



**Ring, ring...why don't you leave me alone?:  
The impact of the work mobile phone on the  
work-life balance**

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## **Abstract**

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The role of technology and flexibility in work and employment has sparked much debate, with optimistic accounts on the one hand and with more negative views on the other. Technology however is not homogenous in its uses or in its impacts. While work technologies such as the internet and email have been critically studied, the way(s) in which the mobile phone may shape work and workers' experiences has largely avoided scholarly attention. This paper is the result of a wider study and builds on a previous paper which explored a broad range of issues associated with the use of the mobile phone for work purposes. The key focus of this current paper is on how the mobile phone may shape the boundaries between the public (work) and private (home) domains, and on how these boundaries are negotiated or navigated. This study involved in depth interviews with 20 workers from different occupational and organisational settings. Participants' narratives suggested both positive and negative impacts of the mobile phone on the work-life balance, seeing the work mobile phone as a 'double-edged' sword (Lowry and Moskos, 2005). Positive and negative impacts of the mobile phone were dependant on occupation, economic and market forces, contextual factors associated with bureaucratic structures, and the reported degree of instrumental agency in mobile phone usage.

## ***Introduction***

Understanding technological development and its application in the economic and social sphere has long been central to academic analysis. The advent of new and more portable technological devices and their dissemination throughout the economic and social sphere has invoked new investigation and theorizing about the role of new technologies and its contemporary association with 'flexible working'.

Debates about the role of technology in work and employment are characterised by optimistic accounts on the one hand (for example flexibility, customer and supply chain responsiveness, and an increased skill premium for workers) and by more negative views on the other (for example work intensification, a blurring of work/life boundaries and a deskilling of workers). It is important to note however, that technology is not homogenous in its uses or in its impacts. A large body of literature exists and is still emerging regarding the consequences of new technologies, such as the internet and email, for workers and the organisation of work (see for example Hipple and Kosanovisch, 2003; Castells, 1996; Skinner and Jack, 2004; Bimber, 2000; Grigsby and Sanders, 1998; Groen, Barry and Scaller, 1998; Shortclife, 1998). Literature, however, is only just starting to emerge which explores broad social issues surrounding the mobile phone (see for example Bianchi and Phillips 2005; Hurme, 2005; Truch and Hulme, 2004; Ling and Haddon, 2001; Sorenson 2004; Kakihara and Sorenson, 2002).

Given the ubiquitous nature of mobile telephony, it is surprising that the work mobile phone has largely avoided scholarly attention. As Geser (2004:4) notes, there is a tendency to ignore the impact of mobile technologies on the 'unspectacular' or pedestrian aspects of every day life, including everyday work-life.

This paper is the result of a wider study and builds on a previous paper, which explored a broad range of issues associated with the use of the mobile phone for work purposes. The wider study examined how the workplace mobile phone may shape worker identity, and the economic impacts of workplace mobile phone usage related to knowledge and distributive supply chains (Lowry and Moskos, 2005). The focus of this current paper is how the workplace mobile phone may serve to shape the work-life balance. The guiding question asked in this paper is how does the mobile phone shape the boundaries between public (work) and private domain, and how are these boundaries mediated or negotiated?

While this study is concerned with the ‘impact’ of the mobile phone in workplaces, the underlying assumption is not one of technological determinism. Guiding the project is the notion that while technology may have various effects or impacts; technology itself is shaped by social and economic forces (Mackenzie and Wacman, 1985) and as such cannot be investigated in isolation. As Sorenson and Pica observe:

The mobile revolution is not only a matter of people moving around carrying mobile technologies, it is also the radical mobilisation of interaction and socialisation processes. This mobilisation of interaction radically influences temporal, spatial and contextual aspects of interaction. We move from a strict linear sense of time defined by the clock towards “social time” where the social context defines our sense of time. In turn, mobile technologies offer technical possibilities of rendering interaction with people and corporate information services fluid. (2003:1)

The discussion here is in four main sections. In the next section we ‘unpack’ the concept and language and existing frameworks of the work-life balance, since the term is arguably not neutral, and in doing this we develop a framework for our study. We then go on to describe our empirical study and findings. Some of the determinants of how the work mobile phone

shapes the boundaries between work and non-work are explored, and finally some conclusions are drawn.

