ICT use, work-life balance and wellbeing in academics

GAIL KINMAN
UNIVERSITY OF BEDFORDSHIRE
Work-related wellbeing in academics

- Rising demands; increasing pressure; reduced control and manager support (2008 – 2014)

- Role overload/conflict and illegitimate tasks

- Comparatively high levels of burnout and distress

- Problems maintaining a “healthy” work-life balance
  - Work-life conflict increasing; facilitation decreasing
  - Linked to high demands/low support/long hours

Sources: Kinman & Wray, 2015; Kinman, 2015; Watts & Robertson, 2010; Winefield et al. 2014
Job control and schedule flexibility can help accommodate the competing demands of work and personal life.

High job involvement; preference for work-life integration.

ICT can facilitate boundary management and improve WLB and role performance in each domain.

BUT, risk that ICT can “enable” intensification.

High demands + schedule flexibility + job involvement can threaten recovery and WLB.

Source: Kinman & Jones, 2009; Kelliher, 2010
Academics and e-mail

- Some evidence that academics frequently access email during evenings, weekends and holidays

- Growing evidence for e-mail overload - a source of stress and a threat to job performance

- Some e-mail management initiatives developed in other sectors

- Little guidance on “healthy” and “unhealthy” e-mail use in HE – reliance on self regulation

Sources: Kinman & Jones, 2004; Pignata et al. 2015; Hadlington, 2015
Aims and method

- To explore academics’ use of ICT for work and the implications for recovery, WLB, wellbeing and personal/professional functioning

- Mixed methods: online survey (n = 322) and interviews (n = 30)

- Measures:
  - Job demands, control and support
  - Schedule flexibility; integration preference; job involvement; e-mail behaviours
  - Affective rumination; work-life conflict; emotional exhaustion; role performance

- Interviews explored issues in greater depth + other related factors
Findings: e-mail use and impact

- Accessing work e-mails outside “office hours” is customary practice
- Reasons: workload pressure; demands for prompt response; expectations of others; short staffing; job involvement/interest; habit and personal choice
- Some ambivalence found:

**Risks**

High email overload, linked to rumination and time/strain based WLC and EE; source of distraction; can impair role performance across domains and impair relationships

**Benefits**

E-mail seen as a potential enabler of flexibility across time and place and of work-life balance; potential to improve performance (volume and quality); facilitates work at time of choosing
Academics and e-mail - some observations

“No choice – too much to do – it will all pile up otherwise”

“Students contacting me at 10pm asking for feedback or for an appointment the next day – we have to keep them happy”

“No emails after 6 or at weekends and holidays. It can irritate colleagues and students though”

“Sneaking off to the loo to read my emails on holiday”

“Making contracts with family (and myself) about accessing emails at set times”

“My partner is also an academic and is always checking his email – I feel I have to do it too and then we start talking how much we resent it!”

“We all put on ‘out of office’ notifications but read our emails anyway nobody takes any notice though”

“Because I work with people who have different expectations of “personal life”

“My choice — it allows me to work from home and fit more research in”

“I prefer to spend some time each day keeping the volume down”

“Students contacting me at 10pm asking for feedback or for an appointment the next day – we have to keep them happy”

“No emails after 6 or at weekends and holidays. It can irritate colleagues and students though”

“Sneaking off to the loo to read my emails on holiday”

“Making contracts with family (and myself) about accessing emails at set times”

“My partner is also an academic and is always checking his email – I feel I have to do it too and then we start talking how much we resent it!”

“We all put on ‘out of office’ notifications but read our emails anyway nobody takes any notice though”

“Because I work with people who have different expectations of “personal life”

“My choice — it allows me to work from home and fit more research in”

“I prefer to spend some time each day keeping the volume down”
E-mail behaviours and preferences

- More schedule flexibility, work-life integration and job involvement = more frequent e-mail use

- Preference for work-life integration moderated the negative impact of e-mail, but poorer WLB

- Satisfaction gained in tackling e-mails, but short-term only
  - “A Sisyphean task” – as an empty in-box is quickly replenished
Few used e-mail management strategies, but the need to develop more healthy behaviours acknowledged.

Little guidance available (apart from e-working policy).

Mixed views of formal e-mail management initiatives:
- Many lacked control, but reluctant to have changes “imposed”.
- High expectations of self management (often in the face of previous failure); self blame.
- E-mail use shaped by the expectations of others and the behaviours of colleagues – importance of role modelling.
Conclusions:

- E-mail overload underpinned by many factors relating to workload pressure, working conditions, culture, behaviours and expectations.
- E-mail facilitates flexibility, but some respite required to sustain wellbeing, WLB and performance – long-term problems?
- Some variation in attitudes towards e-mail management.
- Creative strategies needed - resistance to “one-size-fits-all” interventions in the face of work centrality, integration preferences and high expectations of control.