Changes in Work, Changes in Self? Managing our Work and Non-Work Identities in an Integrated World

By Lakshmi Ramarajan & Erin M. Reid

Diverse workplaces are challenging the boundaries between workers' personal and professional lives, as workers today navigate employer pressures regarding who they are and who they can be outside of work. Below, Lakshmi Ramarajan and Erin M. Reid consider how the attunement to power dynamics affects organisational effectiveness and organisational change.

How much of who we are is defined by our work? This seemingly simple question is surprisingly difficult to answer. Imagine Lisa, a management consultant whose work requires her to travel each week, works online on weekends and becomes close friends with her coworkers because they all travel together and work continuously. Like Lisa, many workers today are under increasing employer pressure to integrate their work and personal selves.

On the other hand, imagine Karthik, a call center employee in India who eats pizza and fries at the office cafeteria and, using an American accent, introduces himself to his American customers as John. Like Karthik, many workers today are confronting pressures to create strange new divides between their work and personal selves.

Employers and employees have long treated work and personal lives as largely separate worlds. But declining job stability, increasingly diverse workplaces and the spreading use of communication technologies are now challenging these boundaries. As a result, workers are constantly navigating employer pressures on their personal selves – either to include them in work or to check them at the door.

People experience the pressures on their non-work selves in different ways. If Lisa loved being with her colleagues and found her work travels exciting, she might happily merge her work and personal lives. Karthik might find shedding his Indian identity and assuming his American identity invigorating and helpful in preparing for further global opportunities. But each could also experience these pressures as unwelcome: Lisa might feel that her personal identity is threatened by her work; Karthik could feel his national identity is being denied. Managers of workforce talent, diversity, and inclusion have to deal with workers' different responses to these pressures every day. And workers' responses have crucial ramifications for their organisations.

Our research shows that the alignment between workers' preferences regarding their work and personal selves and the pressures they encounter at work predicts four strategies they use to negotiate the relationship between their work and personal selves: Assenting, Complying, Resisting and Transforming. These strategies influence workers' well-being, productivity and whether their organisations were likely to change.

Surprisingly, we found that even when workers' desires and work pressures are aligned, there are costs: too much melding of work and non-work selves could lower well-being and productivity. Similarly, misalignment is not all bad: protecting workers' personal selves can lead to positive organisational change.

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Dual Forces: Work Pressures, People's Preferences

In our paper, 'Shattering the Myth of Separate Worlds: Negotiating Non-Work Identities at Work', (forthcoming, *Academy of Management Review*), we develop new theory about how people manage their non-work identities while at work, in the context of major social changes that challenge the work/non-work boundary, namely job instability, increasingly demographically diverse workplaces and the spread of communication technologies. Our theory is based on a review of 117 studies in the areas of management, gender and work, work-family, organisational communication, and sociology that were published between 1990 and 2012 in top European and North American outlets. This review included studies of workers in a variety of work settings and countries, such as American airline pilots, Indian call center workers, Israeli diplomats, and luxury resort employees.

Despite clear differences in the character of these jobs and in the cultural contexts in which these workers were embedded, we found two forces that shape the relationship between personal and work selves emerged consistently across these studies. The first is employer pressure on people's non-work identities; the second is people's personal preferences regarding the relationship between their non-work and work selves. As each person has multiple non-work identities (family, gender, etc.), the pressures and preferences are different for each non-work identity: for instance, how Karthik experiences these dual forces acting on his national identity may differ from how he experiences them acting on his family identity.

These pressures and preferences each occur along a continuum of inclusion to exclusion. Inclusion involves integrating personal and work identities; exclusion involves keeping these identities separate. For example, an Australian call center asked workers to bring their personal passions to work, including idiosyncratic dress;[1] and gay priests in American parishes were pressured to deny and exclude their sexual identities from their work selves.[2]

In each context, people responded to the pressures in light of their personal preferences regarding the relationship between the targeted non-work identity and their work self. Some Australian call center workers loved the idea of 'being themselves' at work, but others wished to keep their private and work selves separate. Similarly, although some priests desired to keep their sexuality and identity as priests separate, others sought to integrate their sexuality with who they were as priests.