## ***Work-Life Balance: Language, Critique and Frameworks***

### **The Language of the Work-Life Balance**

Before an examination of how technologies such as the mobile phone may shape the experience of the work-life balance, the concept of 'work-life balance' itself needs to be dissected, with each of the components of 'work', 'life' and 'balance' carefully defined. As Guest (2002) and Hyman and Summers (2004) correctly observe, in terms of both policy and practice, each of these constituent words present definitional and operational problems. For the purposes of this paper, 'work' is defined as paid employment. This does not get around the limbo time of commuting time, but we have, for purposes of simplicity, opted for subjective interpretations of work-related time that is not directly covered by paid employment. 'Life', in the context of 'work-life balance' and for purposes here, is defined as non-work, that is time when we are not engaged in work. Life in this sense means free time, leisure time (in pursuit of a specific autonomous activities or hobbies) and family time.

'Balance', in the context of 'work-life balance' is not so easily defined. It is a complex word with different grammatical meanings in different contexts. As a noun, it typically refers to a physical process, such that there is an equal distribution of amount or weight. But as Guest (2002) argues, this definition is inappropriate in the context of work-life balance, since both sides could be very heavy (or very light). Moreover, the type of balance between work and non-work sought by many people is not one with equal weighting. Hence a more appropriate interpretation of 'balance' may lie in its psychological meaning, for example in the way we say people are balanced, grounded, or stable. This notion is preferable since it implies human

agency, as well as the need to acknowledge that balance can have both a subjective meaning and measurement (Guest, 2002).

As a verb, balance also implies agency since it implies the potential to manage balance. But the verb 'balance' could be substituted with 'juggle', a term that implies an inherent tension. We are thus still left with the question, is it actually balance that is to be valued? Again, this serves to highlight the need to acknowledge the objective and subjective notion of the term in the context of work-life balance. Arguably, for many (most?), the desired outcome is one of imbalance, when the chosen amount of non-work time is dominant over work time.

This has led some theorists (see for example Caproni, 2004; Shorthose, 2004) to question the very notion of the work-life balance. Shorthose (2004) acknowledges the worthiness of the sentiment of the concept, but provides a cogent argument that work-life balance campaigns are characterised by 'an inherent and limiting managerialism' (Shorthose , 2004:2). He proposes many work-life balance initiatives operate from the assumption that work involves creative interaction with the world. He also argues that work-life balance initiatives are mostly aimed at professionals who are assumed to have a commitment and calling to their profession, rather than manual and unskilled workers who work long and unsocial hours due to a much more formal and overt economic compulsion. He goes on to state:

Work as it is currently organised is not the same as our capacity to interact creatively with the world. Such capacities have been largely hijacked...Despite this, management have routinely advocated work as a route to creative self-expression. This is the offering up of the problem as the solution. The work-life balance campaign is but the latest in a long line of such managerial thinking...It is evidence of the paucity of thinking about work-life balance to simply present a continuation of orthodoxy as a genuine change'.

Caproni (2004) similarly argues that much of the work-life balance discourse reflects the individualism, achievement orientation, and instrumental rationality that is fundamental to

modern bureaucratic thought and action, and advances the idea that such discourse further entrenches people in the work-life imbalance that they are trying to escape.

We acknowledge these critiques of the notion of a work-life balance and understand their foundation. But we feel it necessary to continue to research the concept, and particularly the role that mobile technologies play in it, in the hope that we may better understand the work-life balance not as a managerial initiative, but as a self-determined and subjective *experience*. Following Clark (2000), Guest (2002) and others, we propose that the notion of human agency is fundamental to an understanding of what the ‘work-life balance means. A crucial component of this is how different people mediate and negotiate the boundaries between work and non-work, and the role of new mobile technologies such as the mobile phone in this process. To inform this type of enquiry, we need some understanding of the relationship between work and non-work, and it is to this we now turn.

