

Digital Wellbeing Strategies



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Fourth Edition

2023 Marta E. Cecchinato

We have carefully chosen the sources of information in this booklet, and we hope you find them beneficial, however, unfortunately, we cannot be responsible for the information provided in the websites and apps listed.

www.cecchinato.me

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Digital Wellbeing

Did you know that the 10,000 steps a day recommendation came from a 1960s marketing campaign in Japan? There is no evidence to suggest that specific number is meaningful, other than the fact that it's meant to encourage us to be more active everyday.

When it comes to time spent on our devices, despite all the media news suggesting we are addicted to our devices, there is very little evidence that phones are bad for us. In fact, there is a lot of research that shows how our interactions online can be positive.

So, instead of recommending a magic number on how many hours you should be spending on our phones, we encourage you to use this booklet to help you reflect on your own experience with technology.

Then, if there is anything you want to change, this booklet will help you find a strategy that can work for you.

Our aim to empower individuals to take control of their technology for work and life, and provide useful strategies that can also account for more inclusive ways of being in the digital age.



Our research

Communication technologies are increasingly embedded in our everyday lives, impacting how we work and socialise. This can create expectations of endless availability which may lead to issues of work-life balance. Research has found a positive correlation between work interrupting non-work and stress, and if no measures are put in place to recover from our daily worries and stresses, other major health issues can arise, such as burnout. Therefore, achieving work-life balance is an issue that concerns many. A key factor to reaching this goal is feeling in control. With notifications interrupting and information overload overwhelming us on all our devices, it can be hard to feel in control.

We have been researching how people cope with work-life balance issues and the expectation of being always online. Our findings show that technology should be designed to be more in line with our values and make us stop and think when this is not the case. But it's not all down to technology – individuals play a key role in managing their own work-life balance. We found that there are workarounds and strategies that people can put in place to make technology work for them, to align digital behaviours to personal values so we can be in control of work-life balance. These are **microboundary strategies**.

Microboundary strategies (Cecchinato et al., 2015, Cox et al. 2016, Cecchinato et al. 2017, Newbold et al., 2022) can be used to limit the negative effects of boundary cross-overs (e.g. receiving a work email on a weekend) and feel more in control. When we feel in control, we experience less stress and we fewer interruptions between work and non-work.

These microboundaries, which are presented in this booklet, relate to digital behaviours and can occur on devices, applications, accounts, and notifications.



It's time to take back control

Use this booklet to experiment what microboundary strategies work best for you. We have grouped them in **six sections**: time, email, communication channels, notifications, and expectation management, and rest & recovery.

To put the strategies in context, at the beginning of each section, we have included a summary of prior work that explains why those strategies can be useful for you. Don't worry, we've not made it sound too academic! But if you are interested in reading the original research, there is a list of references at the end of this booklet. Other than some theory, each section includes a list of strategies and step-by-step instructions on how to implement them.

Self-experimenting is a key element to finding the right balance for you between use of technology, expectation management and sense of control. You might find that you prefer automatic rules for settings that help you transition between work and non-work, or perhaps you prefer to manually change settings as a conscious reminder of what you want to be focusing on in that moment.

This is not intended be a complete list of strategies, but it is meant to be a starting point to reflect on your own practices and help you gain more awareness. Of course, as you experiment, you can certainly come up with your own strategies.



How to use this booklet

1) Reflect on your every day practices: What are your priorities? What do you value?

Before you start, take some time to reflect on your work-life balance and what is it exactly you would like to improve. You can spend as much time as you want on this activity.

For example, you could use some self-tracking tools to give you a better understanding of your everyday behaviour using technology. Or you could keep a diary of your communication habits and keep track of when work interrupts non-work (and vice versa).

2) Read through this booklet to identify strategies that can help you.

Select at least one or two strategies to start with for a couple of weeks and see how you get on. Remember, your time = your rules. If something doesn't work out for you, you can always revert back to old habits or try out new strategies.

3) Choose a goal and commit to your new strategy(ies).

We know from psychological research that goal setting is really important in terms of changing a behaviour. A bit like setting an objective, it's important to choose a clear and measurable goal.

In order to help you stick to your new goal, we recommend you write down what you intend to try out in the commitment card on the next page. You can also decide to share your commitment on social media, or just by talking to friends, family and/or colleagues.

4) Keep a log of the strategies that worked (or haven't) for you.

