

Hope for the (New) Ideal Worker: Resolving the Flexibility-Availability Paradox



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Abstract This paper aims to integrate work-life border theory and boundary spanning with performance management principles to contextualize the needs and desires of the (new) ideal worker in the (new ideal) organization. The reality is that performance management systems are rarely implemented in an ideal way. There may be organizational- or country-level constraints that prevent the implementation of a good performance management system. This paper offers a proposal for blending the concepts of ideal worker and ideal workplace and integrating performance management principles to guide boundary management across the changing landscape of organizational structures. As such, the integration of border theory with performance management principles provides valuable insights for resolving the flexibility-availability paradox.

This paper aims to integrate work-life border theory and boundary spanning with performance management principles to contextualize the needs and desires of the (new) ideal worker in the (new ideal) organization. Slaughter (2015) notes that millions of workers “still have day jobs with fixed hours, fixed locations, and bosses who expect fixed amounts of work. How can we change *that* economy to make room for care?” (p. 212). If we are now looking to redefine or rethink what is the ideal worker, then we also need to propose a new view or rethink what is the ideal workplace.

A contributing factor includes the technology advancements in recent decades that make it possible for approximations of the ideal worker or ideal workplace to be realized. Current technology and connectivity influences the many ways in which employees perform their jobs and the kinds of jobs that workers perform. Technology developments have functioned to allow for flexibility in work scheduling in ways that were not previously available. The ability to work remotely and stay connected enables new flexible work arrangements. This is a benefit for many

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employees and organizations. The costs are generally associated with the blurring of boundaries between domains of work and life (Nam 2014; Piszczek and Berg 2014; Piszczek et al. 2016; Piszczek 2017). As such, images of the ideal worker and the actual worker have evolved from a nine-to-five commuter to the 24/7 “always available” prospect.

1 The Flexibility-Availability Paradox

How has this changing landscape shifted the professional identity development for those who find themselves struggling to navigate the organizational pressures that characterize the flexibility-availability paradox? To be clear, the flexibility-availability paradox is this: Advances in technology increase the opportunities for flexible schedules and telecommuting. Generally, this also means the work- and nonwork-life boundaries are more integrated. However, that same level of flexibility also increases the potential availability of an employee, which imposes a more permeable boundary structure between work and life domains—thus, the paradox (Table 1). The intended flexibility increases availability, which restricts flexibility and threatens boundary control when one is expected to always be available (Fig. 1).

Table 1 Factual considerations in practice

Fact: The ability to work remotely and stay connected enables new flexible work arrangements
Fact: Flexible work arrangements combined with the availability of mobile technology communication translate into increased accessibility
Fact: In practice, increased accessibility via technology is often interpreted as increased availability
Herein lies the flexibility-availability paradox

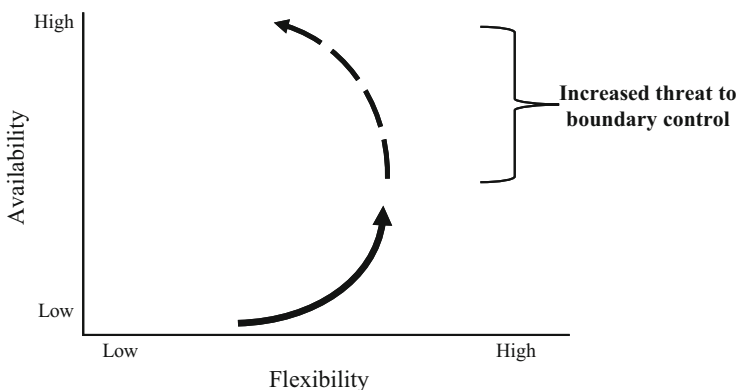


Fig. 1 The flexibility-availability paradox

The notion of paradox in organizations is not new, but applications of the concept to issues related to work-life integration are relatively recent. Lewis (2000) explored the notion of paradox in organizations with a focus on conflicting demands in general among alternative and sometimes opposing perspectives for managing those demands. Emphasis was on learning from organizational tensions and developing a refined understanding of distinctive organizational features and organizational behaviors. Smith and Lewis (2011) also suggested that adapting to tensions is necessary for organizations to accommodate competing demands. Likewise, Johnson (2014) described paradox in organizational context as interdependent pairs of values. Therefore, understanding paradox offers insight into frameworks for examining the management strategies for addressing underlying tensions and processes for improvement (cf. Lavine 2014). Törner et al. (2017) also focuses on the paradox of demands for productivity in organizational climate. Although special attention was directed toward understanding occupational health and safety, Törner et al. do not specifically address paradox in the context of work-life demands. In fact, much of the academic work on paradox in organizations has focused on issues at the management level with regard to productivity and operations within a company (Figelj and Biloslavo 2015). The use of technology among employees to increase flexibility and the paradox of managing the availability of ideal workers is a relatively unexplored domain.

