Motherhood and Employment: Challenges for HCI research on work-life conflict

Yoana Petrova
yoana.petrova.15@ucl.ac.uk
UCL Interaction Centre
University College London
London, UK

Duncan P. Brumby
d.brumby@ucl.ac.uk
UCL Interaction Centre
University College London
London, UK

Anna L. Cox
anna.cox@ucl.ac.uk
UCL Interaction Centre
University College London
London, UK

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**.

KEYWORDS

motherhood; employment; multitasking; work-life conflict; work-life balance

DESCRIPTION OF INTEREST

It is often argued that modern life is overly complex and challenging. Particularly, it is increasingly difficult to balance the conflicting demands of a variety of life roles, such as being a parent, a spouse and an employee. We are a research group interested in discussing the role of technology in motherhood, particularly the existing technological tools and designs to support role conflict. Our research focus includes understanding how interacting with technology impacts work-life balance.

Example Scenario. After her maternity leave, Emily went back to her old job on a flexible schedule. She relies heavily on her devices to support her flexible lifestyle. She was recently offered the promotion she had always wanted. However, she hesitates to accept because she suspects new responsibilities will reduce the time with her family and will make her lifestyle even more stressful. She fears she fails at being a successful working mum.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Yoana Petrova is a PhD student at the UCL Human-Computer Interaction Centre investigating the relationship between multitasking, productivity and work-life balance. Her supervisors are Dr. Duncan Brumby and Prof. Anna Cox. She is a graduate of the BSc Psychology programme at UCL.

Duncan Brumby is a Reader in Human-Computer Interaction at UCL. His research is concerned with understanding how people manage digital distractions.

Anna Cox is a Professor of Human-Computer Interaction at UCL. Her research explores the ways in which technology can make us happy, healthy and more productive.

We are specifically interested in designing technology which facilitates the execution of multiple tasks while minimizing the detrimental impact of frequent switching [4]. We would like to discuss how this research can be applied to meet the needs of modern working parents, and especially mothers, who are a user group at a particular risk for work-life conflict.

Technology increases the risk of work-life conflict because it can blur the boundaries between work and personal life [6]. Our devices keep us connected to everyone at all times and encourage us to switch between unrelated applications, browsers, calls, etc. At the same time, use of online devices has greatly expanded the workday as employees are expected to respond to business matters anytime or place. In addition, technology urges users to pay attention to various notifications which may be perceived as obtrusive and distracting [6]. Yet, using different devices for more than purpose is increasingly required at work (e.g. receiving many emails, switching between meetings and computer work, etc.) and also at home (e.g. using voice interfaces, consuming media). Therefore, frequent and poorly controlled multitasking on devices has been associated with work-life conflict [3].

A particular issue we feel is important is related to parents who are in the growth stages of both their career and family lives. Growing a career requires significant focus and time investment, and same applies for growing a family. National office statistics typically show a consistent rise in employee productivity, yet wages grow more than ten times slower. It is not surprising that the predominant cause of work-related stress from the Labour Force Survey 2009-2011 is associated with workload, in particular, tight deadlines, too much work or too much responsibility. Distributing time between work and family roles is a multitasking challenge which stretches the schedule of every parent. To illustrate with example, please see our *Example Scenario* on the above page. This scenario should serve to illustrate the experience of mothers who fear that career progression will cause work-family conflict through higher workload.

We believe that technology should support the primary childcare person, typically the mother, to achieve successful career by balancing it with the demands of domestic tasks. Examples of such enabling technology include synchronous and asynchronous communication tools which allow taking part in virtual business conversations, and the expansion of jobs that can be performed virtually, e.g. in freelance and in digital media. However, there are insufficient support tools to provide mothers with the right time management strategies to be able to achieve successful career while working flexibly. Training in device interactions [6], design of smart time management and productivity tools [2] based on mother's needs, goal-oriented leadership [5] are few examples of ways forward.

In conclusion, we are interested in discussing how technology has intensified not only work life but also domestic life. For instance, we would like to explore future research directions in enabling parents to automate their domestic tasks. We believe that the CHI community can significantly improve the execution of home tasks which increasingly include digital devices (e.g. smart fridges, online grocery shopping). Research on smart homes and the Internet of Things [1] is particularly relevant.

REFERENCES

[1] Marta Cecchinato, Anna Cox, and Jon Bird. 2016. Work-Life Balance through Tangibles and the Internet of Things. (2016).

[2] Anna L. Cox, Sandy JJ Gould, Marta E. Cecchinato, Ioanna Iacovides, and Ian Renfree. 2016. Design frictions for mindful interactions: The case for microboundaries. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 1389–1397.

[3] Rowanne Fleck, Rosalyn AV Robison, and Anna L. Cox. 2014. Balancing boundaries: The role of technology boundary work in managing work-life balance.

[4] Sandy Gould, Duncan Brumby, Anna Cox, Victor GonzÃąlez, Dario Salvucci, and Niels Taatgen. 2012. Multitasking and interruptions: a SIG on bridging the gap between research on the micro and macro worlds. In *CHI'12 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. ACM, 1189–1192.

[5] Cecile Guillaume and Sophie Pochic. 2009. What would you sacrifice? Access to top management and the work-life balance. *Gender, Work & Organization* 16, 1 (2009), 14–36.

[6] Gloria Mark. 2015. Multitasking in the digital age. *Synthesis Lectures On Human-Centered Informatics* 8, 3 (2015), 1–113.