### **Traditional Work-Life Balance Models**

Examination of the relevant literature reveals that there are five main models which attempt to describe the relationship between work and non-work: 1) segmentation models; 2) spillover models; 3) compensation models; 4) instrumental models, and 5) conflict models. Each of these models are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1: Five main models of the relationship between work and non-work**

<b>Model</b>	<b>Proposition</b>
Segmentation	Work and non-work are two distinct domains of life that are lived separately with no influence on each other.
Spillover	Either world of work or non-work can influence the other in either a positive or a negative way.
Compensation	What may be lacking in one sphere, in terms of demands or satisfactions, can be made up in the other.
Instrumental	Activities in one sphere facilitate success in the other.
Conflict	With high levels of demand in all spheres of life, some difficult choices need to be made and conflicts may occur.

*Source: Adapted from Zedecker and Mosier (1990) and O’Driscoll (1996) both cited in Guest (2002:258-9)*

As Guest (2002) notes, the five models are essentially descriptive, lacking an inherent analyses of their causes or consequences. Thus, while the models as they stand may have some use as an organising framework, their value is limited. In this paper, we attempt to extend the models, by specifically exploring the role of the workplace mobile phone as potentially being a *tool* which shapes the *boundary* and relationship between work and non-work domains, as well as shaping the consequences of that relationship. Before embracing the validity of each of the models however, some discussion of their conceptual basis is warranted.

A criticism that can be made of the models is that they are neither conceptually distinct nor mutually exclusive. For example, how are negative and positive spillover defined for different actors? And how is negative spillover different from the conflict model? There is also some blurring in the distinction between the compensation model, the instrumental model and even segmentation model. Guest (2002) cites an example of the instrumental model as when a worker may undertake long working hours and maximise earnings in order to purchase a home. It is unclear how this *necessarily* differs from the compensation model since any satisfaction associated with the purchase of the home compensates for the long-working hours, and presumably the house purchase may ultimately facilitate segmentation between work and non-work. In any case, the compensation model, as defined in Table 1, is not appropriate for the purposes of our study, since we are looking to see how the mobile shapes the boundaries between work and non-work rather than a substantive consideration of satisfaction in either sphere. With this in mind, we concentrate in this study on the models of segmentation, spillover (positive and negative) and instrumental organisation as an organising framework.

In the next sections we report on our empirical investigation into how the workplace mobile phone may (or may not) shape the boundaries and relationship between work and non-work.

## **Method**

Due to the lack of systematic research that looks at different workers' experiences of the use of mobile telephony in their work lives, an exploratory research design was required. As noted earlier, existing literature that explores possible implications of mobile telephony for work and workers is highly speculative in nature. In an attempt to fill the gap evident in the existing literature we conducted a series of in depth interviews with workers from a variety of occupations and sectors and from different age and gender cohorts. A qualitative approach was crucial in order to access individual workers experiences and interpretations of the mobile phone in their everyday work and non-work life. In line with our understanding of technology and its applications and uses being shaped by social and economic forces, it is our contention that we cannot understand the impact mobile phones have for work and non-work without understanding the meaning that the participants themselves attribute to their actions and views. The aim was to discover the concepts and meaning that are grounded in the social actors 'everyday knowledge' and 'everyday sense making procedures', as they related to the use of the mobile phone and work-life balance.

