Digitally Assisted Life-(Im)Balance?

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This position paper argues that ‘work-life balance’ is an important and complex topic and that digital technologies play significant roles in bringing about what is experienced as poor or positive work-life balance. As yet we have limited understanding of the many, and continually evolving, systemic roles that digital technologies and habits play in life-balance. This includes how their design can either enhance or degrade that experience. Finally we argue for the need to develop methods for identifying and modelling systemic factors that underlie problematic and beneficial digital behaviours and the technological designs and affordances that support them.

work-life balance, digital habits, HCI, systems-thinking

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on preliminary work as part of the Digital Epiphanies project (Digital Epiphanies Project, 2013) focused on investigating the relationships between work-life balance and digital technologies.

Work-life balance is seen as important for many reasons: poor balance between paid work and ‘life’ outside of paid work is perceived, variously, to lead to poor personal and family wellbeing and health/quality of life, lack of community engagement and consequent social problems, serious negative consequences for business and economic outcomes, such as poor staff retention and economic productivity as well as national issues such as a strategic inability to prepare for changes associated with aging populations.

The changing nature of the relationships between paid-work and other aspects of life is driven by the interactions of a wide range of factors from the very personal, such as personality traits and associated habits (Allen & Kiburz, 2012) to the global, for example through the changing nature of work driven by globalisation of trade. Digital technologies play increasingly pervasive and ubiquitous roles in economic, social and personal arenas of life at all levels. This means that any meaningful understanding of work-life balance and related issues must include the roles of digital technologies.

2. DIGITAL HABITS & LIFE-BALANCE

Digital technologies are seen has having diverse functions in bringing about positive or negative work-life balance outcomes. For example they support positive flexible working practices that may enhance personal and family work-life balance, but equally may reinforce behaviours and habits associated with over-work (Porter & Perry, 2008). There is a particular focus in literature on how digital technologies enable increasing ‘spill-over’ of ‘work’ into ‘life’ partially driven by digital habits such as checking of e-mail and smartphone applications and responding to e-mail interruptions (Mark, et al. 2008; Oulasvirta, et al. 2012).

Digital technologies and habits not only affect the balances between aspects of paid-work and ‘life’ but also the balances of many other aspects of our lives. They are pervasive in our leisure, entertainment, communications and orchestration of daily lives with family and friends and the ways in which we engage with our extended communities. An Ofcom report in 2010 (Ofcom & Gfk, 2010) reported “the average [UK] adult spends just over seven hours a day with media, it follows that the average adult spent 45% of their waking hours undertaking some form of media or communications activity.”

At work, habits associated with technology use can be problematic for example in the interactions between work and technology addictions, (Porter & Kakabadse, 2006) and the relationships between the affective aspects of ‘busyness’ and digital technologies designed to support productivity.

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(Leshed & Sengers, 2011). However given the ubiquity of digital technologies these issues extend well beyond ‘work’.

Our digital habits and their consequences, co-evolve with the affordances of the digital technologies that are available to us both individually and collectively. For example the multi-functional nature and ubiquity of smart phones combine for them to become multi-role-devices spanning paid work and ‘life’ responsibilities, social life and entertainment. New features and devices are likely to bring new behaviours; the introduction of high bandwidth (4G) mobile broadband in combination with new devices such as Google Glass1, may enable and induce behaviours and associated habits such as new variations of ‘life-logging’ (Wikipedia, 2013). This continual and adaptive co-evolution is a difficult aspect for those of us studying their multiple and multi-scale roles.

3. CO-EVOLUTION AND SYSTEMIC PERSPECTIVES

As already noted in this paper, technologies offer potential life-balance benefits and yet also appear to bring negative outcomes. Some of these arise from habits that develop though co-evolutionary interactions between underlying technologies, specific design affordances of devices and software, and wider work/life and socioeconomic contexts.

There are examples of studies of how the design of digital technologies can be adapted to help improve specific issues with associated work-life balance, such as that of Leshed and Sengers cited above. However as yet these are relatively limited both in number and scope.

Even less well understood and developed are methods for studying systemic interactions and life-balance outcomes associated with digital behaviours in general and habits in particular.

Small changes in behaviour can have significant larger scale impacts on digital habits. Porter & Perry (2008, p. 269) illustrate how pervasive cultural habits can arise from simple misinterpretations of signals from digital behaviours. In their example, the formation of cultural norms of responding to e-mails out of hours, they note how a simple change in behaviour by managers – saving messages when written out-of-hours as drafts, rather than sending them immediately – could help prevent the spread of unintended and potentially harmful cultural habits.

Identifying subtle but critical behaviours that can underlie unhelpful digital habits can be highly problematic. This is especially the case where they are more distant from their causes and/or outcomes than in the previous illustration, for example though systemic behaviours including feedback and delay.

Subtle behaviours and, importantly for the HCI community, changes in behaviours enabled by the design of digital technologies, can be highly significant across whole work-life systems. We argue that, as yet, methods for systematically identifying and modelling these kinds of factors appear to be limited in HCI practice and are worthy of significant development effort by the community.

4. REFERENCES


1 http://www.google.com/glass/