The prevailing notion of the ideal worker has been characterized by high devotion to work in organizations and highly segmented work- and nonwork-life (Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015; Munn and Greer 2015; Williams 2000). Work-family or work-life border theory is a framework for understanding and explaining how individuals negotiate and manage work and nonwork responsibilities and the boundaries between them. Central to the theory is the notion that work and nonwork responsibilities are interdependent domains of a worker's life. Clark (2000, p. 751) defined "balance" between the work and nonwork borders as "satisfaction and good functioning. . . with a minimum of role conflict." As such, Clark proposed that when work- and nonwork-life domains are similar, weak borders will facilitate work-life balance. Alternatively, when domains are different, stronger borders will facilitate balance.

Work-life border theory (Clark 2000) and related research on boundary spanning (cf. Glavin et al. 2011; Voydanoff 2005) consist of two key concepts—segmentation and integration at the boundaries of various life domains (e.g., work, nonwork, family, leisure, etc.). There is evidence to support *segmentation*—referring to the personal-professional boundary. Individuals who segment domains of work- and nonwork-life reinforce the boundary between personal and professional life. Several studies document a widely held belief that overt expression of personal values is not appropriate at work (i.e., segmentation) and that organizations discourage the display of personal items in work space, as well as references to nonwork roles while at work (e.g., Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015; Sanchez-Burks 2002; Uhlmann et al. 2013). However, changes in workforce demographics and available technology have made integration a more likely pathway for the management of boundaries between life domains (Kossek et al. 2012). Organizational practices that encourage *integration* of personal-professional boundaries include company-sponsored activities, work-family policies that provide on-site childcare facilities, and personal self-disclosure (e.g., Dumas et al. 2013; Fleming 2005; Kreiner et al. 2009; Rothbard et al. 2005). Therefore, the

management of boundaries has become more precarious for new ideal workers as well as for the ideal organization due to the flexibility-availability paradox.

Perhaps the needs and desires are not new, but the (new) ideal worker is better positioned than ever before to negotiate that those needs and desires are met. They have more opportunity and flexibility in personal life to choose when and where they work. Furthermore, the new ideal worker has greater command at navigating the workplace landscape with new technology. While devotion and commitment to professional identity remains high for the new ideal worker, technology advances make remote and virtual navigation of the workplace increasingly possible (work anytime/anywhere). The new ideal worker is one that has adapted to advances in mobile communication technology to efficiently and effectively produce expanded results for the workplace unencumbered by their nonwork-related responsibilities. Therefore, boundary management practices have evolved in an environment where boundaries are increasingly more permeable.

Perhaps more importantly, the new ideal worker prompts a need for revision in the new ideal organization. The new ideal organization is one that recognizes the needs and demands of ideal workers in all domains of life and adapts to those needs and desires as a strategy to recruit, select, and retain star performers (cf. Aguinis and O'Boyle 2014; Aguinis and Bradley 2015; Aguinis et al. 2012, 2013). This means that performance management practices might require some modification. This does not mean that performance standards must change. However, ideal performance management practices should consider boundary-spanning behavior that includes access and utilization of flexible schedules, telecommuting, etc. Management of boundary spanning in the new ideal organization becomes integrated into informal performance management in much the same way that citizenship behavior, extra-role behaviors, and absenteeism have been considered in previous generations of employees.

The reality is that performance management systems are rarely implemented in an ideal way (McAdam et al. 2005). There may be organizational or country-level constraints that prevent the implementation of a good performance management system. The general principles of performance management will be discussed in a later section. As such, this paper offers a proposal for resolving the flexibility-availability paradox by blending the concepts of ideal worker and ideal workplace and integrating performance management principles to guide boundary management across the changing landscape of organizational structures.

Slaughter (2015) describes societal expectations for an “always available worker” that is brought about by the immediate access to anyone, anywhere through the use of communication technology. Advances in technology may be shaping societies' perception of the ideal worker—this flexibility-availability image that may be compounding the stressors of work-family integration. These new ways of working with increased flexibility in scheduling, telecommuting, and the availability of communication technology (smartphones, e-mail, videoconference, etc.) share the advantage of reducing costs for companies while increasing the potential for engagement and performance.

