

# **‘Across boundaries’: narratives of work-life interface among international business travellers**

**Running title: Narratives of work-life interface**

## **Abstract**

This study explores the narratives of work-life interface among international business travellers. A constructionist approach is employed to explore how international business travellers account for their work-life experiences, which aspects of each domain act as demands and resources, and which work-life coping strategies are pursued. Employing a qualitative, semi-structured interviewing method, this study collected data from 11 international business travellers. The findings illustrate how personally enacted and socially bounded is the meaning of work-life interface. While for some travellers work ‘across boundaries’ is a lifetime opportunity, for others it is a necessary evil. In spite of these differences, the results indicate that work-life meaning influences travellers’ perceptions of work-life demands and resources, and coping mechanisms. This study contributes both to the theory of work-life interface and to the study of international business travellers by expanding the scope and the in-depth of the analysis. Thus, areas for further development are proposed and discussed, in accordance with the major findings.

**Keywords:** work-life interface, international business travellers, demands and resources, coping strategies

## **Introduction**

Important demographic and social changes, such as population ageing, higher female employment, and dual-earner couples, have prompted the academic interest for the management of day-to-day work and non-work activities. The literature has been dominated by the assumption that ‘work is a necessary evil to support non-work activities’ (Grawitch and Barber, 2010, p. 129), which has disregarded how work and non-work interface is social and culturally bounded.

Although previous work-life research has provided a wider development to what is known about work-family/life challenges, some gaps still persist. Some recent literature reviews (Byron, 2005; Chang, McDonald and Burton, 2010; Eby, Casper, Lockwood, Bordeaux and Brinley, 2005) suggested the field of work-life research could be further expanded to include: (1) data from less-industrialized societies, thus providing cross-cultural comparisons; (2) additional demographic records (e.g. females, single parents, extended families), to further explore how these variables relate to work-life interface; (3) information from new work arrangements, for instance to include self-employed workers, semi-skilled workers, elder employees, immigrants, and frequent travellers, to further understand how these professionals cope with work-life challenges. Finally, work-life research might explore new theories and methodological approaches, to move forward from the traditional work-family conflict approach.

This study addresses some of these gaps, by employing a personal centered and constructionist approach (Weick, 1995) to further understand how international business travellers’ perceive their work-life. Thus, this study follows three main objectives:

1. Understand how international business travellers perceive their work-life interface;
2. Identify which aspects of work-life domains act as demands and resources to international business travellers;

3. Appreciate the coping mechanisms enacted by international business travellers to manage work-life pursuits.

This study is target to *work-life interface* among international business travellers, in which *work* focuses the roles linked to a financial gain associated to an employment (or self-employment) relationship (Eby et al., 2005); *life* includes all non-work pursuits, such as family (but not exclusively), friends, community, leisure, religion etc.; and finally, the term *interface* encompasses the notions of conflict (i.e., antagonism between fields), balance (i.e. harmony or equilibrium), and fit (i.e. adjustment). Consistently, a qualitative methodological approach was followed, and several international business travellers were interviewed about their day-to-day work and life demands, resources and coping activities.

Three basic assumptions underlie this research. The first is that work and non-work are essential domains of a person's life. The second assumption is that work-life interface is individually and subjectively framed, and is an on-going process through which people aim to ascribe meaning. The third assumption is that people strive to accomplish work-life goals over time, through the enactment of coping mechanisms that are individually framed and socially negotiated, thus without following a single ideal solution.

To our view, this research has several contributions. First, contributes to the international mobility literature, by using a sample of international business travellers, which is an assignment form in increasing use, but still under researched (GMAC, 2012, 2011). Second, this study contributes to the work-life literature by expanding the scope (to include both work and non-work domains), by extending the parameters of focus (to account for appraisals of conflict, balance, or fit); and by taking a constructionist view of individuals as lively actors.

## **Work-life interface in a domestic context**

Given the increasing interest for the work-life interface, a substantial amount of studies have been published on work and family domains. Consistent trends emerged from this research and were summarized in recent reviews, thus suggesting many fruitful research avenues (Byron, 2005; Chang *et al.*, 2010; Eby *et al.*, 2005; Ford, Heinen and Langkamer, 2007; Kelly, Kossek, Hammer, Durham, Bray, Chermack, Murphy and Kaskubar, 2008).

First, although there has been a debate over defining ‘work’ and ‘family’ domains, there is some consensus toward accepting that *work* includes all tasks related with a paid job, while *family* refers to the interdependent roles between two or more individuals who aim to accomplish shared goals (Eby *et al.*, 2005, p. 126). In the field, work-family conflict is probably the most sought construct (Kelly *et al.*, 2008), being composed by two dimensions: work-to-family conflict (i.e. work roles interfering with family roles) and family-to-work conflict (i.e. family roles interfering with work roles). Much of the research has essentially focused the ‘negative side’ of this equation, exploring the antecedents of work-family conflict (Byron, 2005), and its business outcomes (Eby *et al.*, 2005; Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2009). Therefore, there is a need to ‘expand current thinking’ (Eby *et al.*, 2005, p. 181) to further explore *work* and *non-work* domains, and appreciate how individuals manage across work-life domains.

