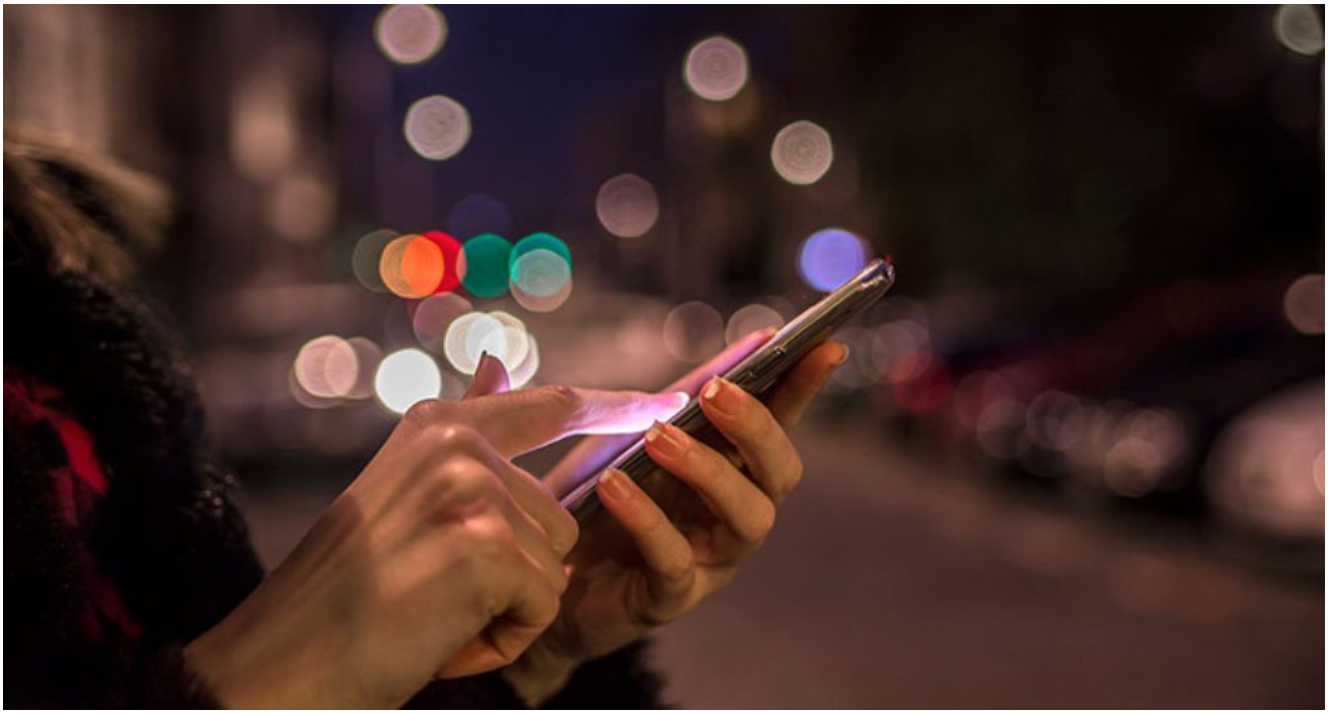
Hanging in the balance: technology and the blurring of work-family boundaries

Technology is blurring the boundaries between work and family realms. Is it possible for the modern worker to avoid overload and live a fulfilling life at home and in the office? *The Work-Family Balance in Light of Globalization and Technology* offers research-backed hope, with strategies and policies to help find equipoise.



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"Trying to do it all and expecting that it all can be done exactly right is a recipe for disappointment," said Sheryl Sandberg. The Facebook COO is no stranger to juggling an immense workload together with family demands. She suggests that perfection, including a perfect "work-life balance," may not be possible in our globalized, electronically connected

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times.

