



# Daily Habits and Work-life Boundary Control: Telework in the Era of COVID-19<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Telework has had a dramatic increase worldwide, especially in the Nordic countries. When work is conducted in the domestic area, the boundaries between work and private life easily become blurred. In this paper, we investigate the daily habits of Swedish municipal office workers as they worked from home during the pandemic with the aim to understand the role of habits in upholding boundaries between work and non-work. Our results indicate that habits from the workplace were sometimes disrupted, and other times transferred to the domestic area. We also saw examples of the establishment of new habits that helped to facilitate role transitions between work and non-work roles, so-called 'transitional habits'. Our main contribution is to show how the establishment of daily transitional habits can alleviate role shifts and thus help to keep work and non-work roles boundaries separate and distinct.

## KEYWORDS

*boundary theory / COVID-19 / habits / telework*

## Introduction

According to Giuntella et al. (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has led to major disruptions in daily habits related to sleep, exercise, and social interaction, all underpinning human wellbeing. In relation to remote work, daily habits such as commuting to work or talking to colleagues by the water cooler or over coffee have been challenged. A recurring theme in the growing field of research on telework is that work and non-work roles often become intertwined and thus harder to separate, since these roles share the same physical space (Raghuram et al. 2003; Reyt & Viesenfeld 2015). When boundaries become blurred, it becomes harder to keep work and family roles separate and distinct (Reyt & Viesenfeld 2015). This can potentially lead to home-to-work conflict (Golden et al. 2007); an experience of never being free from or mentally

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able to disconnect from work (Palm et al. 2022; Ragu-Nathan et al. 2008); reduced ability to stay focused at work (Rosengren et al. 2022) and reduced job performance (Van Steenbergen & Ellemers 2009). However, research also shows that by using boundary management techniques (often referred to as boundary work), the different roles can be separated if desired, even when work is conducted in the domestic area. For example, Rosengren et al. (2022) describe how ICT is used by teleworking employees to manage temporal and spatial availability for work and private matters. According to Mellner et al. (2014), successful boundary work contributes to improved employee wellbeing. The sprawl of telework in the Nordic countries together with the wellbeing risks with blurred boundaries between work and private life calls for more research on the topic. In Sweden, up to 40% of all employees worked remotely to some extent during this period (SCB 2021). Even before the pandemic, the numbers of teleworkers in the Nordic countries have been steadily rising. In a European perspective, the Nordic countries stand out with their high numbers of teleworkers. There are several reasons behind this: high shares of workers in sectors where telework is a common practice; emphasis on work-life balance, a generally permissive attitude to flexible ways of working (including telework); trust-based ways of managing employees, and finally good access to a digital infrastructure that enables remote work (Randall et al. 2022).

We investigate the daily habits of Swedish municipal office workers as they worked from home during the pandemic, and how they constructed habits in a new and disrupted context in order to accomplish boundary work. The aim is to understand the role of habits in boundary work behavior. Our research question is: What is the role of habitual behavior when employees establish and uphold boundaries between work and non-work when working from home? Drawing on the existing literature on habits, our ambition is to expand the understanding of boundary work and how it is accomplished when working from home, and to contribute to the development of boundary theory.

Our analysis centers on habits when working from home during the pandemic. A qualitative research methodology was used, including employees and managers in two different municipalities in Sweden. The main contribution of this article is to the research field of boundary theory: first, to further the understanding of how boundaries between the spheres of work and private life can be established even when work is conducted within the domestic space; and second, to enrich boundary theory with habit theory.

## Theory

### Habits

Every day, people perform several recurring activities with little or no guidance from conscious intention. Or as Wood et al. (2005, p. 918) put it: ‘Daily life is full of repetition’. These daily repetitive actions are often referred to as habits. Habits are commonly defined as ‘learned sequences of acts that become automatic responses to specific situations which may be functional in obtaining certain goals or end states’ (Verplanken et al. 1997, p. 540). The automatic nature of habits allows individuals to perform activities with only minimal cognitive effort, which frees up more time and energy to be spent on other things. From this very broad definition of habits, a wide variety of human

behaviors can be observed and analyzed. Among other things, Clark et al. (2007) list as examples of habits: addictions, complex tasks such as driving a car, and daily routines. In this paper, we will focus on the latter, that is, habits as recurring everyday activities. Examples might include having a cigarette with one's morning coffee, having lunch with colleagues at a specific time and place, going to the gym after work, or sharing a family dinner in the evening. Repetition of these daily activities creates associations in the brain between practiced action and typical performance times, locations, and other contextual factors such as technologies or social settings. In turn, these mental associations then guide habitual action so that it is triggered automatically by stable cues in the environment (Wood 2019).

A central question in habit literature is under what conditions habits are formed. According to Wood et al. (2005), habits reflect the cognitive, neurological, and motivational changes that occur when behavior is repeated. When a behavior is performed in a stable context over time, mental associations are formed connecting situational cues to certain behaviors. Initially during the period where habits are established, it is central that the behavior is rewarded with positive feedback. This need for positive reinforcement linked to the behavior then fades over time the more the habit is established. Consequently, habits are based on past rewards. Eventually, individuals are no longer consciously thinking about the behavior (Wood 2019). Many of the things people do every day fall into this category, for example, brushing our teeth in the morning and in the evening before bedtime.

