personal life realms, and (ii) organizations by helping them understand this important, but often ignored, aspect of employee behavior.

Individuals experience demands from three life realms: their job or career (i.e. the work life realm); their family, residence, or home life (i.e. the home life realm); and their social life, recreational activities, or personal interests (i.e. the leisure life realm). Each of these realms demands varying amounts of attention. Traditionally, work life is thought to dominate the weekday, whereas home, family, and leisure interests play a larger role on weeknights and weekends. Many have suggested that this is not the case in practice – that work, home, and leisure life realms overlap and do not exist as separate entities (Champoux, 1978; Clark, 2000; Crouter, 1984; Kanter, 1977; Watkins & Subich, 1995; Wilensky, 1960), and empirical research supports this claim (Champoux, 1980; Cohen, 1997a, 1997b; Kirchmeyer, 1993; Lance & Richardson, 1988). For example, some research suggests the benefits of recognizing that a person's outside-work identity spills into their job (Bond et al., 1998) and recommends relating to employees as individuals rather than just as workers (Friedman et al., 2000). Despite these assertions, there is a lack of understanding about the 'nature and complexities' of the relationship between work and personal life realms (Fredriksen-Goldsen & Scharlach, 2001: 54).

This study set out to examine that relationship in more detail. Although there is adequate evidence in the literature that work, home, and leisure life realms are not separate, there is less understanding of how the meshed boundaries between these life realms are enacted in human behavior. As Hall and Richter point out, 'most organizations do not know much about the various points of interface between an employee's work life and his or her family and personal life' (1988: 214). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the behavioral manifestations of the overlap between work and personal life realms. Using semi-structured interviews with individuals in a variety of occupations, this research examined: (i) what types of personal activities people engage in at work (i.e. what are the multitude of ways that individuals cross life realm borders) and (ii) why people engage in personal business on the job (i.e. what are the factors behind the behavior). For example, it addressed such questions as: what does an employee do during the workday other than their work (i.e. activities that serve home- or leisure-related purposes) and what reasons are behind personal business on the job (e.g. why are individuals surfing the Internet or engaging in personal e-mail exchanges during the workday?).

It is important to fully understand how work and personal life realms are related given the costs that may be incurred if the connection is ignored. A recent article in the *New York Times* suggested that water-cooler conversations about football in the days surrounding the Super Bowl had the potential of costing employers up to $821.4 million in lost productivity (Herring,

2004). Another article in *Workforce* suggested that personal Internet surfing during work hours costs firms billions annually (Greengard, 2000). The personal activities that may invade the workday can have a significant financial impact on organizations making understanding the issue of personal business on the job a critical one.

Life realm boundaries, borders, and behaviors: A review of relevant literature

The current research is rooted in the notion that workers are not just employees, but are also individuals with home lives and leisure interests (Crouter, 1984). Therefore, there is some degree of integration (Kanter, 1977; Kirchmeyer, 1995) or crossing of boundaries (Hall & Richter, 1988) that occurs among work, home, and leisure life realms.

One way to understand this relationship among life realms is offered by Nippert-Eng (1996). She argues that the boundaries between life realms, namely home and work, are on a continuum where work and home can be fully integrated and indistinguishable, fully segmented and distinct from each other, or somewhere in between. We can see each person's level of integration/segmentation in whether they keep one calendar for workplace and family reminders or separate calendars for each life realm, in whether keys for home and work are on one keyring or are kept on separate rings, in one wardrobe that services both work and home dressing needs or having separate wardrobes, and even in the topics we talk about at each life realm (e.g. only talking about work at work or allowing for talk about home at work and vice versa) (Nippert-Eng, 1996). What Nippert-Eng provides is a means of understanding how human behavior can display the mental integration we allow or segmentation we keep among various life realms.

Another way we might understand the relationship between work and personal lives is by applying Clark's (2000) 'work/family border theory.' She explains how individuals balance work and home by reducing role conflict and crossing the borders between these life realms – borders that are permeable, flexible, and permit home and work life domains to blend. Receiving family-oriented phone calls at work or taking business calls at home are examples of how 'people are daily border-crossers between the domains of work and family' (Clark, 2000: 747). What Clark's model provides is a framework for understanding how and why overlap may occur between life realms. However, her model only considered the balance between work and family, not leisure. Because there is a need to give more research attention to leisure activities and interests (Snir & Harpaz, 2002), Clark's model and

propositions were not tested in the current research, but were used as part of the theoretical background to build upon in the current study.