Second, gender roles and family characteristics are essential to fully understand work-family interface. These factors not only act as antecedents of work-family conflict or enrichment (Byron, 2005), as influence work-family outcomes (Eby *et al.*, 2005). In particular, there are gender differences regarding the tactics used to manage temporal and physical boundaries: men tend to separate work from non-work environments and their work schedules are more determined by job requirements and/or their preferences; while women follow a more integrated approach, and their work schedules are more influenced by the other

members of the family (Eby *et al.*, 2005; Mustafa and Gold, 2012). In addition, women holding children responsibilities' often show more family-to-work conflict than male parents (Eby *et al.*, 2005). These gender patterns are consistent with sex role expectations and stereotypes, which illustrate how socially embedded these arrangements can be. Thus, future research on work-life interface may not overlook potential differences in the meaning of work and life, as their social and cross-cultural foundations (Billing, *et al.*, 2012; Spector *et al.*, 2007). Hence, a person-centered and constructionist research approach is a valuable way to uncover these differences.

Third, results from earlier research lend support to the idea that demands and resources that are specific (i.e., work and family connected) relate more strongly to the work and to the family domain, though they also have cross-domain effects (Byron, 2005; Ford *et al.*, 2007). For instance, Ford *et al.* (2005) showed that a significant amount of satisfaction in the work and family domains was related to outside stressors and support. This finding suggests that demands and resources from work and non-work activities, co-exist, may co-vary along time, and their cross-influence is larger than expected. Thus, exploring personal appreciations of demands and resources, and the cognitive processes involved, is a worthwhile endeavor for future work-life research.

Fourth, earlier work-family research has over-emphasized work conflict, generally disregarding coping strategies. Building on this research gap and following a social constructionist approach, Kreiner *et al.* (2009) used the boundary theory (Ashforth, Kreiner and Fugate, 2000) to envision how American episcopal parish priests manage work-home interface. In this study, work and home domains emerged as on-going personal constructions, socially interpreted, negotiated and enacted. In detail, they found that priests used several boundary management tactics to better manage their multiple professional and personal roles. These coping mechanisms configured several behavioral, temporal, physical and

communicative work-home tactics. For instance, behavioral tactics involved the use of other people to screen calls, temporal tactics comprised planning for private time, physical tactics included short and long-term actions to impose physical distance between work and home; and finally, communicative tactics included setting expectations in advance and confronting work-home boundary violators. Although there was a certain preference, among the inquired sample, for segmenting work-home contexts, the study best documented how priests intentionally used work-home tactics to segment and integrate both domains. The boundaries created to organize and control the environment were socially embedded on shared values, both from work and home cultures (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009; Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy, Hannum, 2012). In light of these findings, research providing a more in-depth analysis of work-life coping is required.

Finally, it is generally accepted that the nature of the occupation and the characteristics of the employing organization, impose some constraints over individual preferences for a segmented or integrated work-family strategy. For instance, boundaries permeability might be higher among teleworkers and self-employed workers, whose personal preferences are more influential than the nature of the job; while other work arrangements might require a more segmented approach. Indeed, in a recent study with domestic self-employed teleworkers, Mustafa and Gold (2012) noted that these professionals had a great deal of discretion over their work-time, yet their control over time (i.e. temporal boundaries) depended much on their control over space (i.e. spatial boundaries). Overall, teleworkers created a physical separation between home and work, which aided to the establishment of work routines. Respondents having dependent children also managed their working time around their children school activities'. The boundary management challenges were particularly critical for these professionals, because they had less control over their workflow and work deadlines; and yet their boundary management endeavors were intentional and ongoing, aiming to attain a

satisfactory work-life balance. On the basis of these trends, research on work-life interface may progress by exploring new work arrangements.

Taken together, the above mentioned findings frame the work-life research as a field requiring further theoretical development, aimed at understanding how individuals enact and manage work and non-work interface. Thus, one sought to understand how international business travellers perceive work-life interface, which aspects of both work and non-work domains are perceived as demands and resources; and which coping mechanisms are enacted in the international context.

### **Work-life interface in an international context**

In the international context, the research on work-life interface has focused the *influence of family* on relocation and the *influence on family*, of these decisions (Lê, Tissington and Budhwar, 2010). Although there is empirical evidence suggesting a positive spillover from work to family and vice-versa, and a cross-over influence of the spouse (Takeuchi, Yun and Tesluk, 2002), the research has predominantly focused adjustment challenges affecting international workers (Bashkar-Shrinivas *et al.*, 2005), and the potential work to family conflict of long-term assignments.

