

Get a Life

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For many students, graduate school may be characterized as a highly stressful experience. Indeed, juggling multiple work demands coupled with a less structured work schedule may make the pursuit of professional and personal goals difficult to navigate at times. It is possible, however, for graduate students to be successful — given the right strategies for managing work/nonwork boundaries. The study of boundary management has examined people's preferences for managing and creating ideal professional and personal lives. Importantly, the boundary management choices we make share relationships with positive and negative psychological and work-relevant outcomes (i.e., Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006). This article includes ways in which graduate students can support boundary management goals and create healthier, happier, and more productive years spent in graduate school and beyond.

Identifying Preferences and Modifying Current Behaviors

Beginning this process will require careful consideration of important goals, such as separately maintaining a productive line of research and a personal life. Regardless of one's goals, it would be advantageous to next observe current boundary-management behaviors in relation to goal achievement. While doing so, it may be helpful to evaluate them in terms of three key dimensions: flexibility, permeability, and symmetry (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012). Flexibility specifies when and where one may easily transition between work and nonwork domains, such as writing manuscripts either on the office or home computer (flexible) but not taking calls from family while in the middle of giving a conference talk (inflexible). Permeability refers to spillover patterns between domains, exemplified by allowing personal activities to steal time from research productivity (permeable) or refusing to speak with clients while on vacation (impermeable). Symmetry characterizes how consistently protective one is toward work and/or nonwork domains, such as never allowing work and nonwork life to spill over into one another (symmetrical) or constantly protecting personal activities from the spillover of research demands, but not vice versa (asymmetrical). Note where current behaviors fall short of being ideal behaviors necessary for successful boundary management, and maintain focus on correcting these behaviors.

Strategies for Successful Boundary Management

Maintaining boundaries may initially prove to be a difficult exercise. However, given that having more control over boundaries has been associated with fewer negative and more positive work-life balance outcomes (see Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, & Hannum, 2012), strategizing ways to increase the likelihood of success is critical. This process should start with identifying the flexible aspects of one's schedule. Make note of these opportunities (large or small) and start using them to reach boundary-management goals. Making progress toward goals will likely require greater segmentation (more impermeability), greater integration (more permeability), or an interplay of both between domains — and there are a variety of tactics you can choose from in the service of boundary management (Kreiner,

Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2009).

Graduate students who desire more segmentation should focus on strategies that will support the impermeability of boundaries and reduce the likelihood of interruptions. For example, they may choose to a) prioritize work from most to least important during the limited work time they have available (e.g., using a one-hour break between meetings to make more thesis writing progress rather than grade papers); b) leverage technology, which may involve silencing their cell phones while at work or refusing to check work email at home; c) create a physical distance between work and nonwork life (e.g., focus on work only while they are physically at the office); and d) control work time, which may involve “banking” time where spillover between domains occurred and making up this time in the future with more segmentation in the affected domain. Many of these segmentation strategies may also be used to create smoother transitions between the work and nonwork domains (e.g., checking personal email regularly as a means of staying connected while at work). Some additional strategies for students who desire integration include eradicating physical boundaries between the work and nonwork domains (e.g., creating a personal work space at home) and allowing cross-domain activities to blend (e.g., having personal and work email delivered to the same email address rather than separate ones).

All graduate students — regardless of boundary management goals — should do themselves and their work a favor by seeking out regular opportunities for respite from the typical demands of their work and nonwork lives. Respite research has examined the effects of the presence and absence of job stressors and has frequently identified psychological and work-relevant benefits such as reduced burnout (Westman & Eden, 1997), associated with temporary elimination of stressors. Examples of ways in which graduate students can seek respite may include a) arriving a day early when attending conferences and using that time to regroup and explore new surroundings, b) making new friends outside of the psychology department (or the university), or c) taking up a new hobby (i.e., fitness) that may consistently remove them from their typical environment.

Communication and Management of Boundary Violations

Communication of boundaries should take place before boundary violations have occurred and should emphasize the relationship between others’ compliance with boundaries and the attainment of important outcomes (e.g., research productivity, less time spent distracted at home). Trusted others, such as an officemate, may then be willing to assume the role of “border keeper” (Kreiner et al., 2009) by acting in ways that support boundaries. Those willing to assume the role of border keeper, however, should be given the opportunity to communicate their boundary-relevant expectations as well. This recommendation is not simply made in the service of politeness. Such conversations have the potential to add objective information to the perception of one’s own behaviors. For example, a research collaborator may mention receiving unwanted interruptions due to your desire to socialize with that person while he or she is trying to work.

Nonetheless, even the most strategic and communicative of graduate students are likely to remain susceptible to preventable boundary violations. Colleagues may not readily perceive their behaviors as unwelcome, so be prepared to explain why such behavior is not welcome in the future. Explicitly label behaviors as violations as they occur and reiterate the detrimental impact such violations have on important outcomes. Specific boundary violations that continue to occur in spite of efforts to communicate may signal the need to reconsider how one’s efforts to maintain boundaries are being

structured. However, subtle changes (e.g., moving work to the library when distracted by others) rather than a complete restructuring of efforts to maintain boundaries may be enough to get back on track.

Conclusions

Several practical lessons from work/nonwork boundary-management research can be translated into a more successful graduate school experience. In this article, I have suggested comparing actual behaviors with ideal behaviors, adopting effective boundary management strategies, finding respite, being proactive in communicating boundaries, and managing preventable boundary violations. Not all boundary violations are preventable, but learning to effectively manage boundaries early in your graduate school career is likely to lead to more success and satisfaction as a young psychologist.