In exploring the role of habits within the framework of boundary theory, this study distinguishes between the intentional efforts involved in managing environmental cues and the automaticity of habits themselves. Research on more complex habits show that they comprise combinations of more deliberate self-control behaviors and more automatic and habitual behaviors (Saunders & More 2024). Many work behaviors likely fall in this more complex category, not only including boundary work to establish separation in a forced integration context, but also successful integration behaviors. Recent work on self-regulation shows that a polyregulatory approach or use of a repertoire of different strategies is related to successful regulation (Fujita et al. 2020; Hennecke & Bürgler 2020). It therefore seems likely that achieving satisficing boundary control is supported by an assembly of intentional behavior, cues, artifacts, arrangements in the environment, and habitual behaviors associated with these artifacts, places, people, and timing.

What happens to habits when there is a disruption in the behavioral context is a central concern in habit theory and is described as contextual discontinuities. According to Verplanken et al. (2008) and Verplanken and Wood (2006), such a disruption removes cues that automatically trigger behaviors and obliges people to revert to deliberate decision making if they are to keep up the habit. In this vein, Triandis (1977) argues that 'when a behaviour is new, untried, and unlearned, the behavioural-intention component will be solely responsible for the behaviour' (p. 205). Changes in important aspects of the context, then, decrease the likelihood of automatically activating the practiced behavioral response. Consequently, the automaticity of habitual behavior is challenged in the event of changes in the context and therefore behavior tends to either come under intentional control or cease (Wood et al. 2005). Habits that were previously conducted without guidance from conscious attention suddenly require our cognitive attention, which they may or may not receive. That means that after a period in the new context,



the habit may again be conducted without guidance from active thought, or it may have ceased all together. Based on this, we can assume that habitual behavior that was previously done without cognitive effort will require more active focus to maintain when the context changes. For example, as we shall see in the results, upholding the habit of taking breaks during the working day when making the transition to working from home.

However, since habits are triggered by cues in the environment, it is worth noting that not all aspects of the employees' environment were lost or altered during the pandemic. They still encounter much of the same technologies, colleagues, and work tasks. It is therefore interesting to understand habits in daily working life from the perspective of *situational cues* and how they changed during the COVID-19 pandemic with the transition from working at the office to working from home. Situational cues can in turn be divided into 1) *social cues* (related to others' presence and behavior that are important factors in forming and upholding habitual behaviors), 2) *temporal cues*, 3) cues related to the *physical setting*, and 4) cues related to *technology* (Wood 2019). One central environmental cue for habitual action in today's digitalized society is technology. Since many digital tools (laptops, smartphones, etc.) are portable, they afford more occasions for a given cue to trigger behavior due to their continuous presence. For example, seeing one's laptop on the kitchen table in the evening may trigger thoughts about work and even certain behaviors such as opening it up and checking for e-mails (Rosengren et al. 2022). There are also habits related to the specific use of technology *per se*, such as habits related to constant e-mail checking. For example, office workers who begin their day under variable task requirements may trigger an e-mail checking habit while logging in to confirm the time of their first meeting: The context of the computer's login screen automatically activates a goal of 'keeping up to date', which in turn triggers the habit (Larose 2010).

When working from home, not only are individual work tasks performed digitally, but most social interactions are as well. One can guess that the habits around digital technology become even more important for upholding boundaries between work and non-work.

### **Boundary theory**

In boundary theory, permeability and flexibility are manifestations of the boundaries' strength (Ashforth et al. 2000; Rothbard & Ollier-Malaterre 2016). A low degree of flexibility and permeability is characteristic of what has been called a *segmentation* strategy, while an *integration* strategy is characterized by a *high* degree of flexibility and permeability. Thus, segmenters prefer separating the two domains of home and work by constructing boundaries, while integrators prefer blending these domains (Nippert-Eng 1995). The preference for integration or segmentation is related to the wish to minimize the conflicts and difficulties of enacting both home and work roles (Ashforth et al. 2000). Consequently, for those who prefer to keep their private and professional roles separate, the blurring of boundaries can be especially emotionally demanding and also lead to fatigue (Ashforth et al. 2000). Gardner et al. (2021) propose that personality traits may determine the extent to which work-family conflicts are experienced differently between persons.

In boundary theory, individuals are perceived as active agents able to act upon and thus intentionally manage their work–life boundaries (e.g., Kreiner et al. 2009; Sayah 2013). This process is referred to as boundary work (Kreiner et al. 2009). It is the process of either segmenting work and non-work to different times and places and thereby keeping work and personal life separate or integrating the two. The latter can imply, for example, that one works on weekends to be able to manage and compensate for dealing with personal matters during office hours. What this process looks like and how much effort it takes can differ between people and over the course of a lifetime. It can be expected that employees with a preference for segmentation will try to uphold boundaries and separate roles when required to work from home (WFH).

What is missing from prior research into boundary work is how intentions (i.e., to integrate or separate work and private life) turn into behavior. There seems almost to be an implied connection between intention and action. For example, Park et al. (2011, p. 459) find that ‘individuals with a high preference for segmentation are more likely to develop impermeable home boundaries so that work aspects (e.g., thoughts, concerns) are prevented from spilling over into the home domain’. Similarly, Kreiner (2006, p. 486) states that ‘individuals who prefer to segment domains tend to erect physical, emotional, and/or cognitive barriers between domains so as to keep the worlds separate’.

In a similar vein, Hecht et al. (2022) argue that daily work and non-work boundary permeation should be seen as a conscious cognitive and behavioral response to changes in the work context. According to this approach, individuals observe and evaluate the situation (e.g., I have to complete an extra task at work which I value as important) and then act in accordance with the intentions (e.g., take out the laptop in the evening and start working).

However, a broad range of research clearly indicates that often people will not follow through with their intentions (see, e.g., Faries 2016). The force of habit is strong. Anyone who has tried to stop having a cigarette with their morning coffee is painfully aware of this.

