**Work-Nonwork Conflict in Knowledge Intensive Firms: Can We Challenge the ideal Worker Norm to Encourage Diversity and Inclusion?**

## Purpose

Davenport, Jarvenpaa, & Beers (1996) define knowledge intensive firms (KIFs) as firms where employees create value by producing new information based on existing information to address problems. “*The primary purpose of their jobs involves the acquisition, creation, packaging, and distribution of knowledge*” (Akinola and Thomas, 2006). The key difference of KIFs from traditional firms is the centrality of knowledge as the key product, whereby knowledge is both inputs and outputs (Alvesson, 2004). Examples of knowledge workers include consultants, analysts, advertisers, and lawyers. Knowledge workers are based in a variety of sectors from management and IT consultancies to high tech, educational and R&D based companies.

The lack of employee diversity in KIFs is well known. Women and minorities are mainly clustered in lower grade roles, whereas senior leadership positions are occupied by white male employees (Ashley and Sommerlad, 2015). This developmental paper suggests that in order to understand the lack of diversity and inclusion in KIFs, we first need to understand the professional norms in terms of work and nonwork relationship that knowledge worker is expected to follow. This research focuses on knowledge workers’ discourses on what constitutes work and personal life, and the ambiguities associated with the definitions in order to understand the internalised performance culture and the ideal worker norms in KIFs that might hinder diversity and inclusion. The paper reports some initial findings based on daily diaries and interviews with knowledge workers in the UK.

## Design/methodology/approach

## Diary Study

Diary method was chosen to collect individual experiences of work-nonwork conflict events. According to Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli (2003), the key benefit of diary methods is the ability to investigate events and experiences naturally and spontaneously as they happen. Capturing experiences close to the occurrences minimized the chances of recall biases and enables a more accurate data collection (Symon (2004). Another advantages of diary methods is the consideration of event dynamics and within–person differences over time (Bolger et al., 2003; DeLongis et al., 1992). Finally, diary studies can provide a great degree of narrative detail as well as understanding of complex issues (Symon, 2004), and can help see the change in how events unfold (Poppleton et al., 2008; Radcliffe and Cassell, 2013).

The pilot diary study was conducted over 10 working days with employees of medium-sized KIFs based in the UK. The study used purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). According to Patton (1990, p. 169), purposeful sampling allows “*selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research*”. The sample encompassed men and women who work for at least 30 hours per week and most participants (apart from one) have at least one child younger than 18 years. Four out of five women worked part-time, whereas none of the men worked part-time. All of the participants were allowed to start and finish work flexibly and had an option of working from home.

The first link to the diary questionnaire was sent out around 1pm asking to report any morning or lunch time conflict events. The second link was sent at 7pm in the evening and included questions around evening conflict events as well as questions on boundary enactment, work/personal life demands, number of hours worked today, and work/persona life schedule predictability. Both questionnaires took no longer than 5 minutes to complete. The links were shared daily for 10 workings days in row.

The daily questionnaires asked to recall specific situations occurred that day when work made it difficult to meet personal life demands. The participants were asked to describe what happened and provide as much detail as possible. Examples were given to illustrate morning, afternoon and evening conflicts. The next section asked to recall situations when personal life demands made it difficult to meet work demands and any details related to such events. The participants were asked to write about what happened and provide as much detail as possible.

Nine participants filled in the diaries for ten working days, one participant completed only one diary questionnaire and therefore was excluded from the analysis. The diarists are briefly described in Table 1.

Table 1 Pilot diary study participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Participant* | *Gender* | *Marital Status* | *Presence of Children under 18 in Household* | *Weekly working arrangements* | *Job Role* |
| Boris | M | Single | No | Mainly homeworking | Consultant |
| Andy | M | Married | One | Mainly office working | IT manager |
| Donald | M | Married | One | Home and office working combined | Senior regional leader |
| Matthew | M | Married | Two | Mainly office working | Consultant |
| Janet | F | Married | One | Works part-time, mostly mornings 5 days, mostly from home | Consultant |
| Kelly | F | Married | Two | Works part-time (4 days per week) mainly from the office | Consultant |
| Melanie | F | Married | Two | Works part-time mainly works from the office but can also work from home | Consultant |
| Martha | F | Married | Two | Works part-time mainly from the office | Senior analyst |
| Matilda | F | Married | One | Some weeks she commutes to the office, the commute takes 2-3 hours. Other weeks, when she has no meetings, she works from home | Consultant |