Clark's model and Nippert-Eng's work provide some foundation for understanding how the borders between life realms may be crossed, but another body of literature on role boundaries is also quite relevant. Ashforth et al. (2000) offer 'boundary theory' to describe how individuals cross boundaries between the roles of home, work, and other social life realms (e.g. churches, health clubs, local bars). As the authors summarize, permeability is about being in one role of life physically (e.g. an employee at work), but crossing over that role boundary (e.g. to the role of a parent) in terms of thoughts or behaviors. Perlow (1998) explains how employers maintain boundary control, while Kirchmeyer (1995) studies how organizations respond to this integration by providing jogging tracks and childcare on-site and offering flextime and company-sponsored financial-, legal-, and marriage counseling services. The implementation of company practices and policies for helping individuals span various life realm boundaries may be helpful, but they are also costly, less used because of social pressure, and hard to customize to specific employee needs and job situations (Kossek et al., 1999; Kossek & Ozeki, 1999). Consequently, there is still a need to examine more informal forms of support from the organization (Kossek & Ozeki, 1999), such as allowing employees to informally cross life realms at work. For example, is it acceptable to loosen the boundaries between work and personal life (e.g. to make home calls at work, to make work calls at home, to bring children to work; Kossek et al., 1999)? As Kossek et al. (1999) note, informal strategies for managing the integration between life roles has been overlooked. The current research examines how employees balance work, home, and leisure – not by using telecommuting, flextime, or on-site daycare, but by actually engaging in the personal activity during work hours.

Some progress has been made in understanding these types of informal nonwork 'invasions' on work time. Vardi and Wiener define organizational misbehavior as 'any intentional action by members of organizations that violates core organizational and/or societal norms' (1996: 151). The misbehavior literature provides some insight, especially in the case of misusing company resources for personal purposes. The use of company e-mail accounts, Internet connections, company phones, and work time for personal purposes could fall into this category. For example, one study looked at cyberloafing (i.e. surfing the Internet for personal interests on work time) as a form of misbehavior at work (Lim, 2002). However, there is a dearth of research on other ways that employees use work time for personal interests. In addition, the current study does not assume that engaging in personal activities at work is necessarily bad – moreso, that it

simply enables individuals to balance and cross the boundaries between life realms.

Given these perspectives, the current research explores how the relationship between work and personal life realms is enacted in behavior to address three gaps in the literature: a need for more research on how home and leisure affect work in terms of behavior, a lack of understanding of the personal activities that people attend to at work, and insufficient knowledge about the factors behind engaging in personal business on the job (i.e. why people do it).

First, many studies in the meaning of work and work–family literatures have examined the effect of the job on home and leisure (e.g. Meissner, 1971; Staines & Pleck, 1984; Wallace, 1997; Winett et al., 1982) and have focused too much on the work life realm while giving little attention to nonwork life realms (Eby et al., 2005). For example, researchers have suggested that more research is needed on the effects of home and leisure on work (Cohen & Kirchmeyer, 1995; Crouter, 1984; Hantrais et al., 1984; Kabanoff, 1980; Kanter, 1977; Near et al., 1980; Wilson, 1980). Admittedly, some have studied the effect of personal life on work (e.g. Bielby & Bielby, 1989; Dumazedier, 1967; Eagle et al., 1997; Greenhaus & Singh, 2003; Kirchmeyer, 1992; Protolipac et al., 2003; Rousseau, 1978), but little attention has been paid to the actual influence of home and leisure on work – in the form of specific activities and behaviors engaged in during the workday. In fact, Snir and Harpaz (2002) argue that there is a lack of employee behavior research evidence on the relationship between work and leisure.

Second, the extant literature on nonwork (i.e. personal life) to work spillover has explored whether spillover between life realms is positive or negative (Kirchmeyer, 1993), whether it results in more or less turnover and organizational commitment (Cohen, 1997a, 1997b), and has emphasized an emotional focus (Clark, 2000). A behavioral focus is needed; in other words, an examination of exactly *what* personal activities people engage in at work is lacking. At the same time, personal business appears to be prevalent in the workplace. A few publications (e.g. popular press articles, web surveys, conference papers) have suggested that employees send or receive personal, offensive, or sexually-toned e-mail messages, engage in personal Internet surfing at work, play computer games, download music from the web, engage in cybersex, pay bills, and shop while at work (Center for On-Line Addiction, 1998; Conlin, 2000; Everton et al., 2003; Vault.com, 2000a). Based on these reports, people appear to be engaging in personal business on the job, but there is still a need to systematically examine and identify the full range of home- and leisure-related activities people engage in at work.

Third, an area neglected in the literature thus far is the factors related

to personal business on the job. Of interest in the current study were the reasons behind the behavior – why it occurs. For example, as Lim (2002) notes, existing research on cyberloafing offers little understanding of why people use the Internet for personal interests during the workday. Previous researchers have suggested that dissatisfaction with work (Hulin, 1991; Rosse & Hulin, 1985) or that compensating for deficient experiences (Champoux, 1978; Wilensky, 1960), in other words, engaging in personal business at work because a person is bored or unsatisfied by the job, may play a role in why individuals engage in personal business on the job. The current study set out to examine how individuals rationalize and construct meanings to explain the behavior to themselves and others.