A conceptual model illustrating the tensions and reinforcing cycles of paradox is presented in Fig. 2. Exploring the flexibility-availability paradox offers a framework

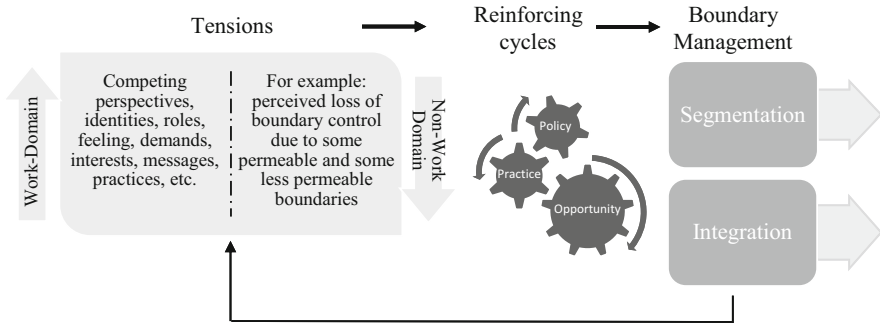


Fig. 2 Flexibility-availability framework. Adapted from: Lewis, M. (2000). Exploring paradox: Toward a more comprehensive guide. *Academy of Management Review*, 25, 760–776

for understanding divergent perspectives and disruptive experiences associated with attempts to maintain boundary control among new ideal workers. In general, a paradox may denote a wide variety of competing elements: perspectives, identities, feelings, demands, interests, messages, or practices. Paradox is also constructed as people attempt to create meaning out of ambiguity and change. The paradoxical tensions, such as the perceived loss of boundary control, are perceptual. An ideal organization composed of a variety of flexible arrangements to allow for autonomy among ideal workers may use highly formalized and centralized procedures for employee control. Over time, such tensions may become objectified within goals or reward systems for performance. The reinforcing cycles perpetuate or worsen these tensions. A reinforcing cycle might be any policy or organizational practice that prevents an aspiring ideal worker from maintaining a sense of boundary control while simultaneously preventing the worker from boundary flexibility necessary to recognize or enact boundary management strategies (integration or segmentation). Providing opportunities for flexible arrangements may initially reduce frustrations or discomfort with work-to-family interference (WIF) (Allen et al. 2013; Frone et al. 1992). However, these same opportunities may eventually foster opposite unintended consequences that intensify the underlying tension if the flexibility in scheduling is translated into expectations of increased availability during nonwork hours.

One study has found that the positive relationship between work engagement and new ways of working (specifically, flexible working arrangements) is fully mediated by efficient and effective communication (Brummelhuis et al. 2012). However, there is a positive relationship between flexible work arrangements and exhaustion due to increased interruptions during the work process (Brummelhuis et al. 2012). Positive relationships have also been observed between increased after-hour electronic communication and work-home interference (Derks et al. 2015) and emotional exhaustion (Piszczek 2017). Therefore, the cost of increased flexibility in scheduling and availability of employees is often associated with the blurring of boundaries between domains of work and life.

Research on outcomes of particular work-life boundary management strategies have provided evidence that increased integration of work and nonwork roles is associated with an increase in the number of hours that employees spend on work and an increase in the number of role transitions (switching roles) and role conflict (Desrochers et al. 2005). Evidence also suggests that increased integration also leads to an increase in family-to-work conflict (Kossek et al. 2009) and that boundary flexibility was generally associated with increased interference (Bulger et al. 2007).

Available evidence suggests, then, that flexibility in scheduling, telecommuting, and available work-related communication technology is not inherently problematic in terms of work-life interference. Rather, individual differences in the ways that workers enact boundary management control strategies seem to influence the observed outcomes associated with flexible scheduling, technology use, employee engagement, and well-being. Despite the individual differences, however, expectations for after-hour electronic communication use and the availability of the ideal worker have shifted with the expanded notions of workplace and work time. Informal organizational norms may influence after-hour technology use by employees by having certain performance expectations or rewarding such behaviors (Duxbury et al. 2014; Fenner and Renn 2010). Mazmanian et al. (2013) explain how organizational norms in knowledge work, for example, have made after-hour technology use critical to success as a sign of motivation among ideal workers. Research in industrial relations also suggests that unpaid after-hour work is associated with and motivated by anticipated future earnings (Song 2009). Therefore, there is compelling evidence for a flexibility-availability paradox that is further complicated by prevailing notions of a new ideal worker who is increasingly flexible and available through the use of communication technology.