Participants were selected on the basis that they used a mobile phone in their work. Variation in the age, sex and occupation in which participants worked was also sought. Fifteen participants were interviewed in depth, and a focus group was also conducted with a group of five people whose partners were identified as frequently using the mobile phone for work purposes both within and out of work hours. Of the in depth interviewees, four participants worked in the real estate industry (including one manager), two held management positions in the retail sector. Three participants were self-employed tradespersons and another four

participants worked as ICT workers (two of which were managers). Another participant was a manager of an agricultural labour hire company and another was a vineyard manager. A total of seven managers were interviewed, with the remaining interviewees being employees with few management responsibilities. Interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed upon location and usually lasted for approximately one hour (in some cases longer). Interviews were conducted using a common set of semi-structured, open ended interview questions related to each participant's use of the mobile phone, their dislikes and likes of the mobile phone, and how they perceived it (if at all) to have changed their work and home life. These questions were used as baseline questioning only. Detailed probing and follow up questions formed a major aspect of all interviews to further pursue all avenues of inquiry.

Interviews and the focus group were tape recorded with the consent of the participant and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed by both researchers. Common themes and threads were identified and compared between the researchers.

## **Findings**

Overall, participants' narratives suggested that the work mobile phone shaped the work-life balance in both positive and negative ways. A major finding was that some groups of participants exhibited varying methods of using the mobile phone to manage the boundary between work and non-work, which served to shape the resultant relationship between the two domains. Occupation, age, status, bureaucratic structures and market forces were all found to differentiate participants' usage of the work mobile phone and subjective experience of the work-life balance. The findings here are organised according to the ways in which the mobile phone was used to manage the boundary between work and non-work against the background of segmentation, spillover and instrumental models of the relationship between work and non-work.

## **Boundary Management and Segmentation**

Tradespersons, and the retail managers in our sample were more likely to report that the mobile phone facilitated a separation of work and non-work domains, and this separation was viewed as the optimum situation by all in these occupations. Their narratives indicated they were highly favourable of the mobile work phone and reported little if any intrusion into the private domain.

It should be noted however, that the blurring between segmentation and instrumental models was evident in the narratives of this study. For some of the participants, segmentation was achieved *through* instrumental means. In this regard, it is interesting to note that this group of workers reported a much higher level of agency in their usage of the mobile phone. *Importantly, making calls was perceived as different to receiving them.* Compared to the other participants, these workers had rules about when their work mobile phones were to be answered. As one trades-person simply stated:

‘...if the mobile interrupts my work-day, I turn it off’

*(Tradesperson 3)*

Another tradesperson’s comments highlighted the conceptual linkage between segmentation and instrumental models:

Some calls I will leave until it’s a quieter time of the day. Then I’ll sit back with a beer in hand and make the few calls that I’ve got to make. It rings at inconvenient times, but I have the option of switching it off and putting it onto message bank. Then I still know that if someone wants to contact me they can leave a message. But I don’t do this often. I normally answer most of my calls unless I’m in the middle of a job and my hands are tied up and then I just leave it.

*(Tradesperson 2)*

## **Boundary Management and Spillover**

As noted earlier, what constitutes positive or negative spillover may well be tied into individual differences and subjective experiences and values. The typical assumption made by most academics who study work-life balance issues (as distinct to managers or management consultants implementing work-life balance initiatives) is that negative spillover refers to an intrusion of work into the non-work sphere. For purposes here, we have defined positive spillover as the subjective positive experience of accessibility to the non-work domain during work-time. Negative spillover on the other hand, refers to the subjective negative experience of work intruding into the non-work domain. It is acknowledged however, that the subjective experience of what constitutes either type of spillover ideally requires a more nuanced analysis. For example, as with the segmentation model, there is some blurring between the subjective experience of spillover and instrumental agency. The following quote from one of the ICT managers is illustrative:

When I'm at work I don't like to get personal calls. I feel that's an intrusion on my work time and I don't like people at work having too many calls either. I have a certain tolerance, but I don't like to see people taking too many personal calls or too long calls. Personally I therefore have to model this and I don't like to receive calls from my family at work unless it is really important.

