2023

# Does work-life boundary management improve work-life balance for remote workers: A critically appraised topic

Danyelle L. Berger
*University of Maryland Global Campus*, dberger73@yahoo.com

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**EDITORIAL NOTE**

In the article "work-life boundary management", author Danyelle Berger critically examines the science behind the practice of managing the balance between work-life and personal-life. This research is important because the recent COVID-19 pandemic wreaked havoc with the working culture of many organizations world-wide. Disturbances such as the availability of the labor force, interruptions in supply chains, and lockdown enforced work-at-home policies, significantly upset work routines. People around the globe have found themselves with more, or less, autonomy over how they arrange their life's activities. The findings in this examination of the research literature indicate that careful management of the boundary between work and personal activities leads to an optimal work-life balance. Careful management, however, means allowing flexibility in the boundary such that exigencies in either work or personal priorities can temporarily adjust the boundary.

# Does work-life boundary management improve work-life balance for remote workers: A critically appraised topic

**Danyelle L. Berger**
University of Maryland Global Campus

## ABSTRACT

This topic paper examines whether managing the boundaries between work life and personal life positively affects work-life balance in the context of remote work. The research that forms the basis of this topic paper is derived from five scholarly, peer-reviewed articles relevant to the stated purpose. The findings are mixed. In the long term, they indicate that successful management of the boundaries between work life and personal life affects work-life balance positively, while non-management of boundaries affects work-life balance negatively. In the short term, the findings demonstrate that managing boundaries in a way that allows for temporary and deliberate weakening of boundaries can also have a positive effect on work-life balance if the move accommodates a personal need or is perceived as a temporary imbalance. As remote working arrangements become more widespread and a larger emphasis is placed on the importance of work-life balance for employees, understanding the effect that remote work has on work-life balance is critical. As a result, the findings of this topic paper are relevant to current management challenges and to managers in all industries where remote working takes place.

## RESEARCH QUESTION

The research question for this topic paper is this: Does work–life boundary management improve work–life balance for remote workers? See Table 1 for PICOC framing of this research question.

## BACKGROUND

Technological advancements in recent decades have expanded the ability and opportunity to perform work in places other than an employer's primary location (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016). Known by various terms, including telework, remote work, or work-from-home, this important feature of twenty-first century employment is defined as work that is conducted via technology (Weiderman & Hofmeyr, 2020) and that typically is performed away from the employer's location (Spreitzer et al., 2017). The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns unexpectedly served as a catalyst for a quick and massive shift to remote work, which enabled workers to continue to work while simultaneously minimizing virus transmission (de Klerk et al., 2021). Since then, many workers have come to prefer remote working over traditional pre-pandemic arrangements and have expressed a desire to continue to work in this manner (Smite et al., 2023).

Despite the increasing incidence of remote work, the literature remains inconclusive as to whether its implementation results in a positive, negative, or neutral overall outcome for work–life balance (Renard et al., 2021). In addition, research on the direct effects of remote working on work–life balance is still sparse (Athanasiadou & Theriou, 2021). In the context of this topic paper,

**Table 1: PICOC Framework**

| PICOC Element | Description |
|---|---|
| Problem | Achieving and maintaining optimal work–life balance |
| Intervention | Establishment and ongoing management of boundaries separating work life from personal life |
| Comparison | Failure to establish and non-management of boundaries separating work life from personal life |
| Outcome | Optimal work–life balance |
| Context | Remote working |

work–life balance is defined as the ability by an individual to manage life's obligations, including work, family, and personal well-being (Haar, 2013). Given that optimizing employees' needs for work–life balance has become a strategic requirement as employers compete for talent (Greenblatt, 2015), understanding whether and how optimal work–life balance can be achieved in a remote work setting is critical.

Although remote working offers advantages for employees that can affect work–life balance positively, the degradation of work–life boundary management has been identified as a significant drawback that may negatively affect work–life balance

(Eddleston & Mulki, 2017). Boundaries can be identified as psychological, social, or cultural creations; may be informally or formally motivated; and are designed to establish stability for expectations within human activity (Star, 2010). In this critical appraisal, boundary management is defined by Kossek and Lautsch (2012) as employees' approach to establishing separate domains to accomplish their work, family, and non-work duties. Therefore, the purpose of this critical appraisal is to address the research question of whether managing the boundaries between work and personal life results in a positive effect on work–life balance in the context of remote working.