Keeping track of how are you going, and what is working, or not working is really important. Also, you will find that as time goes by, or situations change, you might want to revisit your strategies.

Don't be hard on yourself if you don't achieve your goal. If that happens, set a more realistic goal and start again. It's best to set small achievable goals than lots of different ones. Most importantly, make sure you give yourself a reward when you have achieved your goal!



Your commitment

Cut out the commitment card and keep it in a visible place (e.g. your diary, on the fridge, save a picture as your background screen, etc.)



To improve my work-life balance I will:

Four vertical lines for writing, each starting with a small orange triangle at the top.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

cut along here



Manage your Time

Boundary research has shown that work-life conflict occurs when the demands from one domain (e.g. attending art class) interfere with the demands of another domain (e.g. working long hours), leading then to burnout, absenteeism, and stress. To reduce work-life conflict, one of the suggested research solutions is to create temporal boundaries to allow time to recover.

In our research, we have found that sometimes people are not fully aware of how they are spending time (or how much time they are spending actually working). In fact, research has shown that we are not good at estimating how much time we spend on our devices. Self-tracking has been proven to encourage reflection, which increases self-awareness and thus promotes behaviour change.



- Track how you spend your time on devices.**
 There are several tools that allow you to track how you spend your time on your devices. Some of them even classify activities on devices as productive or unproductive.
- Block or limit distractions.**
 There are several apps (e.g. Forest app) and browser plug-ins that can be used to block access or limit the time you spend on distracting websites and apps.
- Build focused and downtime in your schedule.**
 Schedule undisturbed time to work on a task or project every week. Don't forget to also block out time in advance for your own activities, hobbies, etc. Regardless if you share your calendar or not, it will help you protect your time. For example, you could set a calendar event called "No Meetings Monday". You can then use online tools to get people to book time with you in your available slots (e.g. www.calendly.com).
- Find focused time with timers.**
 The Pomodoro Technique can help you focus in bursts of 25 minutes at a time. Be aware, some neurodivergent people find it useful to remind them to stay on track when getting distracted, while others find this distracting if they are hyperfocusing.
- Use body doubling.**
 Although not well researched, there is anecdotal evidence suggesting that body doubling can help those with ADHD at staying focused. It relies on another person being present (physically or virtually) and help ground the individual into the task. You can use any videoconferencing app, or specific apps for it like www.studytogether.com and www.flown.com.

Track how you spend time on your devices

Screen time (on iPhone)

Device setting -> screen time

From there you can set downtime (i.e. times when only certain apps will be available), app limits (i.e. how much time you allow yourself on certain apps)

Digital Wellbeing (on all Android)

Settings -> Digital Wellbeing and parental control -> Dashboard

From there you can visualize your time spent on apps and also set limits.

RescueTime www.rescuetime.com

It can be installed on any laptop/PC and on Android and iPhones. It automatically classifies time spent on each device as productive (e.g. Word) or as procrastination (e.g. Facebook). To make the most of this tool, you could either decide to use it with a specific goal in mind (e.g. find out how much time I spend on email every day/week/month), or let it run in the background for a few weeks and then look back at the data to notice any interesting patterns.

Keep in mind:

You don't need to be connected to the Internet on your phone all the time. Turn on airplane mode, or simply turn off data (so you still get phone calls and SMS) when you don't want to be interrupted.

Manage your Emails

Email research has found that checking email less frequently reduces stress. While there is no magic number about how often this should be, making it less frequent is key.

Mobile email addiction has been identified and compared to gambling behaviours, whereby the unexpected new email provides users with a thrill. Here are some strategies to avoid falling in the trap of feeling rewarded for finding a new email, but then immediately feeling compelled to act on it:



Turn off push notifications.

If you have push enabled, whenever you get a new email, you will immediately get notified. However, you are likely to be checking anyway, so there is no need to be alerted for every new email, especially in your personal account(s). You can still manually check if you have new messages whenever you want.

Change how often you get new emails.

If you still want push notifications, try changing how often your email client syncs your inbox. You could change it to as low as once or twice per day, or to every 25 minutes, to allow you to work uninterrupted following the “Pomodoro technique”.

Check work and personal emails separately.

Download two separate apps for work and personal email on your phone/tablet. Use different email clients for your laptop (e.g. check personal email in a browser tab, and work email on the Outlook desktop client).