2 Boundary-Spanning and Mobile Communication Technology

Boundary theory (Ashforth et al. 2000; Clark 2000) addresses how people construct, maintain, negotiate, and cross the borders between work- and nonwork-life. Boundaries are “the physical, temporal, emotional, cognitive and/or relational limits that define entities as separate from one another” (Ashforth et al. 2000, p. 474). The various physical and metaphorical borders serve to structure the individual roles that people play and maintain in the different domains of their lives.

Boundary control is the ability to enact boundaries consistent with one’s personal preferences (Kossek and Lautsch 2012) and has been linked to lower psychological distress and work-family conflict (Kossek et al. 2012). Boundary permeability and boundary control are distinct in that boundary permeability refers to how easily role boundaries might be disrupted by thoughts or behaviors. Boundary flexibility, on the other hand, is the capacity of a role boundary to be moved in time or location, that is, where and when a role might be enacted. The level of role interference is generally

less when there is boundary flexibility, whereas permeability of boundaries is generally associated with more role interference (Bulger et al. 2007).

The permeability of boundaries and perceived loss of boundary control vary with adoption of mobile communication technology depending on the boundary management strategies enacted by different employees (Duxbury et al. 2014). Recall that integrators combine or blend the roles of personal and professional boundaries, while segmentors reinforce the demarcation of personal and professional boundaries. Integrators are more likely than segmentors to use mobile communication technology as a way to minimize the impact and interference of work on their family and nonwork time. However, while segmentors recognize ways that technology enhances work-related communication and efficiency, they are less likely than integrators to see how work-related communication technology offers any advantages to the management of their family or other nonwork roles (Duxbury et al. 2014). Piszczek (2017) also found that after-hour communication expectations predicted technology use among segmentors and integrators but more strongly for segmentors because they are less likely to engage in technology use if the organizational context does not demand it.

Derks et al. (2015) observed that work-home interference increases with more work-related smartphone use in general. This relationship between smartphone use and work-home interference was stronger among workers who are expected by their employers to be available online after work hours and among employees with low work engagement. Considering the differences in the impact of technology use observed between segmentors and integrators (Duxbury et al. 2014), this finding by Derks et al. has significant implications for supervisory management with regard to the communication of work expectations after hours, especially among workers who are less engaged and enact segmentation as their strategy for boundary control. Segmentors report lower technology use overall, which is consistent with their preference, but after-hour electronic communication expectations can compel segmentors and integrators to exhibit higher levels of technology use (Piszczek 2017).

There is an interplay, therefore, between boundary management among individual workers (in the form of segmentation or integration) and performance management practices among supervisors and managers in the organization. This interplay becomes increasingly clear when taking into consideration the “information and communication technology user role (ICTU)” that is “highly flexible and permeable and therefore can be engaged in many locations and at any time” (Piszczek et al. 2016, p. 5) and therefore overlap with other roles. This interplay between technology use and boundary management is confounded when considered within an organizational context where human resource management practices and performance management systems also influence individual work behaviors. Hence, this leads us to offer Proposition 1 considering when the interplay between technology use and boundary management becomes or is confounded.

Proposition 1 The same organizational human resource policy for flexible arrangements or expectations for after-hour technology use will not have the same influence over work behavior after taking into account performance management practices.

After-hour electronic communication expectations may influence segmentors and integrators to exhibit higher levels of technology use, but with different outcomes. Specifically:

Proposition 1a After-hour electronic communication expectations are expected to be associated with more negative results for segmentors who prefer to keep work- and nonwork-life separate.

Proposition 1b After-hour electronic communication expectations may be associated with positive results for integrators who have more permeable boundaries and use mobile communication technology as a way to minimize the impact and interference of work on their family and nonwork time.

3 General Principles of Performance Management

Although the independent effects of performance management (PM) and human resource management (HRM) are well established in the respective literature on those practices, the effect of their interaction has also been observed on firm performance (Pavlov et al. 2017). The interaction between PM and HRM is also a reasonable influence on individual work behavior in the context of after-hour technology use for the ideal worker.

