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

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

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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.
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