## SEARCH STRATEGY AND RESULTS

To identify relevant research studies that fall within the scope of the research question, I used appropriately crafted key-word search strings and accessed multiple databases. To ensure that only business-related articles would be identified, I relied on two business databases: (1) *Business Source Ultimate*, which is a database made up of academic journals, books, and trade publications, and (2) SCOPUS, which is a database of peer-reviewed research. A summary of the search strings and strategy used to find relevant articles is in Figure 1. The database search yielded 758 articles, and I identified 2 additional articles via "snowballing," or identifying articles in the reference sections of other articles. From there, I refined the list of articles by reviewing titles and abstracts. This refinement strategy yielded

59 articles, and after a more detailed title and abstract review to determine relevance to the research purpose, I retained all 59 articles as relevant. Hereto these 59 articles, I applied inclusion and exclusion criteria. As an inclusion criterion, I retained only the articles published in the past twenty years (since 2003) to focus on the modern IT communications context. I applied additional inclusion criteria in the following order: the article contained the subject keyword "work-life balance"; the article was peer reviewed; and it was published in an academic journal. I excluded articles that were not available in full text or written in English. After I applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria, five relevant articles remained for use in this study (see Table 2).

Using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) allowed me to ensure an adequate critical appraisal of the five articles. This tool uses two screening questions and five methodological quality criteria questions tailored to the study design (Hong et al., 2018). All five articles were determined to be credible, valuable, and relevant to the chosen research topic. Following the critical appraisal, a systematic coding process on the five articles focused on codes, categories, and themes. Table 3 provides an overview of each article by author, research approach, methodology, and critical assessment of validity. From the coding analysis, three major themes emerged from the data, which I discuss in the Research section.
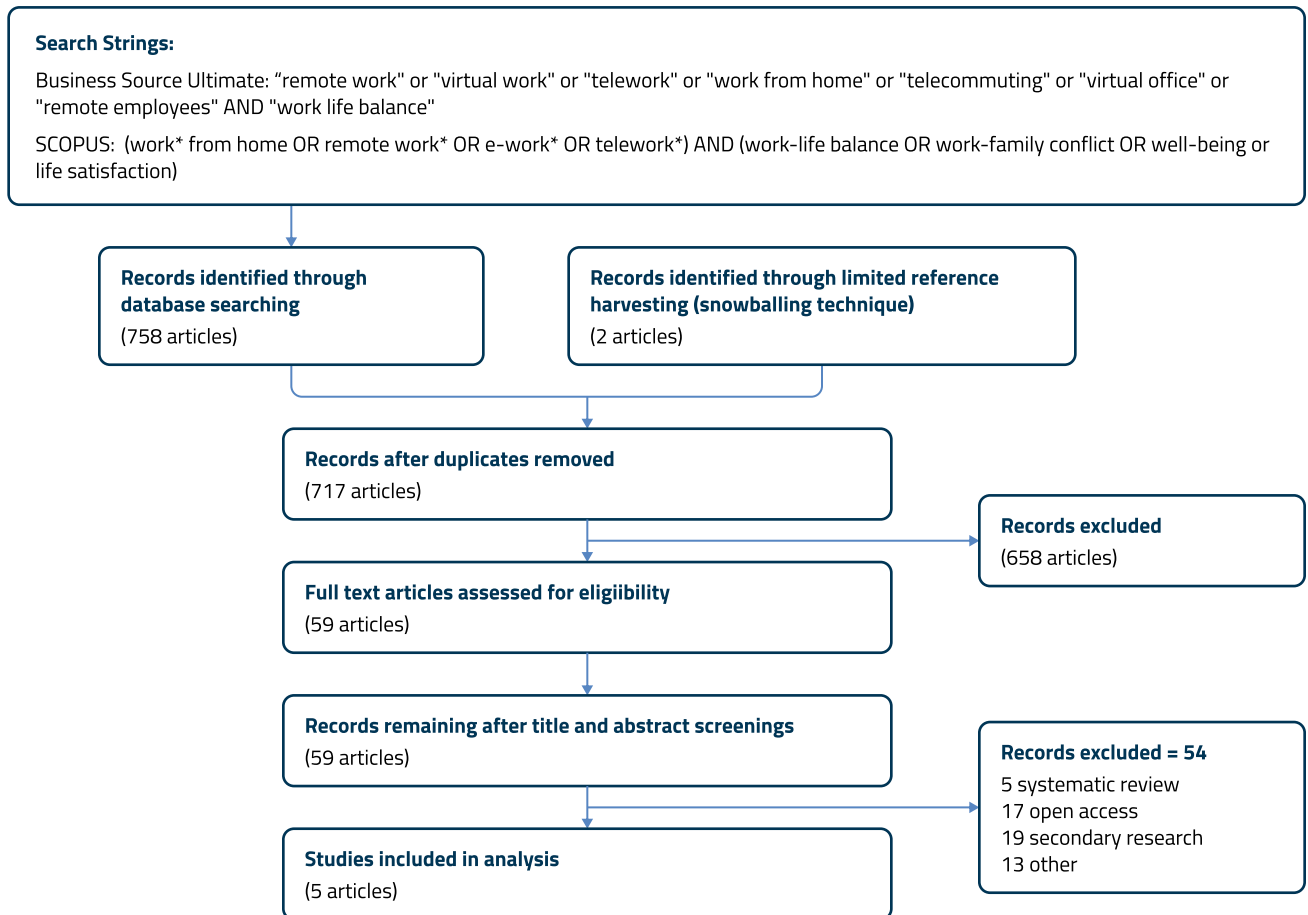
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**Figure 1: Search Flowchart**