#### Analysis of the diaries

The diary data were analysed by firstly reading and re-reading each respondent’s diaries. Each event was labelled considering: the direction (work to nonwork or nonwork to work) and the time of the day when events occurred (morning, lunch time or evening). Definitions of work to nonwork and nonwork to work based on the work-nonwork conflict literature were used. The diary questions included specific definitions that guided the diarists. Diarists’ classification of work to nonwork or nonwork to work conflict events was used and if not clear, clarified during the interviews.

Within each classification, the events were summarised in terms of the main theme depending the aspect of work and nonwork it affected as well as emotional significance each event caused.

The data were examined with the following questions in mind: (a) To what extent were work non-work difficulties in evidence amongst this sample of knowledge workers (bi) What types of difficulties did knowledge workers face? And, (c) How can the definitions of work and nonwork explain daily experiences of work-nonwork conflict?

Questions (a) and (b) were addressed by analysing the diary data, whilst question (c) was addressed by analysing diary and interview findings separately, and then jointly.

Overall, a total of 85 daily entries were obtained, with the average participant completing 9.56 daily entries. Among these 85 daily entries, on 53 days (62%) at least one conflict event was reported. The participants reported from 2 to 18 events over the period of 10 working days.

Table 2 A number of conflict events over 10 day period

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Diarist* | *Total number of events* | *Number of work to nonwork conflicts* | *Number of nonwork to work conflicts* |
| Boris | 5 | 2 | 3 |
| Andy | 6 | 2 | 4 |
| Donald | 16 | 10 | 6 |
| Matthew | 18 | 11 | 7 |
| Janet | 16 | 5 | 11 |
| Kelly | 12 | 7 | 5 |
| Melanie | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Martha | 11 | 3 | 8 |
| Matilda | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| *By gender:* |  |  |  |
| Male | 45 | 25 | 20 |
| Female | 43 | 17 | 26 |
| *Total* | *88* | *42* | *46* |

## Interview design

After the diary completion, the participants were invited to participate in semi-structured, phone interviews. Six participants agreed to participate (two participants were included from a pre-pilot study)[[1]](#footnote-1). The interviewees are briefly described in Table 3 Interviewees.

Table 3 Interviewees

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Participant* | *Gender* | *Marital Status* | *Presence of Children under 18 in Household* | *Weekly Working Arrangements* | *Job Role* |
| 1. Boris | M | Single | No | Mainly homeworking | Consultant |
| 1. Andy | M | Married | One | Mainly office working | IT manager |
| 1. Donald | M | Married | One | Home and office working combined | Senior regional leader |
| 1. Matthew | M | Married | Two | Mainly office working | Consultant |
| 1. Kate | F | Married | Two | Home and office working combined | Research manager |
| 1. Ana | F | Single | No | Home and office working combined | Consultant |

#### Analysis of the interviews

The interviews were thematically analysed (King, 2004). First of all, following the literature review, three *a* priori themes were identified around work and nonwork definitions: clarity of what is work and nonwork, ambiguity, and situational dependent definitions.

The initial coding template was developed based on two pre-pilot interviews and was modified and expanded to include hierarchical levels during the process of reviewing the main pilot interviews (King, 2004). Initial coding of the data started while identifying those parts of the transcripts that were relevant to the research question. If they were encompassed by one of *a priori* themes, the code was "attached" to the identified section. Once the initial template wascreated, the final template began to emerge by systematically working through the transcripts and identifying sections of text that are relevant to the research questions and giving them a code (Table 4 Coding Framework).The template was being modified by inserting, deleting and redefining codes.The identified themes were grouped into higher-order codes which described broader themes in the data.