The Email Charter

1 **Respect recipients' time**
This is the fundamental rule. As the message sender, it is *your* responsibility to minimize the time your email will take to process. Make your email easy to read, by using plain English.

2 **Short is not rude**
It's ok to be brief. Don't take brevity personally and know that others won't. Wordy responses take longer to read. People will scan it and are less likely to read it all; key details can be easily missed.

3 **Celebrate clarity**
Use the subject line to clearly label the topic, and maybe includes a status category [Info], [Action], [Time Sens] [Low Priority]. Use the opening line of the email to explain the basic reason for writing.

4 **Slash surplus cc's**
CC's are like mating bunnies. Only CC someone who really needs this message. Don't thoughtlessly 'Reply all': choose individual recipients.

5 **Tighten the thread**
Some emails depend for their meaning on context. If you need to include the email trail showing the context, cut what's not relevant. If it's long, summarise or make a phone call instead.

6 **Reduce attachments**
Don't use images or logos in signatures that appear as attachments. Time is wasted trying to see if there's something to open. And don't send text as an attachment when it could be included in the body of the email.

7 **Give these gifts: EOM NNTR**
If your email message can be expressed in half a dozen words, just put it in the subject line, followed by EOM (End of Message) or NNTR (No need to respond). This saves the recipient having to actually open the message.

8 **Should we expect an instant response?**
Don't feel you need to give an instant response, and don't expect to get one. Skype or the telephone are your tools if something is urgent.

9 **Disconnect sometimes!**
Consider calendaring half-days at work where you can't go online. Commit to email-free evenings, weekends and holidays. Have an 'auto-response' that makes it clear you're not checking.

10 **References this charter**
Spread the word and help change email culture. Reference this charter in your email footer.



Manage other Communications

Each person covers several roles in their life, some work-related, some pertinent to personal life. In our research on work-home boundaries and technology we found that people create more complex interactions to discourage them from accessing work 'stuff' when not working. They basically create some friction in their interactions.

Research has shown that people make use of online statuses to infer someone's availability and determine how quickly they are going to reply. If you do not want people to assume that just because you are online you are available and can be interrupted, set yourself away.



- Group work and non-work tools separately.**
On your phone, you can use folders to organise (and hide away) work apps such as email, Slack, etc. Moving that folder away from the home screen is another way of creating some friction.

- Sign out of any instant messaging (IM) or video-conference channel.**
You can do this manually at the end of your working day. You could consider logging out during working hours if you really need to focus and not be interrupted.

- Create different accounts for communication channels.**
You could have a Skype account for work on your laptop, and a different personal Skype account on your phone. That way you don't have to worry about thinking where you are logged in.

- Create different user accounts on your devices.**
This might be easier on your laptop (e.g. one for work activities where you block social media, and one for personal where you don't have work emails synched), but you can do it on more recent Android phones too.

Keep in mind:

- Curate the content of your messages – if it's quick questions, use an instant messaging channel. If you need to have a more permanent record, email it.
- Delete app links from your phone's home screen or delete the app from the phone during holidays and longer breaks.

Manage Distractions

The average attention duration on a computer screen has been decreasing over the last 20 years, going from 2.5 minutes in 2004, to 44 seconds in 2021. Research on multi-tasking and interruptions has also shown that we generally react to a new message within 6 seconds. Resuming a task after an interruption takes between on average 25 minutes and 26 seconds. We know that constant activity switching can actually have more negative effects than actual interruptions. Also, research on notification behaviour has shown that critical messages are only 12% of what we receive.

We have found that people who separate their devices (i.e. smartphone and tablet are only for personal stuff, laptop is only for work stuff) feel more in control of work-home boundary management.

- Turn off your notifications.**
You might want to do this forever for certain apps, or based on certain times/locations, or even manually on a case-by-case basis. You can do this for email and any Instant messaging platform (or individual groups within Teams or Slack).
- Put your phone on airplane mode.**
When you don't want to be interrupted, put your phone on airplane mode, or simply turn off data (so you still get phone calls and text messages).
- Create device separation.**
Dedicate each device to one life domain; this might mean deleting or removing any work/personal accounts/apps on it.

- Use (noise cancelling) headphones.**
This is especially helpful if working in a shared space - not only does it help drown out external noises, but it also signals to others that you are as interruptible.
- Use micro-productivity.**
Breaking down tasks into smaller, tiny goals may be the way forward for how we work on some tasks according to researchers at Microsoft. Tools like goblin.tools use AI to break down to-do items into small or even micro tasks.