So, from a habit perspective, opening the laptop in the evening is more triggered by cues in the environment, like seeing the laptop on the kitchen table, which starts you thinking about work. Or perhaps you have spent the day working at home sitting on the sofa, and now the sofa triggers thoughts and feelings of work. We are aware that organizational factors (e.g., high workloads, an integration culture which pushes employees to stay connected to work after hours) and family situation can facilitate or hinder the enactment of preferred boundaries (Gadeyne et al. 2018; Rosengren et al. 2022). However, since habitual actions are shaped over time, they do not necessarily reflect the current situation. Thus, a practice of working in the evening could potentially have been shaped in a context of high workload, or related to rewards, such as being viewed as a committed employee and receiving praise from the boss. This in turn establishes a pattern of late working that is perpetuated even if the reward has stopped and is maintained even when the situation goes back to normal.

Achieving the desired boundary control is a type of goal-directed behavior that takes some work, and thus will benefit from becoming increasingly habitual. In relation to the gap between intention and behavior, this article shows how the deployment of habits can be seen as a link in explaining why intentions to either integrate or separate are sometimes difficult to put into action—and above all to maintain over time. One potential upside of tapping into the automaticity of habits in relation to boundary work

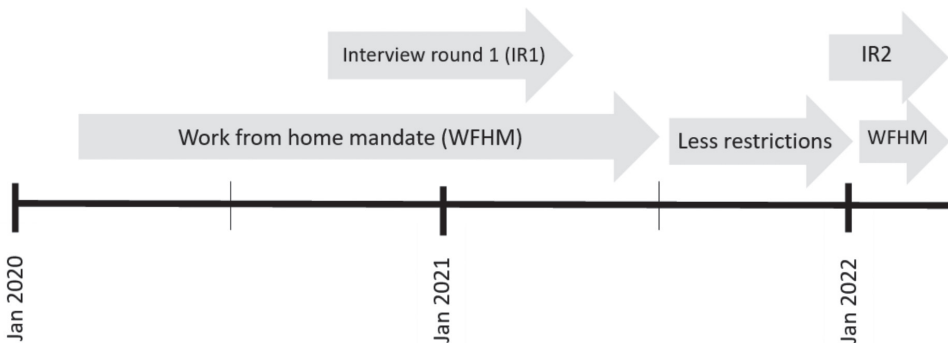
could be to alleviate the need to constantly monitor and enforce boundaries, and think about which sphere to allocate one's resources to (time and energy), which can potentially drain cognitive capacities.

For example, working from home can result in the need to resist the urge to turn on the television to postpone an unattractive work task or overcome the distraction of knowing the laundry needs to be done (Allen et al. 2013).

## Materials and Methods

This study is part of a larger qualitative study encompassing white-collar workers and managers ( $n = 46$ ) in two municipalities in Sweden, mandated to WFH to the extent possible during the pandemic. We are using a qualitative research design with photo-elicitation interviews (PEIs) inspired by Alvariza et al. (2019) and Padgett et al. (2013), at two points during the pandemic, where interviewees presented photographs they had taken themselves prior to the interview to represent their experience of working from home, and talked in depth about their photos and related topics regarding their experience (Figure 1). In this article, we focus on what role daily habits played in establishing boundaries between work and private life 7–11 and 22–24 months into the pandemic. At the first interview round, the Public health agency of Sweden said that those who were able to WFH should do that. In the second interview round, the restrictions were the same but had been preceded by an ease in restrictions and both municipalities had a return-to-work plan that eventually had to be broken.

**Figure 1** Time schedule.



Two urban municipalities were included in the study, one in southern Sweden and one in central Sweden, both with limited prior experience of telework from home. We recruited participants with the help of the municipalities' HR departments. In the central Sweden municipality, we recruited from across the entire municipality, including the municipal-owned companies/public utility companies in fields such as electricity sales, housing, commercial and public premises, electricity and district heating networks, water and sewerage, recycling, and power. From a list of 58 suggested participants, we randomly selected individuals with diverse roles, genders, and ages. All 23 of those contacted agreed to participate.

In the southern municipality, respondents were recruited using a combination of the aforementioned principle (in one administration) and information meetings (in another administration). Out of 50 interested applicants, 23 participants were intentionally chosen to achieve an even distribution across gender, age, and role. We subsequently conducted second interviews with the same respondents in both municipalities. In total, 36 respondents agreed to participate, while the remaining individuals had left their jobs, were on sick leave, or did not respond to our emails. Overall, we conducted 81 interviews (Table 1).

**Table 1** Number of people who participated in the first and second round, divided into each municipality, and the categories managers/employees and women/men.

	Managers	Employees
Public utility, central Sweden (Pc)	1st: 3 (1 woman, 2 men) 2nd: 2 (2 men)	1st: 4 (3 women, 1 man) 2nd: 4 (3 women, 1 man)
Municipal administration, central Sweden (Mac)	1st: 6 (5 women, 1 man) 2nd: 5 (4 women, 1 man)	1st: 10 (8 women, 2 men) 2nd: 8 (6 women, 2 men)
Municipal administration, southern Sweden (Mas)	1st: 8 (6 women, 2 men) 2nd: 7 (5 women, 2 men)	1st: 14 (11 women, 3 men) 2nd: 11 (8 women, 2 men)
Interviews 1 <sup>st</sup> = 45	1 <sup>st</sup> = 17 (12 women, 5 men)	1 <sup>st</sup> = 28 (22 women, 6 men)
Interviews 2 <sup>nd</sup> = 36	2 <sup>nd</sup> = 14 (9 women, 5 men)	2 <sup>nd</sup> = 22 (17 women, 5 men)
Total = 81		

Interview  $N_{e1}$  = 46,  $N_{e2}$  = 36,  $N_{total}$  = 81.