For instance, Lê *et al.* (2010) found, in a recent qualitative study exploring the role of family among UK air force militaries, that relocation and organizational activities affected families, by: (1) impairing officials ability to cope with their family role; (2) disturbing family members, notably the way spouses and children handle their work, school, social and psychological lives; and (3) influencing the family as a whole, either by deepening family bonds or by leading to family break-up. The findings also showed that family had an impact on the work domain, by influencing militaries' motivation to relocate, their work focus, and

their intentions to remain or leave the organization. These results illustrate the reciprocal work-family influence, which suggest that a relocation decision is often a work-family choice.

Also, Takeuchi *et al.* (2002) examining the spillover between work and non-work domains, and the cross-over influence between expatriates and spouses, found that spouse general adjustment was reciprocally and positively related to expatriates' general adjustment and work adjustment. These results support their prediction of a reciprocal spillover effect among work to non-work domains; and a cross-over effect between international workers and their spouses.

Two recent investigations explored work-family conflict and coping mechanisms among Finnish expatriates (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011; Mäkelä, Suutari and Mayerhofer, 2011). Mäkelä, et al. (2011) found that: (1) female expatriates experienced conflict and also enrichment during international assignments; (2) work-life interface had different meanings over the lifecycle; (3) work-life coping mechanisms depended upon personal and social circumstances' (e.g. having children, receiving organizational support, etc.), and the unique way female expatriates pooled their preferences and intertwined their work-life balance. In addition, coping with work-family conflicts in the international context was reported by Mäkelä and Suutari (2011). Among the interviewees, most frequent conflicts were time-based, related with the long working hours and extended travelling; and strain-based, reflecting the extended assignment accountabilities. In addition, the authors found evidence of a mobility-based conflict, related with the relocation and physical and psychological distance from friends and extended family. To cope with these conflicts, global careerists followed different mechanisms (Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011, p. 367): (1) active coping, which occurred when people actively rethink the situation and change the environment to solve the problem(s); (2) emotional coping, which involved an emotional reconceptualization of the problem, often used when circumstances are difficult to change; (3) avoidance coping, present



when people avoided (either physically or psychologically) stressful events; and finally (4) reappraisal coping, which occurs when individuals reassess their problems. Some of these strategies, such as active coping, also extended to family, in particular, by participating in the decision to relocate and preparing the relocation, getting external household help, and keeping regular contact with extended family and friends during the assignment. Partner support was also identified as a key family coping mechanism; and organizational support offered to families was also much appreciated. Overall, these results show that work-life interface is personally framed and coping mechanisms are individually and family enacted.

While earlier research provided evidence on expatriates' work-family conflict and related coping strategies, work-life interface and coping in shorter assignments are still under-researched. This quest is pursued in this study, whereas one aims to understand the narratives of work-life interface of international travellers.

### **The research focus: work-life narratives of international business travellers**

A growing number of alternative international assignments, different from long-term expatriation, are receiving increasing academic attention, including short-term assignments, flexpatriate assignments, and international business travel (Mayerhofer, Müller and Schmidt, 2010; Shaffer, Kraimer, Chen and Bolino, 2012).

This study targets international business travellers because the discussion of work-life interface is particularly relevant for them, bearing in mind their required work-life flexibility. One defines international business travellers as paid workers, traveling across international borders as part of their job, for short but frequent periods of time. This definition is consistent with Shaffer *et al.* (2012), who position international business travellers work as high on physical mobility as flexpatriates, but lower on cognitive flexibility and non-work disruption, because of the less time spent abroad.

There is some empirical evidence from international business travel literature that extensive travelling is interesting and rewarding, but impact physical and psychological health of travellers and families (Demel, Mayerhofer, 2010; Espino, Sunstrom, Frick, Jacobs and Peters, 2002; Striker, Luippold, Nagy, Liese, Bigelow and Mundt, 1999; Welch, Welch and Worm, 2007). Earlier research on psychological stress among international business travellers of the World Bank (Espino *et al.*, 2002; Liese *et al.*, 1997; Striker *et al.*, 1999) have showed that: (1) health claims were more frequent among frequent travellers than their domestic counterparts; (2) social and family concerns, such as the sense of isolation while away and the perception of a negative impact of travel on family, were key predictors of travel stress; (3) frequent travel was associated to added health claims and heavy workload upon return; and yet, overload was reported as an inevitable component of the job; (4) frequent travel was also associated to spouse's stress and children behavioural changes; (5) frequent and longer missions, and unpredictable schedules interfering with family celebrations, had a stronger influence on spouses and children reported stress; (6) self-reported stress among travellers were much influenced by perceived lack of control over travel, perceived negative impact on family, and feeling powerless to refuse a mission without impairing career prospects. Reported coping mechanisms included two strategies: personal-control and family. Personal-control strategies included teamwork (though the results were somewhat inconsistent revealing that teamwork could also extend the hours worked, and therefore, cause physical and psychological stress); time-off after a trip to recover and rest, and the establishment of more realistic travel and workload demands. Also, nurturing a sense of purpose and accomplishment from travelling proved helpful. Family coping strategies included regular contact with significant others during travel; involve the traveller in family matters; and focus on children by providing them special attention.

