Tethered to Work: How Mobile Devices Impact Family Conflict, Work Commitment and Turnover

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The technology of yesteryear is a distant memory for many. Back in the 1990s, cell phone could only make calls and cell service billed by the minute. Internet usage “swamped” telephone lines and conversations focus on the limits of bandwidth. Today, technology has infiltrated nearly every aspect of our lives. Living in the digital world means we always have our cell phones close-at-hand and we find high-tech wearable devices incorporated into our daily activities.

For sales professionals in real estate and other industries, life in the digital world presents numerous challenges. Since mobile devices are the norm, work extends far outside the boundaries of the office and expectations are high for immediate response. Indeed, the Pew Research Foundation reported that 45% of networked workers (i.e., those technologically connected while at work and who possess a mobile device) report working in the family domain during evenings and weekends using a mobile device.

Our Study

The current study considered the concept of mWork or using a smartphone or a tablet with Internet access to engage in work tasks during family time, to answer two major questions. First, what is the fallout on organizational attachment when the employee engages in mWork? Second, how does mWork relate to the employee’s spouse and his or her reactions towards the employee’s organization?

In gathering data, 344 pairs of job incumbents and their spouses were recruited with the assistance of a data management service firm. All participants were married, worked full-time, and both the job incumbent and spouse used mobile devices. Job incumbents completed surveys via an emailed link. After completion, a link was emailed to spouses who completed a separate confidential survey.

In total, 13 hypotheses were tested centering around mWork and its impact on employees, their spouses, and the employer. The hypotheses addressed mWork’s relationship to various factors including burnout, turnover intentions, spousal resentment, and spousal commitment.
This research is important to real estate professionals as it considers the relatively new phenomenon of mWork and its impact on both family and the employer. As technology continues to evolve and the work-life relationship continues to blur, real estate professionals must remain ever-conscious of mWork’s potential impact on their lives and careers.

**mWork Impacts**

There is no question that working from home can have a major impact on an employee’s relationships and motivation. Our study found that mWork increases three types of work-family conflicts for employees, those work-family conflicts that are time-based, strain-based, and behaviorally-based. Additionally, employee burnout also increases with increasing strain-based work-family conflict; however, burnout does not correlate with time-based or behavior-based work-family conflict.

This research demonstrated that as employees experienced greater strain based conflict from always being tethered to work (mWork), they subsequently had greater employee burnout. This burnout contributed to lower employee commitment to the organization which in turn related to higher turnover intention.

Our study also found that all three dimensions of work-family conflict (this is, time-based, strain-based and behavior-based) relate positively to spousal resentment towards the employee’s organization. Additionally, if people resent their spouses’ employers, those people (the spouses in this case) are also likely to be less committed to that organization. When people are less committed to their spouses’ organization, higher levels of turnover are also evident among the employees.

The mWork story is not all negative though as we considered potential feedback loops as well. mWork can provide a level of autonomy and control that employees may view as a resource. Additionally, those who are more committed to their organizations may be more likely to engage in mWork with greater frequency.

Simply stated, our study found that mWork’s relationship with the family system is harmful and that mWork associates positively with turnover intentions. So, it is in the employer’s best interest to remain cognizant of mWork’s impact and seek to alleviate strain and pressure if at all possible.

**Implications for Real Estate Sales Professionals**

What does this mean for real estate professionals? As an agent, your clients are going to have high expectations. While the home-buying process may seem routine to you, the process is daunting for your clients and will no doubt be a significant dinner-time conversation topic.
Conversely, in order to provide quality service, a real estate professional often shares personal contact information with the client. While many clients may refrain from calling their agent outside of business hours, many other clients will simply call, text or email their agents at all hours of the day or night.

Considering that nearly all sales professionals carry some sort of mobile device, the potential for "mWork" is growing at an alarming rate. Responding to emails and taking phone calls well after working hours is a slippery slope. What was “just one email” or “just one returned call” can quickly become a barrage of work that runs right into the next day. Without adequate rest outside of work, you cannot recharge and refuel for another day of work. You’ll quickly find yourself burned out, unmotivated by the challenges each day brings.

The same must be said for employees you oversee. As a leader, employees will model your behaviors – both good and bad. If you constantly send emails or make phone calls outside of work, your employees will believe you expect similar activity from them as well. As an effective leader, it is essential that you seek to promote good work-life balance for your employees so they can be productive, motivated, and committed to their jobs.

Regardless of whether you have a spouse or significant other, mWork can have a powerful influence on your career and personal life. Our study showed that all three forms of work-family conflict relate to spousal resentment. Because spouses play a significant role in an employee’s job satisfaction, spousal support cannot be underestimated.

So, the question becomes – how does one prevent their mobile device from creeping in and taking over? You may want to start easy by setting a time such as 9 PM after which you don’t respond until the next morning or putting your phone away during dedicated family times such as child events or dinner time. Another option would be to participate in the National Day of Unplugging on the first Friday of March and put away your mobile device for 24 hours. Simple. If you can’t go a whole day (or can’t wait until the next event), try simple steps like putting away your phone during meals – and refuse to touch it again until after the meal concludes. A cell phone sleeping bag (available online) may help keep your device just out of reach.

Needing extra resources? A simple Google search will lead you to mobile phone detox plans and countless studies regarding mobile usage. Trouble with self-control? Popular apps, like Moment for iOS, allow you to track your daily phone usage, set usage limits, and send you notifications when you exceed designated limits. Or, download the Friday app and be reminded to unplug each Friday evening.
If putting away your smartphone scares you, a digital detox trip may be necessary. Travelling to off-the-grid locations, participants give up technology for a multi-day period of recharging and reconnecting.

Reducing your dependence on technology may be tough at first, but it’s not impossible. Small steps in the right direction can lead to big changes that will impact you and your loved ones.

As real estate professionals, dependence upon technology is not likely to decrease anytime soon. By remaining well aware of the impacts technology can have on both you and your family, negative effects can be minimized and avoided.

Conclusion

Mobile devices are a double-edged sword. While devices have made working away from the office more convenient than ever before, they open up an entirely new set of issues, namely the question of work-life balance and what is to be expected of employees outside of working hours. Research shows that employees who set aside time fully away from work are less likely to experience work-family conflict and be more committed to the organization. Similarly, the negative impacts on family are reduced for those who set aside time away from work. Developing self-control to put away mobile devices is difficult but the payoffs are immeasurable.

Recommended Reading


About the Authors

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Dr. Merideth Ferguson (PhD – Vanderbilt University) has research interests in two main areas: toxic employee behavior and the work-family interface. She is particularly interested in how abusive supervision and workplace incivility cross over to affect an employee’s family experiences. Ferguson’s current research also investigates the impact of toxic workplaces on
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