



## DIGITAL BRAIN SWITCH: RETHINKING WORK-LIFE BOUNDARIES



Digital Brain Switch: Rethinking Work-Life Boundaries



### Introduction

For many people today, flexible working practices, supported by mobile and digital technologies, have become commonplace. At the same time, our personal lives are a hive of digital activity. It seems that we are always 'online', 'available' or 'connected' across all aspects of our lives.

The Digital Brain Switch research project, funded by the EPSRC, was motivated by a need to understand how this rise

in the use of modern communication technologies might affect individuals' ability to manage transitions across work-life boundaries.

Consequently, we asked 45 individuals to keep video diaries of their everyday activities and take part in interviews about their experiences of switching between different areas of their lives. This brochure summarizes the main findings from the research project.



### The Research Team

The Digital Brain Switch project brought together a team of academic experts from four different universities to work on the project.

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### Further Work

We are currently working on more detailed analysis of the data collected. This will be available through future academic and practitioner dissemination events and activities.

We are also using these findings as a basis for a research platform, MyLifeRocket, on which individuals can set up their own experiments or participate in ones set up by others to explore what would help them to better manage challenges they experience with boundary management, switching and digital technologies. With MyLifeRocket, we aim to provide individuals with the tools to track their daily activities, presenting simple visualizations, sharing and comparing their results with others', and aiding reflection which is specific to each user and their lifestyle.

In addition, we seek to work with a range of organizations in disseminating our work, planning interventions, and developing digital tools. In particular, we welcome input from the health sector, policy makers, businesses and social enterprises, professional bodies, and educational institutions.

### Implications

While self-reflexivity may go a long way to encouraging the making of informed choices, it also has the potential downside of putting all the responsibility for change on the individual. We need to recognize the effects of this and the limitations to the individual's ability to bring about change.

In line with western cultural norms, our participants felt a strong sense of personal responsibility for managing their work-life transitions. Participants framed their experiences as the result of personal choices and blamed themselves for not finding the right balance. However, it was evident that these 'choices' were not completely in the control of the individual. They were constrained by contextual factors, such as social norms, organizational cultures and practices, and by pressures to adhere to 'ideal identities': a 'competent worker', 'caring social entrepreneur' or 'connected student'.

What our research has shown is that with the increased temporal and physical flexibility that digital communication technology affords the individual, there is also a tendency to reinforce continual connection and increasingly permeable boundaries. This can push responsibility on to the individual and underplay the responsibility of others including employers. However, the individual alone is unlikely to be able to deliver change; organizations also need to take some responsibility for these new tasks and challenges, such as digital-housekeeping, time triage and our blended online lives.

### The Study

Our 45 research participants were drawn from three different groups:

<p><b>Social Entrepreneurs</b> who pursue a social impact agenda that they feel morally committed to.</p>	<p><b>Office Workers</b> that work regular hours and are office-based.</p>	<p><b>University Students</b> aged between 18 and 25, under or post-graduates, with or without a paid job.</p>
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We provided each participant with a camcorder and asked them to produce a week-long video diary, capturing what they themselves considered relevant, and giving them freedom and flexibility in terms of how much to film. In particular, the video study sought to capture events and behaviours as they occurred, specifically:

- to catch moments of switching between different roles (in a physical and virtual sense);
- to identify struggles and strategies in managing transitions; and
- to ascertain how digital technologies are implicated in these processes.

After completing the video diary, each participant took part in a detailed interview, in which they reflected on some of their video excerpts. Moreover, the interviews explored what work-life balance, managing boundaries and switching meant to them personally, and how these were influenced by their use of technology.



# Rethinking WORK-LIFE BOUNDARIES



"Had dinner with the family... I've just checked my email because, just as I was leaving, I had a message to say that someone... was expecting me to deliver some results next Wednesday and I thought they were due Friday... Well, it's going to be in the back of my mind over the weekend whether I can shift things around in my diary to meet the Wednesday deadline instead."  
(Alistair, video)

We may often plan our work and personal commitments in the morning with the help of digital devices but then have to 'time triage' as unforeseen events emerge and in response to others' flexible work schedules. This constant re-planning is another time-consuming activity rarely explicitly acknowledged.



"Here I am this morning, I've been itching to look at my phone because it's Saturday morning and my phone has obviously got all my emails on. I've started to get up and tried not to look at my phone but I'm going to have to and I've put on the radio to try and relax me a little bit so that's on in the background [...] So I'm just going to check my phone and yes I've got 5 emails on there..."  
(Fiona, video)

Flexible work combined with digital technologies may undermine the significance of temporal work-life boundaries. We may engage in more blending of activities (e.g. tweeting to a work account while watching TV) rather than a strict association of times with particular activities.



"It's about 7.30 and I realize I came back about 5.30 and just got sucked into the computer again. So I spent too much of my time online but anyway I had some chats with my friends, did some work-related stuff, it's all blending together. But I think I need to go and get some food."  
(Jez, video)

Easy access to work through digital technologies may encourage us to be 'sucked in' to working longer. In our search to remain always updated and informed, notifications and embedded links encourage us to look at 'just one more thing'.



