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CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1.	<p>IMPACT OF DIFFERENT MODES OF TRANSPORT USED BY COURIER UNITS AND THEIR LEVEL OF SATISFACTION ON SELECT FACTORS</p> <p><i>Dr. S. SELVAKUMAR</i></p>	1
2.	<p>A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON ORGANIZATIONAL STRESS AMONG GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS TEACHERS OF BARGARH DISTRICT</p> <p><i>SWAGATIKA NANDA & Dr. MUNA KALYANI</i></p>	6
3.	<p>INTEGRATION OF WORK AND LIFE: AN ALWAYS-ON TECHNOLOGY CULTURE</p> <p><i>SUMANJEET KAUR</i></p>	9
	REQUEST FOR FEEDBACK & DISCLAIMER	13

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INTEGRATION OF WORK AND LIFE: AN ALWAYS-ON TECHNOLOGY CULTURE

SUMANJEET KAUR
ASST. PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
SHYAM LAL COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI
DELHI

ABSTRACT

Over the past many years the work-life balance issues are well explored by the researchers. Work-life balance is a very complex issue. It keeps on changing with the change in growth strategies and work culture of the organizations, needs of the employees and also with the change in the economy, i.e. from demand economy to knowledge economy. Living in a globalized and well-connected world and not accepting the new trends is impossible if you want to grow in life. The globalized and well-connected world has also changed the ways of doing work, from fixed hours to always connected work through technology and virtual workplace. Globalized world and knowledge-driven economy have made the time zones irrelevant for accomplishing various tasks, especially in the business world. This flexible work has ensured 24*7 connectivity with the work. This paper aims to identify the role of technology in the work and life of the employees and how employers are bringing it in their organizational strategies and work culture. Is this always-on with technology work culture giving the autonomy desired in the personal and professional life of the employees?

KEYWORDS

autonomy, integration, work culture, technology.

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INTRODUCTION

Staying ahead, meeting the deadlines and achieving the new heights help an individual to progress in life, be it professional or personal life. Moreover, 24*7 connectivity with the work through various information and communication technological devices (ICT) has become a phenomenon to achieve organizational success. These technologies give greater flexibility and ease in completing the task. An individual can multitask without compromising on any of the work, be it personal or professional. Corporates are offering their employees a flexible work schedule recognizing the issues and need of work and life of their employees, through various means i.e. telecommuting, flexible working hours, work from home and providing them with necessary gadgets and software (smartphones, laptops, free software, etc.). According to many of the organizations providing flexibility in the work ensure higher productivity and better retention of their talented employees. Even an individual also prefer a job in which he/she gets time to relax with his family, friends and for social life. Not for the married people only, it's same for the unmarried or singles too, due to the increased complexities in life. Now life is not just limited to the office and home. It has many facets, like professional life, family life, social life and having some quality time for one's own personal or spiritual growth and well-being. Integration of work and life with various technology devices ensures an "always-on" culture for many in the modern-day world, be it corporates, information technology, education or health sector. This working with technology and always available for work, culture is almost everywhere. There are two views for work and life issues- one is segmented work and life, second is integrated work and life. Young generation prefers integrated work and life, as they are of the view that it gives them greater flexibility in striking a balance between both the domains.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are four types of work-life balances – first *balancers*, maintaining clear boundaries of work and life; second *Careerists*, more concerned about their work-life; third *Career-Sacrificers*, personal or family life is more important to them than work life and the fourth is *Integrators*, they prefer merging both the domains work and life (Ayudhya & Lewis, 2011). From these integrators is more prevalent in today's world. Everybody is trying to strike a balance by preferring flexible work schedules but ending at merging both the work and life instead. Most of the participants were of the view that smartphones make work more convenient and fast for them but many were not happy with that as it is taking their time (Bomber K., 2010). ICT is acting as a facilitator in blurring the boundaries between work and life, by providing flexibility and increasing the workload by taking away the personal space of an individual. People feel more stressed due to all-time connectivity (Tennakoon, 2007, Nam T, 2014; Mazmanian et.al 2013; Mustafa Al-Saidi, R., 2015). Extension of work in personal life (work- extensification) and increased speed and demand of work (work-intensification) as a consequence of the invasion of technology in personal life was very well explained. This long hour culture is affecting the life of academicians (Currie & Eveline, 2010). Technologies give a virtual environment of simultaneous occurrence of personal and professional works. People are working in a dynamic world in which their preference for segmentation and integration of work keeps on changing according to the situation (Whiting et.al.). Employee's attitude and belief towards work, work involvement also decide their willingness to stay connected with the work (Boswell, 2007). Mobile email devices used by the professionals has intensified the expectation of their availability, which is quite contradictory to the belief that technology gives autonomy to the users (Mazmanian, et.al. 2013).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For the purpose of this paper main source of information is the secondary data. The data is collected from the already existing literature related to the topic, some research journals and newspapers. For the better understanding of the implications of the always-on work culture, data is also used from the surveys conducted in the recent years and from specific company websites.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this paper are:

