

# Boundary management and new work–life integration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic

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## 1. Introduction

In Japan, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an increase in the number of companies introducing flexible work arrangements, including remote work. As the pandemic has become more prolonged, some companies have established these new ways of working. In contrast, gradually, an increasing number of companies and individuals are reverting to the traditional work style of working from the office. One of the reasons for this is thought to be the problem of boundary management between people's work and personal life domains. This study focuses on the issue of boundary management and the concept of work–life integration, which integrates the domains of work and private life, aims to create a virtuous cycle, and explores new ways of working and living after the outbreak of COVID-19 in Japan.

## 2. Trends and difficulties in flexible work arrangements

In Japan, new laws related to work style reform were enacted in 2018 and have been sequentially enforced since 2019. The reform of work styles is a comprehensive measure aimed at realizing a society in which individuals can choose a variety of work styles according to their circumstances. Specifically, the reforms aimed to promote the

following three measures: (1) correction of long working hours, (2) realization of diverse and flexible work styles, and (3) implementation of measures to ensure fair treatment regardless of employment status. Since 2020, staggered work hours and the active use of telework have been recommended as measures to prevent the transmission of the new coronavirus infection and achieve social distance. Ironically, the pandemic has prompted workers and companies to request more flexible work arrangements, including working within a stipulated framework. Consequently, in May 2020, 29% of individuals worked from home. By July 2021, however, that figure had dropped to 18.3%, and by July 2022, it was 13.5%, the lowest figure since the survey began (The Japan Productivity Center, 2022). In addition, the trend of employees working shorter hours during the same period showed a downward trend of 15.4%, 12.5%, and 9.5%, respectively (The Japan Productivity Center, 2022). Although forced by external factors, the flexible work arrangements that were introduced are about to revert to their former ways as the spread of the new coronavirus infection is subsiding.

While flexible work styles that emerged through teleworking have had a positive impact on employees, it has also been found that there are some challenges unique to this mode of

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working. For example, working at home has had a positive impact on individuals' stress reduction and work–life balance (Ikeda, Nawata, Aoshima, & Yamaguchi, 2021). However, people who work from home often complain about substantial housework and childcare responsibilities, lack of family support, difficulty switching between work and personal life, and overwork. The issue is that the boundaries between the work and the non-work domains, which are separated in traditional work styles, become physically and psychologically blurred in telework. Ikeda et al. (2021) reported that in telework, the faster a person can switch between work and home, the better the work–life balance. In addition, Otsuka et al. (2021) pointed out that teleworkers who experience family interference and longer work hours while at work experience a negative impact on their work–life balance, thereby increasing the work–family conflict. Therefore, to increase the effectiveness of flexible work, it is necessary not only to introduce it as an institution but also for teleworkers to develop their skills in boundary management between their work and the non-work domains.

### **3. Reconsidering boundary management in the new work–life integration**

Boundary management is a concept that focuses on the transition and management of daily roles and domains, such as work and home (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000). Transition is the movement in and out of a role or domain. It can be thought of as a continuum from differentiating and making roles and domains independent in life (called “segmentation”) to integrating them (called “integration”). Segmentation refers to clearly distinguishing and making the roles and domains of life independent, such as not bringing personal life into work and vice versa. It is a process in which the boundaries between the life domains and roles become thicker,

the switching of roles becomes clearer, and they are less likely to influence each other. However, this transition is labor intensive and has been suggested to be positively associated with work–family role conflict (WFC) (Kreiner, 2006; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). In integration, the boundaries between the life domains and roles are thin, and the transitions from one role to another are easy. Additionally, it reduces the effort required to transition between the roles and promotes flexibility. However, the boundaries between the life domains and roles are blurred, requiring autonomous management skills.

In Japan, the concept of work–life balance, meaning harmony between work and private life, is well established. In recent years, however, the concept of “work–life integration,” in which work and private life are not viewed dichotomously but in a more integrated manner, has been attracting attention. The Japan Association of Corporate Executives (2008) defined it as “the flexible and sophisticated integration of work and personal life, with the aim of achieving synergy through the fluid management of each other, expanding productivity and growth, improving quality of life, and realizing a sense of fulfillment and happiness.” Thus, work–life integration is proposed not as a rejection of the work–life balance concept but rather as an expression of the synergistic and dynamic purpose of work–life balance. Work–life integration is closely related to the integration of boundary theory; however, instead of rejecting separation, it emphasizes flexible and diverse options according to an individual's characteristics and preferences.

A new style of work–life integration, in which the state intervenes in economic activities, business activities, and lifestyles, is being forcefully introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. While synonymous with traditional work–life integration in terms of integrating all

aspects of life, the new style of work–life integration is characterized by the fact that environmental factors over which the individual has no control, namely pandemics, are changing the lives of individuals and society as a whole due to state policies and external influences beyond national borders. Rapid changes due to information technology in the way people work have also had a major impact (Nakamura, 2021). Furthermore, Adisa, Antonacopoulou, Beaugard, & Dickmann (2022) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, it became evident that the work style of working from home, which is generally considered “flexible,” may be becoming less flexible because of certain mandates. Increased workloads, disconnection from society, and blurring of the boundaries between work and personal life are all contributing factors to the loss of flexibility felt by employees. This can be a negative experience, especially for less flexible employees who, prior to the pandemic, wanted to keep their work and home as separate as possible. Whether work from home is effective as a flexible work arrangement is largely influenced by the individual difference factors of orientation and skills in boundary management.

#### 4. Conclusions and future research

In this study, we have reviewed the trends and issues related to telework, focusing on boundary management issues and the development of new work–life integration during and after the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. The time has come for individuals, companies, and society as a whole to consider new ways of working and living. To realize truly flexible work styles in Japan, it is necessary to create a system that allows individuals to choose from a variety of options and make effective use of time and space. This will require flexibility between “integration” and “separation” of boundary management by

individuals and support to facilitate the transition between the two aspects. Simultaneously, it is crucial for individuals to clarify their values and ideas on boundary management and find and practice their own flexible ways of working and living. Moreover, it is effective to set up “micro-borders” within the home to better delineate the boundaries between work and home. Individuals can also learn new skills to control the boundaries that have permeated telecommuting and are being carried over into the post-COVID-19 pandemic styles of working (Adisa et al., 2022).

Future research is needed to sort out the emerging work–life integration issues and study the support measures for individuals and organizations to help the employees understand boundary management and promote the skills required for it.

#### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest associated with this manuscript.

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