HRM practices affect performance through their influence on the organization's social climate for trust, cooperation, and opportunity to share knowledge (Bowen and Ostroff 2004; Collins and Clark 2003; Collins and Smith 2006). Performance management systems, on the other hand, are designed to achieve several objectives. The diverse objectives of performance management can be summarized into two broad categories, namely, *strategic* and *tactical* goals (Armstrong 2000; Aguinis 2009).

Performance management can be used to achieve strategic goals by linking organizational goals with individual goals as a way to reinforce work behaviors that are consistent with the attainment of organizational goals. Employees understand which attitudes and behaviors contribute to organizational operations when performance efforts are aligned, and there is a clear sense that everyone is working to achieve a common mission. Tactical goals may be achieved when performance management is used to inform human resource decision-making (e.g., salary adjustments, promotions, employee retention and termination decisions, recognition or reward for superior performance, or identification of low performance). Employees understand the values of the organization when they are aware of the information that is used to make decisions about recognition- and performance-based rewards.

The principles of a successful performance management system include congruence with strategy, meaningfulness, thoroughness, fairness and acceptability, and discriminability (Cascio and Aguinis 2005, p. 86). These principles align with strategic and tactical organizational goals and will continue to characterize a successful organizational performance system. However, the integration of boundary management strategies will require that leaders manage the system with a different perspective to resolve the flexibility-availability paradox. The principles of meaningfulness and

congruence with strategy are aligned with achieving strategic performance management objectives, whereas thoroughness, fairness, and discriminability are principles that guide tactical performance management objectives.

Congruence with Strategy and Specificity Congruence with strategy and specificity are two principles that can be integrated into boundary management when leaders implement flexible and proactive perspectives in interpreting the ideal worker and ideal workplace. Leaders need to implement flexible and proactive perspectives in boundary management with keeping the focus on achieving the organizational goals. For example, employee recruitment selection measures should refrain from setting traditional criterion and emphasize the capability of achieving specific results. This should be accompanied with higher specificity in communicating expectations and the provision of resources to meet expectations. Consequently, employees' goals will be aligned with organizational goals while allowing employee control over boundaries (Cascio and Aguinis 2005). In addition to performance and productivity, this also contributes to meaningfulness in performance management systems.

Meaningfulness The implementation of performance management principles often works best when they are viewed as important to everyone's job. Likewise, employees are often more motivated and engaged at work when the work is meaningful. Therefore, engagement is another area in performance management that attracts researchers and influences the interpretation of boundary management for ideal worker and ideal workplace. Engagement is important for employees and organizations because higher levels of engagement yield higher employee productivity, improved quality with fewer errors, higher profitability, and higher likelihood of business success (Stairs and Galpin 2010). Engaged employees work with passion (Macey et al. 2009). For employees to be engaged, however, the work environment should promote information sharing, offer learning opportunities and foster a balance in people's lives (Macey et al. 2009).

Crawford et al. (2014) identified autonomy as one of the drivers for engagement. Therefore, to increase perceived boundary control, organizations could allow employees the autonomy to schedule their own work and develop individualized work plans for completing their work. Moreover, from the perspective of strategic resource management, fostering ideal workers in an ideal workplace creates the greatest likelihood for highly engaged employees and increased productivity. There is evidence that employees are more likely to have an increased sense of control over work outcomes when they have higher levels of autonomy (Cascio and Aguinis 2005; Crawford et al. 2014).

Thoroughness The system thoroughness depends on evaluating the performance of all employees across all their job responsibilities. With flexible boundary management, the performance evaluation process will have to integrate new methods that motivate performance and focus on measuring results and promoting effective communication methods instead of measuring activities and evaluating traditional means of communication (Cascio and Aguinis 2005). Another performance

management principle that can be integrated to guide boundary management is fairness and acceptability.

Fairness and Acceptability Although integrators and segmentors react to boundary management differently, workers who enact either of these boundary management strategies view the process as being fair and acceptable. Performance management practices may be perceived as fair and acceptable when performance is based on results rather than activities (American National Standards Institute and Society for Human Resource Management 2012, p. 13). This includes helping workers focus on what they need to do to perform (CIPD 2016) and ensuring that workers contribute positively to the organization's business objectives (Gifford 2017). Successful flexibility scheduling practices are also measured on the basis of performance results, despite the physical location of the employee when the work activities are performed. For new ideal workers, particularly from younger generations, flexibility scheduling is often viewed as a nonmonetary benefit that communicates organizational support. Therefore, flexibility may be viewed not only as a fair and acceptable performance management tool, but it may also translate into higher levels of work engagement and result-focused performance. This, of course, depends on the principle of discriminability in performance management.

