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# Online vs. Offline: Implications for Work Identity

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## Abstract

In our always-connected society, being 'online' can mean being constantly available to assume any of our many daily roles, such as parent, colleague, etc. that reflect our work or personal identity. In this paper we frame the concept of online/offline using work-home boundary theory, discussing the implications of being constantly connected with our work identity for wellbeing and health. We present existing legislation, policies and guidelines that can help regulate when a worker is expected to be available (i.e. assume his/her work identity) and suggest a set of research questions that the HCI community could usefully address to help inform the creation of company policies and guidelines that reflect workers' personal and professional boundary preferences.

## Author Keywords

Information communication technologies; work identity; work-home boundaries.

## ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

## Introduction

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) increasingly enable us to be online whenever and

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wherever we want and this advancement has important implications for health and wellbeing. In this paper we frame the binary concept of online/offline around the expectation of being constantly connected and available with our several roles (e.g. parent, employee, etc.), which we will refer to in this paper as work or personal life identity. An 'online' work identity occurs when a person assumes their work role, regardless of time and location. Contrarily, a worker is offline when he/she decides to not assume their work role, hence not be available to their manager or colleagues. Thanks to ICTs, employees are now able to work more flexibly, but at the cost of finding it harder to disconnect from work. A possible explanation is given by the fact that companies are now selling the availability of their employees as part of their services/products [6].

Drawing from boundary theory and relevant HCI work, we highlight complexities that emerge as a result of constantly assuming an online work identity through the current use of technology. We therefore encourage future work in HCI to inform workplace policies and guidelines. To support our argument, we present examples of existing international policies and guidelines and suggest possible research questions that could be addressed.

### **Connected workers**

Boundary theory suggests people have different roles/identities (e.g. parent, employee, etc.) that they transition between throughout the day [1]. ICTs enable frequent role transitions, for example when receiving a work email in the evening, and some people find it hard to cope with this extreme flexibility. ICTs also enable people to maintain a work identity after working-hours: on one hand, this has been found to be positively

associated with employee's career aspirations and attitudes; on the other hand, it is also associated with higher levels of work-to-life conflict [2]. Kossek et al. [5] found that when work interrupts non-work it has a negative impact on health, correlating positively with stress. Cecchinato et al. [3] identified a number of 'micro-boundary practices' that people use with ICTs to minimise the negative consequences of role transitions. For example, checking work and personal email using two distinct applications, or disabling work emails from the phone during holidays, help reduce the opportunities of work interrupting non-work time. However, more work is needed to understand how these micro-boundary strategies are used in the wider population.

### **Current legislation, policies and guidelines**

Fleck et al. [4] show how different people have different boundary preferences, and Cecchinato et al. [3] found differences in how professional groups manage their boundaries and consequently their availability. The overarching research question that we believe should be answered is: *how can HCI researchers support people in establishing and maintaining their preferred online work identity?* Answers can come from the design of technology or by looking at the context of its use. In the following paragraphs we present legislation, policies and guidelines from 2014 that focus on the context of use.

In April 2014 the Swedish city Gothenburg announced that is considering the idea of adopting six-hour working days. The city's municipality intends to run a yearlong trial to compare a group working the traditional eight-hour shifts with another group working only 6-hour shifts. They expect to improve the mental

and physical state of their employees and increase productivity<sup>1</sup>.

Other countries and companies in Europe have adopted similar measures. For example, in France a recent labour agreement stated that employees must disconnect outside working hours, banning all work emails, SMS and telephone calls for about 250,000 autonomous workers in the technology and consultancy sectors<sup>2</sup>. This meant they needed to cut out more personal time and disconnect from their online work identity.

A similar thing was trialled last year in Dublin's Google offices in a project called "Dublin goes Dark"<sup>3</sup>. Employees were asked to leave their devices at the front desk when clocking out at the end of the day. A survey showed that these employees were experiencing less stressful evenings during the trial, suggesting that disconnecting from a work identity has a positive impact on health.

The German company Daimler-Benz in August 2014 allowed employees to configure their email clients so that all emails they received whilst on holiday were deleted and the sender was emailed asking them to resend the message when the recipient returned<sup>4</sup>. Such

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thelocal.se/20140408/swedish-workers-to-test-six-hour-work-days>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/money/shortcuts/2014/apr/09/french-6pm-labour-agreement-work-emails-out-of-office>

<sup>3</sup> <http://9to5google.com/2014/03/28/google-experiment-asked-employees-to-leave-their-devices-at-work-to-improve-work-life-balance/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-28786117>

guideline has important implications for allowing employees to disconnect from their work identity.

Finally, German government is discussing an "anti-stress" law to ban companies from contacting employees out of hours. In fact, the German Pension Insurance Union found that there has been an increase in the number of workers retired early through stress because of the pressure to remain constantly available for managers and colleagues<sup>5</sup>.

### **Research Questions for Future Work**

To the best of our knowledge, no academic research has been completed on how legislation, policies and guidelines (as presented in the previous section) affect employee's work identity (i.e. their disposition to be constantly available) and the impact this might have on their work-home boundaries. We therefore suggest a set of research questions that the HCI community should address:

- How can we inform company policies in order to constrain online work identity?
- Are there professional group differences in terms of online work identity preferences? What factors influence them?
- What are the consequences of adopting policies, such as the ones presented in this paper?

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/aug/29/germany-anti-stress-law-ban-on-emails-out-of-office-hours>

## Conclusions

In this position paper we draw work from the HCI and boundary theory fields, and discuss what are the complexities of managing an always-available work identity resulting from the use of ICT. We argue that the HCI community should support workers in establishing and maintaining preferred boundaries in order to constrain their work identity. To do so, we recommend studying the context in which technology is used in order to better inform company policies and guidelines. We propose a set of research questions that we would like to discuss further with the other participants at the workshop.

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