*(ICT Worker 3)*

A further illustration of the subjective quality of positive or negative spillover was found indirectly in the narratives of the retail managers in our sample. They found that workers in their stores were receiving and making calls and text messages while 'at work', presumably giving the workers some positive spillover, but this was viewed as negative spillover by the managers:

.... during induction all employees are informed that all mobile phones should be switched off and locked in a secure place....Texting is probably used more than anything else. They'll have the phone in their

pocket and they'll start texting. It's mainly the younger staff. What would happen was that I'd catch someone and have a meeting with them and remind them of the information shared during induction. I'd say this is not on, it's during work time and you shouldn't be doing it. Then it would stop for a while, but then someone else would try it 3 months down the track. The process would start again. There was an incident where a checkout operator answered the mobile phone while serving. That incident was about answering the phone. But texting is more common. They just don't want to leave their mobile phone. It's amazing.

## **Positive Spillover**

A number of workers indicated that the work mobile phone facilitated a desirable crossover of work and non-work spheres. Typically, these workers perceived the work mobile phone as a tool by which they could maintain family contacts while at work:

It can help your family life too because if you've got a work mobile then you don't need to be physically at work. So it's a balance as to whether the benefits outweigh the disadvantages...

*(ICT Worker 3)*

In a lot of ways it gives me more peace of mind, not so much at work but in my social and parenting life, knowing that no matter where I am I can still be contacted if an emergency occurs.

*(Tradesperson 2)*

Similarly:

My wife and I like the way we can contact each other during the day, even if one of us are at work. That's the beauty of it...its part of life now isn't it. Like my daughter was holidaying and due home yesterday, and if we didn't have mobiles we would have worried as to why she was late home. But with the mobile she just rang us to say she was late and not to worry. That's one of the pluses, its nice to be in touch with the family when you're working

*(Real Estate Manager 1)*

Participants in the study who reported positive spillover also exhibited considerable agency in the way they managed the boundaries between the two domains and also provided some

insight into how the mobile phone facilitated a crossover of work and non-work during that limbo period of commuting time. One of the ICT managers in the study reported using his hands free device in what he termed 'dead time' (commuting time) to organise his work day, for example organising meetings and chasing up whether problems had been resolved. Another participant in the study used her commuting time to and from work to organise childcare arrangements and other caring duties associated with her two children.

Other workers simply reported that even if work spilled into non-work time, the nature of mobile telephony rendered the intrusion as minimal:

'If you go back prior to mobile phones and you were on call, you had to hang around your own landline phone in case you got a call or you had a pager. If you had a pager it had to have reasonable range and you also had to be able to respond to that within a certain amount of time. For someone like me that likes the outdoors and likes walking it meant that I couldn't go too far from home because you had to be available to call back. With mobile phones it meant that you're no longer tied to home and that you can get out as long as you stay within range of the mobile coverage'.

*(ICT Worker 3)*

## **Negative Spillover**

Participants indicated a range of ways that the work mobile phone intruded into their non-work domains. In all cases of negative spillover, some participants indicated an compulsion to answer calls, and in some cases simply felt unable to switch off . Two of the participants in our sample had recently migrated to Australia from Peru, and one of them provided the following cultural insight:

Work life in developing countries is very different. In Peru I was on call for work 24 hours a day, everyone where I worked was. There is very high unemployment, so you need to keep your job, and you're just always on call. You can't disconnect from work, the mobile phone made you a slave. The only way to escape was to leave the country by going on holiday. I needed to explicitly say to my boss ' I will be out of mobile range, in fact I'm going to Alaska'.

*(ICT Worker 4)*

Back in the antipodes, negative spillover in some cases resulted from a perceived inability to switch off:

People think they can call you any time of the day or night. Like I got a call about a property at 7.17 this morning! And then you get calls at 11.30 at night, on Christmas Day. So therefore its also inconvenient and its an invasion of your privacy, because you want to have your phone on.... Because I use my phone as an alarm clock, I can't really turn it off. However, I'm starting to um if I want to have a bit of a rest I'll turn it on to silent (vibrate, buzz) mode. Its very rare that I turn it off.