## Photo-elicitation interviews

The study used the method PEI (Alvariza et al. 2019; Clark-Ibáñez 2004; Harper 2002; Murray & Nash 2017; Oliffe et al. 2008; Padgett et al. 2013). The basic idea is to insert a photo into the interview (Harper 2002) with the primary mission to enrich the data collected (Murray & Nash 2017). In PEI, photos could either be taken by the researcher (theory-driven approach) or by the respondent (exploratory approach) (Clark-Ibáñez 2004). In our project, we wanted to explore the experiences of working from home during the pandemic, thus we used an inductive approach and asked the participants to take photos, also called autodriven PEI (Clark 1999), to capture experiences that were not captured in earlier research on telework. We also wanted to gain knowledge on if and how working from home during the pandemic differed from telework work before the pandemic and therefore we also asked theory-driven questions in the interviews. Furthermore, the photos can either be analyzed by the researcher (Oliffe et al. 2008) or by jointly with the participants during the interview (Alvariza et al. 2019; Murray & Nash 2017). In this study, we chose to let the respondent be the main interpreter of their own photos, and in the interviews, we created a shared understanding of the pictures and the stories told. In summary, we followed the principles used by Padgett et al. (2013, p. 1436): '(a) visual data to enhance and deepen (non-PEI) interviews, (b) participant control of the photography with minimal direction, (c) shared meaning making and reflection with the study interviewer, and (d) respect for privacy and sensitivity'.





In terms of qualitative methods, the most common approach is semi-structured interviews (Tietze et al. 2009). Interviews can indeed give insights into thoughts, experiences, and feelings related to telework (Gioia et al. 2013). However, there are a few potential problems when relying solely on interviews. Interviews often become a retrospective method where respondents are expected to recall a situation, an experience based on memory. Incorporating photos in interviews has several strengths: it empowers the respondent to tell her/his/their story (Alvariza et al. 2019; Clark-Ibáñez 2004; Harper 2002; Murray & Nash 2017; Padgett et al. 2013), pictures stimulate memory in different ways the spoken language (Clark-Ibáñez 2004), pictures evoke deeper elements of human consciousness than words since different part of the brain is used meaning that photos does not only elicit more information, but potentially different information (Harper 2002).

An in-depth qualitative approach is valuable for understanding how employees interpret and give meaning to their practices and experiences (Kelliher and Anderson 2010). Consequently, we believe that by using the qualitative method, we not only get an insight into the respondents' daily habits, but it also allows us to gain a deeper understanding of what meaning they attribute to these when it comes to establishing and maintaining boundaries between work and private life.

## Procedure

*Round 1.* Before the interview, participants were asked to take one to three photographs of their working environment and send them the researchers that would help them describe their experiences of working from home during the pandemic. These images were displayed during the Zoom interviews, which began with an overview and consent process. Respondents were encouraged to talk freely about what they wanted to say with each image. Researchers used probing and follow-up questions—themed on leadership, work environment, and other relevant topics (detailed in Appendix 1)—to explore the narratives around these photographs. Participants also titled their photos, as inspired by Alvariza et al. (2019). See Appendix 2 for example photos. Each interview, lasting between 45 and 90 minutes, was audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematically analyzed (Braun & Clark 2006). Due to the automaticity of habitual behavior, people are not always aware of their own habits. So, we did not ask the respondents to ‘tell us about your habits’. In this study, we have limited it to what respondents describe as recurring everyday activities that seem to serve the purpose of doing boundary work. So, what is described as habits in the results section is our interpretation of different behaviors that are carried out during a working day when work is carried out in one’s own home.

*Round 2.* The second interview round aimed at both following up the experiences from round one and capturing experiences of the changed Covid restrictions. From our contact persons at both municipalities, we learned that there was a lot of variety in the extent to which people were at work; therefore, we had four themes in the interviews: general feeling of the situation, discussions at work on being at work or home, experience of hybrid work, and thoughts of the future (See Appendix 3). As in interview round one, the respondents were asked to take and send one to three pictures of their working environment. Before the interview, the researchers read interview one to be able to ask follow-up questions from that interview. The interviews started with probing questions and then follow-up questions on the photos and from the themes.



## Analysis

We conducted an iterative textual analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006) of the interview transcripts to find common patterns into people's everyday WFH and how boundaries between work and private life are managed. The interviews were read by all researchers and analyzed thematically with an open and inductive approach to the data. Since the data set is very rich and our questions encompassed a broad variety of themes (leadership, governance, work environment, boundary drawing, recovery, relationships with colleagues, and technology use), we had different areas of focus in our initial reading. Author one identified a consistent theme in the respondents' stories that included recurring activities that were carried out in a routine way when working in their own home. These recurring activities appeared to be central to the respondents' experiences of how boundaries between work and life were experienced and managed. Alternatively, there was a perceived lack of habits, which in turn affected their overall well-being and ability to focus on work. In a second reading with focus on habits, all authors' codes were compared and discussed. In this step, we looked for specific cues in the context related to time, space, technology, and social interaction that triggered habitual behavior. Coding progressed from noting comments and observations in the interviews that seemed salient to articulating and refining analytic categories. The comments and observations around habitual behavior were aggregated to the categories in the results. The second round of interviews were analyzed by author one and three with regards to understanding if there had been any changes regarding habits. And if so, why? Quotes used have been edited to be easier to read taken out of context and translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

## Results

When looking at the role of habits in establishing and upholding boundaries between work and non-work when working from home, it is not only important to understand the specific habits that help to uphold boundaries, but also the effects of missing or losing habits when work is conducted in the domestic area. The results section starts with a description of habits that were found to be missing, followed by habits that were used to frame the working day, and is finalized with the stability of habits based on interview round two.