Contrary to this distress view of business travelling, some authors have considered that trips as part of a job can be experienced as a respite from home workplace, holding positive outcomes, such as work stress relief (Westman, Etzion and Gattenio, 2008; Westman and Etzion, 2002). From the conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the business trip would provide a detachment from the regular workplace and family demands, thus interrupting the drain of personal resources, while offering new resources, such as rest, new experiences and social contacts. Business trips would be a period of resource gains, while stages before and after, would raise resource losses, and thus increase work-life conflict, stress and burnout. Overall, empirical evidence were consistent with these predictions (Westman *et al.*, 2008; Westman and Etzion, 2002), though data were insufficient to support these causal claims. Overall, only a small number of employees were surveyed (respectively 78 and 57 workers), and these employees were mostly occasional instead of frequent travellers (on average, they had less than four trips a year, with a mean trip duration of 6.5 days). Given the limited international business travellers' research on work-life interface, this study provides new empirical evidence on these issues.

## **Method**

### *Research approach*

The present study is exploratory and attempts to uncover the narratives associated with work and life events among international business travellers. The research focus the interpretation of daily events to better apprehend both the context within which their work-life activities take place and gain meaning. By involving international business travellers from different companies but from the same nationality, one aims to reduce cross-cultural biases and assist the analysis and interpretation of the individual narratives. Although the adoption of a qualitative methodology precludes the results' generalization, it has the advantage of

providing a more in-depth analysis. Besides, fewer studies on work-family interface have followed this approach (Eby *et al.*, 2005), which is another contribution of this study.

### *Research participants*

The interview was considered the most adequate approach to explore individual narratives of work and life events. Overall, 11 in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted by the second author, between April and June 2012. The interview protocol adopted a cinematograph approach, and covered a wide range of topics, such as recent work and life events, work and life demands and resources, coping tactics, and demographic data. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese, tape-recorded, transcribed and content analysed. Two criteria were used to select the research participants: (1) being a frequent traveller (i.e. at least one monthly trip); and (2) travelling internationally, for work purpose. Table 1 summarizes the main participants' characteristics.

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Travellers' age ranged from 27 to 54 years and ten had college education. Of the interviewees, nine were male and eight were married. All were born in Portugal and hold the Portuguese nationality. The main travelling destinations were to European and African countries. The average number of business trips was 1.4 month, ranging from a minimum of one to a maximum of three trips. The average duration ranged from two to 14 days. At the time of the interview, participants occupied positions of professional and management, and five were self-employed.

### *Data analysis*

The interview material was collected, transcribed and content-analysed in Portuguese. The direct quotations mentioned were first translated into English by one of the authors, and later back translated into Portuguese, by another researcher, to preserve data integrity. The process was double checked and revised whenever differences were identified.

Transcripts' content analysis followed a four steps procedure in order to assure a reliable interpretation and classification of data. The first step included data preparation to ascertain that all interviews were used in the analysis. The second step established the rules applicable to content analysis: the paragraph was selected as the unit of context, and in each paragraph the theme was used as the unit of analysis. The third step comprised data coding procedures: first, one followed the literature and established an initial hierarchical coding scheme for the main thematic categories; and later, new categories were added and reframed according to the findings from iterative reading. Finally, the fourth step covered data interpretation, for which one followed a qualitative and quantitative approach: themes were first identified, and later, references and co-occurrences were quantified. This thematic content analysis assisted in the identification of contents and interactions, used to obtain and interpret the main research findings. This analysis was performed with the aid of the software NVivo 9.

### **Research findings**

This section provides details about each research question through data analysis. Although the sample included male and female participants and self-employed workers, the number of participants was not sufficiently balanced to focus on potential differences among these categories. Therefore, research findings are presented reflecting the themes that better illustrate and contribute to the understanding of the narratives on work-life interface for the

entire sample. Due to space limitations, only illustrative quotes are presented for each of the following themes:

- Theme 1: Work-life interface
- Theme 2: Work-life demands and resources
- Theme 3: Work-life coping mechanisms

### ***Work-life interface***

Work and life domains were perceived to be mutually influential, both in terms of antagonism and balance. Starting with the antagonism, several sources of work to life conflict were reported, while life to work opposition was seldom mentioned. Following Mäkelä and Suutari (2011) classification, the conflicting work-life situations were grouped into time-based and mobility-based conflicts, as illustrated in table 2.

