



Make Hybrid Work

How to build and maintain healthy work-nonwork boundaries

An unexpected byproduct of the COVID-19 pandemic has been boundaries between work and nonwork life domains. Millions of people's work lives changed – some went from on-site to remote work, others lost their jobs completely, others have switched to different jobs. All these changes can destroy the ways people transition from work to nonwork and back, and the boundaries people set up around those transitions.

Work-nonwork boundaries – the mental borderlines between one's work and other domains of life – are important for well-being. How one builds and manages boundaries is related to the amount of stress they feel, their engagement during work hours, and more.

Boundaries are shaped over time as people discover their preferences and perform work-related routines. For example, Sheila, a designer at a tech firm, came to realize that stress from her job was spilling over into her home and family life. Unhappy with that spillover, Sheila started mentally filing away work tasks on her commute home, so that when she arrives she can put aside work stress until she gets back to the office.

However, the changes brought on by the pandemic have probably destroyed boundaries for many workers. This destruction of boundaries likely explains some of the recent increases in burnout and exhaustion. Many workers now need to re-examine or even re-build their boundaries, and make some decisions about how to use them to protect their well-being.

Paradoxically, efforts by well-meaning organizations to help workers balance their lives may work against effective boundaries. Policies and tools that enable more flexible work, like mobile technology, relaxed time and location requirements, or on-site health care or child care, make it easier to ignore or erase boundaries that may have been beneficial.

Similarly, many workers really love convenient access to work from anywhere any time, because they feel that allows them freedom to schedule their day how they want to. But even people who prefer to *integrate* their work and nonwork lives completely (instead of keeping them separate) feel more stress and ill health when such integration happens (see our white paper, *The Integration Myth*).

If people don't realize their preferences can end up hurting them, it's important to share that knowledge with them, and provide tools or policies that encourage or nudge boundary maintenance behaviors vs. boundary-eroding behaviors.

Although some organizations appear to recognize the value of boundaries, very few appear to be providing explicit guidance for how workers can re-build, maintain, and adjust their work nonwork boundaries for maximum well-being. This paper provides that guidance.



What boundaries are and are not

Boundaries between work and nonwork are mental divisions – they are lines that help you distinguish between “work time” and “family time” or “hobby time,” “exercise time,” etc. When you're on one side of a boundary, you can dedicate your attention to that domain.

Boundaries don't have to be rigid fortress walls. They can be permeable or solid. They can allow one-way or two-way flow-through; they can be changeable or sacred. They can follow routine clock times and physical locations or be purely mental.

Routines, time of day, or physical locations can reinforce boundaries and help you realize when you're transitioning between domains. Everyone should mindfully design their own boundaries – they are personal to everyone.

You may already have some boundaries that you didn't purposely set up. You may have simply found over time that you prefer to keep work and nonwork separate, and practiced not thinking about each in the other domain. Those boundaries might be supported by *routines* – the most common example is a commute. For those who regularly commute to work, that ritual of traveling physically to a different place, and then back home again after, is a powerful way to signify that it's time to cross over a boundary. Your mind can finish processing things from one domain and start preparing for the other; your body can take that time to relax or get energized.

The commute - something many of us don't enjoy - does serve one good purpose. Creating a boundary. When the commute was eliminated for millions of workers in 2020, that very effective routine was removed, and the boundaries between work and nonwork were challenged. Commuting is just one example of the problem with work changes – the fences that blocked negative stress or competing priorities have been torn down, and spillover is endemic.

So, it's time to spend some time on boundaries. Fortunately, a lot of sound research provides ideas and strategies to help. Below, we walk through several exercises to help you build, and then support and adjust, work-nonwork boundaries.

