Managing digital interruptions in an always-connected world
Anna L Cox, UCL Interaction Centre, @DrAnnaLCox
A whole computer in your pocket
Or even on your wrist
Never miss a
- Text
- Call
- Chat notifications
- Real time updates with Bluetooth
- Alarm
- Battery status

"I'd sit at home and do work emails"
THREE STUDIES

1. survey of technology use and boundary styles
2. interviews about email practices
3. questionnaire study of email on smartphones and overload
STUDY 1: METHOD

- 260 participants
- Work-life indicator
- Device ownership
Findings – Number of Devices

How Devices Were Used

Study 2 METHOD

- Work-life Indicator Scale
- Interviews
- Screenshots of email

Results

Academics (N=9) Prof. Serv. (N=6)

Rigid boundary management

“I would never ever check my work email outside of work, purposely. It's not the kind of job that I think about when I’m not here. I'm not allowed to work from home” – P13, Female, PS.

email practices to create and maintain boundaries between work and non-work

Permeable boundary management

“The first check is probably right after I woke up, I will check everything that has come in the night [on phone]. [...] I will probably have another look once I'm outside the house, so during my commute time I will check once again. And once I'm in my office, I don't have any specific rule, it's really case by case. [...] Once I’m home [...] I have a second work shift after [my son] goes to bed until quite late in the night” – P15, Male, A.
“I CHECK MY EMAILS ON THE TOILET”

Boundary challenges: notifications

“No I turned [notifications] off, it's really annoying [...] when I'm not at work I don't like being alerted about emails coming in. If I want to check my emails I'll check it, but I don't really like being alerted” – P16, Female, A.
Boundaries through accounts, devices and apps
STUDY3: METHOD

- 94 adults in full time employment
- overload = emotional exhaustion (Burnout Inventory)
- Coping/Mastery scale
- smartphone and email use

FINDINGS: EMAIL ON SMARTPHONE

- more emails handled outside work
- lower levels of overload
- no differences in coping

IMPLICATIONS
THANK YOU!