1. To understand what role technology plays in terms of always-on work culture, which leads to the integration of work and life.
2. What are the implications of this long hour culture, in terms of autonomy and technology-assisted supplemental work?
3. How organizations are dealing with this always-on technology culture?

AUTONOMY AND TECHNOLOGY ASSISTED SUPPLEMENTAL WORK

These two terms autonomy and TASW well define the always-on culture, integration of work and life.

Autonomy is the ability to have control of one's activities either related to personal life or at the workplace. But it gets affected by many other factors by using the ICT devices, i.e. work involvement, commitment, flexibility at the workplace and it gives contradictory results. The more a person uses ICT devices the more he/she

is unable to disconnect from the work. In the end, the person has to compromise on autonomy, by allowing technology to invade their personal space and blurring the boundaries between work and life. Here technology is integrating the work and life. This contradiction is well explained by Mazmanian and others (2013). They called it *autonomy paradox*. The study was done on knowledge professionals and how they navigate through technology between their work commitment and personal autonomy. The use of ICT like smartphones, emails, etc. extend the working hours for an individual irrespective of the time and place. More they use these devices more they feel stressed out due to the increase in workload. Some respondents also felt that they are being controlled by these devices (Barley et.al. 2011).

Fenner and Renn (2004) gave a theoretical framework of *technology-assisted supplemental work (TASW)*. It means an increase in working hours for an employee, and remaining connected to work through various technology devices be it laptops, PDAs, smartphones, etc. Why an individual indulges in TASW? This has direct and indirect relation with career aspirations, job commitment and job involvement (Boswell et.al. 2007). It also depends on the type of work assigned to an employee and the type of technology used to complete the work. Perceived usefulness of using technology, improving efficiency and productivity can also be the reasons behind using ICT after hours. TASW blurs the boundaries between work and life which leads to work and life conflict.

ALWAYS-ON TECHNOLOGY CULTURE

There are always expectations from the employees that they will be accessible all the time through ICT. This makes it harder to understand where the working hour's end and personal life begins. There is always an unseen pressure on the employees that they might get a work-related call or email any time of the day. This always-on or available culture is also changing the ways of doing work. It's surprising that not even employers, the colleagues too find it ok to send the message, call or email, etc. regarding work at any time. In the following section implications and how organizations are dealing with this always-on technology work culture have been discussed.

IMPLICATIONS OF ALWAYS-ON TECHNOLOGY CULTURE

In the past studies various technology-related outcomes have been discussed, i.e. work-life conflict, family to work-life conflict, stress, anxiety, various health issues like lack of sleep, fatigue, obesity, etc. Apart from these, there are some other implications of using the technology:

