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Work-related ICT use during off-job time, technology to family conflict and segmentation preference: a study with two generations of employees

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ABSTRACT

The widespread use of ICT, namely the use of smartphones, has dramatically altered the way organizations communicate with employees, leading to flexibility in work schedules that frequently encompass extending the workday. In the current workforce there are different generations, and this can affect the way that ICT use for work purposes during off-job time is perceived. In the current study, we examine whether organizational expectations towards after-hours communications for work purposes (off-job e-communication expectations) and perceptions of technology as causing family conflict (technology to family conflict), may be experienced differently by two generations of employees. Moreover, segmentation preference is examined as a moderator of the relationship between off-job e-communication expectations and technology to family conflict. Data from 238 employees that reported to have used, over the last 6 months, their ICT for work purposes during non-work time, from various industries were collected. Findings revealed that segmentation preferences are related to technology to family conflict directly for both groups. It was also found that for the older employee group off-job e-communication expectations are related to technology to family conflict. Implications for organizations are discussed.

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In recent decades, successive generations of workers have witnessed technological advancements altering the way the work is performed. The use of ICT (information and communications technology) has changed the work and the work relations, allowing employees to stay connected without being constrained by time or space (Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007; Piszczek, 2017). For example, employees can check their work-related instant messages or e-mails using their smartphones or laptops outside of their standard working hours (Piszczek, 2017). However, they can act this way because they are taking advantage of the flexibility that the use of ICT brings for work performance or they can have this behavior because they are expected to do this to fulfill organizational expectations of availability to answer work calls and messages after job hours (Middleton,

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2007; Piszczek, 2017). As such, there is a growing interest of research aiming to have a deeper understanding whether the use of ICT for work purposes during off-job time can intensify and extend the workday and the potential impact in employees' other life roles. As the lines between professional and personal time have been blurred by the use of ICT during off-job time (Colbert et al., 2016; Duxbury et al., 1996; Kossek, 2016), this can lead to increased interrole conflict (work interfering with personal and family life) (Barley, Meyerson, & Godal, 2011). Altogether results of these studies call attention to the fact that the use of ICT for work purposes during off-job time makes the work role to spill over into other life roles. One of the theoretical approaches to understand this spillover mechanism is boundary theory. It postulates that individuals can vary in the extent to which they separate or integrate work and personal life to meet the demands of both life domains (Ashforth et al., 2000). While segmentation preference refers to an individual preference for having clear boundaries that separate the work role from other roles, integration occurs when individuals simultaneously engage in work and personal life tasks. Ashforth et al. (2000) suggested that both contextual factors and social norms can account for setting out boundary management preference to either integrate or separate work from other life roles. Thus, in some workplaces, it may be a norm to freely contact, via smartphone, instant messaging or e-mail, employees outside of regular work hours to address work-related issues, whereas initiating work-related contact after work hours is not expected in other places, unless there is an emergency. For example, a study by Fenner and Renn (2010) found that organizational pressure to use technology, for work purposes outside of the workplace, was related to its actual use. Thus, these expectations of employees' availability by using ICT for work purposes during off-job influence how segmentation preference is shaped. In a recent review on work-related use of ICT, Schlachter et al. (2018) found that organizational context and individual characteristics are expected to influence the amount of work-related technology use which, in turn, may influence the work–non-work relations. Research exploring the consequences of ICT work-related use during off-job time on family domain has uncovered harmful effects for work–family relations. Early work from Chesley (2005) testing spillover effects of work-related technology use in family and personal life found that the use of cell phones caused negative work–family spillover that was related to decreased family satisfaction and distress. Research by Harris (2014) on intrusiveness of smartphones used for work purposes at home found that it can create the sense of work life to personal life smartphone intrusion. Furthermore, the study showed a significant negative relationship between smartphone intrusion and work–life balance and stress levels (Harris, 2014). Other study found that daily use of the smartphone for performing work tasks during off-job hours was associated with increased work-to-family conflict (Derks et al., 2015). Research, examining the effects of the use of ICT for work purposes at home, found negative impacts on the quality of family relationships (Nie, 2001), while others claimed that the use of communication technologies at home frequently cuts off interactions with partners, such as conversations and mealtimes, and creates conflicts over the use of technology (McDaniel & Coyne, 2014). The potentially intrusive effect of ICT on family life was presented by Ofir, Turel and Benko in the concept of technology–family conflict defined, by the authors, as a 'friction between family tasks and the use of a specific work-related pervasive technology (e.g., using mobile email instead of dining with the family)' (p. 88).

Using the lens of the boundary theory, permeable boundaries between work and non-work domain can increase the likelihood of misperceptions about which role should be performed at a certain time, leading to higher perceptions of competing demands that cause role spillover (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Ollier-Malaterre et al., 2013). ICT use, namely smartphone use for work purposes during family time, might increase the likelihood of blurring the lines of separation between work and family, and, because of that can heighten the perception of work-related ICT use as intruding the family domain (Turel et al., 2011).