Keep in mind:

Open plan offices can be very difficult, especially for neurodivergent individuals who might struggle with the sensory overload. Consider having quiet areas and agree on when and how meetings should be scheduled in that space.



Use music to focus

Listening to music or soundscapes can be helpful in the workplace for a few reasons: blocking out distracting sounds such as co-workers or other office sounds; lifting up your mood to help motivate you; or helping you concentrate on more repetitive tasks without getting bored too quickly.

Besides personal preference, think about the kind of work you are doing: the more complicated the task the easier your music can distract you.

If your task is boring or repetitive put on the kind of music that really motivates you (like you might have in your gym playlist!)

If you are distracted from your task, choose music:

- **with less variation.** Music or soundscapes with too much variation, such as very rhythmic music or birdsong sounds, can make it hard for us to focus because there is too much going on. One type of music that especially neurodivergent people find useful is Lo-Fi music.
- **more instrumental.** We are really sensitive to singing and talking as we are used to having to respond when someone is talking to us.
- **or no music at all!** Some pieces of work have too many moving parts for us to focus on music too. Consider some natural soundscapes, like white noise or brown noise (e.g. rain sound), moving somewhere quieter or even just keeping your headphones if your coworkers are still chatting too much!

Music for concentration

Focus @ will www.focusatwill.com

Different playlist with different types of music designed to help you focus, depending on what you are looking for and the task you are working on

BrainFM www.brain.fm

This music is designed to help you find deep focus in 15 minutes

Coffitivity www.coffitivity.com

White noise from coffee shop chatter.

Nature Sounds for Me www.naturesoundsfor.me

Nature sounds

Moodil www.moodil.com

Nature sounds



Manage Expectations

Research has shown that response expectations to are set after the first response, with an initial baseline of 24 hours. This is valid for email, but will vary depending on the channel used.

We found that people will message you on the channel they are most likely going to get your quickest response from. Create some “perceived boundaries” – if you want to check your emails, go ahead, but it doesn’t mean you need to reply straight away.

Keep in mind:

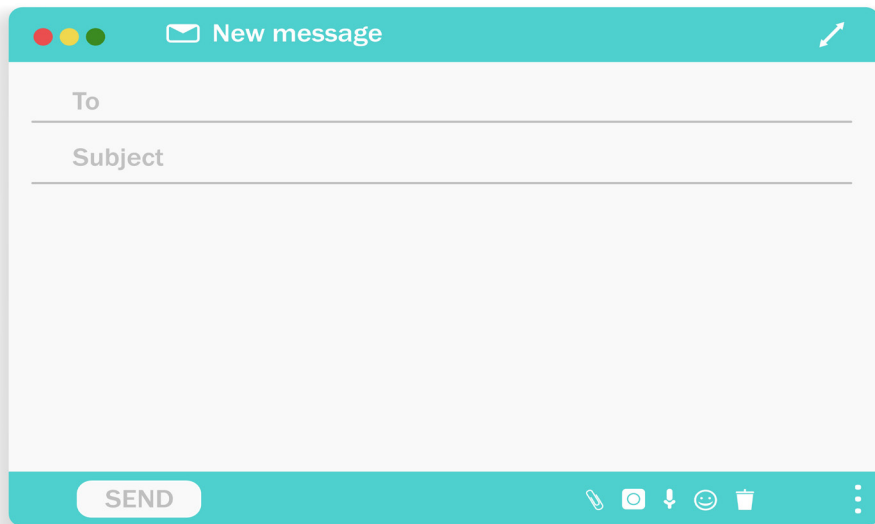
- Set expectations in advance.
- Sit in someone else’s office when they are not in, or go to a coffee shop.
- Learn to say no and delegate:
 - “I only say yes to something if I have something particular to offer”
 - “I only say yes if I’m the best person to do this, because...”
 - “I will do it because I will be able to get out of it”
 - “If I want to say no, or delegate, I should ask ‘Is there someone else who could do this equally well?’”