Work–life balance may also be a factor in personal business on the job. Many have argued that the lines between work and personal life are becoming blurred (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Voydanoff, 2001; Wilensky, 1960), that work and personal life realms are more connected and inter-dependent than detached and autonomous (Porter et al., 1975), and that this connection is necessary in order to balance work–life duties and responsibilities such as finding enough time to meet the needs of children (Parcel, 1999; Sekaran, 1986). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) suggest that imbalance between work and personal life can take the form of time-based conflict (i.e. conflict in the form of time pressures and being preoccupied with one life role while physically at another life role) and strain-based conflict (i.e. emotional strain resulting from role conflict), and Eby et al. (2005) reiterate that stress, emotional reactions to imbalance, and schedules are key issues in the work–family literature. It is in these ways (time and emotions) that work–life balance (or imbalance) may be a factor in personal business on the job. However, the tremendous literature on work–life issues (e.g. Eby et al., 2005; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Hodson & Parcel, 1999) continues to suffer from a dearth of research linking work–life balance to personal activities at work. In fact, Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) describe this gap in the literature – that there is a deficiency of research on how work–family conflict is evident in behavioral patterns. Because work and family each place demands upon an individual's time, affect the emotions people have, and influence the energy people must expend, the experiences had in one realm can affect the other (Brief & Nord, 1990; Champoux, 1978). There is an exchange and a relationship between work and personal life that sets the stage for this research suggesting that work–life issues (i.e. balance and conflict) might play a role in personal activities at work.

In addition, the current research examined the meaning or importance that people place upon work, home, and leisure life realms and whether this meaning is also a factor in why people do personal business on the job. This

concept was defined as the meaning of life realms (MOLR) for the purpose of this research. There have been several approaches to studying the importance that individuals place upon various life realms (O'Brien, 1992; Sverko & Vizek-Vidovic, 1995) ranging from job involvement, central life interest, and work role centrality to work salience, meaning of work, and work centrality (e.g. Dubin, 1956; Harpaz & Fu, 2002; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965; Mannheim, 1975; Mannheim et al., 1997; MOW International Research Team, 1987; Nevill & Calvert, 1996; Super & Sverko, 1995). Researchers have cited evidence that leisure is becoming increasingly important in people's lives, and that work's importance is waning (e.g. Snir & Harpaz, 2002); they have also offered findings to suggest that family holds more importance in a person's life than does work (Kelly & Kelly, 1994). There is also some research evidence that the meanings people place on various life realms are related to their behavior. For example, Snir and Harpaz (2002) found that individuals who were more oriented toward leisure worked fewer hours per week than individuals who were more oriented toward work. Although past efforts have worked to generate knowledge about life realm interests and their impact on behavior (e.g. Harpaz, 1988; Hartung, 1997; Mannheim et al., 1997; Nevill, 1995), researchers continue to cite a need for more research on the meaning of work for employees and the consequences of that meaning (Kelly & Kelly, 1994). The current research explored the relationship between life realm importance and doing personal activities at work. Specifically, it addressed what people do at work to act upon the importance they place upon work, home, and leisure – in particular, do people take care of personal business on the job because their MOLR is more home- or leisure-oriented than work-oriented?

To summarize, the extant literature suggests a need to examine the relationship among work, home, and leisure life realms in more detail – specifically, to develop a better understanding of how this relationship between life realms is enacted in employee behavior. The purpose of this research, therefore, was to identify the full range of personal activities that individuals engage in at work and to develop an understanding of why people engage in personal business on the job. The literature suggests some forms of personal business as being prevalent on the job (e.g. cyberloafing, e-mailing for personal use, personal phone calls), but has failed to identify the full population or domain of nonwork activities that are informally allowing individuals to cross life realm borders during the workday. In addition, the literature suggests that work–life balance and the importance of work, home, and leisure in people's lives (MOLR) are factors that may explain the behavior. The question remains whether these views are supported by data and if there are other explanations (e.g. rationale) that individuals may

construct that also provide insight into why this behavior occurs on work time.