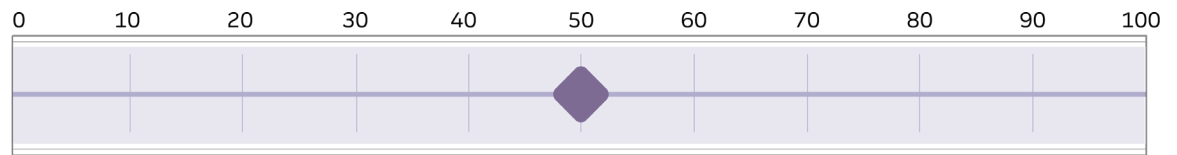
Build your boundaries: Six questions to define your boundaries, and tips for maintaining them

First, the basics – these are three questions to ask yourself that will define the fundamentals of your boundaries.

1. Do I want permeable boundaries?

- Pros:**
- Boundaries that are permeable, that allow some things to pass through, allow for some flexibility & adaptability for crunch times at work or nonwork.
 - Permeable boundaries can allow positive effects through – for example, thinking about a work success can help boost your confidence outside work.
- Cons:**
- Permeability can encourage too much, or increasing amounts of, spillover of negative things from one domain to another.
 - Permeable boundaries might be easier to slip and allow more than intended to pass through.

Think of this as a continuum—so you don't have to choose fully one or the other extreme:



Fully permeable
(no boundary at all)

Fully impermeable
(nothing gets through)

Start at the spot that feels good for you, and then you can turn it up or down later based on how it's working for you.

2. What will I allow to get through?

a. Positive thoughts and events?

- Pros:**
- Thinking about successes, positive interactions, or simply reflecting on enjoying work can enhance self-efficacy and self-esteem. It can also fortify your mental health and resilience.
 - It can be simply enjoyable!
- Cons:**
- Allowing some spillover of work content, even if it's positive, into nonwork domains can lead to "boundary creep," and open up the channel to other less positive things getting through your boundaries.

b. Negative thoughts and events?

- Pros:**
- If you have trouble leaving stressful work events at work, then allowing yourself some time to think about them outside work might help put them to rest, which might (somewhat paradoxically) ease your mind.
 - You might have a position that requires a lot of availability, or "on-call" time, and urgent notifications might need to get through.
- Cons:**
- The biggest concern here is spillover stress. If allowing negative events or thinking starts to create tension and stress in nonwork domains, it can be bad for well-being.

3. Do I want changeable boundaries?

- Pros:**
- Allowing yourself to re-adjust or temporarily change your boundaries can be useful for super-busy work times.
 - It can also allow for complete disconnection in off-the-grid vacations.
- Cons:**
- If boundaries are changed too often or too much they may lose their strength.

Build your boundary-supporting routines:

Next, we move to routines or markers that can help you keep sight of, and honor, your boundaries. These physical or visible cues can help remind you of your boundaries, and help keep you from accidentally letting them slip.

4. Do I want to build some time-based routines?

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- Pros:**
- Keeping work inside defined times and nonwork inside other times makes it very easy to know when you're in which domain.
 - Time-based boundaries can support fully unplugging from one domain and concentrating and focusing on another.
- Cons:**
- Time-based routines might be too rigid at extra-busy work times or during unexpected schedule changes, and breaking them on those occasions might cause worry or stress.
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5. Do I want location-based rules?

- Pros:**
- Dedicating a certain area of your home, or working exclusively at the worksite can make it very easy to transition mentally (to protect from unintended spillover) through the physical transition (think of a commute).
 - These boundary supports are very deliberate and obvious to you and others, which can help enforce and support your boundaries.
- Cons:**
- Strict location rules might not allow for flexible work in different locations on occasions that you want to travel or can't access normal work spaces.
 - You might have no choice about working remotely, and have a small home!
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6. Will I set up some new routines or rituals for transition times?

- Pros:**
- Routines or simple rituals can help train your brain to switch over, thus protecting from unwanted spillover.
 - These routines can take many forms, like washing hands, packing up equipment, or even a "pretend commute" for home-based workers, wherein you get dressed and leave the house for a quick walk, and mentally transition to work by the time you return.
- Cons:**
- Routines might be hard to enact sometimes, like when you are rushed or when schedules or locations change. This can be confusing and make transitioning across boundaries hard until the ritual is reinstated.
 - Rituals might become onerous over time.