Table 4 Coding Framework

1. Clear understanding of what ‘work’ and ‘personal life’ is
   1. Clear start and end of work time. Personal life is organised around that
   2. Clarity around lunch breaks
2. Ambiguity around what ‘work’ and ‘personal life’ involve
   1. Transitioning from work to personal life and from personal life to work
   2. Multitasking
   3. Interruptions
3. The understanding of ‘work’ and ‘personal life’ depends on the situation
   1. Planned work during personal time and planned personal activities during work time
   2. Addressing work needs during personal time when there are no important and urgent personal needs
   3. Personal vs. forced choice to address work needs during personal time and vice versus

## Findings

**Diary findings**

Diarists reported work to nonwork and nonwork to work conflict events that occurred throughout each of 10 working day. Morning events included nonwork to work events when individuals struggled to get themselves or children ready, doing drop-offs to nursery/school, having sleep problems at night or difficulties of waking up in the morning, as well as experiencing delays when commuting to work. In terms of work to nonwork conflicts during mornings, the situations were around starting work earlier than usual.

Most afternoon conflicts that participants reported were related to lunch time hour. People recorded conflicts when they were often unable or late to take lunch breaks because of the workload, meetings or work calls (work to nonwork conflict). Nonwork to work conflicts included running errands during lunch time that took longer than expected and required to stop work earlier because of family emergencies.

The majority of evening conflicts included work to nonwork events that occurred because of working late, having late evening work calls and business trips. People reported the inability to have a good quality recovery. Diarists described occasions when they could not detach from work, mainly because they were worried about work. Nonwork to work conflict events involved the need to leave work early to address family needs. Some conflict event examples are presented in Table 5 Conflict Event Examples.

Table 5 Conflict Event Examples

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Event Examples | Work to nonwork conflict | Nonwork to work conflict |
| Morning | 10 events, e.g.:   * Had to rush the kids with their morning preparations, breakfast etc so I could get to work earlier. * I have been answering work emails while preparing breakfast for the children. * Woke up early and could not get back to sleep because I was thinking of work. | 22 events, e.g.:   * My son is not well and he slept badly last night and I couldn't have a proper sleep and rest during night and was late to start my work. * I missed my train as my daughter woke up while my husband was still in the shower. * Drop off to nursery and school took slightly longer than normal so I started work late. |
| Afternoon | 12 events, e.g.:   * Was very busy, could not take my full lunch break, things did not go to plan. * Had a late lunch because of numerous calls and impromptu meetings. I got called into another meeting while I was having my lunch as well. | 13 events, e.g.:   * I need to leave the office at 2.30pm to look after my daughter who is sick. * I gave blood on my lunch break and the session overran. |
| Evening | 20 events, e.g.:   * Had to leave to Amsterdam for a work trip. No time to see my son. * Had a call with the US while we were seeing [son name]‘s doctor. * Had to work later than expected and had to rush home to put the kids to bed. * I worked when the children were in bed to finish something I was worried about. | 11 events, e.g.:   * I could not stay behind to deal with a small crisis [at work] due to having to pick up the kids from school/nursery. * I had to leave the office at 2:30 to go home and look after my [name of relative] who was not feeling well. I had a number of things to do in the office and will have to work after the dinner. |

### Discussion

The first research question aimed to find out the extent to which knowledge workers experience work-nonwork difficulties. The diary records show that knowledge workers tend to experience from 2 to 18 events over the period of 10 working days which is a higher frequency than previous diary studies found (Montgomery et al., 2009; Shockley and Allen, 2015). The higher number of events can be due to the fact that, differently from the other diary studies, the participants were requested to report such events more frequently, i.e. twice per day. It is also likely that knowledge workers may experience more conflict events due to a strong performance orientation. Research suggests that knowledge workers work hard and frequently very long working hours, and are driven by the need to develop, produce results on time in order to convince that they are worth to the firm (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006).

The second research question aimed to explore the types of difficulties knowledge workers face. The comparison of conflict event prevalence by gender suggests that both male and female tend to experience similar numbers of conflict events, women, however, experience nonwork to work and male work to nonwork conflict events more frequently. Considering that most women participants in this study were part-time employees, it is likely that they are more involved with nonwork roles, and therefore have higher chances of nonwork to work conflicts.