Method

The research utilized a qualitative and exploratory approach to gain a thorough understanding of personal business on the job. This method was chosen for its richness in data, its flexibility, and its ability to fulfill the research purpose of identifying and understanding the full range of activities and factors behind engaging in personal activities at work. When little is known about a phenomenon, qualitative methods are advocated for their ability to discover the underlying nature of the phenomenon in question (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Sampling

Participants were identified using purposive (Stone, 1978) and referral (Welch, 1975) sampling methods. Because individuals meeting certain criteria (i.e. middle management employees who work in office jobs with fixed work hours (e.g. 9:00–5:00, 8:00–4:00)) were sought, purposive sampling allowed the researcher to 'hand pick' individuals for participation (Stone, 1978: 81). These criteria were chosen for a number of reasons. Making mid-hierarchy positions a sampling criterion resulted in a set of individuals with a moderate degree of autonomy in their work situation who had the opportunity to perform personal activities on the job. It may have been difficult for individuals in high-level jobs with a great deal of autonomy to be able to distinguish between work time and free time. At the same time, lower-level employees might have too little autonomy to be able to engage in personal business during work hours. A similar explanation can be given for making fixed work hours a criterion. For example, salespeople in the field or telecommuters may not have set work hours that suggest they be at work for a certain amount of time, performing specific work-related tasks; they have more autonomy given their flexible work schedule. Finally, having office jobs as a criterion resulted in a sample with access to the media (e.g. phones, e-mail, the Internet) that are often used for personal activities. Employees on a factory floor, for example, do not usually have such access during work hours. After purposive sampling, additional participants were identified by referral or snowball sampling (Welch, 1975) (i.e. asking participants to identify additional individuals who meet the criteria who might also be willing to participate). Because sampling participants through their places

of employment might have resulted in biased data (e.g. underreporting of personal business on the job) or ethical concerns (e.g. employers becoming aware of what their employees are doing during the workday and punishing them for it), the sampling procedures used in the current study were able to provide a diverse pool of participants for exploring personal business on the job in various walks of life.

The resulting sample of 30 individuals was 43 percent female, 70 percent married, 90 percent between the ages of 25 and 39, 73 percent working in their field for 3–10 years, 86 percent working in their jobs for 1–5 years, and primarily (i.e. 80 percent) from for-profit organizational types. They represented a wide variety of industries including: finance, sales, marketing, government, development, commercial real estate, law, public relations, engineering, and graphic design. In only two cases did participants self-report that they were in upper management; however, these individuals were employed in particularly small organizations, so the organization's hierarchy may have appeared compressed.

Data collection, coding, and analysis

Interviews were semi-structured and consisted of open-ended questions to assess the types of personal activities people attend to on work hours and the underlying factors behind personal business on the job. Participants were given a list of general personal activities (e.g. phone use, e-mail use, Internet use, visits from leisure- or family-related individuals) that had been generated in a pilot study to use as a guide for discussion. Participants were asked to review this list, to discuss whether they engaged in any of the activities, and to provide specific examples. However, to maintain the exploratory nature of the research, participants were asked to identify any additional home or leisure-related activities they attended to on work time (e.g. not during lunch or break times) that did not appear on the list. In order to explore the reasons behind this behavior, participants were specifically asked why they engaged in the behavior, what motivated them to do so, and what their own interpretations were of the behavior. These questions were aimed at identifying emergent patterns of reasoning from the data. Two patterns emerged from the responses to these questions – the rationale behind personal business on the job and work–life balance. In addition, because the extant literature suggested that MOLR might play a role, MOLR was assessed using a series of four questions adapted from Dubin (1956) and Lodahl and Kejner (1965) such as, 'where would you say the most satisfaction in your life comes from (work, home, leisure, all three)?' and 'what do you hate missing the most: work, a family event, a leisure outing?'

Responses to these questions helped identify a pattern of attitudes and behaviors among the sample that also provided insight into the reasons behind personal business on the job.

The interviews were recorded with permission. The recorded data were then transcribed by the researcher. Following transcription, the interview data were systemically analyzed and coded to identify emerging patterns or common themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) about personal business on the job. Data were coded into categories of: (i) common themes of activity (e.g. phone calls, e-mails, or Internet surfing) to understand what personal activities people engage in at work; and (ii) the reasons that people engage in personal activities at work (e.g. boredom, respite, liberation of personal time). Frequencies were used as the basis of analysis representing the number of individuals citing an activity or reason in order to identify patterns in the data. Responses to questions about MOLR were also recorded; how they were analyzed is described later.

Results

Analysis of the interview data resulted in two main findings. One, employees engage in numerous personal activities during work time. The details of these activities, the life realms they pertain to, and the mediums (e.g. phone, e-mail, Internet) used for personal business on the job are discussed later. Two, the data identify the underlying factors that account for the behavior. Specifically, a need for work–life balance, MOLR, and various rationale (i.e. boredom, convenience, trade-offs) emerged as the factors behind personal business invading the workday.

Personal activities engaged in at work

Participants reported participating in betting pools at work, social conversations in the workplace, daydreaming, e-mail use, Internet surfing, making personal appointments (e.g. doctors, stylists), organizing and planning for their personal time, bill paying, phone conversations, reading, and visits with friends and family at work. The most widely reported activities included using the phone to make calls for home- or leisure-related purposes, sending and receiving personal e-mails, engaging in conversations about nonwork issues, and surfing the Internet for personal purposes. The details of these activities appear in Table 1.

