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Devoted but Disconnected: Managing Role Conflict Through Interactional Control

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Abstract

Historically, *ideal workers* demonstrated their devotion to work by being constantly available. Today many workers experience and welcome a range of non-work demands, increasing the potential for role conflict. Research has identified numerous practices to manage this conflict with positive implications for non-work relationships; however, the implications of these practices for work relationships remain unclear. How do efforts to manage role conflict affect workplace relationships? To examine this question, we draw on ethnographic data from 72 STEM workers across three organizations. We find that workers who experience role conflict interpreted interactions in the workplace—often unpredictable in timing, frequency, and length—as a threat to fulfilling both their work and family roles on a daily basis. Thus, they screened and controlled work interactions to make time for both work and non-work roles. However, interactional control limited their sense of workplace belonging and opportunities for exchange. In contrast, workers who did not experience daily role conflict encouraged interactions, allowing these encounters to expand across time. As a result, their work extended into evenings and weekends and they experienced a sense of belonging and more regular resource exchange. We identify how interactional control practices manage role conflict but limit the development of workplace relationships. We also expand the repertoire of how devotion to work can be performed, identifying the occupied worker who expresses devotion through focused and efficient work and interactions rather than availability for work and interactions.

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Keywords: ideal worker, workplace relationships, role conflict, interactions, time, control, STEM, professions, work-life, childcare

Introduction

The ideal worker continues to be represented as entirely devoted to their job (Blair-Loy 2003, Williams et al. 2016). Historically, this devotion was performed through availability for work. Those able to fulfill the ideal were heterosexual men with stay-at-home wives who attended to family and household needs (Hochschild 1989, Acker 1990, Williams 2001). Since this early theorizing, however, the American workforce has changed. Reflecting the increase in women in the workforce (Petriglieri and Obodaru 2019), rising fatherly involvement in childcare (Gatrell et al. 2022), and the increasing proportion of LGBTQ+ couples and non-binary identities (Sawyer et al. 2017, Murphy et al. 2021), fewer workers have a fulltime stay-at-home spouse. Although pressure to demonstrate devotion to work persists, an increasing number and variety of workers experience role conflict—particularly in terms of their time—as unmediated family and home demands conflict with workplace demands (Beckman and Mazmanian 2020, Kelly and Moen 2020).

Thus, for a large and growing number of workers, devoting themselves to their work *and* caring for their family is a significant challenge. People use various practices to manage these conflicting role demands. Boundary management allows workers to alter and modulate the boundary between work and home (Rothbard et al. 2005, Kossek and Lautsch 2012). Identity management allows workers to reconstruct their sense of self in response to varying role demands (Ladge et al. 2012, Ladge and Greenberg 2015). Image management practices allow workers to shape others' perceptions of them as conforming to work role expectations (Reid 2015, Ladge and Little 2019). Time work allows people to shape their time directly to attend to both work and home demands (Moen et al. 2013). Across these practices, the intention is to devote oneself to work while maintaining daily engagement in family life. Yet despite concern about how role conflict affects family commitments and relationships, its effect on *work* relationships remains largely unexamined. This raises the question: How do efforts to manage role conflict affect workplace relationships?

Workplace relationships are vital for personal and professional success. High-quality work relationships improve work performance (Hoegl and Gemuenden 2001, Gittell et al. 2010), such as by facilitating task help (Settoon and Mossholder 2002), enhancing knowledge sharing (Tortoriello et al. 2012), and overcoming differences in understandings between groups (Ren et al. 2015, Johnson et al. 2022). They boost positive emotions (Colbert et al. 2016) and wellbeing (Craig and Kuykendall 2019). There are thus both exchange- and belonging-related benefits to relationships at work.

