Powering On: Switching Off
An investigation into the effects of the ‘switched on’ culture on employee work-life balance

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Background: The ‘Switched On’ Culture

- The rate at, and extent to, which employees are required to use technologies is persistently increased (Golden & Geisler, 2007)

- Portable, wireless technology has created a new culture of connectivity for social and work-related purposes that researchers have termed “workplace connectivity” (Schlosser, 2002)

- A wide range of employees, based remotely or in fixed locations including offices, are now affected by the ‘switched on’ culture (Goodchild & Hodgson, 2006)

- Research has demonstrated that flexible, wireless technologies can encourage employees to adopt an “all the time, everywhere” level of connectivity (Tarafdar et al, 2007)

- In support, studies have demonstrated that constantly-advancing technologies provide employees with little respite from the workplace, due to their capability for employees to remain connected to work outside of working hours (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012)
The use of communication technologies increases permeability between domains as an individual becomes part of the ‘switched on’ culture (Valcour, 2007).

This permeability of boundaries also creates blurred domains and an unhealthy work-life balance (Xanthopoulou et al, 2009).

Employees using technology more frequently outside working hours were found to have lower well-being (Wright et al, 2014).

Technology can permeate boundaries, even in instances where individuals have a preference for highly defined domains (Ashforth et al, 2000).
Technology can create positive feelings resulting in well-being and increased organisational commitment (Koch et al, 2012).


Individuals can feel liberated when exercising flexibility, dealing with work-related issues at home in their own time (Fonner & Roloff, 2010).

Technology can assist in maintaining integration and/or distinction of work and non-work domains (Kreiner, Holensbe & Sheep, 2009).
Research Aims

• To explore and understand how the ‘switched on’ culture affects employee work-life balance.

• To inform business understanding and HR policy surrounding the provision of remote-access technology for employees

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Research Procedure

Stage One
- Literature Review
- Questionnaire Design
- Drafted Interview Schedule
- Pilot Testing

Stage Two
- Tweaks following pilot study
- Study ‘advertised’
- Quantitative survey completed
- Survey results analysed
- Refined Interview Schedule

Stage Three
- Study ‘advertised’
- Qualitative interviews conducted
- Conducted Thematic Analysis
Quantitative Research Questions

**H1:** Does the frequency of technology use impact employee work-life balance?

**H2:** Does the provision of technology by employers affect work-life balance?

**H3:** Does the provision of employer support regarding technology affect work-life balance?

**H4:** Do demographics impact employee technology use and work-life balance?

**H5:** Does technology type affect work-life balance?
Online survey

735 people accessed the online questionnaire with 171 completing it fully

12 interviews were held (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Participants were recruited through virtual snowball sampling, via social media ‘adverts’ which were shared among social networks

Selection criteria:
- Age over 16
- Currently working
- Using technology to continue working beyond regular hours (e.g. checking emails at night/first thing, working on documents at home, etc.)
Quantitative Survey

The 'Switched On' Culture and Work-Life Balance

https://coventry.onlinesurveys.ac.uk/the-switched-on-culture-and-work-life-balance-2

- Survey created using Bristol Online Survey
- Questions split into 4 main sections:
  1. About You
  2. Work Information
  3. Technology Use
  4. E-Work Life

(Grant, 2013)
EWork-Life Scale (Grant, 2013)

- 28 self-assessment items measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale
- Cronbach’s Alpha score of 0.8 (Grant, 2013).

Key Dimensions:
1. Work life integration
2. e-working effectiveness
3. e-job effectiveness
4. e-well being
5. Managing boundaries
6. Role conflict
7. Trust
8. Management Style
## Quantitative Study: Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hypothesis</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Correlation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>Does the frequency of technology use impact employee work-life balance?</td>
<td>$r_s(169) = .209, p = .006$</td>
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<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>Does the provision of technology by employers affect work-life balance?</td>
<td>$r_s(169) = .118, p = .123$</td>
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<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>Does the provision of employer support regarding technology affect work-life balance?</td>
<td>$r_s(169) = .193, p = .011$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>Do demographics impact employee technology use and work-life balance?</td>
<td>$r_s(169) = -.334, p = .007$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| H5         | Does technology type affect work-life balance? | **Remote Access Software**: $r_s(169) = -.162, p = .035$
|            | **Laptop**: $r_s(169) = -.215, p = .005$ |
Qualitative Research Questions

- What are employee experiences of the ‘switched on’ culture?

