

# Can technology stress at work impair partnerships at home?



Imagine Hannah sitting in her office and waiting for an email from a colleague with crucial information for an upcoming meeting with her boss. Unfortunately, her email program erroneously filters the email as spam, producing severe time delays, and messing up Hannah's meeting. Over the course of the day, Hannah cannot let go of the stress and the negative feelings that linger on. As she returns home in the evening, she is grouchy and takes her anger out on her husband Marc, who becomes frustrated.

Employees across all job industries and hierarchy levels find themselves in situations that Hannah faced in her office. Digital technologies increasingly pervade our workplaces and produce stress, commonly referred to as IT-driven stress or simply technology stress, with often problematic effects for employees. Stressed ICT workers tend to be fatigued, prone to mistakes and injuries, and more likely to be absent, resulting in healthcare costs that are twice as high as those of other employees ([APA 2018](#)). Collectively, the consequences of work stress, from depression to heart disease, cost the U.S. economy an estimated \$200 to \$300 billion a year in lost productivity ([Alicea 2016](#)).

Over the last two decades, researchers have studied technology stress mainly as a within-domain phenomenon, primarily in the work domain, but have neglected to look at the work-life interface and potential cross-domain implications. Given the pervasiveness of digital technologies, technology stress may also bleed over into employees' homes with the potential to drive a wedge into their romantic relationships. On the other side, however, more recent studies have hinted at potentially beneficial effects of technology stress highlighting that good stress has to be distinguished from bad stress. This begs the following questions: 1) Does IT-driven stress at work spill over to affect employees' partnerships at home? 2) If so, can IT-driven stress be detrimental and beneficial for partnerships at the same time? 3) How can companies reduce bad technology stress and promote good technology stress across life domains?

Our work at Technical University of Darmstadt may offer some answers. In a recently [published paper](#), we investigated how employees of German companies across different industries and sizes experienced technology stress over the course of two workweeks. Using experience-sampling methodology, we surveyed employees multiple times a day and specifically examined how they and their partners were affected by technology stress.

We found that technology stress indeed spilled over into employees' homes by affecting their (and their partners') partnership satisfaction and that employees' emotions and affective states were mainly responsible for transmitting the work stress into their homes. On days when employees encountered negative technology stressors that were experienced as barriers or hindrances to their task fulfilment (such as a computer breakdown or unsolicited email spam), they felt stronger negative affect, which spilled over to hamper their partnership satisfaction at home. Employees reported that the negative affect tugged at them over the course of the day, hindering them from investing sufficient resources into their partnerships. Even more interestingly, on days when employees encountered positive technology stressors that were experienced as challenging and conducive to task fulfilment (such as completing important work tasks more quickly with the support of IT or building up essential digital skills), they felt higher positive affect. These positive emotions in turn translated into higher partnership satisfaction, when employees shared their positive experiences at home and infected their partners with their good mood.

How can organisations influence and manage these pervasive effects of daily technology stress? In our study, we looked at two pertinent factors likely shaping the work-home spillover process: (1) work-home role integration and (2) perceived organisational support in work-home boundary management. First, work-home role integration refers to the preferences of individuals for integrating or segmenting aspects of work and home. While "segmenters" prefer to keep work and family separate from each other, creating and maintaining a mental fence, "integrators" prefer to combine elements of both domains, essentially removing boundaries between life domains and blending facets of each. Second, employees also differ in how they perceive their organisations to be supporting them in managing their individual work-home boundaries. Examples of such support include providing flexible work arrangements (e.g., flextime, unpaid leave), childcare assistance (e.g., on-site childcare facilities), and financial assistance for dependent care.

Our study revealed that both factors played important roles at the work-home boundary by promoting or inhibiting the IT-driven affective spillover processes. We found that work-home role integration acts as a double-edged sword. Integrators can benefit from good technology stress and positive affect spilling over to enrich partnerships at home, while they also suffer from bad technology stress and negative affect impairing relationships at home. In contrast, segmenters can protect themselves from the negative affect triggered by bad technology stress but also miss out on the advantages from the stimulating effects of good technology stress and positive affect on partnerships.

Employees perceiving high organisational support in work-home boundary management were able to benefit from positive technology stress spillover, while blocking negative technology stress spillover. High organisational support helped employees to strengthen their psychological and physical resources and free up capacities such as time and energy (e.g., by mitigating concerns about childcare) to cope more considerately with emotions in the wake of stressful technology demands. Such extra resources and flexibility allowed employees to invest more time and attention to their partnerships at home.

As workplaces become increasingly permeated with digital technologies that can produce good and bad stress throughout a day spilling over into our homes, organisations are well advised to carefully integrate employee preferences in work-home role integration into their work-life balance programs and support employees in their daily work-boundary management. The value at stake is high because technology stress cannot only affect employees' productivity at work – it may even make or break their partnerships at home.



#### Notes:

- This blog post is based on [A Daily Field Investigation of Technology-Driven Stress Spillovers from Work to Home](#), *Management Information Systems Quarterly*, Vol. 44 Iss. 3, p. 1259-1300 (2020)
- The post expresses the views of its author(s), not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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