*(Estate Agent 2)*

One of the participants expressed the view that the ease of mobile telephony as a tool to solve problems quickly and associate actors in the bureaucratic web in decision-making processes, further facilitates negative spillover:

Because you have a mobile phone you are very accessible and people may call me for silly things, things that are obvious. Co-workers and managers call you because somebody needs to make a decision about something - it doesn't matter what. And because you are accessible, instead of making their decision themselves, they ask for help. Instead of taking their own chances and options they ring someone else. So sometimes I don't like the mobile phone. Simple decisions are transferred to higher positions just because they are accessible'.

*(Focus group participant 3, previously an ICT Worker)*

This intrusion of work into the home through the work mobile phone was not just felt by the workers. The narratives indicated some disharmony with other family members:

My wife hates my work mobile phone. She hates it ringing, its intrusiveness. You know when you sit down with your family and the kids always run after the phone and ask 'Dad, why are you on the phone again?'. That sort of stuff.

*(Estate Agent 4)*

I have a few hours in the afternoon with my six year old son, I won't turn my phone off but it depends what I'm doing whether I answer it. I usually do answer it, but it depends on my son's mood too. He sometimes gets grumpy, he'll say 'are you of the phone again?' He does get a bit upset about it because some properties are more popular than others and so you're getting more calls. So I have to say 'this is Mummy's job' and every now and then we have to have a little chat about me answering the mobile'

*(Estate Agent 3)*

'... I do remember feeling very annoyed particularly about being disturbed at night as he often didn't wake up and I would be the one who would say would you answer that phone and he would take a while to wake up and he would take the call in the bedroom then have to get up and start the computer up and oh...

*(Focus Group Participant 2)*

'It drives me nuts. He gets called on the mobile at all hours of the night, sometimes two or three times. He's fine at getting back to sleep, but I just lie there in bed awake for hours. I've just started seething about it all, its like his workplace has entered our bedroom. And the lack of sleep is affecting my own performance at work.'

*(Focus Group Participant 1)*

## **Boundary Management and the Instrumental Model**

Some of the participants indicated creative use of the work mobile phone in their management of the boundaries between work and non-work. For example, one participant suggested that the use of the work mobile phone allowed them to achieve much greater efficiency in time and increased productivity.

There are many problems that can be fixed with a phone call. If I didn't have the mobile then I'd have to down tools and go and talk to someone face to face or on a land-line. Arranging time and work place and work locations would become much more difficult. The mobile phone has become a very useful tool and I'm lost without it.

*(Tradesperson 3)*

Another used the mobile phone as a means to prioritise work tasks so that they could move onto more productive activities.

“Around here there’s areas of poor reception, you just lose the line, it drops out. Nothing worse, although you can use it to your advantage. If you can’t get rid of a client on the mobile phone you just click it off and pretend you dropped out”

*(Estate Agent (Manager) 1)*

### ***The Mobile Phone and Determinants of Work-Life Balance***

The way the mobile phone was managed to shape the boundary between work and non-domain was found to be dependent on age, occupation, status, economic context, and the degree of instrumental agency that participants expressed in regard to their management of the work mobile phone. Each of these are dealt with in turn.

#### **Age**

Participants in our study were aged between 22 and 65. It was found that the older participants, particularly those aged in their thirty’s and over were more likely to use the mobile phone to actively manage the boundary between work and non-work, and were less likely to experience negative spillover. The younger workers had essentially used the work mobile phone since entering the workforce, and appeared more prone to view it as a legitimate work device, in terms of the way it controlled their activities rather than the other way around.

#### **Occupation**

Tradespersons were more likely to report managing their work mobile phones to ensure a segmentation of work and non—work domains. The occupation of a trades-person holds little

of the formality or emotional labour associated with a sales job which involves a pay structure partially dependent on commission. Similarly, trades work does not typically involve being part of a large bureaucratic structure and being on call (aside from say emergency plumbing work, they are not *expected* to be available at all hours). Trades-persons are thus involved in qualitatively different interactions and communications with others in the course of their work lives, and seem more able to manage the boundary between work and non-work domains.