Mobile technologies change where we can work; not just outside an office, but in various parts of our homes previously not accessible to work (e.g. in the bathroom). Yet, paradoxically, our digital lives are also very static as we mentally engage in a variety of activities while physically not moving from our computer screens.

"Hi, good morning, it's now quarter to ten. I've been up this morning looked at some emails on my tablet in the bathroom so I wasn't going to video that and I just had some breakfast. Just taking it easy a little bit this morning, I'm at home all day today so I'll be able to measure work out."  
(Stephen, video)



"...My partner said, 'well you know, you've gone from being... you know, 20 minutes ago you were in a really good mood and now you're really annoyed, you look, you know, you look really fed up'. So it's... it also comes back to this idea that it's quite, you know, when I've got out of my work zone that, sort of, mind... headspace, I can get in... it's so easy like a bit of electronic communication can put you back into it like that..."  
(David, interview)

We may manage transitions through the use of different technologies or moving between locations, but mental and emotional switches may be more difficult to achieve as quickly or completely. We may experience leakage of emotion across activities. In just 'dealing with a quick work email while making the tea' we may underestimate the impact this will have on our mood.



"As soon as I got into the Eurostar, I got my laptop out and just kind of juggled between work, emails, sorting out files on my desktop, cleaning up a bit on my desktop, clearing my bins, my folders, rearranging things..."  
(Mark, video)

We are facing a new kind of digital chore: 'digi-housekeeping', including activities like updating software, syncing between different devices, clearing out e-mailboxes and maintaining social media presences. The time this takes is underestimated, seen as peripheral to 'real' work and is an unacknowledged component of workdays.



"One of the [members of the social enterprise] left and started a really acrimonious campaign

against the other people who were left, online, blogging all the time, making lots of accusations... it made me quite sensitive to the fact that I can post something that seems perfectly, you know, normal but then potentially it could be construed by someone who wants to paint what I'm doing in a bad light [...] I don't like the thought of putting out a lot of personal information about my family."  
(David, interview)

We may have several online identities through different email and social media accounts. Maintaining boundaries between these 'private' and 'public' selves online can be quite a challenge to monitor and manage. Rather than maintaining strict boundaries, a more contemporary concern may be how much of our 'private' selves to reveal online.



"I wrote those ideas for the blogs, then I just thought, oh I'll just email Judy [a client], let her know, and then checked my emails and deleted everything. And there was an offer on Mountain Warehouse and I bought myself some new walking boots [...] And then I... sorted out [an event] for Saturday night followed by a meal for a group of us. So that's all my online stuff done now hopefully for the day."  
(Jane, video)

Terms like 'work' and 'life' may be inadequate to describe our transitional experiences between different domains. Indeed, new domains, such as 'My Online Life', may be more relevant. We may think in terms of boundaries between activities, for example 'online stuff', rather than between the domains of work and life.



**Time triage: the constant re-planning of the day**

**Temporal boundaries: creation, undermining and re-negotiation**

**Getting sucked in: the lure of digital technologies**

**The erosion of physical boundaries: the paradoxically static nature of mobility**

**The emotional switch: trying to mentally keep pace with digital transitions**

**Digi-housekeeping: digital lives need a lot of maintenance**

**The challenges of managing public/private online identities**

**The online domain: blurring boundaries between work and life**

## Reflective Experience as an Intervention: The Video Diaries

As well as being interested in what images and comments the research participants collected, we were also interested in how they experienced keeping a video diary itself. In general, participants found the video diaries very helpful in encouraging them to reflect on their own activities. Recording and watching videos of themselves (and then later reviewing these videos in the interviews) allowed them to observe their own activities and...

- ... realize semi-conscious behaviours that might be inefficient, ineffective or simply undesirable;
- ... appreciate some useful established routines and valued activities; and
- ... change their behaviours especially around technology (e.g. switching off alerts).

Recognition of the importance of self-reflection encourages the design of a technological intervention, MyLifeRocket—a tool that we are developing to support change, which allows experimentation with new behaviours.

"It made me very, very conscious that week of what a chaotic life I lead, and I don't really like chaos at all, it's not my thing. And it made me very conscious of how frustrated I got with really silly little things... On one occasion I was emptying the washing machine, I was so pissed off that I was emptying the washing machine!"  
(Fiona, interview)

"Well, yes, about the routines that I'd established that I didn't know I had. That was definitely one thing [...] even though I've said about the journey being a buffer [...] I've already checked my emails, and as soon as I get in I'd probably do that as well. [Also] when I get to work I'm going in to get a coffee. And I didn't realize I had so many [routines]!"  
(Denise, interview)

"One thing I did do, I turned off the Buzzy Twitter account notifications on my phone, while I was doing the diary, because I realized they were going off all hours..."  
(Anna, interview)