Trouble in Paradise: How Working at Home May Negatively Affect Spouse’s Work Productivity
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Trouble in Paradise: How Working at Home May Negatively Affect Spouse’s Work Productivity

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The dim flicker of a laptop buzzes against the dark room. The rest of world is getting ready to turn it off for the evening, but not you. With deadlines approaching, you try and squeeze every last drop out of your busy work day. Your relationship with your spouse is on the rocks right now for working too much. You reassure yourself that things will get better after you meet your deadline, but are there consequences for this neglect that you aren’t realizing?

In today’s society, being busy is a badge of honor awarded to those who are important enough to contribute 60-80+ hours a week to the cause of their organization. This concept of Americans being workaholics is nothing new; however the traditional office work space has now been ruled obsolete. No longer is work contained by four walls that distinguish work life from personal life. The lines are blurred, and we often have a hard time separating work from home. The two have become intertwined like ivy on a tree branch. What you may not have considered is how working from home might affect your spouse. Our research suggests that the use of mobile technology for work purposes during family time has been found to negatively affect employees’ work and family lives.

Three hundred forty-four married couples were surveyed throughout our research. All participants worked full time and used mobile devices at home for work.

Our findings follow three logical arguments:

1. Working at home during family time causes conflict.
2. Conflict results in relationship tension between spouses.
3. Relationship tension causes spouse to experience reduced job satisfaction and performance.

Working at Home Causes Conflict

Working from home is inherent in real estate. Stanford recently released a study that showed employees who worked from home had increased productivity, fewer sick days, and took less
time off (Mautz 2018). Yet, like most things, moderation is key. Problems begin when work begins to bleed into your home life.

Research shows that when a mobile device is used for work during family time—for e-mail in particular—the individual’s ability to recover from work is compromised (O’Driscoll et al. 2010; Sonnentag & Bayer 2005). Working during family time also steals energy and focus away from family matters, which results in a plethora of issues, including internal stress and conflict among spouses. To clarify, working from home can boost productivity as long as it is conducted during business hours. When work is done through a mobile device during family time, it contributes to work conflict crossing over into the family domain.

**Conflict Causes Relationship Tension**

When work tasks are taken home, so are the conflicts that go along with them. This is especially true in high-stress, high-pressure industries such as real estate. Conflict often results in a loss of personal resources such as time, attention, and energy, which in turn leads to relationship tension as stress is placed on the partnership. Occasional disagreement is healthy in a relationship; however, constant stress can lead to negative outcomes, such as isolation and separation for the spouse.

**Tension Affects the Spouse’s Work Outcomes Too**

When there is tension at home, it can be hard for the spouse to focus on his or her own work during the day due to constantly ruminating on prior conversations and thus being unable to concentrate on work tasks. Our research shows that as the spouse employs resources to address the tension, fewer resources are available to dedicate to the spouse’s work domain. People often compartmentalize their life by sorting problems into little boxes such as “work” and “family,” but keeping them separate is harder than it seems. Our research shows that when family conflict spills over into the work domain, the spouse experiences a decrease in job satisfaction as well as a decrease in job performance.

**Implications**

In today’s ultra-competitive business environment, we often try to squeeze every last hour out of the day in order to get in one last email or one last call. However, we don’t stop and think about how that last email might impact the ones closest to us, and we certainly don’t think that it might negatively impact our spouse’s job performance.
Time management is crucial in making sure you have the time and energy to devote to your family. For real estate agents, setting boundaries with your clients may be a good start. Setting guidelines for times when you are and are not available to respond to texts or email help may reduce your temptation to work during family time. It could also help to sit down Sunday evening and schedule out time to be present with your family. Block out time to have dinner. But most importantly, make sure that the mobile device is locked and put away so you are present both physically and mentally. That last email isn’t going anywhere.

**Recommended Reading**


**References**


**About the Authors**

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Dr. Dawn Carlson’s (PhD – Florida State University) research focuses on workplace issues, such as abusive bosses and working mothers. Her work has been published in numerous journals such as the *Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Management*, and the *Journal of Business Ethics*. 
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Dr. Merideth Thompson’s (PhD – Vanderbilt University) research focuses on two main areas: bad employee behaviour 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. Her work has been published in numerous journals including the Journal of Applied Psychology and the Journal of Organizational Behavior.

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Dr. Wendy Boswell’s (PhD – Cornell University) research focuses on employee turnover and retention, job search behavior, and the work-nonwork interface. Her research has appeared in various scholarly and practitioner journals, and she serves on the editorial boards for several academic jobs. She has also served as Associate Editor for Personnel Psychology and Human Resource Management.

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