

BUILDING WORK-LIFE BOUNDARIES IN THE WFH ERA

BY NANCY P. ROTHBARD

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Remote work used to be an option for those employees who could convince their manager that it was a good idea. All that changed with the arrival of Covid-19.

For many, the transition to remote work has been remarkably smooth, aided by technologies such as fast internet, smartphones, and video- and audio-based conferencing. Yet the technologies that have made remote work possible have also created a more permeable boundary between work and family roles. In many cases, employees must attend to email, Slack, and video meetings alongside family members who are also working or learning from home. Compounding this change is the fact that working from home was mandated seemingly overnight for many knowledge workers, rather than a thought-out plan that employees could adequately prepare for or opt into at their discretion. All of this makes it more difficult to psychologically detach and recover from work, and creates a need to more actively manage boundaries between work and family.

Much of my research over the past 20 years looks at how we form and manage boundaries between different parts of our lives. As many knowledge workers and their managers face more months of remote work, it's vital to understand how you and your employees navigated work-family boundaries in more traditional office environments — and how mandatory working from home affects these approaches. Only then can you begin structuring remote work that is not only productive but honors everyone's boundaries over the long term.

INTEGRATORS AND SEGMENTORS IN THE OFFICE

Back when you worked at an office, maybe your family dropped by to visit you or you regularly took work home. Or you may have tried to separate home and family, taking work-related calls at work and family-related calls at home. These preferences — known as *integration* and *segmentation* — are key factors in the ways we navigate our daily boundaries. Integrators, as the first example above demonstrates, tend to blur work-family boundaries; segmentors, on the other hand, strive to preserve clear ones.

Generally speaking, there are two key dimensions that integrators and segmentors have to navigate: time and space. Understanding these dimensions will give you an idea of which category you fall in.

Time. Integrators tend to be comfortable performing work tasks during “family time” and doing family tasks during “work time.” They often work after office hours and take care of personal matters, such as paying bills or making doctor’s appointments, during work time. A strong integrator might take work calls in the evenings when they are at home but also makes sure to show up at a parent story hour at 10 AM, even though it’s during typical work hours.

In contrast, segmentors strive to focus on work during work hours and on family during family time. A strong segmentor aims to finish up work calls while at work, even if it means staying a bit later, and might only participate in a parent story hour during a lunch break. My research, conducted with Tracy Dumas and the late Katherine Phillips, also shows that segmentors are happier and more committed when they have access to flextime, as this allows them to block their time in a way that preserves a clear distinction between work and family.



Space. Integrators tend to be more comfortable blurring spatial boundaries. They are more apt to work from home, and, when they do work from the office, they're more likely to display pictures of their family members. Indeed, my research shows that integrators are happier and more committed to the organization when they have access to workplace practices that bridge the spatial divide, such as on-site childcare. Segmentors, however, like to keep these spaces separate. They sometimes split work and home by having different calendars and even key chains for each domain. While they are less likely to have a home office to begin with, if segmentors are required to do so they're likely to need a physical barrier between work and home, like a room with a door.

Broadly, these time and space differences also mean that integrators are more likely to experience distractions and interruptions, given that they tend to allow work and family activities to coincide. Segmentors, however, often have the ability to focus more deeply on whatever task is a priority, because they preserve a sharper boundary between work and home. That said, integrators have an easier time transitioning between different roles compared to segmentors — and that was true even before Covid-19.

How, then, do the characteristics and needs of both working styles change when employees are required to work from home? I see some new challenges both work types face today, and offer some practical ways to address them.

INTEGRATORS AND SEGMENTORS IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

Today, segmentors' strong desire to keep their office and family lives separate is almost impossible to satisfy while working from home. For integrators, the sudden and fully immersive blurring of work and home boundaries can be difficult if they've never felt the need to separate work and home in the past but might have to now. Here are ways both segmentors and integrators — and their managers — need to reconsider both time and space.

Time. Putting boundaries around your time is important regardless of whether you are an integrator or a segmentor. This might come easier to segmentors, who crave clear boundaries. Integrators might have to work harder at this skill by creating more schedules and routines.

In particular, sticking to a schedule of predetermined working hours will be important for segmentors to feel in control of their work life, especially when they are surrounded by the reminders of family when working from home. However, it's still important to recognize that any predetermined schedule may need to be modified based on your responsibilities in caring for family members. Negotiating "work" hours with your family and your coworkers — and sticking to them — will help you stay on track and feel better about working from home.