- a) *Work and life get intertwined*- 24*7 connectivity results in the invasion of work through technology in personal life. Currie and Eveline (2010) explained it through work intensification (increase in the speed of doing the work) and work extensification (extension of work beyond office hours). A person ended with working longer hours than required.
- b) *Unhealthy competition among employees*- a healthy competitive environment should prevail in the workplace for the growth of the organization and employees. It helps in maintaining an active and innovative workforce. It becomes unhealthy when an employee tries to overtake another employee by working for odd hours and sending and replying immediately to work messages or emails. That might not be possible for another employee. It unnecessary raising the expectations of employers from all the employees. It's also not good from the employers to end to send emails, messages or calls after hour. It unnecessarily burdens the employees.
- c) *Employee burnout*- the more an employee remains accessible for work, the more he/she feels overworked. When you are unable to get yourself disconnected from work, it leads to burnout for those employees who work for longer hours on technology. This is seen in knowledge professionals, IT professionals or those who are working at managerial level jobs in the corporate world.
- d) *Reduced productivity*- many of the people think that technology helps them to do their work efficiently and with ease. Technology give flexibility, speed, fast processed information, free from boundation of time and place, helps in multi-tasking the things. But research has already proved that scientifically human brain can't effectively multitask. We are just switching from one work to another and not multitasking (Goldhill, O.2016). The human brain is not designed to do two works at one go. It is just the technology which is helping to switch from one task to another. Moreover, long-hour culture results in burnout, fatigue and workload stress which ultimately reduce the productivity of an employee.
- e) *Technostress*- a stress caused by working daily on ICT devices, i.e. computers, laptops, smartphones, etc. Globalization and intense competition have pushed employer and employee both to use more of technology. Employers are investing more in it by providing company laptop and smartphones to its employees. Employees have to learn new technologies and devices to remain competitive, if they are unable to do so or face any problem doing so they feel stressed out. ICT usage results in any of these stress i.e. fear of losing the job, ICT complexities and uncertainty, work overload, invasion of personal life (Tarafdar, 2003).
- f) *Switching between roles*- an employee has to switch between roles, while using technology after hours, from an employee to a person who is just a normal family member or friend in the family. While using technology employees are either creating psychological boundaries or physical boundaries between their work and personal life (Ashforth et.al. 2000). Integration blur the physical boundaries thus more need to create psychological boundaries arises. And a person has to switch between roles psychologically, which is more stressful as a person is again trying to multitask which is not possible for the human brain.

In a survey conducted by Accenture in 2012 in 33 countries (including India) revealed that:

TABLE 1

Findings/outcomes of the survey	% of participants
Technology helps in flexible schedules.	77%
Flexibility is extremely important to have work-life balance	80 %
Work is entering in their personal life through technology.	70 %
Participants think that they are workaholics.	40%
During vacations:	
Checking email	71%
Catching up on work	44 %
Working with no distractions	35%
Participating in conference calls	30 %

Source: <https://newsroom.accenture.com>

The results of this survey were quite contradictory. it shows support for flexible work hours but at the same time, the majority of the participants find it that work is interfering in their lives through technology.

A survey conducted by Randstad Workmonitor, in January 2018 (covering 33 countries), shows shifting in trends from traditional work methods to a more agile way of doing work. India and China are taking the lead. 82% of the respondents are happy with this flexibility but 44% says that they feel certain work pressure due to all-time work connectivity. In the case of virtual meetings culture in the jobs, again India is taking the lead at 74% and China at 70%. In the present survey, it was found out that 48% of the participants believe that their boss or manager has the autonomy to decide and prioritize their work. This results in autonomy paradox. Results of the survey have shown that autonomy increases with the increase in age, 68% of 18-24 years, 63.1% of 25-34 years, 49.8% of 45-54 years and 45.2% of 55-67 years of the age, says that managers have the say in prioritizing their work. The reason could be, with an increase in the age employees get promoted or grow in their respective professional fields.

ORGANIZATIONS STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH ALWAYS-ON TECHNOLOGY CULTURE

It should be the priority of organizations to implement a proper work-life policy to improve the productivity of their employees. It should be embedded in organizations culture and should not remain only on paper.

