

# Separating Home and Work for Online Faculty

Lee M. Stadtlander, Ph.D., Lori K. La Civita, Ph.D., Amy E. Sickel, Ph.D., and Martha J. Giles, Ph.D.

## Abstract

Through the lens of environmental psychology and photo voice, this study explores online faculty's work vs. home environment. Results indicated many participants had previously considered separating work and home and developed methods to maintain separation. This is a preliminary exploration to a larger survey study.

## Problem

Although previous literature has examined the faculty work environment in brick and mortar institutions, little is known about how online faculty work from their home. Previous research (Stadtlander, Sickel, & Giles, 2014; with 236 online faculty from colleges/universities around the US) found that some faculty (particularly part time) did not have a separate workspace for their online work. The present study extends this work by exploring whether and how online faculty separate work and home.

## Purpose

The present study extends the examination of the online faculty's home/work environment. It specifically examines the issue of separation of home vs work place.

## Relevant Literature

Research on telecommuting (i.e., those individuals who work virtually for an outside organization from within their own homes) has examined aspects of the virtual worker's environment such as physical characteristics (see Belanger, Watson-Manheim, & Swan, 2012) and psychological perceptions of job control and work/home boundaries (Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006). There is a considerable literature on faculty working at in-person institutions and their work environment (e.g., Dollard & Bakker, 2010; Gornall & Salisbury, 2012; Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2011). However, there is very little research on the online faculty home work environment. Oliver (2009) conducted the only previous study of the online faculty work environment through a qualitative study of 26 community college faculty who worked both online and in-person, and tended to use their in-person offices. The present study addresses the gap in the literature on faculty working only virtually.

## Research Questions

Do online faculty members separate home from workplace?

How do online faculty visualize their workplace?

## Procedures

Following approvals from Walden University's IRB and Office of Institutional Research, ads were placed in the Center for Faculty Excellence's monthly newsletter for six months (June through November 2015). Participants were required to only work online. Interested individuals were sent the consent form and an email interview, they were also asked to email a photo of the area they considered their "workplace." Subsequently, each participant was interviewed about their responses and photo for 15-20 min by a researcher.

A total of 26 Walden faculty offered to participate, however only 18 faculty completed the full interview process. Of the 18 participants, 13 were females (5 were full time) and 5 males (3 full time). Ages of the participants ranged from 30 to 71 years, with a mean of 52.6 and median of 54 years. Males tended to be older ( $M = 60$  yrs.) than females ( $M = 49.7$  yrs.), part ( $M = 52.6$  yrs.) and full time faculty ( $M = 52.5$  yrs.) were similar in age. Participants were predominately Caucasian ( $n = 16$ ; 1 Native American and 1 Other), all were married, 4 (22.2%) reported having children at home. Years at Walden varied between 1 and 14; total years teaching from 2-44.

## Data Analysis

Responses from participants were coded and themes developed. Comments about photos were similarly coded and themes summarized.

## Findings

*Do online faculty members separate home from workplace?*

The most common method ( $n = 12$ ; 7 or 87.5% of fulltime) of structuring the home environment for work was to have a room dedicated as an office. For example: "My office is separate from the rest of the house (we bought it for that reason) and I typically sit at my office desk most of the day, even though I can take my laptop elsewhere" (sub. "Rose", age 37, full time). Three indicated having a desk, but did not use the term "office" or "study." Three worked in other areas of the house, such as kitchen or living room.

## Findings, continued

Five faculty (3 part time) mentioned structuring their work hours helped them to separate home from work life.

I prefer to work mostly during the day during the week. I do try to log in once on the weekend as well and check email ("Eva", age 54, full time).

I travel with my family in an RV (280 square feet) full time. I go to bed at the same time as my kids each night, 8 or 9 PM. Then I get up to make coffee around 3:30 AM, sit in a corner swivel chair, in the same room my kids are sleeping, fire up my laptop, and I can get into the "Walden zone" ("Lisa", age 43, part time).

One male and two females indicated that they had no separation between work and home.

I find that I do not do a good job at all separating my work and my personal time. However, I prefer it this way, as I am able to spread my time across more hours, which allows me to do things I want to do during the day such as the gym or Starbucks ("Kevin", age 47, full time).

While it would be nice to have an office or something similar, this is not an option for me right now. No, my home environment is my work environment. I'm not sure that I would even work better in an office as I like to move around a bit ("Missy", age 36, full time).

Two females indicated, that while they did not separate work from home in space, they did separate it by time.

I only separate time, not environment. My commitment is to have a personal life, and we take that time after 7 pm and most of the time after noon on Saturday until Monday 5 a.m. ("Laura", age 68, part time).

*How do online faculty visualize their workplace?*

Example photos of faculty work areas are attached. Three major themes were present in their descriptions: presence of technology, need for books to be present, and beauty of views,

## Limitations

This study was conducted with Walden University faculty who volunteered based upon an ad in the CFE newsletter. As a result of this recruitment method, the sample tended to be older, were predominately female, Caucasian, and married. Presumably, only those individuals very interested in the topic chose to participate in the email and phone interview.

## Conclusions

It appears that many participants have considered the issue of separating home and work and developed methods to maintain the separation. Full time faculty were more likely to report having a separate room they use as an office, while part time faculty more often report structuring their work time.

Of concern, are the three faculty reporting no separation of work and home, such individuals may be more at risk for burnout. Additional research is warranted in this area.

## Social Change Implications

The information from this study suggests that institutional administration can support online faculty through training on issues of home vs. work. A survey further examining the separation of work and home is currently in progress. Future research will examine the impact of personality on the home/work environment and burnout.