There were a few surprises in the data. First, an unexpected activity, watching television at work, was reported by two participants. While

Table I Personal activities engaged in at work

Activity	Frequency of respondents (percent)	Examples and sample comments
Using the phone	23 (77)	Phone calls regarding family, landlords, spouse or partner, errands, social plans, hobbies, socializing, pets, graduate school, job searches, volunteer work 'Like I have to call to get the swimming pool opened and other dumb stuff like that. And I have a shower I need to RSVP to. I'll do that at work. . . .'
Sending or receiving e-mails	20 (67)	E-mails to family or to make social plans 'E-mail has definitely enabled me to keep up relationships with friends from college that I probably wouldn't have if it weren't for e-mail. Um, so keeping in touch with people that either I don't have time to call or e-mailing a group of friends. It's sort of like we're sitting in a room all together watching sports or something, but instead we're all really at work.'
Social conversations	20 (67)	Conversations about sports, family, children, weddings, books, travel, television shows, dating 'We'll talk about the basketball game that was on last night or the [television] show, *Survivor* . . . just discussions [about] politics, tax issues, there's a lot of that.'
Surfing the Internet	18 (60)	Internet research for sports scores, travel information, shopping, on-line banking, social plans, hobbies (e.g. gardening, biking, running, horses), keeping tabs on celebrities 'Finding a new biking helmet, a new bike jersey, a bunch of clothes for my skiing trip, a special backpack that I need for things, . . . trail running shoes. I do the gear research on the Net.'
Making appointments	9 (30)	Appointments for doctors, hairstylists, veterinarians, mechanics, other services 'You know, you can't get an appointment to bring your car in unless you call from work.'
Paying personal bills	8 (27)	'I pretty much take care of all of the bills of the house . . . on a Friday, I'll pay a few bills, write checks, slap some stamps on envelopes, and they're out . . . maybe 20 minutes to a 1/2 hour a week.'
Leisure reading	6 (20)	Read magazines, newspapers (e.g. *Boston Globe*, *Wall Street Journal*, *New York Times*), novels 'I read magazines. Like *Cooking Light*.'

Table 1   (Continued)

Activity	Frequency of respondents (percent)	Examples and sample comments
Organizing or planning for personal time	5 (17)	Getting organized or preparing for personal time (e.g. lists for errands, vacations, wedding plans) 'I definitely make to-do lists at work using, like, Word. And it may be something as simple as my grocery list. Or I'll write down my errands in the order I know I can do them in so I'm not backtracking when I drive. Like, "ok, I'm gonna go to the recycle center, and then I'm gonna stop at [the grocery store] to pick up . . ." I'll organize my errands so I'm in one big, gigantic loop.'
Betting pools	5 (17)	Betting pools for NCAA tournaments (i.e. March Madness), fantasy football and baseball teams '. . . our office has a fantasy football league. So we'll all spend a little time putting our teams together, talking about football during the workday . . .'
Daydreaming	4 (13)	'You know, you're just sitting there, looking out the window and all of a sudden two minutes have gone by and you haven't done anything . . .'
Visits with friends or family	3 (10)	'They stop into my office . . . my mother, sisters, nephews, father.'

Notes. N = 30. Frequencies reflect number of participants who reported engaging in the personal activity. Percentages reflect percentage of the sample who reported engaging in the personal activity.

television is available to these participants and their coworkers for work purposes, it was also utilized for entertainment purposes at work. One explained, 'You know, we have TV available to us because we need to see C-SPAN and CNN and all that for work . . . But then we get the Spanish channel, ESPN, . . . I might watch ESPN for an hour in the morning to watch Sportscenter.' Second, 2 of the 30 participants talked openly about viewing pornography at work during work hours. One explained that since his workplace only monitors personal e-mails for steady e-mails from a nonwork-related source, the occasional e-mail with a pornographic attachment gets 'by' the company's eyes. He explained, 'If a friend of mine sends me [pornography], we are not at fault. I can open it because I didn't ask for it. My coworkers don't know 'cause I have a lot of privacy. I look at some of it at work, a lot of it.'

Clearly, personal activities are a part of the workday. Of all the people who were informally questioned during purposive sampling and the 30 individuals that were interviewed for this study, only one individual claimed to avoid engaging in any personal activities, but when questioned, even this person admitted participating in betting pools at work from time-to-time. Taken together, these findings suggest that engaging in personal activities at work is a widespread pattern of behavior.

Factors behind personal business on the job

Content analysis of the interview transcripts demonstrated several key themes: (i) that people construct common meanings to explain or rationalize personal business on the job; (ii) that the desire for work–life balance plays a large role in this behavior; and (iii) that the importance that people place upon their work, home, and leisure life realms (MOLR) is also strongly related to engaging in personal activities at work.