- How are employees affected by the ‘switched on’ culture?
Qualitative Study

- Semi-structured interviews

- 12 interviews were held (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006)

- Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, via social media ‘adverts’

- Selection criteria:
  - Age over 16
  - Currently working
  - Using technology to continue working beyond regular hours (e.g. checking emails at night/first thing, working on documents at home, etc.)

- Thematic analysis carried out on participant transcripts identified 5 key themes
Thematic Analysis: Key Themes

- Flexibility
- Intrusion
- Mobile Phone Connectivity
- Work Pressures & Expectations
- Employer Support
Themes: Flexibility

- Flexible working arrangements due to technology
- Working from home/remotely to suit needs

Examples:

“Without the technology I could not work from home and I would have to be away from [my daughter] for 5 days a week instead of 4”

“I appreciate the flexibility I have been given to work from home on a Friday as this gives me more time with my daughter, which is my priority”

“It improves it by giving me more time at home but it hinders it because I am never away from work emails”
Themes: Employer Support

- Strictly no working outside of regular hours
- Colleagues remain 'switched on'
- No clear guidance
- Verbal guidance
- Inconsistent support across departments and role types
- Lack of employer understanding surrounding role demands

Examples:

“Most people in our team that have smartphones will check emails / respond outside of working hours if required”

“…only real guidance is to only use when required, and to ensure that if I am on leave or not working not to check emails. This is communicated verbally”

“No guidance or support relating to workload and that fact that I have to work in the evenings in order to complete all of my work”
Themes: Intrusion

• Constant checking of emails during non-work time
• Impacts on family life and members
• Lack of time to switch off

Examples:

“I do find myself checking my emails outside of working hours – but try to only respond if urgent”

“I suppose, it impacts my husband. I normally wait until my daughter has gone to bed and then check my emails and send replies”

“…never away from work emails. I find myself responding to them at any time, even when I should be having down time with my family or relaxing”
Themes: Mobile Phone Connectivity

- Constant access to work emails
- Easy access
- Quick email responses via smartphone at any time of day

Examples:

"Technology such as smartphones allows almost immediate access to work emails"

"Most people have smartphones and they’ll check emails after work if they need to. I believe this is because it is easily accessible"

"Work emails are sent directly to my mobile so that I can answer them ASAP"
Themes: Work Pressures & Expectations

- Lack of employer understanding of role demands
- Lack of employer understanding of workload
- Changing demands of role

Examples:

“…more time communicating and finding out what their employee’s workloads are like mean that they would have a better understanding of the demands put on us and the implications it has for us outside of work”

“If circumstances changed such as more responsibility or pressure to complete work I can easily see how technology would change that work / life balance”

“There is a lack of understanding in what my job actually entails”
Research Implications

- Organisations should develop clear staff guidance around limiting/eradicating tendencies to remain ‘switched on’
- Employees respond best to official, written, top-down communications regarding working hours rather than individual, ad-hoc, verbal comments from line managers
- Expert contributions from HR departments in developing these guidelines will therefore be key
- Relational support in a day-to-day context by line managers and colleagues is key
- Organisational support should be through long-term cultural values and organisational norms
- Wider implications of not addressing the issue could include increased stress, absence and sickness
- Support for the existing EWork-Life scale (Grant, 2013)
Future Research

- Personal boundary management – links to the ‘switched on’ culture
- Measurement of employee perception of organisational norms/expectations
- Case study application
- Technology trends fuelling a tendency to remain ‘switched on’
Key Conclusions

- Strong links between remaining ‘switched on’ and work-life balance
- Relationship may be positive – move away from previous negative focus of research
- Organisational norms perceived expectations caused pressure to remain ‘switched on’
- Human agency and the addictive nature of technologies also play a role
- Current research fulfils the call of researchers in the field for greater understanding of the relationship between the ‘switched on’ culture and employee work-life balance
- Businesses should be aiming to promote a healthy work-life balance that is suited to their employees and to managing more effectively the ‘switched on’ culture.


Fonner, K.L., and Roloff, M.E. (2010) 'Why teleworkers are more satisfied with their jobs than are office-based workers: When less contact is beneficial'. *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 38(4), 336-361


Leung, L. (2011) 'Effects of ICT Connectedness, Permeability, Flexibility, and Negative Spillovers on Burnout and Job and Family Satisfaction'. *Human Technology* 7 (3), 250-267


Ransome, P. (2007) 'Conceptualising boundaries between 'life' and 'work''. The International; *Journal of Human Resource Management* 18, 374-386