Negative spillover was more likely to be experienced by the ICT and estate agent participants, occupations with either elements of formality or bureaucracy in their work environments (the ICT workers), or elements of emotional labour in the course of their work (the estate agents). Narratives from both occupations suggested that the work mobile phone intruded into aspects of their home life, and that they were often rung at all hours for work-related matters.

This was most evident in the estate agent participants. This occupation is characterised by processes of emotional labour subject to the whims of buyers, vendors, and managers, and remuneration is partly based on commission from sales. Against this backdrop it is not surprising that the estate agents in this study discussed feelings of being '*compelled*' to respond to their work mobile phones whenever or wherever they rang. Their response may be just to see which client (if known) called, but when this happens at midnight and you are not officially 'on call', it can be considered to be a crossing of the boundary between work and non-work.

The ICT workers in our sample were involved in 24/7 operations and part of a formal bureaucratic structure which extended globally. They were called at all hours of the night in the event of an assembly line stoppage apparently caused by their ICT systems. In the event of a stoppage, an elaborate reporting system and protocol was enforced which meant that some of these workers would be contacted several times throughout the night

The subjective experience of participants in these occupations highlighted how the work mobile phone has shaped their experience of work more negatively. For workers in these occupations, the work mobile phone has facilitated a transgression of the boundary between public and private domains. Implicit in these workers' narratives was a sense of identity dissonance and anxiety, whereby front stage work behaviour collided with the identities of being 'mother', 'father', 'partner', or 'friend'. This identity dissonance in cases extended to the spouses of some of the workers ('...its like his workplace has entered our bedroom').

### **Status**

The participants in this study consisted of management and non-management employees. The narratives revealed the consistent pattern of those respondents in management positions exhibiting more agency in the way they used to the mobile phone to mediate the boundary between work and non-work. Non-management employees on the whole revealed a greater likelihood to experience negative spillover.

### **Economic Context**

The propensity to allow the work mobile phone to transgress the work-home boundary is also likely to be embedded in the economic context of the type of work being performed. We do not wish here to rely on meta-narratives which serve to reduce complex phenomena 'away', however, some mention should be made of the economic context in which our participants' narratives are located. Market forces are themselves 'flexible', and so it needs to be acknowledged that our participants may have offered very different narratives at a different point in time and space (as evidenced by our example of cultural differences by our Peruvian participant). For example, the estate agents in our study are operating in what can be currently described as a static property market, with a shortage of properties, sellers, vendors, and general lack of property movement. If the market was more active, they may have exhibited

more agency in their management of the work-home interface, by virtue of being more (at least temporarily) financially secure. Along the same lines, there is currently a shortage of skilled trades workers in Australia. The high demand for trades-workers places them in an untypical position of some power, and this may go some way to explain their greater control over usage of the work mobile phone, and their capacity to invoke rules that served to seal off the boundary between public and private domains.

## ***Conclusion***

Taken together, the findings generally support much of the speculative assertions mentioned in the first section of this paper. Workers most prone to the work-life imbalance were those who did not articulate conscious and definite strategies in the use of their work mobile phones for managing or negotiating the boundaries between public and private domain. The difference in levels of agency between the participants can be partially explained by the nature of the work involved in the different occupations, the bureaucratic structures in which the occupations were embedded, and the economic context or market forces in which the occupations were situated.

The explorative study reported here attempted to address the way in which the mobile phone may shape the boundaries between public (work) and private domain, and how these boundaries may be negotiated and managed. The findings reveal a complex web of interrelated issues, re-enforcing earlier work against the paradox of the work mobile phone being viewed as a 'double-edged' sword (Lowry and Moskos, 2005) and highlighting conceptual gaps in the work-life balance literature.

There is a great need for more empirical research of this ubiquitous technology. We need to more fully understand the complex ways in which we interact and shape its form and usage,

and how it in turn shapes and reshapes organisational communications, and our related negotiations of the boundaries between work and non-work domains.

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