Segmentation preference as a moderator

A main conclusion of the research on the use of work-related ICT after-hours is that employees can experience work–non-work tensions due to this use. However, this experience of conflict can vary and be experienced differently, namely due to segmentation preferences (Derks et al., 2016; Duxbury et al., 1996). Individual differences can be found in the preference to segment work and personal and family life (Kreiner, 2006; Powell & Greenhaus, 2010), and this can have a different impact on the perception of technology interfering with family life (Chen et al., 2009). For those, who are unwilling to be interrupted with work-related calls or requests during off-job time, a boundary between work and family is to be established. However, individuals might struggle to have control over the implementation of these boundaries if they perceive that they have to fulfill organizational expectations of availability during off-job time. This perception can weaken their ability to have control over these boundaries and intrusion of technology in family life can be experienced. For other individuals, with weak segmentation preferences, this perception of technology intrusion in family life can be less problematic.

Thus, we expect that after-hours communication expectations can impact the technology-to-family conflict differently via role segmentation preference.

Hypothesis 1. Off-job e-communication expectations will positively predict technology to family conflict.

Hypothesis 2. Segmentation preference will moderate the relationship between off-job e-communication expectations and technology to family conflict.

Generational cohorts

The impact of ICT work-related use during off-job time on the family domain in different generations of employees has received less research attention. Younger and older employees, belonging to different generational cohorts, coexist in the current workforce. Their distinct social and work backgrounds might affect the way each group perceives the work-related ICT use for work purposes during off-job time. Research has already indicated that work expectations have changed over the last decades with technologies having an important role in how the work is performed (Dries et al., 2008). Younger employees grew with ICT and they are referred to as ‘digital natives’, while middle-aged employees had to adjust to use ICT at the workplace (Harrington et al., 2015). As mentioned before, while the use of ICT can be a work asset because it frees the employees from the work schedules, allowing working anywhere and anytime it can be perceived as intrusive in

the non-work domain. While employees of all generations desire to have good work and non-work relations, this can be seen differently according to the employees' demands related to both life domains. As pointed out by Demerouti et al. (2012) work and family roles change over the career stage, with different demands and resources associated to both life domains varying as well. According to several authors, young employees are more likely to have insecure or high demand jobs and are often required to meet up the expectations to fulfill the work demands above the non-work demands (Demerouti et al., 2012; Harrington et al., 2015; Van der Heijden et al., 2008). Middle-aged employees are expected to have high demands both at work and non-work domains. They tend to have more work autonomy, flexibility and security but they also tend to have more non-work constraints like caring activities (e.g., childcare or elderly care) (Demerouti et al., 2012). Subsequently, the impact of ICT work-related use during off-job time and its interference over family demands may be experienced differently by younger, and by older employees' generations.

In fact, the younger generation entered the work force at a time where high demands for productivity and the use of ICT for work purposes are omnipresent. Moreover, in some cases, by answering a work-related call during off-job time employees may signal a willingness to go the extra mile for the company. This can be particularly relevant for the career stage of younger employee generation, more than for the older employees. Therefore, the blurring of boundaries between work and personal life, associated with the work-related ICT use can be seen as a part of the modern working life mostly for the younger generation. Older generations, on the other hand, may be less acquainted with the use of technologies, have more stability in their career and at the same time more family demands. Thus, older employees may impose less blurring of the family boundaries.

The current study aims to shed light on both generations of employees and on the relationship between off-job e-communication expectations and technology to family conflict. Individuals' segmentation preference is investigated as potential moderator. To add to the literature in this field, we have chosen to analyze two groups of employees (1) younger employees, aged between 18 and 35 years and (2) middle-aged employees, aged between 36 and 45 years.

Method

Sample and procedure

A sample of 238 participants was recruited with the help of students involved in a master program. An online survey allowed approaching employees from different companies and industries. As a requirement to participate individuals had to have used, over the last 6 months, their ICT for work purposes during non-work time. The sample was composed of 76.1% women, with ages between 18 and 45 years old. For the present study, participants were divided into two age groups: from 18 to 35 years old ($n = 123$) and from 36 to 45 years old ($n = 106$). Around 30% of all participants (33.6%) reported being parents: 9% in the younger group and 24.6% in the older group. The majority of the sample had a university degree (76.1%), with 21.8% having a high school/vocational training diploma and 2.1% completed elementary education. Weekly working hours

varied: 50.4% worked more than 40 h/week, 46.6% worked from 20 to 40 h/week and 2.9% worked less than 20 h/week. In what concerns the type of work schedule, 51.0% work in fixed schedule, 37.4% in flexible schedule and 11.3% in shift work. From the total sample 39.5% reported never taking work to home, 28.2% taking work to home frequently and 32.4% taking work to home only sometimes.

