“When I’ve Packed It In and They Send Me Something…”: Information Boundaries in Professional Home Offices

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ABSTRACT
Home offices are fused living and working spaces that lie at the intersection of the personal and the professional, blurring traditional divisions between these two domains. This poster reapproaches findings from a previous Masters thesis (Thomson, 2010)—which investigated information management in professional home offices—with an aim to highlight ways in which home office users negotiate and maintain ‘information boundaries’ in their hybrid, often unbounded, environments. Data was ethnographically gathered from four professional home offices via tours, interviews, and observation. Analysis suggests that professional home office users are far from passive subjects in their spaces, continuously answerable to all imaginable demands, needs, and whims arising in both their domestic and vocational lives. Rather, they constantly make decisions about the permeability of their spaces and often actively (even if not consciously) preside over ‘information boundaries,’ choosing where (with a physical boundary), when (with a temporal boundary), and why (with a psychological boundary) to integrate or separate the personal and the professional. This poster contributes an in-depth portrait of how four individuals deliberately design their unique environments and, in so doing, influence what information interactions they do and do not have.

Keywords
information management, information use, information boundaries, home offices, teleworking

INTRODUCTION
Technological services identical to Apple’s iCloud feature are ubiquitous; ones “built into every new [device]” manufactured, allowing you “access [to] your music, photos, calendars, contacts, documents and more, from whatever device you’re on,” and designed to ensure that “you always have the things you want—exactly where you want them” (Apple (Canada), 2013). Implicit in each of these offerings is the assumption that constant envelopment within one’s “space of information” (Jones, 2007) (i.e., with the varied informational weavings that run through every area of an individual’s life, given their multiple responsibilities, roles, tasks, and so on)—or, at least, the ability for such constant engagement—is, or is soon to be, a universal desire.

Facilitations of unbounded information access by way of “devices that do ‘everything,’” such that choosing which [one] to carry becomes obsolete” (Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011, p. 143) mirror larger shifts in the social environment. Moves toward near-total permeability between seemingly disparate realms, such as work and home, for example, have altered and even obliterated many of the unstated boundaries and borders that previously separated people’s personal and professional identities (Thomson, 2012). The contemporary prevalence of flexible work arrangements and of employees choosing to conduct work at home, within home offices, are illustrative of this phenomenon.

In 2010, four professional home office users (i.e., those based fully in home offices) were ethnographically studied. Findings indicate that despite the inherent duality of home offices generally, users of professional home office spaces specifically (at least those in this study) avoid total fluidity in their information practices and encounters by employing strategic complementary physical, temporal, and psychological ‘information boundaries.’

As the Information Science (IS) field’s first sustained foray into the professional home office setting—and one of only a handful to consider the home office setting at all—this study empirically questions the view most often touted by those companies like Apple (and unquestioned by many consumers). As information scientists and those in related sub-fields move to deliver services, products, and tools that are responsive to users’ wants, this study’s findings warrant further attention and investigation. This poster uses an in-depth portrait of four individuals with identical job roles to suggest that an absence of boundaries between the many discrete, topical “information collections” that together compose one’s entire “space of information” (Jones, 2007) may actually, in certain situations and at certain times, prove undesirable.

PRE-EXISTING LITERATURE
Research into individual and group information practices in traditional office settings is plentiful within the IS field, and research into information practices in domestic settings is growing. Yet, the field has not considered the same phenomena within “professional home offices,” and overlooks home offices almost entirely. The following “office continuum” model (Figure 1) highlights three information spaces, all worthy of scholarly inquiry. Each is reviewed briefly in turn.

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1 Gradations between the three office types highlighted indeed exist, each with unique characteristics warranting study.
Information in the workplace and the home

At the leftmost end of the “office continuum” model sits the traditional professional office, the space conventionally associated with the term office as a centralized workplace occupied by one or more organizations, located apart from the home. Studies of professionals’ information behaviours in the workplace are a predominant mode of IS-related research, and have provided numerous portraits of localized habits along with generalizable findings. Many scholars investigating information behaviours in the workplace have too acknowledged that, therein, “personal style” (Whittaker & Hirschkberg, 2001) and “social value” (Malone, 1983) are suspended in tenuous balance.

At the rightmost end of the “office continuum” sits the personal home office, a space set in the home wherein non-professional information-centred tasks (such as personal Internet and email usage and personal recordkeeping) are carried out by one or more inhabitants. This space might be specifically designed and designated, or might be an ad hoc creation (for example, a dining room table or kitchen counter ‘desk’). Kalms (2008) and Hartel (2007), among others, have confirmed that non-professional information practices in the home are intensely individualized while, at the same time, “socially defined” (Rieh, 2004, p. 2). In-home information practices form out of the complex “interactions of a householder with information, information-related devices and services, and other householders” (Kalms, Conclusions section).