### Interview Findings

The aim of the pilot interview study was to understand, in general terms, how professional employees with flexible working arrangements define ‘work’ and ‘nonwork’. On the one hand, employees provided clear descriptions of work and nonwork. On the other hand, when prompted more specifically, employees were unsure on what constitutes work and nonwork and often changed their minds about what each domain entails. This is an important finding and contributes to the understanding of work-nonwork conflict experiences. Literature on knowledge workers and their cultural norms may explain such ambiguity and will therefore be discussed in more detail.

Alvesson (2004) suggests that ambiguity is the defining characteristics of knowledge-intense firms and describes two possible sources of ambiguity. The first ambiguity is related to the knowledge worker’s identity construction. Knowledge-intense workers have a constant construction, reconstruction, and reparation of their positive self-image. The doubt of self-image is to some extent due to the doubt from clients and broad public scepticism about their profession as well as the lack of clarity on what knowledge work involves in terms of the inputs, processes and outputs (Alvesson, 2004). The pilot interviews provide examples of ambiguities in terms of what counts as knowledge work. For example, a consultant was not sure whether work email checking on a train on the way from work counted as work. Another employee described the time he spent on his professional development as his nonwork. Research on knowledge work suggests that employees invest in personal development as a means to sustaining the status and positive identity as a knowledge worker (Alvesson, 2004).

The second ambiguity is related to the way work is organised in knowledge-intense firms. On the one hand, knowledge workers are allowed the autonomy to choose where and when to do their work. However, on the other hand “*high pay and bonuses as well as strong community feelings fuel a norm of working when it is needed and an identity in which work and organizational membership are central. This means that strong material for identity work is offered, which can be used by individuals in struggling with the identity problems*” (Alvesson, 2004, pp. 206–207).

Employees may feel they have a personal choice to work or not during their personal time, especially since flexible working is widely practiced in most KIFs. However, knowledge workers are often unable to utilise flexible working opportunities because of their employer and client expectations as well as the professionalism norms that suggest flexible working can only be used for the benefit of work related goals (Rory Donnelly, 2006).

An example of such autonomy vs. no choice ambiguity from the pilot study is when a consultant did not see a conflict between her work and nonwork when she needed to check her work emails during her nonwork because her work did not require her to, it was her “self-choice”. The question arises, whether the option of not checking work emails during personal time truly exists considering strong performance culture that knowledge workers tend to internalise and what happens when the employees choose not to check their work emails during personal time. Knowledge workers are known for working very long hours, often responding to client needs around the world and working across different time zones. These employees tend to be very ambitious and competent, meet their client deadlines on time and “*prove their worth to the firm*” (Alvesson and Robertson, 2006, p. 211).

The ambiguities described above are interlinked in a way that they drive each other: in order to sustain the positive knowledge worker’s identity, employees require spending a lot of time in convincing clients, working on their personal development and constructing the positive image about themselves as knowledge workers and about the firm. As a result, they have to work extra hard to ‘prove themselves’. The level of competition is high since most knowledge workers strive to be part of the ideal worker norm.

## Research implications

The research showed that it is important to consider the context of knowledge-intensive organisations when analysing work-nonwork conflict experiences. The ambiguity and paradox in people’s discourses about what constitutes work and nonwork is likely to be influenced by the context.

The ambiguities about knowledge worker identity and the autonomy vs. self-control paradox are interlinked and drive each other: in order to sustain the positive knowledge worker’s identity, employees require spending a lot of time in convincing clients, working on their personal development and constructing the positive image about themselves, as knowledge workers, and the firm. As a result, they have to work extra hard to ‘prove themselves’. The level of competition is high since most knowledge workers strive to be part of the ideal worker norm.

The strong performance culture and competition as well as the ideal worker norm raises questions of what groups of employees are welcome in KIFs and who can successfully fit in and take on senior roles? Moreover, what are the chances of getting promoted to senior roles if you are non-white/ female with caring responsibilities. Finally, considering the knowledge workers have to work extra hard to ‘prove themselves’, how much harder do you have to work if you are in the minority group?

## Originality/value of the paper

This paper discusses the majority norms in terms of work and nonwork relationship in KIFs in order to encourage a debate on how we can challenge the norms of strong performance and ideal worker to make KIFs more diverse and inclusive.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)