The Integration Myth:

How a misconception about work styles might be harming worker well-being

Truist Leadership Institute

Workers are asking for more and more flexibility in their work arrangements, and they are getting it (1,2,3). Flexible work arrangements can make switching between work and nonwork very convenient, and many workers are taking advantage of that convenience and blending their work and nonwork time. But that integration of work and nonwork life domains can have a hidden cost.

From Balance to Integration

In recent years, even before COVID19, the idea of *work-life balance* has fallen out of fashion. In its place, many promote work-life *integration*.

The *work-life integration* approach proposes that workers should not try to *balance* work and nonwork as if they are in competition, but to seamlessly integrate work and nonwork wherever and whenever it is convenient. The approach also implies that the blurring or eliminating of boundaries between work and nonwork is healthier than separating them.

In fact, empirical evidence indicates exactly the opposite. The research has over time become quite clear, and during 2020 and 2021 seems to have gotten even clearer: **boundaries** between work and non-work, **not integration**, protect against burnout and work-nonwork stress. Blurred or non-existent boundaries are associated with such outcomes as more exhaustion, stress, burnout, absenteeism, intent to quit and dissatisfaction with job, marriage, and life in general (4,5,6).

Boundaries are simply mental barriers that define a role (7). For example, the psychological boundaries of your work role would be defined by the mental lines that you put up around the times, or the effort, you dedicate to working. Boundaries do not have to be impregnable walls – they can be permeable and moveable (see our companion paper "Make Hybrid Work" for a step-by-step guide to building and maintaining boundaries).

How does Work-Life Integration stand up to evidence?

The work-life integration approach is underpinned by several arguments and assumptions that turn out to be largely unsupported by evidence. Understanding what research indicates about each of these dubious ideas – myths, if you will – should help individuals and leaders make better decisions about the work-life interface.

1. Myth: Remote work = work-life integration/balance/well-being. Some say that giving workers remote work options and technology *by definition* means workers will be happier, less stressed, and more balanced (e.g., 8). Remote work options and managing

work stress are, in fact, two separate topics. They are of course related – when a worker starts working remotely for the first time or begins more flexible working arrangements, they are faced with new choices about how to handle potential work-life conflicts.

But simply having more remote work options does not automatically mean that a worker is better off. In fact, more flexibility may even be detrimental if boundaries are not enacted. Research indicates that non-work-time access to work impinges upon disengagement and recovery time from work stress, which is related to poorer health and well-being (5,9,10). These effects could be prime contributors to burnout.

2. Myth: The existence of technology means work-life balance is impossible. The argument is, that because new technologies allow more flexible work, the separation of work and nonwork is forever gone. This unfortunate conclusion implies that humans are so helpless, so dependent, so controlled by device notifications and social media, that we are incapable of the act of turning off our devices or of adjusting our notifications for different email accounts or phone numbers; or that organizations are powerless to set limits on after-hours communications.

We believe working adults are more capable than that. We also believe that turning off devices (or at least notifications) after hours might be a powerful health intervention for many people. It may seem difficult, or impossible in some positions, to fully unplug from work in this way. But the research suggests that the **quality** of your plugged-in time will increase if you fully engage in your unplugged time. You may also reduce your risk of burnout.

3. Myth: "Work-life balance" puts the two roles in competition. This is an argument that many speakers use when they say integration is the way of the future. If you feel like the term "balance" or the juxtaposition of "work" and "life" invokes some kind of conflict, you certainly don't have to use it! That opinion, however, does not constitute a reason to remove boundaries between work and life. The science is clear – although there may be some benefits of integration, the preponderance of evidence indicates that fewer or more permeable boundaries between work and non-work means poorer well-being (4).

In fact, technically speaking, researchers mainly use the term "work-life balance" to describe when the two domains are compatible and fulfill one's values, so that workers are investing exactly what they want in both work and non-work (11). To make things even more complex, some authors who advocate for work-life integration seem to appreciate and incorporate good research into their guidance (e.g., 12). We don't mean to suggest that practitioners need to conform to the academic convention–we simply note that paying attention to writers' underlying arguments, not just the labels they use, is important.

If you don't want to see your work and non-work as competing, that's fine – we agree that such competition would likely be detrimental or at least unpleasant. But it does not logically follow that there should be no boundaries. This is a fallacious argument – don't fall for it! (Some executives might be interested in selling the idea of full work-life integration; cynically, we might question their motivation in doing so – more integration, after all, would mean easier access to workers during non-work hours.)

4. Myth: Separating work and life artificially separates parts of your identity that should be integrated. Apparently the argument is this: if you rigidly segment your work time from your non-work time, then your self will be divided, and that division is harmful or at least unpleasant.

But if stress from one life domain bleeds over into another, or if you're constantly wondering whether you should be working now or not (13), flexibility becomes a burden rather than a benefit.

You do not need to have constant access to both work and nonwork for the two domains to supplement each other. You can build your identity and pride from multiple life domains, you can think about both, you can revel in and enjoy both, without having immediate access to work emails in every moment of your non-work life. Having boundaries does not mean that work must be rigidly sequestered from all other life domains – your boundaries could allow free passage of certain identity-related benefits, like taking pride in your work, but block things like stress or second-guessing. Talking and thinking about work and its value and meaning can be rewarding in non-work times, and taking pride in your family or non-work activities while visiting with colleagues at work can be energizing (14).