Search Strings:

Business Source Ultimate: "remote work" or "virtual work" or "telework" or "work from home" or "telecommuting" or "virtual office" or "remote employees" AND "work life balance"

SCOPUS: (work* from home OR remote work* OR e-work* OR telework*) AND (work-life balance OR work-family conflict OR well-being or life satisfaction)

Records identified through database searching
(758 articles)

Records identified through limited reference harvesting (snowballing technique)
(2 articles)

Records after duplicates removed
(717 articles)

Records excluded
(658 articles)

Full text articles assessed for eligiibility
(59 articles)

Records remaining after title and abstract screenings
(59 articles)

Records excluded = 54
5 systematic review
17 open access
19 secondary research
13 other

Studies included in analysis
(5 articles)

**Table 2: Search Results**

| Study Number | Article Reference |
|---|---|
| 1 | Grant, C.A., Wallace, L.M., & Spurgeon, P.C. 2013. An exploration of the psychological factors affecting remote e-worker's job effectiveness, well-being and work-life balance. ***Employee Relations*** 35(5): 527–546. |
| 2 | Pillai, S.V., & Prasad, J. 2023. Investigating the key success metrics for WFH/remote work models. ***Industrial and Commercial Training*** 55(1): 19–33. |
| 3 | Moore, J. 2006. Homeworking and work-life balance: Does it add to quality of life? ***Revue Europeenne de Psychologie Appliquee***, 56(1), 5–13. |
| 4 | Bellmann, L. & Hübler, O. 2021. Working from home, job satisfaction and work-life balance – robust or heterogeneous links? ***International Journal of Manpower***, 42(3): 424–441. |
| 5 | Irawanto, D. I., Novianti, K. R., & Roz, K. 2021. Work from home: Measuring satisfaction between work-life balance and work stress during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. ***Economies***, 9(96): 96. |

**Table 3: Evaluation of Validity**

| Study Number & Author | Research Approach | Empirical Basis | Analysis Method | Overall Validity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Grant et al. (2013) | Qualitative; interview and thematic analysis | Interviews of 11 U.K. remote workers in private, public, and voluntary employment positions. Participants had various hybrid remote/in-person schedules. | Semi-structured interviews and thematic coding analysis | High validity; conclusions follow from the literature review and thematic analysis interpretation. |
| 2. Pillai & Prasad (2023) | Mixed method; focus group interviews, structured question-naires, and model development | Interview and survey of 85 employees, corporate executives, and HR managers, in information technology industry in Kerala, India. Participants had various hybrid remote/in-person schedules. | Statistical analysis with model verification | High validity; conclusions follow from the literature review, statistical analysis, and model. |
| 3. Moore (2006) | Mixed method; semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and questionnaire | Interviews, surveys, and questionnaires conducted with 123 remote workers in North England. Participants worked remotely exclusively. | Descriptive statistics | High validity; conclusions follow from the literature review and are drawn from semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. |
| 4. Bellmann & Hübler (2021) | Quantitative; survey and model development | Approximately 7,000 employees working at private sector European companies. Level and duration of telework varied among participants. | Statistical analysis with model verification | High validity; conclusions follow from the literature review, statistical analysis, and model. |
| 5. Irawanto et al. (2021) | Quantitative; questionnaire and model development | Questionnaire completed by 472 remote workers all over Indonesia. Participants worked remotely exclusively. | Statistical analysis with model verification | High validity; conclusions follow from the literature review, statistical analysis, and model. |

