Work-home Integration: Challenge or Hindrance?

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BACKGROUND

Technological advancements have brought tremendous changes to the way people work. One of the consequences of these changes are increasingly blurred boundaries between work and home (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Shepp, 2009). In line with new developments in the challenge-hindrance approach (Webster, Beehr, & Love, 2011) we argue that work-home integration can be appraised as challenge, as hindrance or as both at the same time. Previous research has focused on the consequences of the appraisal process, rendering empirical evidence that work-home integration may result in positive consequences (i.e., work-home enrichment) as well as negative consequences (i.e., work-home conflict; Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000).

Empirical evidence investigating work-home boundary management styles shows that perceived control over one’s boundaries influences work-home consequences (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012). Integrating these findings, we argue that perceived control (autonomous vs. externally-controlled) may represent an influencing factor in appraising work-home integration as challenge or hindrance. Thus, we focused on the following research questions:

1. What are challenging and hindering aspects of work-home integration?
2. Does perceived control over work-home integration influence primary appraisal processes?

METHOD

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 45 employees, 27 of which were male and 18 female. As the use of new media technologies facilitates work-home integration, we selected a sample of ‘digital natives’, as they have been engaged in technology all their lives (Prensky, 2001). Participants were born in between 1981 and 1990, securing that all of them are part of the ‘digital natives’ cohort.

First, participants were asked to indicate to which extent they appraise work-home integration as challenge and as hindrance.

Next, we asked them to describe challenge and hindrance situations.

Finally, participants rated to which extent they felt autonomously and externally-controlled in the respective situations.

RESULTS

Approximately 25% of the participants stated that they did not integrate their work and home life (n=12). They worked in fixed working schedules or they intentionally demarcated strong boundaries between work and home. The majority of the participants (n=33) indicated that they integrate work and home life at least to some extent.

Challenging situations were best described by the categories efficiency (n=7), schedule flexibility (n=7), and networking (n=3). Efficiency included statements describing the possibility to do work-related things on the move, at home or during vacation.

Participants appraised work-home integration as hindrance in situations with increased workload (n=8) and when it led to an impaired quality of private life (n=7). Increased workload included working at home in addition to working in the office.

Perceived control

Interestingly, efficiency as challenging category and workload as hindrance category described an intensified work. However, the situations differed whether participants felt autonomously or externally-controlled. Situations that are characterized by efficiency are described by autonomy. Workload situations were rather described by control from the employer’s side.

Our findings provide insights in potential challenges and hindrances when integrating work and home as well as point to the salient role of control over work-home integration in a sample of ‘digital natives’. The perception of control seems to influence primary appraisal processes.

Our results have notable research as well as practical implications. Increased control over their boundaries may be a salient resource, and should be further researched. Future research should compare ‘digital natives’ with ‘digital immigrants’ (Prensky, 2001). Although qualitative approaches are very suitable to obtain knowledge on how individuals appraise certain situations, we propose conducting quantitative studies in a next step to validate our qualitative findings.

In conclusion, our study confirms the importance of control in flexible working arrangement for digital natives, and our findings represent a reliable starting point for researching control in flexible working arrangements.

REFERENCE