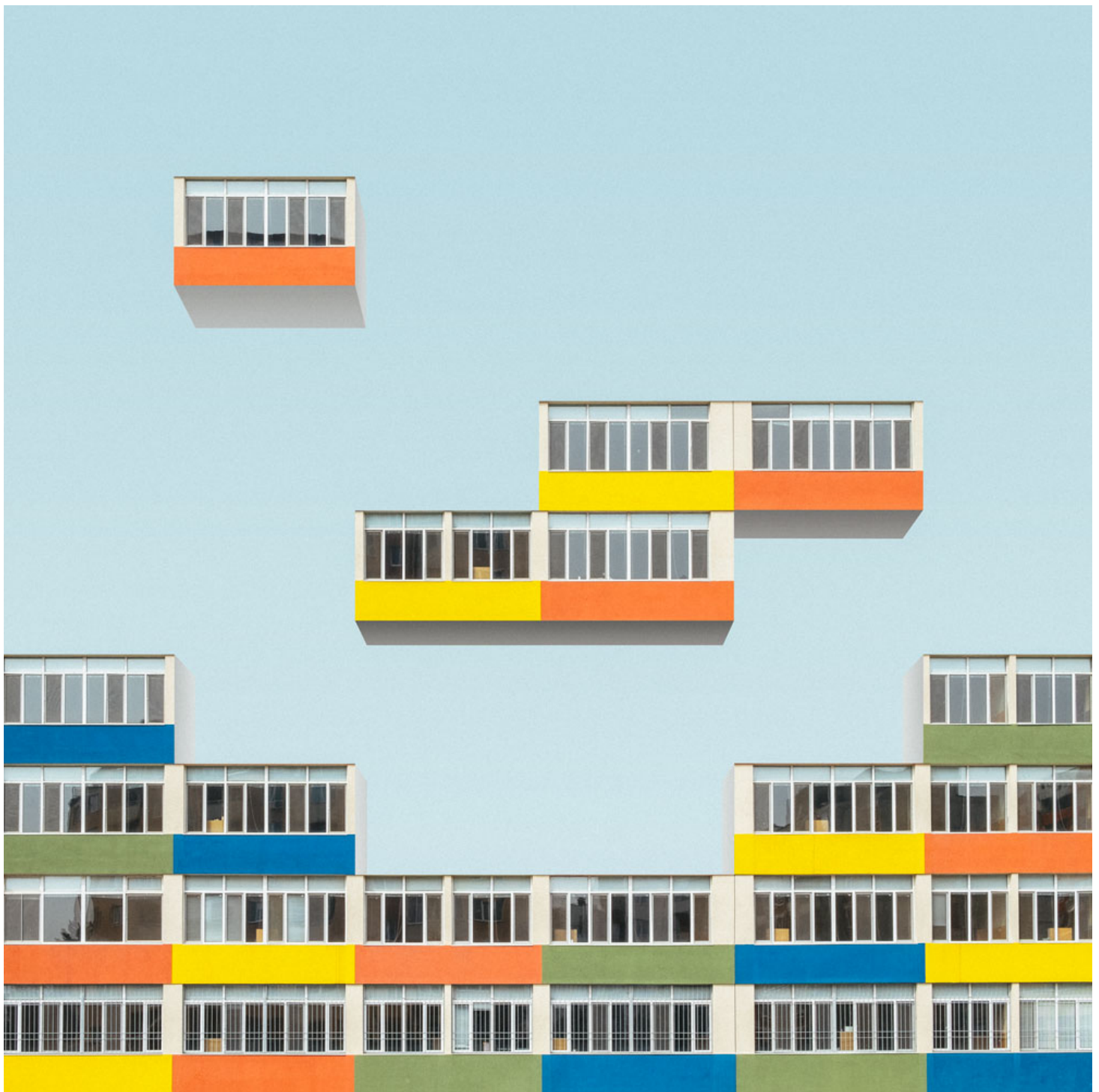
A second technique that may help segmentors fulfill their need for a clear boundary is to dress for work, whatever this means for you. This might look more like a casual Friday in the office, but not sitting in pajamas and sweats all day. This will help you separate and feel like you are "going to work," especially once you close the door of your home office.

Integrators, on the other hand, may not need a strict schedule. They may be very productive working in their pajamas. But they too need to set some boundaries while working from home. For example, they should deliberately block out time for important meetings or for solitary, focused work. Doing so might involve rearranging their schedule to align with those of their family members.

Managers' behaviors toward employees also need to change when it comes to time. For example, a segmentor might have had a boss who expected emails to be answered in off-hours before the pandemic. Now that boss may want to escalate those interactions into video calls at all hours, while the segmentor would prefer an audio call or an email exchange so that aspects of their home life remain sacrosanct. A manager who is an integrator may not be able to easily recognize the segmentors' concern; as a result, they need to learn what routines will help each team member perform at their best.