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According to table 2, there were no references to other sources of work to life conflict, such as behaviour conflict. Also, among the sources of life to work conflict, only time-based sources were mentioned, reflecting the fact that most travellers seemed to have subordinated life to work: *“I think work, under these circumstances’ [frequent travel], involves personal, family and social sacrifices (...). Although I would like to have other priorities in my life, work is a top priority and frames all I do.”*

Regarding work-life balance, while life circumstances’ contributed positively to the work domain, such as being *family-free* (i.e. having no dependents) and having spouse support, enrichment opportunities provided by international travelling were much emphasized: *“Being ambitious as I am, I want the [highest] professional level... and be even*

*more successful. I want to attain a very high position. I'm not sure where... I have to search the opportunities.*” Statements such as: “*I have no ‘working-hours’ and hours ‘outside-work’. I have hours, only! (...) I believe that work comes first and then, the other things (...)*” or “*Right now, to me work is just about everything in my life*”, were common among inquired travellers. Further, these statements are consistent with the *getting high* and *getting ahead* career aspirations (Derr and Laurent, 1989) reported among flexpatriates (Demel and Mayrhofer, 2010).

Overall, these findings are similar to those reported earlier with other international workers (Demel and Mayrhofer, 2010; Mäkelä and Suutari, 2011). This study results suggest work-life meaning is mostly work-framed. While assignments’ circumstances’ were similar: time and mobility bounded, and reflect a trend toward work flexibility (Demel Mayrhofer, 2010; Mayerhofer *et al.*, 2010); traveller’s interpretations differed. The reported statements suggest two distinct views to the quest of work to life dominance: a *deliberate* versus an *unintentional approach*.

In light of a *deliberate approach*, people prioritize work over non-work activities in accordance with their personal preferences and/or life stage; as one traveller explains: “*I want to marry, have children and I want to achieve! I want to have a life... I want to be happy and I think happiness is something one's getting... Our life stages also require us to look at it very differently (...). Now, I want to continue travelling, I want to have my social life with people abroad*”. While in case of an *unintentional approach*, people subordinate involuntarily their life to work, under the weight of their circumstances’: “*In certain moments, a person may look back and think - if I went back ... I wouldn't do certain things! (...) But at this point in time, we are already quite used to...*”

These findings suggest that travelling on a paid work is a lifestyle (Demel Mayrhofer, 2010), though the meaning of work-life interface is personally constructed and socially

bounded. For some travellers, working ‘across boundaries’ is an enabling career and life opportunity; while for others, it is a necessary evil that just happens. In accordance with the work-home literature (Kreiner *et al.*, 2009), these distinct narratives are expected to frame boundary management efforts and coping mechanisms, which are described following.

### ***Work-life demands and resources***

In this theme, emerged several work and life aspects perceived as demands and resources. Table 3 outlines these features.

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Regarding demands, the most demanding factors were work related. Workload and being permanently connected were mentioned by eight interviewees: *“You're out but life continues..., IT equipment's' makes you accessible anywhere in the world (...) it is the slavery (...) You do your work there, and have to do what is here. That's a great drama!”*

In addition, the feeling of being powerless to control short-term notice work, and travel changes, were referred by most travellers: *“I always start the week without knowing what will happen the day after. (...) This makes me have my suitcase always ready and be available to go anywhere, at any time. (...)”*.

Another work demand relates to physical and psychological stress, based on several travel incidences, such as: *“jet lag is a reality, I get all confused... lack of sleep, eating poorly, flight delays, long flights, loss of luggage... arriving at the destination without clothes..., customers' delays when I have a flight to catch! It's not easy.”*

Stress and health claims were also frequently reported, as a direct consequence of work and travelling: *“I got sick immediately after I come [from Angola]... I stopped at the*



*hospital. It was all psychological. I was traumatized by what I saw there, and what I brought from there.”*

From the life domain, with the exception of time constraints, all reported demands were originated from family members and significant others. All interviewees felt their work impaired their ability to cope with other non-work roles and expectations, in particular, their family role: *“when they [children] were babies, it was even worse for my wife (...) she had to adapt to this life style, because when the person is out everything falls to one side, and in this case, was to her side”*.

Concerning work and life resources, they were grouped into four main categories: personal, organizational, family and social resources. *Personal resources* include time management skills, travel enjoyment, sports, family and friends connection while abroad, faith, and holding a sense of purpose and accomplishment from the work done, as one traveller explains: *“By being away your [professional] growth is faster, is steadily (...). At the outset, gives you a challenging career.”*

*Organizational resources* include logistics and travel support, as exemplified: *“When I travel, I have everything worked out: I know the hotel I am going to, I have a rent car at my disposal, I have a return flight, I have a daily allowance for meals and other expenses.”* Also, home office support proved helpful: *“it is essential that my BackOffice is aligned with me: two people I cannot dispense because you must have fast responses out there.”*

*Family resources* include family acceptance of a traveller life-style and the provision of emotional support and affection: *“essentially I think it's the emotional support, the affection (...) when you're out, you really don't need others pushing you down: you have already enough weight on your head!”* Also, not having dependent bonds, either from children or elderly parents, is a relief for several travellers.