5. Myth: Separating work from non-work impinges on lifestyle. Proponents of work-life integration often make the case that integrating work and non-work enables a more flexible lifestyle, wherein workers can attend family events, pursue their fitness activities or hobbies, or even vacation more if they can access work from any of these other activities. Separating work and non-work, then, restricts workers' ability to enjoy such a lifestyle.

If work is performed during nonwork activities, however, the benefits of flexibility and integration may start to disappear. A robust line of research indicates that trying to switch back and forth between two activities or do them both at the same time reduces the quality of both (15,16). After each switch, the brain needs time to adjust to the new task, and thoughts about the old task can linger, interfering with the new one.

These "task switch costs" will likely make the work you do from a family event lesser quality. They will also interfere with your ability to engage in, appreciate, and remember some meaningful life events.

The question then becomes, is it better to integrate work and non-work and do both with less quality, or to enact boundaries and do better at both?

6. Myth: Work-life "balance" means you can't bring your best self when it's best for you. If when and where you work is rigidly fixed and unalterable, you might not be able to be at your best during all that time. So, some flexibility in when and where you work can help, say, allow you to do child care during certain hours during the day and then work later. That type of flexibility certainly helps you apply yourself to roles at convenient times.

Such flexibility should, however, follow boundaries. Effective boundaries do not imply that you have to work on-site – whether you're at home, in an office, or at another worksite, you can define and enact boundaries. In fact, establishing set times or places to work might help you concentrate more and dedicate more brainpower to the task at hand through habits. When a routine becomes habitual, it is performed with less effort, freeing up your capacity to concentrate (17).

7. Myth: Work-life integration = more autonomy. Autonomy is thought by many to be a fundamental human need, and it is a top driver of work engagement (18). Work-life integration is often sold as giving workers more control over their lives – they can control when they run personal errands, when they want to attend a child's school event or engage in their favorite workout activities. Without boundaries, however, this kind of freedom can end up requiring you to constantly worry about whether you should be working or not. This worry can be amplified if you are expected to always be reachable by text or phone.

In this scenario, work is reaching into every area of your life, and you've lost control over a fundamental freedom – the ability to choose how to spend your time and attention. With integration, people may think they're getting autonomy, when in fact they've given control over some of their mental capacity – 24 hours a day – to their employer.

8. Myth: Everyone wants work-life integration. In fact, studies show that preferences for managing the work-nonwork interface can vary widely (19). Many people seem to value firm boundaries between work and non-work. Many workers may not have the same goals and values as career-centric executives and executive hopefuls. Many positions (like many non-exempt, hourly workers) don't get paid to think while off the clock, and many likely want it that way. Even among professionals and thought workers, many may treat their paying job as a sinecure while they pursue more intrinsically valuable work that wouldn't pay their bills.

Our research (20) shows as many people report no work stress spillover into home time as those who do, suggesting that some workers have successfully segmented their work and non-work life domains. (Those who report no spillover have significantly lower intent to search for a new job.)

What should be done?

We recommend that employers:

- Define your organization's philosophical positions on the interface between work and nonwork. That position should be guided by your corporate values, and should take into account the science of work-life balance. How important is it, for example, that workers be accessible round the clock, and how does that weigh against the importance of boundary management?

- Build formal policies governing after-hours communication. For example, you could require late emails to be cached and sent in the morning, or prohibit use of personal phone numbers after hours.

- Then, take a close look at the official policies, and *unofficial expectations*, that drive work-life integration behaviors. Are they aligned with the official position? Keep in mind that *norms* – like perceptions of what the manager expects, or seeing that everyone else is accessible after hours, strongly influence workers' behaviors whether or not they match company values (19). So, no matter what your formal policies are, find out what the norms are, and adjust them to match your official stance.

It could be very difficult to give up after-hours communications, especially when you feel competitors might be more nimble or responsive because of it. We recommend weighing those concerns against the benefits of less stress, better recovery, and ultimately better health among your workforce.

For individual workers, we recommend:

- Spend some time thinking about what you value in your life. Is work accomplishment your top value? Does family time rank as high as earning money? Where do things like travel rank?
- Then, think about what research says about dividing your attention, and decide how much you want to mix work and nonwork tasks.
- Thoughtfully build and enact boundaries according to your conclusions about your values. You might develop absolute, impermeable boundaries. Or they could be more complex; for example, so that important work tasks come through, but only if you mindfully transition between work and non-work.

Conclusion

Firm, consistent boundaries between work and non-work life domains are exactly opposite what many popular articles advise (8,21,22,23). Even some academic institutions promote the blending of work and non-work (24). Unfortunately, we see the common discourse around work-life balance or integration as almost entirely ignorant of the research on it.

Instead of following the latest trends in popular articles or talks about work-life integration, we recommend examining your own values and setting boundaries that enact them. *Prepared by Will Sutton, President and Director of Truist Leadership Institute.*

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Debunking the Myths about Integration

Identify a policy or guideline in your organization or team that is connected to the myths about integration (remote work, technology, balance, etc.).

Where are the gaps between the intent of the policy or guideline, and the impact on employee well-being?

How well does it support balance over integration?
How is it applied differently within your organization?
How do you know?

What actions can you take to lessen the gaps? How can you include others in making improvements?

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1427 REVISED 3/2025