### Missing and losing habits

In our reading and analysis of the empirical material, we discovered that habits that used to be enacted at the workplace were sometimes hard to uphold when working in the domestic area. In other words, habits related to the workplace could get lost when work was performed at home. One example of a habit that could be lost was taking breaks (or micro-transitions from work to non-work-related activities) during the working day, specifically coffee and lunch breaks. Coffee breaks were normally closely related to the social context, that is, taken in the company of colleagues. The relevant social cues, for example, hearing someone putting on coffee or a colleague knocking on the door, were lost when working from home:



- Researcher: But it was better when you were in the office, you said. What did the habits look like then?
- Female employee, Mas: Yes, I think it was more fixed routines then, that you start working at basically the same time, you took your coffee break and went away with a colleague and sat down at a table, at half past nine sat and talked a bit and then drank up your coffee, grabbed a piece of fruit and then went back to work. Then when it was lunch, you could go and eat at a restaurant, or sit in the lunchroom and talk to colleagues outside the unit and have lunch. Now I experience that [laughter] you wake up, you sit directly in front of the computer while I eat breakfast. If I'm only sitting there, my morning goes very much straight to the work, if you compare with before.

A perceived lack of habits could also contribute to feelings of disorganization and fragmentation:

- Female employee, Mac: But I find it very messy. It's more fragmented... At work I only have the job around me. [...] If I start working, I'm doing the job. I forget if I'm going to make private calls and stuff. Call the hairdresser and I always forget that, for a long time. Because when I'm at work, I work. At home, I get much more divided on different things, so. So, for me, this is a messy picture.

The disruption of context for these respondents seems to have meant losing valuable work habits that were tied to cues in the form of co-workers and various artefacts and happenings in the environment. Employees demonstrate relying on their environments in a broad sense to help them keep focus, and to be reminded to take breaks, respectively.

### **Intrusive cues and habits**

At the same time, it was obvious that the domestic area was not devoid of its own habits. For example, sitting at the kitchen table triggered habits such as emptying the dishwasher or going to the refrigerator for a snack. Thus, cues in the home environment triggered certain habitual behaviors that were not work-related. For some, this meant it was hard to keep focused on work, and led to feelings of being less productive:

- Researcher: So, do you find it easier to concentrate while at the office or not?
- Male employee, Pc: /.../ I find it much easier to concentrate in the office. Because then it's like this... Everything is like this automatically, so that as soon as you have a little downtime you think about 'What should I do next?' or 'Is there anything I can grab?' Or alternatively you go out for a walk or something like that. But if you are at home, you go to the fridge every ten minutes when you have nothing to do and focus on other things. I'm not in the same... There are so many more options when you feel that your concentration is starting to decrease.

In short, our respondents were both trying to replace habits from the office and dealing with old habits related to the domestic area. When talking about habits, our impression was that respondents had reflected quite a lot on this topic—and had many times, through self-discipline, tried to establish and uphold new ones.

### **Efforts to establish new habits for boundary work**

The forced ‘integrative’ situation of working from home prompted a more deliberate upkeep or establishment of new habits in relation to boundary transitions. Most respondents described either missing (described above) habits or the active development of habits for framing the workday in various ways. Boundaries were constructed in new habits built from a mix of old habit associations, old and new props, places, procedures, and timing cues.

### **Boundary work through morning habits—home-to-work transitions**

In the case of morning habits, most of them seemed to be intended to create the feeling of going to work by, for example, putting on office clothes and simulating a walk to the office and thus creating a distance between working life and private life.

Female employee, Mas: For me, it is super important. Partly because I need... As an individual, I really need this distance between work and everyday life. [...] During my telework period, I have really tried to step up, fix myself, put on office clothes and make myself fresh and not just sit in my pyjamas in front of the computer right away and make breakfast. So, I try to maintain a kind of structure, which helps me prepare for the job.

Here, the employee is relying on established habits and props such as ‘office clothes’, related to going to the office, to help her maintain the more complex habit of a commute with the aim of putting some ‘distance’ between her everyday life and work needed for her separation strategy and to feel mentally prepared for the job.

The commute to the office was missed by some of our respondents and replaced with a symbolic habit of taking a morning walk away from home and then coming back to ‘the office’. The change of environment and circumstances was not so great that they could not enact a desired, similar behavior, allowing a slightly altered but to a large degree the same habit to play out:

Female employee, Mac: Yes, but I realised I was a little tired like that. I’m used to either biking or walking to the office and getting some fresh air before work starts. So even before, or quite early really when we were home, I realised ‘Oh, gosh, it’s because I’m not out’. So that then I went out for about twenty minutes and said ‘Oh, I’m off to work’, but I really walked a little loop and came back home again.

In a similar fashion, leaving the kids at kindergarten and returning home had now become ‘walking to work’ (at least mentally):



Male employee, Pc: Now I never go home [at the end of the day]. But you could say that I go to work a little when I take my daughters to school and then I go home again. Then I 'go to work' a little anyway. But I never 'go home'.

### **Boundary work through evening habits—work-to-home transitions**

A recurring habit that was mentioned was cleaning up and putting away work-related technology so that these environmental cues did not trigger work-related habits in the evening:

Female employee, Mac: But if you think about the work environment, I have... I thought like this that, so you really have to, it's so easy for everything to stay where you sit, huh, but I... So I have to think about removing, so it is not left until the next day. Shut down the computer, collect all the papers, for it's like... Now it's evening. So that I'm not like, yes, yes, but I'll soon be working again like this. Without cleaning up.