Information practices in traditional offices and homes (i.e., personal home offices) are equally affected by personal preferences, social surroundings, and physical space. Still, however, home and work are not analogous, but rather like “different countries” with important “differences in what constitutes acceptable behaviour and differences in how to accomplish tasks” (Campbell Clark, 2000, p. 751).

Information in the home office

Halfway between the work and home settings sits the professional home office, a space within the home where the professional work of at least one individual with no supplementary workplace is performed, regardless of whether non-professional tasks are also done there in addition (Thomson, 2010); simply, the space must serve as the singular professional workplace of at least one individual.

A dearth of research into home offices in any capacity characterizes the IS canon. When the topic is broached (Fulton, 2000a; 2000b; 2002 is the only IS scholar ‘proper’ to do so thus far), it is occasional teleworkers—not the equivalents of professional home offices—whose arrangements are problematized and viewed logistically, without probing into information behaviours or patterns.

Scholars hailing from the fields of Sociology and Business have taken up the topic of the home office, noting that individuals acknowledge “borders” or “boundaries” (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Hochschild, 1997; Campbell Clark, 2000; Campbell Clark, 2001; Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011; Sturges, 2012; Fonner & Stache, 2012; and others) between work and domestic spheres in their everyday lives, and are cognizant that “spillover” is never without consequence, whether positive, negative, or neutral (Hill, Ferris, & Martinson, 2003; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2006, among others). With aims to elaborate upon broad abstractions such as ‘work/life balance’ and ‘employee productivity,’ these studies furnish valuable insights, but tend to employ samples with gross differences across work arrangements and lines of work.

A useful starting point for further exploration and cross-population comparison, what lacks in each of these subsets of pre-existing work are sustained investigations of home office users that account for finely grained differences in social, physical, and professional environments, and that consider and control for variables along the “office continuum” and among varying lines of work. From that foundational basis, sorely needed research into and theories of home office users’ information behaviours can begin to take shape, and deeper understanding of more nuanced aspects like information boundaries can be achieved.

METHOD

This study took an exploratory, ethnographic approach, paying heed to “qualitative insights and compelling examples, not statistical proof of [prior] conjectures” (Malone, 1983, p. 101). Its four participants were all long-time (5+ years) account managers in printing companies, working in professional home offices in Ontario, Canada. By chance, two were men and two were women. Data was collected from February to December 2009, with three participants visited once for periods of 1-2 hours each and one visited twice, each session lasting approximately 90 minutes.

Study participants comprise a relatively homogenous group, though ranging in their years spent in the printing industry, years spent in professional home offices, in-home locations of their workspaces, and users/uses of their workspaces. Table 1, below, summarizes these background details.

Data was ethnographically gathered via guided tours of home office spaces, semi-structured interviews, and unobtrusive observation, and included field notes, maps, diagrams, and photographs. A first attempt to engage with home office spaces, this study aimed for depth of findings over breadth of time or sample size, and so is limited in its ability to draw conclusions about information behaviours.

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2 See, for example, the more seminal research into contextually driven information management by Malone, 1983; Kwasnik, 1991; Barreau, 1995; Barreau, 2008; Whittaker & Hirschkberg, 2001; Sellen & Harper, 2002; Bondarenko & Janssen, 2005; and others.
FINDINGS

The intangible borders and boundaries separating—or not—individuals’ workplaces from their homes, and vice versa, are often discussed by sociologists, and sometimes identified explicitly.1 Campbell Clark’s (2000) three-“border” typology accurately reflects the various information boundaries employed by participants in this study. Like those in Sturges’ (2012) research, according to individual circumstance, participants in this study combined and employed different boundaries in tandem, and enacted each through multiple techniques.

### Physical boundaries

Physical boundaries refer to the spaces “where domain-relevant behaviour takes place” (Campbell Clark, 2000, p. 756). Three of four participants in this study employed more than one physical boundary in order to segregate their dealings with professional information and dealings with personal information. The participant (Participant 2) whose professional home office was not actually distinct from the personal home office used by her and the rest of her family nonetheless routinely made reference to her professional workspace as if a physically separate entity.

Walls enclosed a room designated solely to the professional home offices of participants 1, 3, and 4, apart from his or her personal home office elsewhere in the home. Figure 2, below, models these distinct workspaces. The same participants also maintained separate physical technologies and equipment (including computers, laptops, and telephones) and physical storage structures (including desks, shelves, and cabinets) for strictly professional use—supplementary methods of enforcing a physical boundary. While Participant 2’s physical workspace as well as its one computer served in both professional and personal capacities, she consistently referred to “my office” and “my computer” (Thomson, 2010), anecdotally raising this distinction as one she sometimes must reinforce in response to her daughter’s midday requests for computer use.