Discriminability An effective performance management system provides a mechanism for distinguishing good performers from the bad performers (Cascio and Aguinis 2005). Discriminability between effective and ineffective performance should also be integrated into the implementation of boundary management. The limit of autonomy and flexibility offered under boundary management should be justified with performance results. The objective of performance management is to guide resources and operations to achieve organizational results. Therefore, boundary management should be seen as a process that contributes to meeting that objective rather than a barrier. Given this perspective, we introduce Propositions 2 and 3.

Proposition 2 The relationship between enacted performance management practice and positive work-related behavior outcomes will be moderated by the preferred boundary management strategy of individual workers. Specifically:

Proposition 2a Performance management practices that integrate boundary management preferences of workers will facilitate greater work-related behavior outcomes that will be more pronounced for integrators.

Proposition 2b Performance management practices that are incongruent with the preferred boundary management strategies of workers will impose limits on work-related behavior outcomes that will be more pronounced for integrators.

Proposition 3 The perceptual tensions associated with work-to-family interference among integrators may be mitigated by performance management and HRM practices that account for the boundary management of ideal workers.

4 Old Ideal Versus New Ideal Thinking: Resolving the Flexibility-Availability Paradox

As promised, this paper offers a proposal for resolving the flexibility-availability paradox by blending the concepts of ideal worker and ideal workplace and integrating performance management principles to guide boundary management across the changing landscape of organizational structures.

Effective strategies for motivating workers may require laying new foundations. The goal for managers and supervisors, as well as employees, is to engage in meaningful and purposeful work while sustaining productive behavior and managing performance. Boundary management research focuses on the individual approaches one uses to organize and separate role demands and expectations into specific realms of home and work (Kossek et al. 1999). Successful boundary management depends on the development of a strategy to manage the flexible arrangement (e.g., mobile communication technology device; flex schedule; telecommute) prior to adoption.

Successful boundary management also depends on the ability to change one's strategy to respond to concerns at home. The development and implementation of specific workplace policies around mobile technology outside of regular workday, for example, are not expected to contribute in significant positive ways toward resolving the paradox for employees who struggle to control boundaries through segmentation and therefore might ask for and need flextime or telecommuting benefits. Struggling segmentors do not appear to effectively enact the implementation of such workplace policies (Duxbury et al. 2014).

Finally, there are implications for theory and research. Successful boundary management depends on self-control. According to self-concordance theory (Downes et al. 2017; Sheldon and Elliot 1998), the individual pursuit of goals for intrinsic or identified motive aligns with personal values and fulfills the individual need for autonomy. This is in contrast to the relative number of controlled motives or goals pursued for extrinsic reward.

Based on the review of available research on boundary management and employee use of mobile communication technology, what follows are evidence-informed recommendations for leaders and managers in organizations who are considering work engagement and performance in the context of flexible work arrangements. These recommendations are particularly relevant for better understanding how to develop a work context (culture and climate) that is conducive to engaging ideal workers and capitalizing on the resources that those employees have to offer. First and foremost, employers should formally endorse employee boundary control to avoid the development of informal workplace norms that might contribute to higher work pressure. Other important considerations include:

1. The way that an individual chooses to integrate or segment work-life issues has implications for the quality of fit with organizational expectations for time use while at work as well as when a person is doing work away from the physical workplace.
2. Organizational HR practices are not necessarily supplies (benefits), but rather opportunities that ideal workers may use to enhance the ideal work environment.

3. Performance management practices are important contributors to an individual's actual ability to behaviorally enact his or her existing boundary management preferences. The performance management practices set a minimum standard for the employee's ability to integrate and segment by granting additional supply opportunities through organizational mandates and raising the floor for strategically formulated practices.
4. Assess the alignment between organizational goals and goals of the ideal worker by assessing employee perceptions of the organizational expectations for performance and time use when doing work away from the workplace relative to the employees' preferred boundary management strategy (integration or segmentation).

Bolman and Deal (2013) describe the organizational perspective of human resources where the complementary work arrangements would be ideal if both the organization and individual see a "fit" for each other. Essentially their premise is that there should be cooperation, motivation, and participation that support both the organizational goals and the individual's (worker's) goals/needs. The worker and/or the organization will face consequences that are likely to be less than positive if the "fit" is poor. This perspective is consistent with our proposed recommendations for resolving the flexibility-availability paradox. The (new) ideal relationship between workers and organizations will be one in which both the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual are met.

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