Rationale behind personal business on the job

Various rationale emerged from the interview data. These represent common themes of reasoning that individuals create to explain their engagement in personal activities at work. Table 2 provides a list of the top 10 reasons reported by the participants (i.e. used by more than 25 percent). For example, 18 participants explained their personal activities using a 'convenience' rationale. Specifically, it was convenient to make phone calls, to surf the Internet, or to e-mail because the device (e.g. phone, computer) was right at their fingertips. Equally popular reasons had to do with time constraints (i.e. personal activities at work was exacerbated by a long commute, by long work hours, or by demanding needs of children and family) and timing (i.e. calling the plumber, mechanic, air conditioning company, landscaper, doctor, or hairstylist from work because that is the only time they can be reached).

Other rationale for engaging in personal business on the job emerged from the data such as being able to multi-task and handle both work-related and nonwork-related tasks simultaneously, viewing the personal activity as a reward for having completed a work project, or having the privacy and autonomy to engage in personal activities at work. However, these other rationale were used by fewer than 25 percent of the participants suggesting that it is less common for a person to rationalize personal business during the workday in these ways. Despite varying degrees of popularity, these insights into how people construct meaning behind their behavior help to inform the field of the full domain of potential reasons that may exist.

Table 2   Top 10 rationale for engaging in personal business on the job

Rationale	Frequency of respondents (percent)	Examples and sample comments
Convenience	18 (60)	Because the phone, computer, e-mail, or Internet is readily available 'So it just works out if I'm on the Internet, you know, finding out where my next client meeting might be, that I'll also look at something for personal stuff.'
Time constraints	18 (60)	Because time constraints and the time demands created by home life, leisure interests, a long commute, or long hours make it necessary 'Because by the time I get home after work, after exercising or book club or bowling or whatever the heck I'm doing, it's very late at night and the last thing I feel like doing is turning on the computer.'
Timing	18 (60)	Because business hours are the only times they can reach these people or accomplish these tasks 'Because that's how I can reach all the other people who are working 9-to-5. . . . 'Cause a lot of them work businesses, so . . . I have to call them during the day when they're at work.'
Liberation of personal time	17 (57)	To liberate personal time so they don't have another 'to do' list at end of the workday '. . . at night, we're more likely to just relax and watch a movie or watch TV. We try not to spend too much of our time talking about bills and things when we're at home. I'd rather do it at work actually because that way it's not taking up time that we have to spend together.'
Boredom	16 (53)	To reduce boredom on the job and/or fill downtime '. . . more often than not, it's that I'm bored. Because I don't have so much going on that every hour of my workday is taken up with work.'
Work purpose	16 (53)	Because socializing, betting pools, reading together in a break room are perceived to build trust, teams, relationships, morale, productivity, and help people get a start on their workday 'While this takes away perhaps from time that could be spent a little more productively, I think that you could also look at it as establishing camaraderie . . .'

Table 2   (Continued)

Rationale	Frequency of respondents (percent)	Examples and sample comments
On one's mind	14 (47)	Because the personal issue (e.g. calling a friend, looking up movie times) is 'on their mind' at the time and would be forgotten if not done right then 'Because things like that I do when I think of them. And if I don't do them then, I'll forget.'
Respite	13 (43)	Because they need a break and some time off from their work obligations 'I would say some of that gets done because I need a break. Not necessarily because I'm bored, but just because all of my work entails looking at a computer, and that you need a break from . . .'
Cultural norms	13 (43)	Because the organization's cultural norms allow it (i.e. it's understood and accepted) 'At the place where I work, it's kind of like, "as long as you get your work done".'
Trade-offs	8 (27)	Because it's a trade-off (i.e. they do a lot of business travel or work long hours so they're entitled to do personal business) 'Because it's a major inconvenience for me to travel. So . . . it's like, "Hey, you know, I worked 16 hours the other night in Texas for you . . . and you're gonna get on me for wasting an hour on the Internet? Get off my back!" It's like a give-and-take.'

Notes. N = 30. Frequencies reflect number of participants who reported the rationale. Percentages reflect percentage of the sample who reported the rationale.

Work–life balance

The interview data also provided strong evidence that people engage in personal activities at work because doing so helps them balance work, home, and leisure. First, consider the rationale behind engaging in personal business on the job. Table 2 identifies 'time constraints' as a top reason for engaging in personal business on the job with 60 percent of participants explaining their personal activities at work in this manner. The lack of time that people had to take care of work, home, and leisure demands in the appropriate life realm (e.g. home activities only at home, work activities only at work) forced them to handle personal activities at work. One comment from a participant

substantiates the connection between work–life balance and personal business at work, 'You know it's the only way I've been able to balance a career and a personal life. If I weren't able to do things at work, then I probably wouldn't be able to stay working. For me, it's a necessity. . . . So you have to find a way to balance it. To do personal stuff at work.'

