



Modern Day Communication Technology: Empowerment or Enslavement?
An Interview with Uthpala Senarathne Tennakoon

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The tools of our work – cell phones, smart phones, email, the internet- have profoundly changed in recent decades. They have paved the way for working far more flexibly and in many ways productively than ever before. Simultaneously, these incredible tools enable us to work anytime and from anywhere, but the boundaries between work and other parts of our lives are eroding - and at times vanishing altogether. Modern-day information and communication technology (ICT) is clearly a double-edged sword and we are grappling, individually and collectively, with using these tools in ways that enable rather than overwhelm us.

Uthpala Senarathne Tennakoon, an assistant professor at the Bissett School of Business at the Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada, was moved based on her own experience to explore the positive and negative impacts of using these modern-day ICTs on work-life interactions.

Research Questions and Design:

The primary research questions under investigation were:

- How do individuals use technology for both work and non-work related activities?
- What are the beneficial and detrimental consequences of ICT use across work and personal boundaries?
- How does the use of ICTs influence work-life balance?

To explore these questions, Senarathne Tennakoon designed a two-phase study beginning with qualitative research. Through one-on-one interviews with 32 managerial and professional employees, she inquired about how they used ICT devices, how they defined the boundaries between their work and personal lives and how their approach helped, or hurt, in terms of work-life management. This exploratory stage informed the design of a web-based survey for the second phase of her research.

Distributed to professional and managerial employees in both Canada and Sri Lanka, she received more than 500 completed surveys. Among the Canadian respondents, 53% were male, 80% married or in a

common-law relationship, and 61% raising children under 18. The respective figures for the Sri Lankan respondents were 64%, 71%, and 43%.

In the second phase of the research, Senarathne Tennakoon analyzed the survey results to investigate the cross-domain use of ICTs, working in non-work situations such as working over the weekend or managing personal affairs while at work such as handling on-line banking needs at the office.

Research Highlights

The research explored how cross-domain use of technology influenced the reported experience of work-life conflict (with work and personal responsibilities being at odds) as well as work-life enrichment (with work and personal responsibilities being complimentary.)

In addition, the research examined the impact of cross-domain use of ICTs on work-life balance. For example one's ability to attend to work over the weekend while at home with your family may help in managing high work demands and reducing work-related stress, contributing positively to an improved experience of work-life balance. Alternatively, working from home over the weekend could increase conflict, as your spouse and children express frustration with your divided attention, thus diminishing your experience of balance between career and your life outside of work.

Work-life balance was measured through a compilation of eight questions including items such as:

- I do what is important to keep me balanced in my life.
- I have a lot of demands on my time but I think I can do them well.
- I don't overextend myself in one aspect of my life to the detriment of another aspect of my life.

Based on exploring many potential relationships for how cross-domain use of ICTs influences work-life conflict, enrichment, and balance, these salient results emerged.

- Use of work ICTs during nonwork time was a *strong positive driver of work-to-life conflict* and a *strong negative driver of life-to-work enrichment*. By both increasing conflict while simultaneously reducing enrichment, using work ICTs during personal time had the greatest impact on work-life balance out of all possible cross-domain uses explored through the research.



- *Perhaps most importantly, these combined effects create a negative self-reinforcing spiral.* Given limited amounts of time, attention, and energy, having work consistently encroaching on personal time impedes one's ability to detach and have space for responsibilities and pleasures outside of work. In addition, not having sufficient time to recharge outside the office makes it more difficult to be most productive and effective while working.
- Being able to manage 'personal business' at work was strongly and positively related to a reduction in work-to-life conflict. One survey respondent commented, "If you use 15 minutes of a 10-hour long work day to sort out a family matter, it is hardly felt. I think it also makes you more time efficient as you will anyway fulfill your work tasks for the day."

When asked if anything about the research surprised her, Senarathne Tennakoon responded, "It was really surprising to see such a strong relationship between taking work home and the negative impact on work-life balance. I expected to see more evidence of people feeling empowered by taking work home."

Implications of the Research for Organizations and Individuals

The pathways of influence captured in the research, most notably the negative implications of over attachment to work via ICTs, have important implications for both organizations and individuals.

For employers, the research illustrates that employees being constantly connected to work via their communication tools negatively influences work-life balance. In turn, the stress resulting from ongoing work-life imbalance can have negative repercussions for future work performance. Employers can strive to create environments that minimize the overflow of work to home. A concrete means for employers to erect boundaries on ICT use is through the creation of black-out windows in which employees are not expected to be connected to work. In the absence of proactive communication from employers, the default mode for many professionals is to always be on-line.

In addition, providing employees with the flexibility to selectively attend to personal demands during work hours helps to alleviate the strain and improve work-life balance. The research underscores that creating a culture which supports employees in turning off from work is an investment in their work-life balance and potentially the future resilience of the workforce.



The research also invites individuals to be more conscious of their use of work-related ICTs in their personal time. Catching up on work at home might not be as helpful as anticipated. While in the short-term or periodically, it can be a good strategy, on a longer-term more consistent basis, it can become detrimental.

The research results are certainly provocative in light of the tacit expectation that professional jobs can no longer be adequately managed during traditional work hours.

Implications of the Research for Future Exploration

The impact of cross-domain use of ICTs suggests several additional angles for future exploration.

- How do perceptions of technology, positive or negative, moderate the impacts of crossing boundaries in the use of ICTs between work and home?
- What is the continuum over which individuals define work-life balance? How does their personal definition relate to their personal experience of work-life balance?
- How have changes in technology use since the data was collected in 2008, such as increased utilization of social networks, influenced the experience of these cross domain effects?
- What are implications of the personal use of ICTs, such as being on Facebook while playing with your children, on home-life conflict?

Research Links

Below are links to other researchers examining the use of ICTs.

- Noelle Chesley
<http://www4.uwm.edu/letsci/sociology/faculty/chesle.cfm>
- Judy Wajcman
<http://www.lse.ac.uk/researchAndExpertise/Experts/profile.aspx?KeyValue=j.wajcman%40lse.ac.uk>
- Linda Duxbury
<http://sprott.carleton.co/directory/duxbury-linda/>