- Set email signatures.**
Tell people when/how you check emails or what channels are best to be used for certain situations
- Set an out-of-office for the weekends.**
You could say something like “As an attempt to master more work-life balance, I don’t check my email during the weekend. I will get back to you next week
- Turn off Awareness cues.**
Awareness cues are all those cues that let you know whether a person is online, if a message has been read, or when they were last using the app. Knowing someone has read your message can be useful, knowing they’ve been online 4 times since is not so useful.



Examples of Email Signatures:

- Please note I work flexibly - so whilst it suits me to email now, I do not expect a response or action outside of your own working hours.
- Please note: I sometimes work offline but will check emails at least once per working day.
- I'm terrible at carrying and answering my phone/email/social media/etc., best way to reach me is ***.
- Email is the best way to contact me. If you need to talk to me please send me your number and I'll call you back.
- Save our inboxes! <http://bit.ly/emailcharter1>
- Too brief? Here's why: <http://bit.ly/emailcharter1>
- Q: Why is this email a pre-determined number of sentences or less?
A: <http://sentenc.es>



Examples of Out of Office messages:

- I'm out of office until 16/08. I get a lot of emails, so you may wish to contact me again after this date.
- I am on leave until 16/08 and will not be able to respond to your email until I return.
- I'm away on holiday with a large pile of novels. I'll be back on 16/08.
- I'm on leave until 16/08. If your message requires an urgent response, please re-send after that date.
- I'm travelling between 10/08 and 16/08 with limited access to email/Internet/etc. If it's urgent, you can find me on social media.



The Inclusive Hybrid Meeting Charter



1 Consider the digital and physical setup
Make sure you have tested your set up before a meeting - what software and devices will you need? How will the in-person attendees be positioned to feel connected to the remote attendees (and vice versa)? Do a practice run.

2 Share agendas and notes
Get in the habit of sharing an agenda and any necessary documents ahead of the meeting, and after the meeting. This helps prepare and process key points that might have been missed, especially for neurodivergent colleagues.

3 Keep the camera on
Having the camera on can help some stay focused and others with non verbal communication. If seeing your video is too distracting, consider switching settings so others can see you but you can't see yourself.

4 Support equitable turn taking
Use the 'raise hand' feature or have someone coordinate turn taking and advocate for equitable meeting dynamics. Women are more likely to ask questions in parallel on the chat, or if a woman has asked the first question.

5 Allow for stimming
It can include knitting, playing with a fidget toy, doodling. Keeping hands occupied is an outlet for neurodivergent colleagues to channel their energy and helps them stay focused on the conversation.

6 Have quick recaps
This helps keep everyone on the same page. Inadvertent moments of distraction are common for everyone, especially for neurodivergent colleagues. Normalise re-focusing needs by providing quick recaps during the meeting.

7 Keep to time
Set a timer for when it's 5 minutes to the end of the meeting. Allow breaks between back to back meetings and don't scatter meetings throughout the day to allow for longer stretches of uninterrupted time.

8 Minimise background distractions
Close doors and windows if you can, and mute yourself when not talking. Turn off other notifications during the meeting (e.g. emails). Some virtual background can be more distracting, if it appears like parts of a face disappear.

9 Should it be an email instead?
Consider whether a meeting is really necessary or could be replaced with an asynchronous meeting or more simply an email?

10 Share this charter
Include this charter in the calendar invite for the meeting. Spread the word and help improve hybrid experiences for everyone.



Rest and recovery

While the jury is still out on whether mindfulness is effective, what exactly counts as mindfulness and how to practice is, some research has shown that it can be effective for some people in improving their mental health. More importantly, mindfulness practices can help you relax through breathing exercises and focusing on the moment.

Apps for relaxation and meditation

Aura www.aurahealth.io

3-minute meditations and mood tracking

Calm www.calm.com

Guided meditations with nice visuals. "Sleep stories" also included.

Headspace www.headspace.com

Daily guided meditations. A special section for kids.

Insight Timer www.insighttimer.com

A popular free app with guided meditations. It also has social features where you can become part of groups, see who is meditating "with you", and see what people around you are choosing.

Stop, Breathe & Think www.stopbreathethink.com

Guided meditations and mood tracking.

Light of any kind, and especially blue light such as from phones, can make it harder for our bodies to produce melatonin, a hormone that regulates the sleep-wake cycle.

Reduce blue light at night

Flux (on Mac)

www.justgetflux.com

Twilight: Blue light filter (Android on Play Store)

Night Shift (iOS)

Device settings -> Display & brightness -> Night shift -> Scheduled



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