However, home and leisure invading work was not always a matter of balancing time constraints. For some, balancing work and other life interests took on an emotional component. Consider this comment,

> I would say [doing personal things on the job] helps make the whole picture more rounded for me . . . I would say that [I do home and leisure type activities] to not forget about them during the workday . . . to recognize that everything is not all about work . . . in this day and age, oftentimes work is so all-encompassing that it's easy to forget about the other things in your life, and I think it's healthy to incorporate those other areas that make you the person that you are that comes to work everyday.

To summarize, the data suggested that home and leisure invade the work life realm so that individuals could meet the demands from multiple life realms. It seems that individuals engaged in personal business on the job because doing so helped them balance the demands from all three life realms both emotionally (i.e. maintaining a sense of balance in one's life) and within limiting time constraints.

Meaning of life realms

Reviewing participant responses to the MOLR interview questions demonstrated that MOLR was also a key factor in personal activities at work. The interview data suggest that there was congruence or similarity between people's attitudes (MOLR) and their behavior (the types of personal activities they engaged in at work); in other words, the meaning that individuals place upon work, home, and leisure in their lives was also reflected in their on-the-job behavior. This suggests that engaging in personal business on the job can, at least partially, be explained by the meaning of work, home, and leisure in people's lives.

To review, MOLR was determined for each participant by the pattern of responses to four interview items. When the pattern of these four responses was predominantly home-oriented (i.e. home was where the individual placed the most importance), that person was coded as having a home-oriented MOLR. When the pattern of these four responses was predominantly leisure-oriented, that person was coded as having a

leisure-oriented MOLR. The same coding strategy was used for coding a participant, 'work-oriented', whose responses were predominantly about work. On some occasions, participants gave responses that reflected some combination of the life realms (e.g. being home- and leisure-oriented); their MOLR was coded to reflect that response. In addition to coding each participant's MOLR, the data were also coded for the behavior (i.e. the predominant pattern of activities that each participant engaged in at work). Again, participant behaviors were coded as home-oriented, leisure-oriented, work-oriented, or some combination of the three life realms.

The coding labels attributed to each participant's MOLR and behavior were compared to determine whether there was similarity, or congruence, between people's attitudes and behavior. For example, when the MOLR was home-oriented, congruence or similarity would be reflected by people primarily engaging in home-related activities at work, and when the MOLR was leisure-related, congruence or similarity would be reflected by people primarily engaging in leisure-related activities at work. Interestingly, these comparisons demonstrated that there was a high degree of similarity between people's attitudes and behavior (e.g. their MOLR was leisure-oriented and they engaged in mostly leisure activities at work). In fact, most participants had either fully congruent ($N = 12$) or partially congruent ($N = 15$) attitudes and behavior. Only 3 of the 30 participants held incongruent attitudes and behavior (e.g. their MOLR was home-oriented but they engaged in leisure-related activities at work). This suggests that the interest people had in their various life realms played a key role in determining whether personal activities were engaged in at work. In other words, home and leisure-related activities were performed at work and on work time because people place more importance upon those life realms than they do on their work. Interestingly, no participants held solely work-oriented MOLRs. In other words, work was not the place where any participants placed the most meaning or importance in their lives; instead, a majority of participants held home-oriented MOLR attitudes.

Discussion and future research

Given these findings, it is clear that employees are engaging in personal business during work hours. This type of 'invasion' of home and leisure life realms into the work life realm has been relatively neglected in the literature to this point. The current research addressed that gap in the literature by (i) identifying the full range of activities that individuals are engaging in on work time and (ii) providing insight into the factors behind the behavior.

The findings suggest that home and leisure life realms invade the work life realm in the form of personal business on the job. People engage in home-oriented activities at work such as taking care of business related to their family, children, spouse, partner, parents, siblings, housekeeping, errands, and home maintenance, and they engage in leisure-oriented activities defined as attending to the demands of their social life, recreation, relaxation, amusement, entertainment, personal interests, hobbies, sports, art, friendships, and other free-will interests (MOW International Research Team, 1987; Parker & Smith, 1976) during work hours.