Employer pressures and peoples' preferences regarding the relationship between their work and their personal selves may be *aligned*, such that each tends towards inclusion or exclusion, or may clash, such that they are *misaligned*. This alignment or misalignment shapes peoples' experience of the power relationship between themselves and their employer. The greater the alignment, the less likely people are to be aware of employer pressures, or they may credit the pressures with enabling them to be their desired selves. In contrast, the greater the misalignment, the more likely people are to experience the pressures as controlling.

Strategies for Negotiating Non-work Identities

People commonly employ one of four different strategies to cope with the pressures they encounter.

Assenting strategies: People pursue *assenting* strategies when preferences and pressures are aligned. For example, many workplaces encourage people to 'bring their whole self to work': young professionals are often expected to participate in evening social hours. The effect is to encourage workers to merge their 'friend' and work selves, as the social hours crowd out time for non-work friends, while offering opportunities to bond informally with colleagues. When, as Lisa might, workers want to bring this aspect of their personal self to work, the dual forces of pressures and preferences are aligned towards inclusion. Similarly, pressures and preferences may be aligned towards exclusion, as when both employers and employees agree that work and personal lives should be separate. In each case, people are likely to assent to the pressure they encounter.

When pressures and preferences are misaligned, three different non-work identity management strategies may emerge.

Compliance strategies: Workers may *comply* with organisational pressures that do not match their preferences. Employers often pressure workers to conceal their non-work selves, and

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workers often acquiesce, as in the example of the Indian call center agent.[3] Compliance may also occur when there are pressures to include non-work identities: workers who are asked to bring their families to work parties but prefer exclusion may still comply with the pressure to integrate their personal and work selves.[4]

Resistance strategies: People may also *resist* pressures, acting in accordance with their own preferences. For instance, Israeli diplomats resisted pressures to exclude their Israeli identity and adopt a 'modern' European professional identity by seeking opportunities to re-assert their national identity.[5] Workers may also resist inclusionary pressures by withholding their non-work identities: high-performing women may refuse to join women's networking initiatives because they feel their gender identity is not relevant to their work self.

Transforming strategies: Sometimes people respond to misalignment by reinterpreting and transforming the pressure in a way that aligns with their preferences. For example, American airline regulators recently introduced changes designed to empower crews at the possible expense of the pilot's authority.[6] In this macho occupation, male pilots could experience crew empowerment as threatening to their own claims to masculinity and authority. However, some pilots embraced the regulatory change by redefining themselves as father figures who could teach and mentor their junior crew members. This transformation enabled them to maintain their masculinity in the face of the regulatory changes.

Table 1 illustrates pressures, preferences and the strategies that people employ.

> Our theory presents a new way of understanding the implications of alignment and misalignment for workers' well-being, productivity and organisational change.

Practical Implications

When an employer's pressures and a worker's preferences are aligned, one might assume that both parties are likely to be satisfied. One might also assume that when the dual forces are misaligned, it is a cause for managerial concern. Our theory presents managers with a new way of understanding the implications of alignment and misalignment for workers' well-being, their productivity and for organisational change.

The benefits of misalignment: How can resistance help?

Managers who have encouraged workers to bring their whole selves to work typically hope to avoid the problems caused by the myth of separate worlds: situations in which employers pressure unwilling workers to exclude their non-work identities from work (i.e., top left quadrant of Table 1). Workers' compliance with exclusionary pressures may build employee cynicism regarding employer intentions, ultimately harming their own well-being and

Table 1. Non-work identity management strategies

	Exclusion Pressures	**Inclusion Pressures**
Inclusion Preferences	**Misalignment** Resistance: Revealing personal self at work Compliance: Concealing personal self at work Transformation	**Alignment: One World** Assenting: Bring whole self to work
Exclusion Preferences	**Alignment: Separate Worlds** Assenting: Bring only work self to work	**Misalignment** Resistance: Withholding personal self from work Compliance: Revealing personal self at work Transformation

organisational productivity. Imagine the results if Karthik could never really listen to his customers' problems because he was too consumed by maintaining his American persona? Often, inclusionary efforts aim to forestall such negative consequences.