Researcher: Do you stash it away in a drawer or in a special location?

Female employee Mac: Yes, I collect it and put it in my work bag.  
[...]

Researcher: So it is a habit you have to pack up and put away?

Female employee, Mac: Yes, I pack up around four thirty, before my husband comes home.

Sometimes these evening habits could be very elaborate:

Researcher: How do you end your working day? Do you have any habits related to that?

Female employee, Pc: Yes, then I write it down... If I have a lot in my head, I write it down as "to do" before the morning so that I do not have to... keep it in my head so that it becomes stressful. And then... yes, I close all tabs... check the email again so that there is no email that I have missed. And then ... I end the working day. And I do not use this computer privately precisely because it is so easy to get stuck in it then.  
[...]

Female employee, Pc: Then I have a small chair here where ... it [the computer] lives. So, there it lives, next door. And then I pull the power cable out of the power and gather it up... put it on the computer, put my glasses on there and then I say goodnight to it, 'See you tomorrow'. And then it has to be there until I start again.

As we have seen, habits of packing up and removing work-related technology can help reinforce the feeling of 'leaving' work. Another way of doing this was via habits that symbolized leaving work—for example, lighting a candle to create a cosy atmosphere:

- Researcher: So, for you, is it about then moving these work artifacts away somewhere else?
- Female manager, Mac: Yes, and then light some candles and make it cosy. Like that.

Or going out in the garden at the sound of the ‘factory whistle’:

- Female manager, Mac: As soon as I have shut down for the day around five o’clock, then I put on my garden clothes and walk straight out.

### **Substituting cues and habits—Habits related to breaks and pauses during the working day**

A normal workday at the office is often characterized by different kinds of breaks and pauses, often in the company of colleagues and involving certain food and/or beverages and relocating between different meeting rooms. At least in a Swedish context, the obligatory *fika* (coffee break) can in a sense be seen as almost ritualized. For many of our respondents, a lack of present colleagues could make it harder to uphold *fika* breaks. However, other cues in the home could also trigger pause routines. For example, the washing machine:

- Female employee, Pc: Then I usually turn on the washing machine, I love to wash. So, when it beeps like this, then it gives me an opportunity to go and hang the washing to dry. And these movements that you do when you might empty the dishwasher or you hang the laundry, they are pretty good. Because you move your whole body when you do it and your circulation get going.

Sometimes family members helped to uphold habits around breaks, substituting for colleagues:

- Female employee, Mas: We (cohabitants) usually drink coffee at three o’clock together, for example as... we try to do every day and it is very nice to get into those routines. So that it has worked well.

In some cases, respondents were able to transplant workplace routines in their domestic area by enacting a habit in completely the same way even though an observer might deem it unnecessary; even packing a lunchbox as if they were going to the office:

- Male employee, Mas: I stick with my schedule, [...] we have phone time between half past eight, half past nine, then I go for coffee just like I did when I was at work. I go for lunch; I make a lunchbox so I never stand and prepare any food but I have a lunchbox and put it in the microwave and heat it just like I would have done if I had been at work. I have coffee, I have afternoon coffee, I take my breaks, I do.



While a lack of the usual cues to take a break caused some respondents to take fewer breaks and work more intensely, most respondents found ways of substituting cues instead: using the time of day, tying a break into a domestic routine, or implementing a work habit at home to make the home environment more like the work environment where the habit was usually performed, such as preparing and then eating a packed lunch.

### Change of habits or not?

When we returned to our empirical data and analyzed interview round two, we were quite surprised to find how stable some habits were. Especially those that were triggered by temporal cues. Regarding morning and evening habits, our respondents described pretty much the same habits as they did in interview round one. It was interesting to note that some even had added further layers to already established habits. For example, the female respondent quoted above, who emphasized the morning ritual which meant that she put on office clothing even when working from home, says that she added perfume. This was done to reinforce the differences even further between casually walking around in comfy clothing on the weekend to getting in a professional mode during working days. A male respondent who liked to take morning and evening walks to demarcate the beginning and end of the working day had bought himself a dog. According to himself, this was done to strengthen and uphold the habit.

It was mentioned that the respondents experienced difficulties in taking breaks and pauses when working from home. One way to deal with this was to introduce so-called digital coffee breaks where the employees met in a digital forum instead of the lunchroom at the office. However, the respondents consistently describe difficulties in maintaining this habit.

Male employee, Pc:      When everyone was asked to work from home entirely, we still had a standing coffee break. In the beginning, there were quite a few people at that coffee time and then it died out, you could say. [...] There isn't even a standing time anymore.

### Discussion

This study investigates how the pandemic-induced shift to remote work among Swedish municipal workers affected the use of daily habits in boundary work. Our results indicate that habits related to the workplace were sometimes hard to uphold, and could be lost, when working in the domestic area. Our study highlights the inventive strategies employed by individuals to create new cues in their home environment that serve both to trigger work-related habits and to delineate the end of the workday. For example, establishing a habit of taking a daily morning walk in some sense symbolized a walk to the office and enforced a micro-transition to the work-related role. Since establishing completely new habits is hard and time-consuming, this way of building new behaviors onto existing cues has proven fruitful (Wood 2019). Similarly, we found that having habits at the end of the working day helped to mentally switch back to the home role;

for example, changing into other clothes and going out into the garden or lighting a candle to create a ‘cosy’ and thus less work-like atmosphere. Respondents also described how habits from the office were incorporated into the domestic area, such as packing a lunchbox even when eating lunch at home. Mimicking habits from the workplace while working from home could help to create a sense of being at work, or off work, even when working from home. In this sense, habits can be seen as a part of boundary work, that is, the process of either segmenting work and non-work roles to different times and places and thereby keeping work and personal life separate or integrating the two.

