

# Boon and bane of a boundaryless world (Commentary on Palm, Hornung & Glaser)

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Palm, Hornung, and Glaser present a research model of boundaryless work, specifically, targeting the spill-over from work into the nonwork sphere. It integrates the constructs used in a series of seven studies, including original works, reviews, and recommendations for practice. Key antecedents for boundaryless work in this model are individual preferences and (descriptive and injunctive) organizational integration, respectively segmentation norms, and their interaction, as well as (albeit dealt with to a far lesser extent) personal and professional circumstances, behavioral control, and socio-cultural factors. As manifestations of boundaryless work, the authors use work-home segmentation / integration behavior, active and passive off-hour work-related ICT use, and (in a single study that differs in several respects from the others) multiple role occupancy. Studied outcomes are positive and negative aspects of work-life-balance, as well as positive and negative aspects of work-related health. Potential dynamics of the different antecedents as well as potential paradoxes in the broader context of flexible and boundaryless work are discussed. In line with parsimoniousness, individual studies target only a few combinations of the different concepts, but keep open the argument for more complex dynamics and interactions between all mentioned (and probably other) variables influencing the dissolution of work boundaries. Drawing on the „boundarylessness“ concept of employed work as denoted by Allvin, Aronsson, Hagström, Johansson and Lundberg (2011), and the „boundary management“ concept of Kossek and colleagues (e.g., Kossek & Lautsch, 2012; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy & Hannum, 2012), Palm and coauthors stress the opportunities and risks inherent in these new developments and state repeatedly that the overall aim of the presented research program was to gain a better understanding of how individuals (and organizations) can successfully manage the interfaces between work and private lives. Although the results of the projects are only briefly sum-

marized, making it difficult to assess all ramifications, most hypothesized relations were confirmed, e.g., a mediated chain of relationships from organizational segmentation standards to boundaryless work behavior, and, in turn, to resulting role conflict and cognitive irritation, partially moderated by individual segmentation-integration preferences. Although not targeting boundaryless work directly, but rather the requirement for self-organization in an increasingly flexible world of work, study four shows another noteworthy result: as a behavioral proxy for boundaryless work, the use of ICT was generally associated with self-organization requirements. Moreover, passive ICT use was associated with higher work-life conflict, whereas active ICT use was related to work-life enrichment. Previous research has provided ambiguous results on ICT use – unsurprisingly so, as ICT as a tool might only be as helpful to the degree that it fits the respective task at hand. Although such a distinction regarding task-tool-fit is not made by the authors, they have to be credited for distinguishing between the push and pull character of ICT demands, thus revealing differential positive and negative work-life-balance effects via a link to the controllability of flexibility demands. Unfortunately, the operationalization of active (self-initiated) and passive (other-initiated) ICT use remains vague, so that some relevant and interesting questions cannot be answered, for instance: „Is it really a *passive* use of ICT, if I have to *actively* decide whether or not to answer an other-initiated request for information during nonwork time?“ The complex dynamics of ICT mediated requirements and demands might be an interesting additional line of research with regard to the experience of boundaryless work.

Work-related ICT use during off-hours as one specific manifestation of boundaryless work leads to some additional aspects that are not or only implicitly addressed in the contribution by Palm and colleagues. If the ICT-as-a-tool metaphor is taken one step further,

the new possibilities seem to suggest that nearly every (information processing) task in modern workplaces can be performed, or at least supported, by ICT. However, some decades ago, Daft and Lengel (e.g., 1984, 1986) have already introduced the so-called media richness theory, adapted and extended to media synchronicity theory (e.g., Dennis, Fuller & Valacich, 2008), denoting, in a nutshell, that different communication media differ in their effectiveness, depending on characteristics of the processed information (task). Tasks and information with high complexity, according to these theories, are not suited for typical ICT use, and, thus are likely to increase the necessary mental effort, putting additional strain on the cognitive abilities of employees when confronted with ICT communication of the „wrong“ type. Additionally, the sheer amount of information might pose a cognitive challenge: Junghanns and Kersten (2018, 2019) recently explored associations between information overload, working conditions, and health. Finally, with regard to ICT use, the tool metaphor itself might be challenged: Is ICT a tool in the sense that it can be the optimal measure for one specific task and that it provides not only cognitive but also sensory feedback on processing progress and task completion? If not, necessary preconditions for the development of experience-guided working and system 1 processing according to dual process theory (e.g., Evans, 1984) might be missing, leading again to an overtaxing of higher cognitive processes.

Taken together, and challenging the authors emphasis on individual preferences as a main antecedent, effects of boundaryless work might be much more dependent on cognitive abilities, which, in turn, might also be at the core of the self-organization requirements debate. Similar to the „blind spot“ mentioned in the editorial to the special issue (i.e., the implicit assumption that employees comply with flexibility requirements voluntarily and / or out of intrinsic motivation), another blind spot might arise from the ‘positivistic’ assumption (mostly from researcher with high cognitive abilities) that one just need to have the right skills, like time- or boundary management, to deal with these demands, rather than thinking about general limits of cognitive performance in all kinds of employees. In the research project LedivA – Regulation of work performance in the context of digitally connected work, we are currently developing a model of work above a permanent mental workload threshold (<http://www.klinikum.uni-muenchen.de/Institut-und-Poliklinik-fuer-Arbeits-Sozial-und-Umweltmedizin/en/working-groups/ampa/projects/LedivA.html>). Analogous to the medical concept of a limit for a tolerable permanent physical load, this model will try to define a limit for a tolerable permanent mental workload suitable for different types of tasks and employees.

Palm and coauthors themselves discuss the notion of individual „voluntary“ preferences critically with regard to flexibility-autonomy and performance-health paradoxes. Nevertheless, in the same discussion, employees are advised to pay attention to and heed their personal preferences in managing work boundaries, and, further, it is implied that conflicts between professional and private obligations could be reduced, if the possibility to pursue private matters during working hours is granted. This sounds a lot like upholding the basic paradigm of organizational interests. Looking at the broader world of work, probably the only domains, where integration (preferences) between work and nonwork exist(s), lie outside the realm of paid work, however, in these cases other constraints apply (e.g. farming, self-employment). With regards to paid work, the „segmentation“ of work and nonwork has probably been one of the biggest achievements of unions in Western industrialized countries. By letting the boundaries in the new „flexible“ economy blur, problems may arise that have previously been discussed for the detrimental effects of unemployment: The latent functions of work by Jahoda (e.g., 1979) are, among others, the provision of social contacts and time structure. Space-related flexibility (as home office or telework) has already been subject to discussions of loss of social support. Integration preference and integration norms might rob work of its function and individuals of the experience of time structure necessary for mental health.

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