A German vehicle-maker Daimler innovated "holiday email", which has the auto-delete option in case employees don't find the courage to delete work emails during their vacations. Volkswagen's and BMW has followed this policy and encouraged its employees not to respond to work emails after office hours to ensure a proper balance between work and life. There are certain behaviors which are associated with an overload of technology usage like burnout, technostress, low productivity, etc. these harm employees health. An organization must issue guidelines or policies that could limit the excessive use of technology for work after working hours. France has implemented the "right to disconnect" rule for workers of France as a part of the labor laws of the country. The organization has been asked to set the limit when workers need not respond to the work-related emails or messages etc. Amazon has announced to its employees not to take work-related calls from 6 pm to 8 am. The stress arising from these work calls out of office hours is quite complicated. The employer can also initiate a digital detox program, a program to better understand the effect of technology usage on employees. In the digital detox period, a person refrained from any technological devices or ICT services. The benefits are to reduce stress, anxiety, increase social interactions. This may include not sending any work-related calls or messages to the employees during their vacations.

The onus of creating a healthy work culture mostly remains on the employer. If the employer is appreciating the always available for work employees then other employees who can't do so will feel left out. Certainly, the employer will expect always available behavior from them too. Using the technologies is not a problem but handling it improperly is. Some are of the view that at a higher level of management it is impossible to completely stop the work emails or calls after hours. In globalized business and working in different time zones of the world it is difficult to leave behind the emails and messages, a work-related emergency can occur at any time.

There could be several reasons behind doing work after hours by the employee and employer:

TABLE 2

<p><i>Reason:</i> Excessive competition due to globalized business, it's impossible to stop after-hours calls and mails by the employer.</p> <p><i>Corrective measure:</i> Employer may restrict the emails and calls if unable to completely stop it. Moreover, top management should learn that it's more important to complete the work in-office hours.</p>
<p><i>Reason:</i> Due to noise and distractions at workplace employees prefer to work from home.</p> <p><i>Corrective measure:</i> Employer must ensure that those employees who are doing work which require lots of thinking and research must be assigned a separate space at the workplace.</p>
<p><i>Reason:</i> Employees have been assigned too much work which is not possible to complete in limited office hours.</p> <p><i>Corrective measure:</i> The employer must take corrective measure, either by redesigning the job structure, providing proper training or flexible schedule according to the need of the employees.</p>
<p><i>Reason:</i> Calling employees to attend meetings and conferences, which are not meant for every of the employee of the organization.</p> <p><i>Corrective measure:</i> In this case employer should ensure that only that employee should be called whose presence is much required. Others may be apprised through various audiovisual modes.</p>
<p><i>Reason:</i> Showing extra dedication to remaining in good books of the employer, this is also called "striver syndrome".</p> <p><i>Corrective measure:</i> Employer must restrain this kind of behavior because there is a possibility that it will lead to unhealthy competition among the employees.</p>
<p><i>Reason:</i> Fear of losing the job, intense competition.</p> <p><i>Corrective measure:</i> Employer must ensure a healthy work environment, where doing overtime should be restricted and employee's contribution should be appreciated. Employee counseling may also be initiated by the employer.</p>

CONCLUSION

Regular use of technology through social media, internet, etc. indicates that respondents are well versed with and know how to use the technology to their advantage. Having control of technology decides whether it will be positive or negative for the well-being of those who are using it. Most of the people are compromising on their autonomy thinking that technology is helping them to exercise greater autonomy in whatever they do. The impact of technology is well researched by researchers from time to time since the advent of technology. 24*7 connectivity has made the work-life balance concept almost obsolete in today's agile world. So, there is no such thing named balance, it is just the integration of work and life and prioritizing the work accordingly, which are being accomplished by the technology. Work culture has been redefined by the all-time connectivity. Organizations must think about its implications to ensure retention, physical and psychological well-being of its workforce for the long term. Sometimes, employees are unable to adapt to this always-on work culture. Past studies and various surveys conducted shows this trend by pointing at contradictory results, integration, and technology a welcome step in their life and an intrusion too. It is the collective responsibility of the employer and employees to ensure healthy always-on work culture. This always-available culture will remain and prevail in the future too.

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