Finally, another resource mentioned to be important is having an international network of friends and acquaintances, which was a source of support and affection: *“holding friends out of the country, from the time I studied and worked abroad, ends up by building helpful relationships with people.”*

In this study, interviewees recounted similar travel demands as that noted by Espino *et al.* (2002), such as personal stress, concerns about their physical and psychological health, and distress because their frequent travel affected close and extended family. Reported work-life resources extended beyond the personal sphere, and included an international social network, which was a source of instrumental and emotional support.

Overall, these findings reflect spillover and cross-over effects across work-life domains. Spillover effects include conflict and also enrichment, and were stronger from work to life domain: *“I think the professional dimension is an important factor, without neglecting the others (...). I think we're worst professionals when the personal dimension is not balanced, but the professional dimension has a very important role. Leisure time, family time, time for a girlfriend, I think those are the main points.”*

Reciprocal cross-over positive effects occur, and were larger than expected, since travellers recognized non-work positive outcomes from their work arrangements, and inversely, but in a lesser extent, positive work outcomes, from their personal life: *“I think that personal balance helps for professional stability and good performance. And vice versa, I think the professional stability also helps to personal stability. I think the two are connected.”*

### ***Work-life coping mechanisms***

The use of narratives in this study extended the findings by providing a more in-depth awareness of coping mechanism enacted by international travellers. Table 4 summarizes the main findings. The reported coping strategies were grouped following Mäkelä and Suutari

(2011) classification. In addition, strategies related with the work domain were distinguished from life coping strategies.

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As illustrated in table 4, active coping is dominant, though emotional, reappraisal and avoidance coping strategies were also referred.

*Active coping* strategies were most commonly mentioned, and included the use of technology to cope with work-life roles. Interestingly, the use of internet, phone and tablets made work possible at all time and in all places, but also assisted on family interaction. Planning was also another active coping strategy highly used, including planning work tasks and travel schedules, but also co-planning with spouse some other life roles.

*Emotional coping* mechanisms emerged from many travellers' comments referring how they adjusted to their life-style. Yet, some participants felt guilty for being absent and/or for delaying the decision to get married or having children, though they doubt they could do better, as one traveller explains: "*Overall, I feel that the result is bad, but I do not know if I could do much better, because my private life is demoted for a second plan. I don't like talking like that, but it is what I feel...*"

On *reappraising* their work-life interface, respondents reported their cognitive efforts to accept the cons of the situation, with "*no drama*"; being supported, in these effort, by their significant others: "*Fortunately, people have realized, many years ago, that this is my modus vivendi and no longer make any comment about it.*"

Finally, *avoidance coping* included full work concentration during travel periods, and some time reserved to call or be with the family, without being disturbed. Overall, such avoidance strategy reveals how job embedded these travellers are, and how they attempt to

segment work-life domains: *“I can disconnect a bit, because usually when I get off work I ‘close the door’ as much as possible, and things do not mix.”*

Most surveyed travellers aimed to separate work-life domains and follow a segmentation strategy, as illustrated by the statement: *“the personal and professional side cannot cross. I think there is here a very thin line, which I increasingly prize: my privacy and my personal life. And I do not like them target or subject of discussion”*. However, the forceful strain entrenched into frequent and long-term travelling often makes this segmentation useless and work-life balance unattainable, over the long-term. This is explained by one international manager, when asked about his work-life interface: *“I do not advise this job to anybody who wants to. You can do it during a certain number of years, while having fun working, and [while] working is fun. From then on... it is difficult. One has a wife, has small children (...) and the price to pay, most of the time, is loneliness, and isolation. We reach the weekend without anyone to talk to! To whom exchange affection and share a life”*.

## **Conclusion and implications**

This study explored the narratives of work-life interface of international business travellers. In particular, this study provides an in-depth analysis of work-life meanings among research participants, their perceptions of work-life demands and resources, and their coping mechanisms. By following a constructionist approach, this study shows how work-life meanings drive attitudes toward work and life domains, and how international travellers enact work-life interface. By doing so, this explorative study provides new empirical insights.

First, the findings suggest that work-life interface is personally constructed and socially bounded: for some travellers working ‘across boundaries’ is a lifetime opportunity,

while for others it is a necessary evil. In spite of these differences, all travellers recognize their current work overruns their private life.

Second, this study identifies work-life demands and resources perceived by international travellers. Data mainly yield similar findings from Espino *et al.* (2002) and Mäkelä and Suutari (2011) who identified time-based and mobility-based conflicts associated to long working hours and extended travelling. However, in this study, reported demands and resources were mainly work-related, which is consistent with a meaning of work-life in which work pervades all other domains.

Third, study findings show that all travellers aim to build work/travel boundaries to limit and keep this domain apart, which corroborates previous findings on role integration-segmentation (Mustafa and Gold, 2012; Kreiner *et al.*, 2009). Yet, it is noticeable that several international travellers do not pursue these coping efforts, because a segmentation goal associated to control work and travel seemed unattainable. Thus, it is without surprise that people enact a paradox situation: the acceptance of a work-life meaning in which work dominates personal life, leads to the acceptance of higher work demands, which in turn decreases the time and energy to pursue other life resources. In addition, less coping efforts are enacted to manage work-life boundaries, which ultimately reinforce work dominance.