Measures

Off-job electronic communication expectations

The scale intends to capture organizational expectations regarding employees' availability to respond to work requests during their off-job time. It was measured using 7 items adapted from Piszczek, Pichler, Turel, and Greenhaus (2016). An example item is: 'My organization expects me to respond to after-hours electronic work communications immediately' (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$).

Segmentation preference

The three items from Kreiner (2006) were used to address individuals' preferences in regard to boundary management. An example item is: 'I prefer to keep work life at work'. (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

Technology to family conflict

The four items from Turel et al (2011) were used. The scale captures the extent to which the individuals perceive the use of technology, namely smartphone and e-mail, as intruding in the family life. An example item is: 'The use of mobile email keeps me from my family and friends more than I would like'. (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).

All measures were assessed using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Control

Previous research on work–family conflict consistently shows differences in this indicator between men and women (Munn & Greer, 2015), thus we controlled for gender in the moderation model.

Analysis procedure

Using the process macro developed by Hayes (2012) for SPSS, a moderation model in accordance with Figure 1 was tested. Off-job e-communication expectation effect on technology to family conflict is tested for different values of segmentation preference (moderator), using gender as a covariate.

Since all study variables were tested using self-reports, we performed a factor analysis to test for the threat of common method bias with Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Results indicate that one factor accounts for 35.87 for the variance in the data and therefore, the threat of common method bias is unlikely.

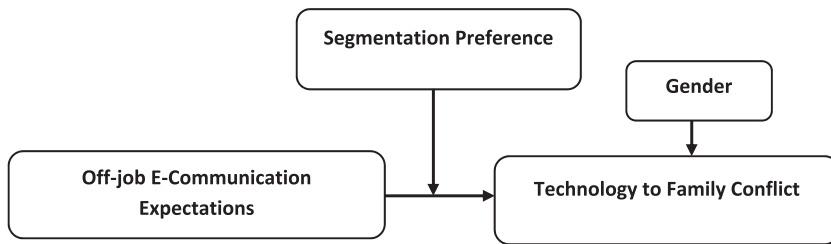


Figure 1. Relationship between off-job e-communication expectations, segmentation preference, and technology to family conflict.

Results

Table 1 presents Pearson bivariate correlations of all variables in the model. Overall, the pattern of correlations is quite similar between the two employees’ groups. Off-job e-communication expectations are correlated negatively with segmentation preferences and positively with perceptions of technology to family conflict. Segmentation preference is further negatively linked with technology to family conflict.

The testing of the moderation model using the Process macro revealed that segmentation preference has a main negative effect on technology to family conflict in both groups of employees. Off-job communication expectations have a main effect on technology to family conflict only in the older employees’ group, (i.e., higher expectation of communication after job is linked positively with higher technology to family conflict). No interaction effect between off-job communication expectations and segmentation preferences was found. The model explained around 26% of variance for the older group ($R = .51$; $R^2 = .26$; $p < .001$) and 15% for the younger group ($R = .39$; $R^2 = .15$; $p < .001$). (see Tables 2 and 3).

Discussion

Previous research that examined work-related ICTs use during off-job time has highlighted its harmful effects for the family domain (e.g., Derks et al., 2015, 2016; Piszczek, 2017). Moreover, in light of the boundary management theory, segmentation preference plays an important role in linking ICT work-related use (e.g., smartphones) and negative

Table 1. Zero order correlations between off-job e-communication expectations, segmentation preference and technology to family conflict for the younger employees’ group ($n = 123$) and for the older employees’ group ($n = 106$).

	1	2	3	Mean (SD)
1. Off-job communication expectations	1	-.25**	.40***	2.55 (.74)
2. Segmentation preference	-.27**	1	-.37***	2.63 (.68)
3. Technology to family conflict	.28**	-.32***	1	2.46 (.69)
Mean (SD)	2.59 (.69)	2.83 (.58)	2.40 (.62)	

Note: correlations on the upper diagonal refer to the older employees’ group and on the lower diagonal to the younger employees’ group.

$p < .06$.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Moderation model results for the younger employees' group.

	B	SE	t	Lower bound CI	Upper bound CI
Off-job communication expectations	.16	.11	1.50	-.05	.38
Segmentation preference	-.26	.10	-2.70	-.45	-.07
Off-job communication expectations × Segmentation preference	-.08	.14	-.54	-.35	.20
Gender	.14	.14	1.06	-.13	.41

Notes: CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error. Bolded text indicates a significant effect; estimates are significant if the CI does not contain zero.

Table 3. Moderation model results for the older employees' group.