The main contribution of this study to boundary theory is to illustrate that successful boundary work is not dependent mainly on intention and willpower, but rather efforts to establish daily habits that help create clear boundaries between work and private life, even while working from home. This is similar to findings on ‘effortless self-regulation’ (Fujita 2011; Gillebaart & de Ridder 2015) showing, for example, that people high on trait self-control do not, in fact, exercise more active behavioral inhibition but are better at creating habits that avoid the need for active inhibition in the first place.

Central to habit theory is the principle that much of human behavior is a result of habits and unfolds with little or no conscious effort (Wood 2019). Habitual behavior is triggered by cues in the environment, and thus, *managing cues* becomes central to link intention and behavior. In relation to telework, boundaries between work and private life have become permeable (cf. Nippert-Eng 1995). A boundary is permeable if elements from one domain are readily found in the other domain. Thus, when working from home, cues in the environment (seeing a laundry basket, hearing the beeping of a washing machine) trigger thoughts and behaviors related to domestic work, even during office hours.

In responding to the boundary challenges presented by forced teleworking, our findings illuminate how individuals either forge new habits or re-construct existing ones using the available resources in the new work context. This adaptive process underscores a dynamic interplay between intentionality and the habitual mechanisms that guide behavior found in research on complex habits (Saunders & More 2024; van der Weiden et al. 2020). For instance, the act of simulating a morning commute by taking a walk before starting WFH could be seen as either the cultivation of a new habit or the transformation of an existing commuting habit to fit the home-work setting. The study reveals the nuanced ways in which individuals seek to preserve the structural integrity of their work-life boundaries in the absence of their familiar cues.

With regards to the home environment, seeing the laptop on the kitchen table in the evening can trigger thoughts about work and related behaviors (opening the laptop and checking for e-mails). Thus, being aware of how different cues affect the possibility to uphold boundaries is an important first step when working from home; and second, removing or limiting contextual cues that cause actual interruptions or intrusions from one domain into the other.

To uphold boundaries between work and non-work while teleworking in the domestic area, we saw a lot of behaviors intended to support role transitions between work and non-work roles. These behaviors, for example, taking a walk ‘to’ work in the morning, or putting away the computer in the afternoon, we labeled ‘transitional habits’. A transitional habit can thus be seen as a daily ritual to symbolize the transition from one role to another in everyday life. We encourage other scholars in the field of boundary theory to address this type of behavior to further the understanding of what significance





it has for balancing demands from the different spheres, and in the long run its effects on employee well-being. Although more research is needed, our results indicate that this specific form of habits can increase the possibility to enter the professional role more clearly at the beginning of the working day and thus facilitate the employee to be better focused on work. And conversely, at the end of the working day enforce the transition to the private role and thus facilitate the possibility of mentally detaching from work.

From habit theory, it is known that establishing or changing a habit takes time and effort. For example, to uphold office hours while working from home or taking out and putting away work-related equipment at the beginning and end of each working day can be perceived as cumbersome. But with persistence, eventually, it will become automatic and done without effort. Alternatively, as seen in this study, tapping into existing habits like putting on office clothes or taking a morning walk to simulate a commute can help to uphold mental boundaries between work and private life, recreating a cue-environment at home that takes advantage of existing associations and making a transfer of habits between contexts easier.

### **Practical implications**

In the article, we have highlighted several central challenges in managing boundaries between work and private life when work is carried out in one's own home. With the support of habit theory, we have pointed out the importance of reflecting on what daily habits one has when working from home, and in what way they either facilitate or hinder the creation and maintenance of boundaries between work and private life. For managers and HR, it is not only important to raise this discussion with the staff and encourage the exchange of experience, but also to reflect on what type of employee behavior is rewarded and encouraged. This is done to prevent habits from being established that make it difficult for the employee to mentally detach from work.

### **Limitations and strengths**

The study is performed in the municipal sector where the normal has been to work at the common workplace, therefore the respondents were not used to working from home. This may affect the development of habits differently from contexts where employees are being used to telework. For example, it may have taken longer time to develop habits, or it may have led to people bringing their habits from work to home. The pandemic was a time of uncertainty and insecurity; this may have affected the making of habits in ways not apparent to us. The interviews were conducted digitally on Zoom and Teams, and even though we experienced them as working well, not least while looking at the photographs, we do not know if the result would have been different if meeting in real life. On the other hand, holding the interviews digitally was the only option available given social distancing requirements during the pandemic. We regard the number of interviewed respondents and interviewing them twice during the pandemic as strengths.

## Conclusion

This article contributes to our understanding of how boundaries between work and private life are accomplished in everyday digital working life and specifically the role of habits in boundary work. In relation to boundary theory, it furthers the understanding of how intentions (to integrate or separate the spheres) turn into action—or not. This gap between intention and action is mainly overlooked in research on boundary work, where it is assumed that intention, with little friction or through willpower and an active decision-making process, turns into action. Instead, we point to the fact that much of everyday life is full of habitual behavior that is triggered by cues in the environment, thus making cue management a core influence mechanism. The automaticity with which well-established habits are performed can help to remove the need to apply conscious effort in switching back and forth between work and family roles. Conversely, it may be assumed that a lack of daily habits while working from home results in a lack of boundaries around work, and therefore makes it harder to distinguish work from private life.