Ongoing maintenance:

Boundaries can be hard to maintain, especially when your workplace does not support the specific balance you value. The tips below can help you optimally maintain your boundaries.

Adjust notifications and access to work.

- Flexible work and technology developments make it very convenient to access work from any place at any time. But convenience can be the enemy of effective boundaries.
- Set notification settings for work-related devices and channels to conform to your boundaries. Be deliberate in setting them and share your settings with your boss and the people in your other life domains.
- When disengaged from work, consider turning off devices completely. Don't just shut your work laptop or lock it, shut it down. Practice resisting to the lure of opening work email, or checking for messages. Even if it feels like a quick glance at messages would ease some stress, that ease will probably not last, and practicing full disengagement will more likely lead well-being long term.

What will I do when the boundaries are violated?

- Your boundaries will almost surely be violated at some point. Be prepared to recognize when this happens, and have an idea about what to do.
- You might plan to make up for lost time – say, if a co-worker calls for your help for a few hours in an evening, you might plan to sign off a few hours early the next day (although this arrangement might not always work).
- Every time a boundary is violated, be aware of it, even if you cannot control or reverse it. Prepare to recover fully the next time you disengage and switch domains.
- Importantly, give yourself a break! Boundary management probably won't be perfect – there will be slips and violations. Keep practicing and working on it until you find the right balance.

What do I do if my boundaries are different from everyone else's?

- You might desire certain boundaries that don't fit with the expectations at work. If this happens, try talking to your manager about the mismatch and your preferences.
- Try to meet the expectations, or to appear to meet the expectations, of your boss or team to the extent that you can while maintaining health and well-being. If you happen to have a position that just has to have certain boundaries that are not what you prefer, try to remind yourself of some positive aspects of the job or work (like the pay, the relationships with teammates, etc.).

- Quit. Your and your family's health and well-being are more important than a certain career path or amount of money. Especially during an employee-tilted job market, you might find a different job with more respect for boundaries.
- Be a proponent of healthy boundaries, especially if you are a leader. Don't judge or act superior, but share your approach when people ask, and be sure to support your team members' boundaries. Have intentional conversations about boundaries to normalize the topic in your team and weave it into the culture.

Be aware.

- Habits are hard to break. Many of your work routines that creep over into nonwork time (and vice-versa) might be automatic and hard to interrupt. Raising your level of awareness is a good first step to fixing such habits. For example, ask yourself what it is about the work thoughts or habits that you find satisfying when it leaks over into nonwork time.
- Mobile device notifications are scientifically designed to hijack your attention and draw you into checking for updates or messages. Re-assess your need for these alerts, and mindfully choose when and what you need to monitor.

Learn and adapt.

- The boundaries and routines you build might not work right away. If they do not seem to be working after a few weeks, try adjusting them or working on new routines. It may take a while for new habits to set in, so don't abandon anything too soon. But if something doesn't look like it will work then don't feel bad about changing it.
- It's probably most manageable to work on one thing at a time. For example, if your notification settings aren't satisfactory, try a new arrangement; then, if your after work mental ritual doesn't fit, try a new one of those next.

Conclusion

Mindful boundaries might be the key to managing hybrid work. If you have not taken the time to set them up, maintain them, and adjust them occasionally, you might find your stress level has increased. If that is the case, and hybrid or flexible work seems to be harder to manage than it should be, try thinking about your boundaries. Research indicates it can help!



Exploring Boundaries Consider your current and ideal work environment and explore how you can implement boundaries that improve your well-being and productivity.

Build Your Boundaries

How will I approach establishing my boundaries?

Do I want permeable boundaries?

What will I let get through?

Do I want changeable boundaries?

Build Boundary Routines

How will I build boundaries into my routines?

Time-based?

Location-based?

Transition times?

What actions (mental rituals, access, notifications, etc.) will I incorporate?

Ongoing Maintenance

How will I communicate my boundaries with my manager and team?

How can I encourage open discussion about differences in boundaries at work?

How will I manage future changes to my boundaries?

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