In sum, this study contributes to the knowledge of work-life interaction of international business travellers in several ways. First, by framing work-life interface through a personal centered approach, this study focus how international business travellers interpret, enact and manage their work and non-work experiences. Second, this study explored day-to-day experiences and travellers' accounts of their work-life demands and resources, instead of focusing the single dimension of work-family conflict. Third, this study features the coping mechanisms enacted by international travellers, through a constructionist approach, which is an added methodological contribution. Finally, statements suggesting a clear segmentation of

work-life domains were reported as desirable, and yet unattainable, which raise the question of knowing how pervasive are societal and work changes (i.e. economic crisis, unemployment, work flexibility, and new work arrangements), and how are they changing work-life domains, and ultimately, people's identity.

While the research findings are informative and advance our understanding of work-life interface of international business travellers, some limitations should be noted. First, data was collected from a particular context. While this was considered relevant to this exploratory study, in which context is a relevant variable, it naturally precludes generalization and comparisons beyond the scope of this study. Second, the sample is small and was not selected to be representative. In addition, the small number of female participants and self-employed workers impeded the exploration of differences and comparisons. This can be accounted in future, in particular, because one envision that occupation, tenure, travel frequency and duration, gender, and family composition, are key determinants of work-life challenges and coping mechanisms. One has also found evidence of physical health symptoms among the participants of this study, much in line with similar findings from the work-family conflict (Eby *et al.*, 2005), and international business travel literature (Espino *et al.*, 2002); yet the data was insufficient to further analysis. Therefore, future research could examine how work-life interface affect physical and psychological health, and how coping mechanisms moderate this influence. Finally, future studies aiming to expand work-life interface might gather data from work colleagues, family members, and friends, to provide a more comprehensive picture of frequent travellers' experiences and further understand how interactive and socially bounded their work-life pursuits are.

By taking a more holistic approach to the work-life interface of international business travellers, this study showed that the meaning of work-life interface is not homogeneous. Although, international business travel 'is not always bad', nor produce only 'negative

outcomes'; in fact, this experience is lived differently by different people. While the findings reproduce a trend toward increased work overload and work flexibility among international travellers (Sub and Sayah, 2013), they also highlight how strenuous, and ultimately, unattainable boundary management efforts can be.

This research has also major managerial implications for employers and frequent travellers. To the employing organizations, it suggests that the dominance of work roles is being accepted explicitly or tacitly. Among international travellers, work boundaries have blurred on time, space and strain. Yet, while some workers find these conditions an opportunity to enable future career and personal developments, others find them restrictive and disruptive. Thus, these findings raise questions about *how* are these meanings enacted and, *how* organizations can better manage international business travellers. Given the results that not much organizational support was provided, this is a topic requiring further research.

To frequent travellers, this study shows that the meaning work-life interface frames the perception and acceptance of work-life demands and resources, and enacts coping efforts to manage work-life boundaries. Thus, fostering a sense of purpose for what one aims to attain from work and life domains can be helpful.

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Table 1 – Sample demographics

| <b>Identification</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Education</b> | <b>Family</b>                 | <b>Type of Contract</b> | <b>Type of Industry</b> | <b>Travel Frequency (trips/month)</b> | <b>Travel Duration (days/trip)</b> | <b>Travel Destinations</b> |
|-----------------------|------------|---------------|------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Interview 1</i>    | 33         | Male          | College          | Single                        | Paid-employment         | Manufacturing           | 3                                     | 2 to 7                             | Europe; Brazil             |
| <i>Interview 2</i>    | 41         | Male          | College          | Married with 2 children       | Self-employment         | Services                | 1                                     | 5                                  | Europe, Angola             |
| <i>Interview 3</i>    | 34         | Female        | College          | Single                        | Paid-employment         | Manufacturing           | 1                                     | 7                                  | Africa                     |
| <i>Interview 4</i>    | 30         | Male          | College          | Married/Living with a partner | Self-employment         | Manufacturing           | 1                                     | 7 to 21                            | Europe, Brazil, Marroco    |
| <i>Interview 5</i>    | 51         | Male          | College          | Married with 2 children       | Self-employment         | Manufacturing           | 2                                     | 2 to 3                             | Europe                     |
| <i>Interview 6</i>    | 29         | Male          | College          | Single                        | Self-employment         | Manufacturing           | 2                                     | 2 to 3                             | Europe; Turkye             |
| <i>Interview 7</i>    | 34         | Male          | College          | Single                        | Paid-employment         | Education               | 2                                     | 3 to 7                             | Europe                     |
| <i>Interview 8</i>    | 54         | Male          | High school      | Married with 2 children       | Self-employment         | Manufacturing           | 1                                     | 7                                  | Middle East, Asia, USA     |
| <i>Interview 9</i>    | 36         | Female        | College          | Single                        | Paid-employment         | Services                | 1                                     | 7 to 14                            | Europe, Africa, USA        |
| <i>Interview 10</i>   | 36         | Male          | College          | Married with 1 child          | Paid-employment         | Manufacturing           | 2                                     | 2                                  | Europe                     |
| <i>Interview 11</i>   | 27         | Male          | College          | Single                        | Paid-employment         | Services                | 1                                     | 14                                 | Africa (Mozambique,        |