## RESEARCH

Each of the five articles analyzed in this topic paper used a different method or methods to examine the effects that managing (or not managing) work and personal boundaries have on work-life balance for remote workers. The findings and evidence of the five articles are detailed in Table 4. My review of the articles indicates that non-management of boundaries affects work-life balance negatively, while management of boundaries affects work-life balance positively. The review also provides evidence that managing boundaries in a way that allows for occasional overlap to accommodate personal needs and perceived imbalances also affects work-life balance positively.

Study 1 investigated how remote working affects job effectiveness, work-life balance, and well-being, to arrive at general themes (Grant et al., 2013). The overall results of the research regarding work-life balance were mixed (Grant et al., 2013). The experienced remote work employees interviewed for the study indicated that establishing strict boundaries between work and personal life was necessary to successfully integrate the two (Grant et al., 2013). Thus, the study supports the need to establish clear boundaries to ensure a positive influence on work-life balance. However, participants also reported that the ease and availability of technology created challenges for them in establishing and maintaining optimal boundaries between work and personal life; many of the study participants voluntarily allowed work to carry into their personal time (Grant et al., 2013). Some participants also described a habitual need to access work

**Table 4: Key Findings**

| Study Number & Author | Finding 1: Managing boundaries positively contributed to optimal work-life balance | Finding 2: Managing boundaries while allowing for temporary permeations positively contributed to optimal work-life balance | Finding 3: Not managing boundaries negatively contributed to optimal work-life balance |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Grant et al. (2013) | Participants stated that establishing strict work and personal time boundaries is necessary to improve work-life balance. Remote work enables individuals to better integrate work and personal lives in a way that suited them best. | N/A | Technology makes it easy for employees to be accessible during non-work hours, contributing negatively to work-life balance. Remote workers experience a habitual need to access work remotely, causing them to ignore family or personal life commitments and contributing negatively to work-life balance. |
| 2. Pillai & Prasad (2023) | N/A | The option to be more flexible with schedules when needed improved work-life balance for women. | Distractions caused by other family members in close proximity affected work-life balance negatively during remote work. Additional stress resulting from the constant need to manage work and family dynamics led to increased attrition. |
| 3. Moore (2006) | Many participants acknowledged that successfully managing work and personal life was critical to their success with remote work. | N/A | Study participants who had young children at home had difficulty managing their work life and personal life demands, contributing negatively to work-life balance. |
| 4. Bellman and Hübler (2021) | N/A | When a work-life imbalance existed for private or personal life reasons, the increased flexibility of remote work scheduling helped to re-establish optimal balance. | Employees were shown to voluntarily exchange personal time for additional work time, contributing negatively to work-life balance. |
| 5. Irawanto et al. (2021) | Employees recognized that establishing clear boundaries between work and personal lives was needed to improve work-life balance but noted that it was a continuous challenge. | N/A | The study showed that employees are not used to having to manage work and personal life because they are used to a fixed working schedule that reflects their experience of working in an office environment. |

when they worked remotely – sometimes at the expense of family commitments; such habits eroded work-life balance (Grant et al., 2013).

Study 2 investigated the work-life balance and productivity experiences of employees and employers in settings that allow remote work (Pillai & Prasad, 2023). The research found that employees' work-life balance benefited from the increased flexibility in schedules because it allowed them to manage the interface between work and personal life in an optimal way (Pillai & Prasad, 2023). In this example, if voluntary overlapping of work and personal time provides efficiency to an employee, the overlap can have a positive effect on work-life balance. However, the research also demonstrated that remote workers experience challenges in managing work and personal life boundaries; such challenges that negatively affected work-life balance were caused by distractions from family member and the constant need to navigate complex work and family dynamics (Pillai & Prasad, 2023). In addition, the research found that attrition among remote workers increased because of the complexities of navigating work and personal lives (Pillai & Prasad, 2023).