However, some workers may also see inclusion as controlling (i.e., the bottom right quadrant of Table 1). These workers may feel a need to conceal their personal selves while at work in order to resist work's encroachment on the rest of their lives. Concealing one's non-work identities can therefore signal resistance to inclusion pressures not just compliance with exclusion pressures. Imagine the effect on her team's communication and camaraderie if Lisa suddenly decided not to go to dinner with her colleagues to talk shop some of the nights she was on the road. Managers could look to these signals of resistance to inclusion improve workforce management. If Lisa's manager noticed her withdrawal, she could suggest that her team help Lisa find time for personal pursuits and this could improve everyone's productivity.[7]

Transforming strategies offer paradoxical consequences. Unlike compliance, transformation allows people to remain true to their own preferences, retaining some power over their personal selves. Therefore, transforming strategies may affect employees' well-being and productivity more positively than compliance.However, because transforming is a less overt strategy than resistance, it is less likely to spur organisational change. The airline pilots' self-reinvention as father figures allowed them to accept the regulatory changes, and this strategy helped maintain their authority. Managers might look to the subtle ways in which workers' might be maintaining the status quo to protect their non-work identities.

The costs of alignment: Is bringing your whole self to work too much?

Managers would also be mistaken to assume that alignment carries no costs, especially if they are attempting to move the

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organisation towards more inclusion of non-work identities (i.e., the top right quadrant of Table 1). Although workers whose desires for inclusion match employer pressures are likely to feel fulfilled and committed to their work in the short run (with concomitant benefit to organisations from this commitment), there is a cost to alignment: as people progressively bring more of their selves to work, their non-work lives may become diminished, causing new problems. A nine-year study of investment bankers found negative health implications for those who progressively sacrificed more of their personal selves to their work.[8] Such sacrifices are further troubling because peoples' non-work lives often provide emotional, physical and mental resources that are rejuvenating and allow individuals to contribute to their work. Over time, even those who easily assent to inclusion may become less productive.

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Similarities in the midst of differences

Managers of talent and diversity can also focus and amplify the effects of existing policies. Organisations often have discrete talent and diversity programs directed towards specific groups, such as ethnic affinity groups or women's leadership initiatives. Although these identities are different in important ways, the strategies we found were common across different types of non-work identities. For instance, revealing one's religious identity and revealing one's family identity in the face of exclusionary pressures could have similar dynamics. This suggests that it may be just as important for managers to know employees' preferences regarding the inclusion or exclusion of their non-work identities as it is to offer discrete programs targeting those identities. Two employees from different ethnic groups who face employer pressures to include their ethnic identity in their work selves but who each prefer exclusion may have more in common than two that share ethnicity but have opposing preferences. To take advantage of such commonalities, managers could seek complementarities between different talent and diversity programs.

Conclusion

Managers have long presumed that work and personal life are separate domains. As a result, they have focused on the ways in which work shapes employees' work identities, and largely overlooked the ways in which work shapes their non-work identities. However, declining job stability, increasing demographic diversity and proliferating communication technology are altering the barriers between peoples' work and non-work lives. By respecting workers' preferences and questioning employers' pressures over the inclusion or exclusion of workers' non-work selves, managers can influence workers' well-being and productivity and create positive organisational change.

About the Authors

Lakshmi Ramarajan is an assistant professor of Organisational Behavior at Harvard Business School. She received her Ph.D from The Wharton School of Business, University of Pennsylvania. Her research examines how people manage their multiple identities in organisations.

  Erin Reid is an assistant professor of Organisational Behavior at Boston University School of Management. She received her Ph.D from Harvard University. She studies how men and women cope with time-greedy work, the consequences for their own lives and the consequences for their organisations.

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