One way a leader can do this is by asking people about their preference for meeting times and modalities, understanding that not everyone always gets their first choice if schedules and needs vary among team members. For example, a manager could tell the team: I want to maximize everyone's ability to focus — what times do you think you can consistently be available? If the schedule is variable, ask to do weekly polls to optimize the times, but rotate them to make sure that one team member is not always getting their last choice.

Space. Whether you are an integrator or a segmentor, you need to select your work-from-home space carefully — but where you set up shop may be different. Integrators may be comfortable setting up their home office somewhere central, like the kitchen or dining room, where they can keep an eye on what is happening with family members. However, as I mentioned above, segmentors should choose a room with a door, if possible. They should also pay attention to what home-related items are in their office and consider moving them to another room, so that family members don't need to come in and look for items while they are working.



Managers can help segmentors gain more control of their boundary challenges by regularly clarifying the goals and tasks team members need to perform. This can help impose structure on the work itself; while this doesn't necessarily affect space considerations overtly, it *can* minimize the stress associated with blurred boundaries, making shared spaces easier for segmentors to adapt to.

Managers should also be tolerant and encouraging of integrators working in a way that suits their individual needs and preferences. If an integrator shows up at a virtual meeting but has to check on a child or other family member, recognize that it is important for that employee to bring their whole

self to work. They will be more satisfied and committed to the organization if they can display this side of themselves and know that it will be welcomed.

HOW WORK-FROM-HOME NORMS COULD CHANGE DUE TO COVID-19

Keep in mind one of the most unique aspects of the pandemic's mandatory work-from-home restrictions: There is little to no divide between people working in the office and those working remotely. At many companies, a majority of people are doing the latter. This has a number of advantages.

First, managers aren't making assumptions about why people want to work from home, which in the past could result in biased conclusions about someone's commitment to the organization. Second, employees' concerns about missing out and being overlooked may be lessened and equalized, because no one is in the office. Hence, there is less FOMO.

However, this also means that managers and employees have to work more intentionally to build and maintain relationships. Scheduling virtual "watercooler" time provides an opportunity for team members to check in with and get to know each other better. Informal bonding and relationships help to fuel better communication and allow people to interpret each other's meaning better when they are communicating while physically apart.

The Covid-19 crisis also has caused many managers and organizations to expand their definitions of what types of jobs can be done remotely. This may lead to greater numbers of managers being more open to work-from-home options, creating the opportunity for many workers to increase their flexibility in the future — something we know segmentors in particular appreciate.

At the same time, the extreme blurring of the boundaries in the Covid-19 world may further push societal views — particularly those stemming from the Industrial Revolution ethos of work-home separation — toward a norm of integration. Kids interrupting a work conversation may become less taboo. Having a window into the home lives of one's coworkers may become not only acceptable, but even expected.

There are potential costs and benefits to this. On the one hand, team members who are different from their coworkers — racially, socioeconomically, or along other identity-related dimensions — might find this increased transparency challenging. On the other hand, and with organizational support, this

may help these diverse team members find strategies for revealing aspects of their cultural background that allow their teammates to connect with them better.

Further, this window into our home lives may also help segmentors build a greater tolerance for family intrusions, both from their own family and that of their colleagues. Integrators may find that they develop new limits to how much they are willing to blur the boundaries when put to the test, finding ways to use segmenting strategies to be more effective while working from home. Under these extreme conditions, both integrators and segmentors might gain deeper perspective and broader skills over time.

We're still learning which nonwork topics are becoming more acceptable and which may be off-limits, as well as what the implications of working from home are for team building and authenticity more broadly. As you and your team and company begin to identify and explore these issues, question why certain things feel more appropriate than others. As this forced officeless life has shown us, some assumptions many have made about work and family separation have proved to be without merit.

Finally, as many workers transition back to the office in fits and starts, some of these dynamics will persist while others will change. Segmentors, seeking to reestablish the boundaries between work and home, may embrace a move back to the office more quickly than integrators. Managers should be aware, however, that what happens in the office also needs to be regularly communicated with those who are still at home. This hybrid form of remote work makes clear communication and regular check-ins even more important. What's more, the virtual watercooler becomes even more crucial for forming and preserving relationships.

While Covid-19 presents us with a crisis, exacerbating the challenge of the permeability of work-family boundaries, it also allows us to think more systematically about how we approach workplace flexibility and remote work. Now is the time to learn more about your own integrator and segmentor tendencies and those of your team. By understanding how everyone works best from home, leaders can turn this unexpected crisis into opportunity as we develop new and better ways of working in the future. | **THE BIG IDEA**

About the author: Nancy P. Rothbard is the David Pottruck Professor and Chair of the management department at the Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. She studies how people navigate the boundaries between their personal and professional lives and how technology is changing the way we work.