Study 3 sought to better understand the experience of remote working and to identify the factors that contributed to an improved work-life balance, sense of well-being, and quality of life (Moore, 2006). The remote workers who participated in the study shared that managing the boundaries of work life and personal life was critical to successful remote working (Moore, 2006), thus supporting the idea that managing boundaries contributed positively to work-life balance. The study participants also reported that they struggled to implement and maintain boundaries between work life and personal life, especially if they had young children at home (Moore, 2006).

Study 4 investigated how remote work affected job satisfaction and work-life balance. The study found that employees who experienced work-life imbalances for personal, non-work-related reasons were better able to manage and re-establish balance because of the increased flexibility that remote work afforded (Bellmann & Hübler, 2021). This finding demonstrates that intentional mingling of boundaries between work life and personal life has the potential to affect work-life balance positively. Based on this example, managing boundaries between work life and personal life by allowing for temporary overlaps benefited work-life balance positively. Such overlaps had to be done at the employees' discretion to resolve a temporary imbalance or to address a personal need. The research also showed that remote workers struggled to observe boundaries between work life and personal life; and even when they voluntarily exchanged personal time for additional work time, the struggle contributed negatively to work-life balance (Bellmann & Hübler, 2021).

Study 5 investigated the predictors of job satisfaction during remote working, looking specifically at the factors of work-life balance and work stress (Irawanto et al., 2021). The research showed that remote work negatively affected work-life balance, job satisfaction, and work stress (Irawanto et al., 2021). Remote work employees who participated in the study noted that establishing clear boundaries between work and personal life to maintain optimal work-life balance was important; however, they also stated that it was difficult to do so (Irawanto et al., 2021). In addition, the study showed that employees struggle with managing the boundaries between work life and personal life because they are unaccustomed to doing so and they lack the required tools and mindset, having become accustomed to a fixed work schedule that comes with working in an office setting (Irawanto et al., 2021).

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The evidence reveals that in a remote work setting, managing boundaries in the long term between work life and personal life is critical to establishing an optimal work-life balance; meanwhile, failing to manage boundaries between work life and personal life affects work-life balance negatively. The research also provided evidence that managing work life and personal life boundaries in a way that allowed for temporary adjustments and overlaps also had a positive effect on work-life balance if it was done at the discretion of the employee to address a personal or non-work issue or imbalance. The research did not reveal any findings to indicate that managing boundaries between work life and personal life contributes negatively to work-life balance.

**Managing boundaries positively contributed to optimal work-life balance.** In three of the research articles evaluated, employees working remotely acknowledged that implementing strict boundaries between work life and personal life was imperative to successful remote work that resulted in an optimal work-life balance (Grant, 2013; Moore, 2006; Irawanto et al. (2021). The research also revealed that implementing these boundaries enabled employees to successfully integrate work life and personal life (Grant, 2013).

**Management of boundaries that allowed for temporary permeation positively contributed to optimal work-life balance.** Bellman & Hübler (2021) found that the flexibility afforded by remote work empowered employees, giving them the autonomy they needed to adjust their schedule and allowing for a shift in work life and personal life boundaries to better accommodate personal life needs. Intentionally and mindfully allowing a temporary overlap between work and personal lives contributed positively to work-life balance. Pillai and Prasad (2023) also revealed that deliberate but temporary adjustments of work life and personal life boundaries, done to accommodate personal needs, could affect work-life balance positively. In this study, personal needs often related to accommodating for the presence of young children or caring for elderly family members, which required temporarily shifting schedules.