## Conflict of interest

This work was supported by Afa Försäkring. The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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## Appendix I

### Interview questions—first round

#### **Background**

- Tell us briefly about your work tasks.
- How long and how much have you been working from home during the Corona pandemic?
- The colleagues you work closely with—do they work from home or from the office?
- Are you sitting in an office landscape, activity-based office or do you have your own office room?
- Has your manager been working from home or from the office during the pandemic?
- How much did you work from home before the Corona pandemic?
- How long does it take to travel to and from work?
- Who are in your household and have any of them been home at the same time as you?

#### **Triggers/trigger questions**

- Then I'm curious to hear you tell me about your pictures!
- Why have you taken and selected this photograph?
- What do you want to tell us with this picture?

#### **Themes**

The respondent talked about her/his pictures and the interviewer asked questions based on the interview guide where they fitted. After the pictures were shown, the interviewer went through the themes and questions (for his-/herself) and made sure nothing was missed.

#### **Doing work**

- Do you take breaks when working from home? Can you tell us about when and how you do it. What do you do during your break? How do breaks at home differ from when you're in the workplace?
- As an individual, have you felt that you needed to take greater responsibility for your own work? In what way? Is it positive or negative?
- Do you feel that you have a good grasp of what you should be working with, has it been affected by working from home? How do you plan your workday and decide what to work on?
- How do you experience your own efficiency during the Corona pandemic compared to before?



- o If you're more efficient, is there anything else that's had to stand back? For example, have creative ideas and initiatives for new tasks/projects decreased?  
Chat?
- What are your opportunities for concentration at work when working from home?
- Have your duties changed and in what way in such cases? For the better or for the worse?
- Has your workload changed? In what way? For the better for the worse?
- What do you miss in your work situation when you work at home compared to when you are at work?

### **Boundary strategy.**

- How do you feel that the boundary between work, and personal and leisure life has changed now that you work more from home?
- Spatial boundaries—where do you work? To what extent can you decide for yourself?
- Temporal limits—when do you work, when are you free? To what extent do you feel you can decide it yourself?
- Has your boundary strategy changed from when you worked from the office?

### **Relationship with manager**

- How has your closest manager acted during the Corona pandemic?
- Do you feel that you have received feedback on your work in any other way than before?
- Do you feel that you have been more or less monitored in your work than before?
- What do you think the manager could do differently to make it better for you when working from home?
- How do you feel that your organization has managed the Corona pandemic from a work environment perspective?
  - o Have you been able to influence the organization of work during the pandemic?
  - o Has the organization issued guidelines and recommendations during the pandemic? What have they been about? Have they been a help to you in your work?

### **Relationship with colleagues**

- How has the relationship with colleagues worked during the Corona pandemic?
- How do you communicate? About Teams/Zoom/Skype—do you only use audio, or do you also have a camera running? What does it matter?
- What has happened to the 'small talk'?
- Do you miss the 'small talk'/coffee breaks?
- Do you feel that you have become socially isolated or have social contacts increased?
- Do you feel that you have become professionally isolated, that is, had less exchange around work-related issues when working from home?



### **Family situation**

- Has your private life situation affected your work during the Corona pandemic? If so, how?
- Has your private life situation affected your work environment during the Corona pandemic? If so, how?
- Has your private life situation affected your job satisfaction during the Corona pandemic? If so, how?
- Has working from home during COVID-19 affected your personal life situation? If so, how?

### **Ergonomics and technology**

- How has the technology worked during working from home?
- What technical aids do you use?
- What has your physical work environment been like? In what way is it different from the one you have/experience at work?

### **Perceived health**

- How do you feel that your health has been affected by working from home?
- Can you let go of your thoughts about work after the workday has ended while working from home?
- Are recovering from work? How do you do that?
- Are you experiencing more or less stress now during working from home during the Corona pandemic? Why?
- Has your sleep changed slightly while working from home during the Corona pandemic? Why?

### **Being a manager during the pandemic**

- Perceived challenges to being a manager during the Corona pandemic?
- How have you dealt with these challenges?
- What are the good experiences?

### **Concluding question**

- Based on the experience you have gained during the year. How would you like to work in the future?

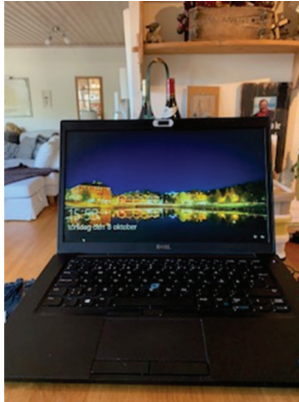


## Appendix 2

### Photographs



Walk to the home office.



Bringing work to 'home'.



The routine of the day.

## Appendix 3

### Interview guide—second round

#### *Preparations*

The second interview was a follow-up interview. Before each interview, the interviewer read up on that respondent's first interview and looked at the pictures to summarize the person's experience on working from home. Things that were especially important to the person were highlighted. By bringing this up at the interview, we looked for both things that had and had not changed during the past year and capture what this was due to.

#### **Four themes**

When talking to our contact person on each municipality, we got the impression that there were a lot of differences among the respondents about the extent to which they worked in the common office, and from home. We therefore decided to have four overarching themes and that the interviewer asked relevant questions in relation to the themes and to the first round of interview.

- How do you feel this year has been since we spoke at the last time? It has been a time where restrictions have held up, but also eased during the autumn. How is it now?
  - Did bra work?
  - Worked less well?
  - Health/well-being?
- How did the discussion go at work (with colleagues and managers/management) last fall when the restrictions eased?
  - Policy/principles/procedures??
  - Unclear/clear what was expected?
- How do you feel this hybrid variant works? That is, when switching between working from home and in the common office, alternatively, when some work from home and others don't?
- What are your thoughts on the future?