Personal Tasks at Work: An Exploration

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Abstract
Technology has changed the way that people work, socialize, and generally live their lives. Especially, technology has changed the way that those distinct parts of a person's life intermingle. Previous work has largely focused on different styles of work-life balance, and most of the industry contributions to this problem focus on preventing work tasks from leaking into one's personal life. However, little work has been done to investigate the ways that personal tasks impact the work day. We present the results of a survey of 93 employed people, as they relate to personal tasks that people do at work. We consider the context, consequences, and persistency of these tasks, and propose some design implications that could better reinforce the individual boundaries that people have between their work and personal lives.

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Work; personal tasks; work breaks; productivity; work-life balance.

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Introduction and Related Work

With widespread access to technology, particularly mobile devices at home and work, research on work-life balance has become an important area of study in the field of computer-supported cooperative work. Recent research on this topic has primarily focused on the ways work overflows into our personal space and time.

An investigation of tablet use found that people use tablets to extend work tasks beyond the time in the office [8]. Research also found that more flexible work environments can ultimately lead to working beyond the constraints of 9-5 [3,6]. While some of this work attributes the blurred lines between work and personal life to specific jobs and personality differences [3,4], an experiment has shown that doing a relaxing, at home activity, such as watching TV, while doing work, does not necessarily reduce the stress experienced from the work related tasks [2].

With plenty of research investigating how work tasks leak into personal life, early research on breaks during the workday has quickly uncovered a rich complexity. Research has found that different breaks from work can support productivity and comfort [5]. Yet Pew research also found that people check social media at work as a less helpful mental break [7]. Indeed, the type of break and the way that it is handled can have a significant impact on the benefits they provide a worker [1].

All this considered, there is surprisingly little known about the ways in which *personal tasks* affect people's time at work. Naturally, personal life tasks and needs do not always halt the moment one begins their work day: family members may need attention, cars break down, and medical appointments must be scheduled according to the business hours of the clinic. Investigating the causes and consequences of necessary personal tasks is the first step towards designing technology to support the personal needs of people at work. Therefore, we focus this work on the following research question: *What are the personal tasks that people are accomplishing throughout the work day?*

We provide a first look at personal tasks that take place while at work, explore how these tasks are accomplished, and how people feel about conducting these tasks while at work.

Methods

We investigated the types of personal tasks that people perform at work through a survey of 100 people on Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were required to work at a company with at least 5 employees, work at an office building (not from home), and use a computer throughout their work day. Seven participants were excluded as they did not meet the eligibility criteria. As part of a larger survey examining personal and work accounts across devices, we asked the following:

Think of the last 3 personal tasks you needed to take care of during working hours. Please tell us about it and provide some context about the last time you had to accomplish this task. What was the situation? How long did it take to deal with? When did you do it (e.g., during a meeting, during lunch, during a break….)?]

We collected reports of 280 tasks from 93 respondents. Fourteen items were excluded from the analysis as they were not personal tasks, giving a final dataset of 266 tasks. We coded the tasks according to the platform from which the task was completed, who they interacted with to complete the task, and the goal of the task. We also asked participants for their open-ended thoughts on conducting personal tasks at work and applied open codes to 29 responses.

Results

The most frequently reported tasks performed at work were scheduling and attending appointments,

TASKS ACCOMPLISHED DURING WORK	N (%)
Schedule an appointment	51 (19.17%)
Coordinate events or activities	33 (12.41%)
Banking/legal related tasks	19 (7.14%)
Attend to family (non-child)	16 (6.02%)
Go to an appointment	14 (5.26%)
Attend to child	11 (4.14%)
Record personal memos	9 (3.38%)
Make a purchase	8 (3.01%)
Arrange childcare	8 (3.01%)
Pay a bill	7 (2.63%)
Car related tasks	7 (2.63%)

Table 1: This table presents the 11 most common personal tasks reported by participants. Other tasks were mentioned fewer than 7 times.

coordinating events, banking and legal, and attending to family members (Table 1).

The most common means to accomplish tasks was placing or receiving a phone call (43%), followed by an in-person activity (14%) and mobile messaging (7%). When tasks involved interacting with another person or organization, family (25%), medical offices (24%) and other businesses (24%) were most commonly reported.

Medical and dental appointments, as well as banking and legal tasks, were frequently mentioned to require attention during working hours due to the small window of open business hours for those services.

"Fairly recently, I took some time during lunch to make a doctor's appointment, as, again, I could only schedule the appointment during business hours. It was sort of annoying to have to do this during my lunch, but I felt I could not step away from my desk just to do it, in case it ended up being more drawn out than expected." - P2

I needed to leave work during the day to attend the closing of a new home purchase. I was gone for a couple of hours and had to work a little late to catch up. - P91

Coordinating events and activities occurred in conjunction with both family and friends, and ranged from complex planning (vacation planning with multiple parties) to simple check-ins (confirming dinner reservations with a friend).

"I spent too much time texting and finalizing details about our upcoming weekend plans with friends while I should have been working." - P31

Seven participants mentioned negative ramifications from these personal tasks, such as focus interruption, and needing to work extra in order to make up for lost time.

"I received a phone call from the daycare stating my child was sick. I had to make arrangements for a relative to pick him up so I did not have to leave work. All together this took around 10 minutes. I stepped out of a morning meeting to take this call." – P78

Participants also reported that they frequently use formal break time to conduct these tasks (26% of tasks), as well as other patterns of discretion to save face with employers (e.g., taking phone calls in the bathroom).

Implications for Design
Our findings result in three main implications: improving scheduling and coordinating, setting boundaries so people can protect their work time, and addressing the tension between the privacy needs of employers and the ways employees need to be transparent with their family.

Scheduling Conflicts
As P2 mentioned in the results, some tasks can only be completed during normal business hours. Unfortunately, hours of operation at doctor's or accountant's offices are unlikely to change. The frequency at which people needed to contact offices and schedule events during business hours suggests that more technology could be developed to automatically schedule appointments so that one or both parties need not attend to this task during business hours.

Not All Interruptions Are Created Equal
Some participants mentioned that tasks that came up felt distracting or unwanted. Since other work has described the need to be able put away work notifications while at home, perhaps some personal

notifications such as those from social media, or non-essential contacts could be show after work hours. While parents need to be able to answer phone calls from their children's schools, giving more people tools to control how they are contacted during the day could reduce guilt or stress related to unnecessary interruptions in their work day.

Employer Privacy vs. Employee Transparency
As both of the earlier implications questioned the necessity of certain tasks, another way to consider unnecessary interruptions is for employees to have better transparency about their workday to their family or close friends. If workers could help their family know when a meeting or lunch break is happening, then perhaps family members could have a better sense of when it would be appropriate to contact those at work. This calendar would need to be interpreted or abstracted to respect the privacy of company data as well as to translate the events as they apply to family or friends viewing the schedule.

Conclusions and Future Work
Through a survey of 93 people on Amazon Mechanical Turk, we found several new considerations for work-life balance. Tasks performed at work often required to be done during work hours, but workers also felt compelled to make up for, excuse, or hide their personal needs. Future work will explore the technology used to manage both work and personal needs in the workplace. Also, developing tools for these needs will give people better control of their own work-life balance.

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