### Temporal boundaries

Temporal boundaries divide “when work is done from when family responsibilities can be taken care of” (Campbell Clark, 2000, p. 756). All four of the participants in this study carried out only work-related tasks on company time when in their professional home offices, and adamantly reserved their personal business for after working hours. (Conversely, after-hours were protected as personal time for non-professional matters.)

Participant 2’s double-tasking workspace was utilized by her family as a personal home office only once she had “packed up” (Thomson, 2010) at the end of her employer’s set workday; “routines emerge by virtue of which certain spaces are seen as ‘belonging’ to certain individuals at certain points in time” (O’Brien & Rodden, 1997, p. 256). When work hours are over, boundaries may suspend, allowing a professional home office to transform into a different space with a different meaning, work concerns now secondary to personal.

### Psychological boundaries

Psychological boundaries manifest as the “rules created by individuals that dictate when thinking patterns, behaviour patterns, and emotions are appropriate for one domain but not the other” (Campbell Clark, 2000, p. 756). Participants in this study invoked subjective psychological justifications as a way to bolster and safeguard the physical and temporal boundaries erected around their professional home offices.

Personal information in paper or electronic form was never acquired or dealt with in the professional home offices of any of the four participants, as each maintained separate email accounts and files—and, in the case of three, altogether separate machinery and storage structures—for their personal content. Despite using a portable laptop for all of his professional work, Participant 1 carried it beyond his office doorway only for business trips. Similarly, Participant 2 imposed and presided over a specific order for the shared bookcase in her home office, storing all non-professional content on its leftmost shelves and relegating all work-related material to the right (shown in Figure 3, below).

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1 Fonner and Stache (2012) investigated rituals teleworkers use to transition between work and home, identifying those based around time, space, technology, and communication. Sturges (2012), studying rituals professionals use to shape their work/life balance, noted physical, relational, and cognitive activities.
Moreover, participants expected others outside of the professional home office to be knowledgeable and respectful of the boundaries they maintained (though these were often never explicitly stated by participants). As this poster’s title illustrates, frustration arises when boundaries are seemingly disregarded: Participant 2 noted, “I really hate when I’ve packed it in [at the end of the workday] and they [employer] send me something…” (Thomson, 2010)—the virtual equivalent of being caught at the cubicle doorway by a boss at 5:01 on a Friday afternoon.

DISCUSSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

This poster recasts findings from a previous Masters thesis to emphasize a theme of ‘information boundaries.’ Four individuals carrying out their professional work entirely from home offices, inherently hybrid and ‘unbound,’ are deliberately designing these spaces in ways that afford them control over where, when, and why they interact with information therein.

Participants in this study created information boundaries themselves, many times choosing to “segment” an environment that is, by its very nature, an “integrated” (Nippert-Eng, 1996) one. As a result, they point to important considerations and potential implications, of which two in particular this poster showcases:

01. Participating in and influencing, even if minimally, where, when, and why their personal and professional worlds “integrated” or “segmented” was a source of joy and pride for the four participants in this study—a direct contrast to the majority of contemporary IS-related literature that portrays home offices and teleworking as negative detractors in individuals’ lives. A more balanced approach in the theory that informs IS service, product, and tool design—achievable through further research into the countless imaginable multi-faceted office settings—is in order. Participants’ decisions and actions underscore the idea that home and work are not “binary and competitive” (Fonner & Stache, 2012, p. 245), but instead dynamic, “elastic constructions reinforced and at times changed and redrawn” (Cohen, Duberley, & Musson, 2009, p. 239) by attentive, contextualized agents.

02. Consciously or not, participants in this study made the same distinctions between the office types modeled along the “office continuum” (Figure 1), and worked to actively uphold these distinctions. Are these same boundary distinctions being incorporated into and supported by the services, products, and tools that IS workers design? As “the very nature of advanced technologies may increase opportunities for flexibility” (Fonner & Stache, 2012, p. 254) that undermine conventional demarcations, when taken to its most utter extreme, “the constant blurring of work/non-work boundaries is likely to have implications for employee performance, stress and burnout, and work/family conflict” (Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011, p. 156).

Far from caught in perpetual cycles of personal/professional compromise and trade-off, and far from passive or reactive in their dual environments, participants in this study took steps to “mold the parameters and scope of their activities and create personal meaning” (Campbell Clark, 2000, p. 750), embodying the “active managers” and “job-crafters” described by Sturges (2012).

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