
Virtually Possible: The Impact of Remote Work on Work and Life Experiences

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The emergence of remote work, which gained significant momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, is at the heart of our two separate but related research papers.



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In our initial study, we explored the prevalence of employees using their phones or computers for work-related tasks outside of regular hours, a phenomenon that is very common in today's work culture. Although this practice is widespread, its effect on job performance is not well understood. We proposed that there might be a sweet spot for using technology for work during off-hours. Technology use could potentially lead to improved connections at work and reduce the risk of burnout, thereby enhancing job performance. However, excessive use could have a detrimental impact. We investigated this hypothesis with two groups of people working at a large pharmaceutical company and a significant financial institution. The data from both groups suggested that a moderate amount of technology use after hours could indeed be beneficial, but excessive use might be harmful to work.

This conveys a vital point: although the "always on" work mentality may seem like the norm, it is crucial for employers to determine how much is excessive. They should work with their teams to strike a suitable balance and establish definitive protocols for after-hours communication. Since the right amount of technology usage can vary by job or situation, employers might need to tailor their policies accordingly. Conducting regular check-ins on how their employees or staff members are coping with work outside of regular hours and its impact on them could aid in making jobs more flexible and less stressful. For individual workers, it is equally important to identify personal thresholds for after-hours work and to communicate these boundaries clearly with their colleagues and supervisors. Workers can also reflect on how their after-hours work is affecting their well-being and job satisfaction, and seek out strategies or organizational support to manage these challenges effectively.

The second study focused on examining how working from home during the pandemic has affected couples where both partners work. We explored how this situation changes the way that people handle work and family tasks and how they feel about these changes. We gathered daily updates from hundreds of couples in China and South Korea, finding that working from home has facilitated an increase in the completion of familial duties for both partners. However, it has also induced feelings of guilt and a perceived decrease in work engagement because of the challenges in maintaining the balance between work and family obligations.

These findings and insights are tightly relevant to today's workplace. The blurring lines between work and family life can lead to a sense of disconnection from one's work or feelings of guilt, underscoring the need for couples to anticipate and navigate these effects. Additionally, if one partner is working from home, it may help the other partner with managing family tasks better, thus potentially improving their performance and well-being both at work and at home. Our research suggests that employers should calibrate realistic expectations for remote teams to accommodate the special challenges faced by couples working from home. Furthermore, our results support the idea that flexible working hours, especially for husbands, can help in supporting their partners and keeping family life smooth during uncertain times such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the insights from our research on the effects of remote work and the use of digital technologies for work-related purposes outside of conventional hours, here are some tailored recommendations for university faculty, staff, and organizational leaders, contextualized within the university setting:

- 1. Set clear boundaries:** Faculty and staff should delineate their work and personal time, such as not checking emails after certain hours, to prevent burnout and maintain a healthy work-life balance.
- 2. Embrace flexible work arrangements:** Leverage the flexibility of remote work to align work tasks with personal productivity peaks, while clearly communicating availability to colleagues and students.
- 3. Promote flexibility and well-being:** University leaders should foster a culture that supports work-life balance, including resources for time management and stress reduction, and policies that encourage mental health.
- 4. Encourage open communication:** Establish forums for faculty and staff to share their experiences and suggestions about remote work and after-hours communication, allowing for policy adjustments that reflect their needs.
- 5. Provide training and support:** Offer training on remote work best practices and digital tools to help manage work efficiently, reducing the need for work outside of traditional hours.

These tailored recommendations aim to enhance productivity and well-being for university faculty, staff, and leadership navigating the challenges and opportunities of remote work.

Recommended reading

Ren, S., Hu, J., Tang, G., & Chadee, D. (2023). Digital connectivity for work after hours: Its curvilinear relationship with employee job performance. *Personnel Psychology, 76*, 731-757.

Hu, J., Chiang, T. Liu, Y., Wang, Z., & Liu, Y. (2023). Double challenges: How working from home affects dual-earner couples' work-family experiences. *Personnel Psychology, 76*, 141-179.