	B	SE	t	Lower bound CI	Upper bound CI
Off-job communication expectations	.30	.12	2.53	.07	.53
Segmentation preference	-.34	.18	-2.93	-.57	-.11
Off-job communication expectations × Segmentation preference	.14	.18	.43	-.21	.49
Gender	.15	.15	.97	-.15	.45

Notes: CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error. Bolded text indicates a significant effect; estimates are significant if the CI does not contain zero.

family outcomes (Chen et al., 2009; Derks et al., 2016). The current study aimed to add to previous research by considering the differential impact of perceptions of technology as causing family conflict (technology to family conflict) in two generations of employees. This is of particular interest since in contemporary workplaces, generations with different socialization processes, in what concerns, the use of ICT co-exists. Furthermore, in the so-called today's digital workplaces employees are often expected to be available to answer work-related call or e-mails, during off-job time, creating an extension and intensification of the workday (Currie & Eveline, 2011). The current study aims to investigate the off-job e-communication expectations considering the role of segmentation preferences and their impacts on technology to family conflict.

First, our results mainly supported that off-job e-communication expectations were related to technology to family conflict for the older employees' group. This is in line with the results of previous studies that claim that the work-related use of ICT is linked with an increase of work-family conflict (Fenner & Renn, 2010). A possible explanation for these results could be anchored in the literature that indicates that the younger generation grew up in an 'always-on culture', where the use of the smartphone is perhaps seen as a device inextricably linked to the contemporary work culture. In fact, for younger generations the ICT is seen as part of oneself and its use is widespread for work, leisure, family contacts, etc. As stated by Haeger & Lingham (2012) the younger generation in the labor market is the 'Net' Generation as they are connected to work and life through technology. In contrast, for the older employee generation when they perceive the use of the ICT as intruding their personal life this exacerbates an overall perception of technology to family conflict, probably due to the fact that they were not raised in a culture where ICT (e.g., smartphones, tablets) are carried out and used for work-related tasks anywhere, anytime. Another possible explanation for these results could be related to the fact that older employees are also more likely to have more family demands, since a larger percentage in this group reported being a parent, when compared

with the younger group. As the use of ICT for work during off-job time interrupts daily interactions within the family setting, the off-job e-communication expectations of availability to work through ICT use during off-job time, increase the likelihood of perceiving ICT use as conflicting with their family lives.

Secondly, drawing upon the boundary theory we assessed the moderating role of segmentation preferences on off-job e-communication expectations and technology to family conflict. This reasoning was empirically validated but for both employees' group with preference for segmentation being linked with technology to family conflict. In the light of previous research (Chen et al., 2009; Derks et al., 2016) our results support the rationale that employees, who prefer that work and family roles to be segmented, experience more technology to family conflict. It is remarkable though, that this result is found for both groups. Our results seem to claim that it is not the generational dimension that accounts for technology to family conflict, but the individual preference. These findings are of relevance for organizations since they may inform the implementation of practical measures that improve employees' work and non-work relations. In particular, organizations may want to revise the norm of having employees available during off-job time as it is commonly accepted that heighten perceptions of work interfering with family life can have detrimental effects not only for the individual wellbeing but also may backfire to the organization, in terms of organizational commitment, involvement and productivity. Indeed, as Kreiner (2006) showed the fit between individual preferences for segmentation and the workplace supply of this segmentation is a good predictor of reduced stress, reduced work–family conflict and increased job satisfaction. Furthermore, the impact of segmentation preferences for both generations of employees as a potential augments of technology to family conflict may also signal relevant avenues for organizational interventions aiming to develop more inclusive workplaces. These heightened effects for the senior group can bring serious effects to the organizations, since typically these employees are the ones holding managerial and higher responsibility jobs. These effects for the younger group may imply that they commit less to the organization, leading to higher turnover rates. Despite its merits, this study is not without limitations and thus we encourage future studies to address more in-depth the specificity and distinctiveness of particular working contexts (organizational culture) and different job occupations, organizations and sectors. We were also not able to disentangle aspects of the personal life of the employees such as family formation and demands which may also shape how technology to family conflict is experienced. At a methodological stance we have a cross-sectional design and, therefore, causation cannot be established and also our measures could have been more refined, for instance the usage of more objective data such as the number of e-mails and phone calls received during off-job time could help complement the analyses. In sum, response to pressures of a 24/7 work environment using ICT can create pressures that blur the boundary between the work and family domains and can contribute to technology to family conflict that could be particularly detrimental for some employees. Since the use of work-related ICT has become a commonplace in many organizations it is important to think about this issue as part of the organizational norms that could be explicitly integrated in the human resource policies. Finally, we wish to acknowledge that a large body of literature has already made clear many potential benefits of the use of ICT for creating more flexible work environments. Thus, we do not argue that work-related ICT use is negative but that boundaries on its

use, taking into account personal characteristics and choice, should be thought out. The right to disconnect from work should be further explored and integrated in the organizational policies.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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