Table 2 – Work to life and life to work conflict and balance

|                 | Work to Life   | Life to Work  |
|-----------------|--|---|
|                 | <b><u>Time-based</u></b>   |   |
|                 | <i>"I have practiced sports for many years. I've played in Portugal, in Spain, in Hungary... and now it's over. There's no time or patience"</i>   | <i>"I don't have many (family) responsibilities, but when you are home, you've your friends, your girlfriend, your family, you've a set of regular demands that require time"</i> |
| <b>Conflict</b> | <i>"I have little time for being with friends and family."</i>   |   |
|                 | <b><u>Mobility-based</u></b>   |   |
|                 | <i>"My worst week was the first time I went to Angola: not only because of the misery ... but mainly because I was shoked with the [cultural] differences."</i>  |   |
|                 | <b><u>Mobility-based</u></b>   |   |
| <b>Balance</b>  | <i>"(...) having to live among different cultures makes you see the world differently, helps you put things in perspective and helps you mature (...) it is fruitful in terms of personal growth. (...) I think the professional stability also helps to personal stability"</i> | <i>"(...) I think that personal stability helps to achieve professional stability and good performance."</i>  |

Table 3 – Work-life demands and resources

|                  | Work Domain                       | Life Domain                             |
|------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| <b>Demands</b>   | Unpredictable work requirements   | Dependent bonds (e.g. children parents) |
|                  | Workload                          | Social unacceptance                     |
|                  | Organizational support (lack of)  | Social strain                           |
|                  | Travelling logistics              | Constitute family                       |
|                  | Loneliness                        | Time                                    |
|                  | Business strain                   |   |
|                  | Stress and health                 |   |
| <b>Resources</b> | Career/professional challenge     | Support from family/significant others  |
|                  | Organizational support            | Dispersed networks                      |
|                  | Travel control                    | No dependent bonds                      |
|                  | Time management                   | Other (sports, religion, personality)   |
|                  | Travel enjoyment                  |   |
|                  | Others (IT, communication, money) |   |

Table 4 - Work-life coping

|                           | <b>Work Domain</b>   | <b>Life Domain</b>   |
|---------------------------|--|--|
|                           | <p><b><u>Equipment and Technology</u></b></p> <p><i>"There are two things without which I never travel: my phone and my tablet (...). The more information you have the more weapons to respond soberly to the client"</i></p> | <p><i>"Contact (with parents) is completely essential, through new technologies. (...) I speak with them every day and speak every day with my friends, because I make a point...(it is) really important to me."</i></p>                      |
| <b>Active Coping</b>      | <p><b><u>Travel Planning</u></b></p> <p><i>"I try to plan travels so that they can be more or less expected"</i></p>   | <p><i>"It often happens I plan to come. Then, I change the flight and my girlfriend makes the trip. "</i></p>  |
|                           | <p><b><u>Work Planning</u></b></p> <p><i>"Our goal is to follow this strategy: we must have people who can replace us."</i></p>  |  |
|                           | <p><b><u>Family Planning</u></b></p>   | <p><i>"So things have to be planned (because) I have to adjust my trips according to external factors that often do not even depend on us. (...) My wife (have to) replace me in this role. Let us coordinate "</i></p>                        |
| <b>Emotional Coping</b>   | <p><b><u>Travel life-style</u></b></p> <p><i>"So I do it with pleasure, it is not difficult for me to accept this situation and this way of life"</i></p>  | <p><i>"(homesickness) So it's something that I have got used to, but it's something that inevitably a person feels "</i></p>   |
| <b>Reappraisal Coping</b> | <p><b><u>Life-style reappraisal</u></b></p> <p><i>"Fortunately people have realized, many years ago, that this is my modus vivendi and no longer make any comment about it."</i></p>   | <p><i>"There is no drama... but at the age of 34 I feel like having some peace, taking time to go to the gym, go running, go to the Arabic course, or just go dinner with friends."</i></p>  |
| <b>Avoidance Coping</b>   | <p><b><u>Work emersion vs. avoidance</u></b></p> <p><i>"(When you) arrive at the hotel, you dive into work (...) I think I am able to work more hours than when I'm home because it is a way of keeping my mind busy "</i></p> | <p><i>"I try not to talk about work when I talk my family, because now absorbs me so long... My escape is to call family and talk about other things. I want to know more what's going on here than ... listening than do the talking"</i></p> |