The findings also suggest that there are a number of factors related to this behavior. First, people do personal activities at work because doing so helps them balance work, home, and leisure. Home and leisure domains invade the work life realm so that individuals can meet the emotional and time demands from multiple life realms. Second, various meanings are constructed to rationalize this behavior. The individuals interviewed independently constructed 10 very similar rationale for their personal business on the job ranging from convenience, time constraints, and boredom to self-provided rewards and cultural acceptance. As a result, it appears that the home and leisure domains enter into the workday by way of various rationalizations (e.g. because people are bored, need to free up personal time, or need a break). Third, analysis of the patterns in the data demonstrated that behavior is reflective of the meaning, importance, and significance of work, home, and leisure in people's lives (i.e. MOLR). In other words, home and/or leisure invade the work life realm because individuals perceive that home or leisure life realms hold a high degree of meaning or importance in their lives. Carlson and Kacmar's (2000) recent work supports the need to include MOLR as an underlying factor in the work–life interface. They found that life role values had an impact on the conflict between work and family and suggested that future studies consider life role values as an important element in the relationship between work and family. This research not only considered these life role values (as MOLR), but the data suggest that MOLR plays a very important role in the invasion of personal life realms to work life realms.

Based on the results of the current study, future research should attempt to better understand and define the relationship among home, leisure, and work life realms in terms of personal business on the job. For example, research efforts might be directed toward quantifying the extent to which people engage in personal activities at work (e.g. in terms of hours per day or week), toward a quantitative assessment of the degree of influence that each underlying factor has on personal activities at work (e.g. does work–life balance or MOLR account for the most variance, or are there a

few key rationale that are the strongest predictors of the behavior?), toward determining which factor dominates which type of activity (e.g. does the need for work–life balance dominate personal visits, whereas MOLR dominates phone calls?), and toward examining interactions between the factors. In some instances, only work–life balance, for example, may explain the relationship between personal life realms and the work life realm. In other cases, several factors may be at play. For instance, if people are bored (i.e. rationale), and if they place more importance upon their home life than they do their work life (i.e. MOLR), then they might engage in more home-related activities at work.

Although biodata were collected on the participants in this study, the qualitative nature of the research hindered analysis beyond detecting patterns. There was no noticeable or consistent pattern of differences in what people do at work due to their age, gender, marital status, parental status, occupational field, type of work, tenure, hierarchical level, work hours, work set-up, or organizational size. Both males and females, single and married individuals, parents and non-parents, new employees and established organizational members, and people with their own office and those who share workspaces reported engaging in personal activities at work. Future research should seek to empirically assess individual- and organizational-level differences in the behavior.

In addition, the impact of this behavior on organizations remains unclear. Some have suggested that personal business on the job is in contradiction to accepted business ethics and values of today's workers and employers (*HR Focus*, 2001). Others have argued that personal business at work may hurt productivity and have reported that companies are making a concerted effort to cut down on Internet abuse at work for that very reason (Center for On-Line Addiction, 1998; Greengard, 2000). By contrast, there is evidence that using the Internet at work for personal interests may not be a problem. Vault.com found that 66.6 percent of 451 employees surveyed did not feel that Internet surfing or personal e-mailing hurt their productivity (2000a) and that 50.2 percent of 670 employers surveyed felt the same way (2000b). In fact, 56 percent of individuals who engaged in personal Internet surfing at work felt that it had a positive influence (Greengard, 2000). They contended that it helped them in their jobs, increased happiness at work, and decreased stress levels (Greengard, 2000). While these findings are based solely on employee perceptions and are limited to Internet and e-mail use, they suggest that personal activities at work may not always entail negative organizational implications. Future research might investigate the implications of these activities on organizations.

Conclusion

This research was strongly rooted in the relationship among work, home, and leisure life realm boundaries. Several explanations of this relationship were offered by Clark (2000), Nippert-Eng (1996) and the notion of permeating (Ashforth et al., 2000) the boundaries between various roles in life. Although some research has examined how this relationship is enacted in behavior (e.g. misbehavior, cyberloafing, calendar keeping, keyring choices, Lim, 2002; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Vardi & Wiener, 1996), it was described that there is less understanding of the multitude of ways that individuals engage in personal business on the job and the factors behind such behavior. The current study explored this influence of leisure and home on the workday and found support for the notion that employees behaviorally cross borders among work, home, and leisure life realms. As Stracher notes, American society is 'witnessing the transformation of the workplace into the home . . . and the home into the workplace' (2000: A19). This study provides insight into that cross-over between life realms in which people carry out home-oriented activities, such as making doctor appointments, and personal social life activities, such as vacation planning and weekend arrangements, at the workplace.

The current research suggests that engagement in personal activities at work is both widespread and easily rationalized by employees. These findings have implications for future research and for organizations by helping them understand this very practical way in which home and leisure invade work because the research identifies how workers spend their workdays besides simply working – what they do from moment-to-moment, what they do when they're bored or have some downtime, the types of social conversations they have, and whom they call and e-mail from work. More importantly, these findings provide information about the factors behind this behavior. This research demonstrates that personal business on the job is as much a function of the personal interests people have, as it is a function of their need to balance work and nonwork and the meanings they construct to rationalize their personal business on the job.

Note

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