Certainly, how we find equipoise must take into account recent technological and social changes. IESE holds a biennial academic conference devoted to work-family balance. And now professors **Mireia Las Heras**, **Nuria Chinchilla** and Marc Grau have collected select conference papers in a book, *The Work-Family Balance in Light of Globalization and Technology*. The book's contributors use a range of analytical approaches, with research across eight nations, to show that technology is fundamentally changing the way we spend time at work *and* with our families worldwide — from entrepreneurs in Ethiopia to managers in Spain.

One thing is clear throughout: work-family balance is about boundary management. According to the authors, our success in managing our work and home lives is determined by how we perceive, set and move between boundaries. But finding balance may not happen in the way we expect. Much of this new research shows that balance in our globalized age is less about a traditional separation between work and home, and more about a skillful, flexible negotiation of these overlapping domains.

Three trends that transform

Why must we change the way we approach work to keep our balance? In their introduction, the book's co-editors point to three main employment trends:

1. The pace and global nature of work. Firstly, the world of work has transformed into a fast-moving, globalized domain. Human resource (HR) practices are more flexible than ever, information and communication technologies are rapidly updating, and we work with people across the entire globe.

2. Deregulation and our service economy. The labor market offers fewer promises to workers and has shifted towards a services model, where businesses offer personalized solutions rather than simply selling physical products. This means employees need to be more committed than ever to going above and beyond their job requirements to offer competitive and consistently excellent service.

3. More dual-earners. The third factor is the massive increase in families where two caregivers both work. This means employees seek more flexibility in their jobs, as well as being more likely to outsource some childcare and domestic services.

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The pros and cons of more connectivity

The book's co-editors and authors point out that our globalized world of work offers many new opportunities for finding balance. Due to technological advancements and more flexibility in working remotely, employees can have increased control over their time and can make independent, creative decisions to coordinate work and home pressures. Social networks offer opportunities to "both broaden and deepen our network connections."

But there are dangers to being constantly, remotely connected to our work electronically. As the co-editors note, many people end up "working everywhere, all the time," failing to delineate boundaries between their work and family lives, and setting themselves up for overload.

The book's research establishes that both employee and employer attitudes are important in determining whether always-on work practices are experienced as opportunities or hazards. In one chapter, professors Rashimah Rajah and Remus Ilies track how connected employees are to their jobs outside the workplace, and measure this against the employees' "integration preference" — how much they preferred to integrate or separate their work and family lives. The outcome was that employee wellbeing was much higher when employers gave workers the choice *not* to be connected outside the workplace. If job connectedness is forced on employees, they feel a loss of psychological control and have higher risks of burnout, even if they personally don't mind integrating their work and family life. Here, the authors conclude that the most important thing is for employees to have enough control to "engage in boundary management tactics to circumnavigate the negative effects associated with constant connection to job matters."

Enrichment: letting work and family roles benefit one another

In another chapter, professors Sowon Kim, Mireia Las Heras and María José Bosch Kreis explore the power of a boundary-management tactic called enrichment. Here, enrichment means "work and family roles benefit one another" by providing opportunities to transfer skills and learnings from one domain to the other. The authors point out that individuals can be proactive in increasing their resources across boundaries, and that employers can support them through workplace policies that facilitate positive enrichment.

Taken together, the book's studies show that navigating work-family boundaries is a

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complex, dynamic process. On the one hand, employees need the control to create firm boundaries between their work and home lives, but on the other, they can gain great enrichment advantages from moving fluidly between these boundaries. It is of the utmost importance that companies and employees work together to develop policies that allow optimal flexibility, limits *and* overlap in work-family boundaries. The wellbeing of our globalized workforce hangs in the balance.

Methodology, very briefly

For this volume, the co-editors selected 10 papers presented at the IESE International Conference of Work and Family, 2015. Themes include technology, management, globalization and work-family balance. Selections were based on the quality of the scholarship, methodologies and geographical regions. Countries in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, Europe and North America are represented, and analytical approaches include ethnographic studies, quantitative projects and research-sample methodologies. Each paper contributes new knowledge to understanding work-family balance in the globalized workplace and how to improve the balance.

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