**Non-management of boundaries negatively contributed to optimal work-life balance.** All five articles provided evidence that allowing the boundaries between work and

personal life to mix contributed negatively to work-life balance. Grant et al. (2013) demonstrated that the convenience and ease of technology caused remote workers to voluntarily expand their working hours and, in some cases, to develop a habitual need to "stay connected" at the expense of personal time. Pillai and Prasad (2023) found that the home environment introduced family and personal life distractions that caused work and personal time to overlap. Moore (2006) revealed that many remote workers – especially those with young children at home – struggled with balancing work and personal time. Bellman and Hübler (2021) also found that remote workers voluntarily expanded their work schedule and developed a tendency to expand work hours while reducing personal time hours. Irawanto et al. (2021) showed that simply not having the experience necessary to manage work and personal time boundaries – after working for many years with a fixed, in-office work schedule – caused remote workers to struggle. The added stress of managing work and personal life boundaries was found to increase attrition of remote workers (Pillai & Prasad, 2023).

None of the articles provided evidence to indicate that effectively managing boundaries between work life and personal life negatively affected work-life balance.

## CONCLUSION

Optimal management of the boundaries between work life and personal life is critical in ensuring the success of remote working. The study findings indicate that workers should mindfully and intentionally manage the separation of work life and personal life while engaging in remote working; they need to be vigilant in monitoring this boundary to achieve an optimal work-life balance. As with all things in life, circumstances change. While both small and large life or work events may cause temporary disparities in work-life balance, the flexibility of remote work schedules enables individuals to quickly pivot. Remote work flexibility temporarily allows for boundary

shifts, and also for maintaining an overall positive influence on work-life balance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on this analysis, mindful and deliberate management of the boundaries between work life and personal life is the main recommendation to ensure that remote working affects work-life balance positively (Grant et al., 2013; Pillai & Prasad, 2023; Moore, 2006; Bellman & Hübler, 2021; Irawanto et al., 2021). Pillai and Prasad (2023) and Grant et al. (2013) found that family distractions and interruptions degraded the boundary between work life and personal life. Irawanto et al. (2021) suggest that clearly separating work and personal lives is not easy because previous non-remote work has conditioned employees to rely on fixed working hours, and such structure may degrade or not be feasible in a remote-work context. To combat this challenge, remote workers should implement strict time management practices, establishing clearly defined work hours and ensuring that they are acknowledged in advance by other employees, the employer, and the employee's family. This communication sets expectations and enables an easier mental switch between work time and personal time for the remote worker. Moore (2006) indicates that establishing the boundary between work life and personal life is essential to successful remote working and an optimal work-life balance. Such boundaries might be spatial as well as temporal: Remote workers might establish a physical workspace where they undertake their remote work responsibilities; the space can act as a buffer between work time and personal time, enabling a real psychological shift between both work time and space and personal time and space. All work, or as much work as possible, should be performed in this location during established work hours. These recommendations establish a spatial psychological boundary between the concepts of work time and personal time (Messersmith, 2007), which can help employees to switch between a work-centered mindset and a home-centered mindset.

As a word of caution, the simple and predictable nature of these recommendations is a cause for concern on behalf of remote workers. Important solutions often are discounted because of their simplicity and predictability. As a result, the time and attention required to implement these solutions truly and effectively may be underestimated. In this case, remote work is likely to have a negative effect on work-life balance.

Given the ongoing push toward a remote work environment since the COVID-19 pandemic (Smite et al., 2023), the recommendations stemming from this research review may help remote workers to achieve a satisfactory work-life balance while continuing to perform effectively as employees (Messersmith, 2007).

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this review of the literature indicate opportunities for future research. First, the search strategy yielded no peer-reviewed articles based in the United States. Although modern communication and work technology are similar across the globe, the customs and cultures of each country are not. Therefore, investigating this topic specific to the workforce of the United States may yield additional recommendations or considerations for future insights on behalf of U.S.-based remote workers.

As the literature shows, obtaining a healthy work-life balance is critical to ensuring that employees remain fully engaged and productive (Marques & Berry, 2021). Moving forward, the academic literature needs to explore remote work as a new, separate paradigm to discover the optimal context and situation, rather than simply transposing traditional, in-office work habits and expectations to an alternate location. In addition, exploring situations in which managing boundaries between work life and personal life resulted in a negative effect on work-life balance should be explored further as an anomaly to this research.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Danyelle Berger** is Chief of Contracting Oversight and Development for a component of the Department of Defense. Her research interests are in the area of employee attrition, work-life balance, and organizational culture. She is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland Global Campus and holds an MBA from Johns Hopkins University and an Masters in Music Performance from Southern Methodist University. She lives in the Washington, DC region.