Relationships in the workplace emerge out of an accumulation of interactions, and interactions require time. The interactions that build relationships can emerge from interdependent work, requests for help or advice, or desire for social contact and breaks. Across these forms of interaction, workers engage spontaneously, synchronously, and repeatedly with one another to forge high quality relationships, for example, through cycles of giving and receiving task help, time spent chatting about personal lives, or tête-a-têtes about office politics and happenings (Stephens et al. 2011, Dumas et al. 2013, Grodal et al. 2015). The implication is that interactions that accumulate to build workplace relationships take significant time. Further, these interactions are unpredictable in timing, length, and frequency, and they may interrupt work in ways that disrupt and distract (Jett and George 2003, Pillemer and Rothbard 2018, Puranik et al. 2020). An implication is that certain interactions may, inadvertently, lead to work hours needing to be prolonged so that uncompleted work tasks can be attended to later in the day or week (Gonsalves 2023). Perlow (1999) for instance demonstrates that interruptions require workers to put off tasks, leading to cycles of overwork because employees must work late into the evening to make up for lost time. Thus, work relationships—through the interactional demands that generate and sustain them—might exacerbate role conflict for workers.

In this paper we examine how workers who experience role conflict manage the variable and time-intensive nature of interactions, and the relational consequences of such management. We draw on ethnographic data from 72 STEM workers across three organizations: a pharmaceutical company, a

professional services organization, and a university. Our rich qualitative data allow us to analyze comparatively how workers who do and do not experience role conflict interpret and manage workplace interactions. We find that those who experience this conflict—specifically, parents who perform regular and extensive childcare—regulate workplace interactions to protect time for family. Specifically, we show how these workers screened and managed interactions—that is, engaging in interactional control practices—by limiting encounters they perceived as social or peripheral to their work and efficiently managing task-related interactions. In so doing, they completed most of their work during more “standard” 9-to-5 hours. However, they also inadvertently reduced the quality of their workplace relationships, and therefore experienced limited belonging (e.g., closeness, trust, attachment) and exchange (e.g., of information, advice, resources). We show how, in contrast, workers who do not have daily and extensive responsibility for childcare encouraged a wide array of interactions with colleagues. While this engagement resulted in their work time expanding outside of standard business hours (i.e., into evenings and weekends), they also developed workplace relationships and benefitted from a sense of belonging and more intensive exchange.

These findings extend and enhance knowledge about how, against a backdrop of ideal worker expectations, role conflict is managed and the implications of such practices for experiences of relationships and expressions of work devotion. First, contributing to the literature on role conflict management practices, we identify interactional control as a daily means to manage work and non-work demands, by regulating the predictability in frequency, length, and timing of interactions. Second, departing from the usual focus on managing role conflict to protect *family* relationships, we identify the negative *workplace* relationship consequences of managing role conflict through interactional control. Importantly, we identify how extensively controlling interactions can limit workplace relationships, particularly exchange and belonging-related benefits. Finally, we enrich the ideal worker literature by describing an additional role performance of work devotion by identifying—in addition to the “available

worker,” who is regularly open to work tasks and interactions—the “occupied worker” who expresses devotion through focused and efficient work.

The Ideal Worker and Role Conflict

The ideal worker is an archetype of the “perfect” performer (Turco 2010) who is highly devoted to work (Correll et al. 2007, Davies and Frink 2014, Dumas and Sanchez-Burks 2015, Lupu et al. 2022). While the precise form of the ideal worker varies across institutional contexts (Tienari et al. 2002, Wasserman and Frenkel 2011, Al Dabbagh et al. 2016) and is culturally contingent (Blair-Loy 2003, Kossek et al. 2021b), it has commonly been identified in white-collar settings as someone who demonstrates their devotion through constant availability for work (Williams 2001, Michel 2011, Kmec et al. 2014). This available worker as the ideal, devoted worker has been supported by the nature of professional, white-collar work, in which performance is often difficult to measure; in such a context, managers and coworkers have been found to rely on presence as a proxy for performance (Bailyn 2006, Gonsalves 2020).

However, enacting devotion through availability creates the potential for role conflict—particularly with regards to time—because extensive availability may make it difficult to comply with the time demands of non-work commitments (Kahn et al. 1964, Greenhaus and Beutell 1985). For example, professionals often face an expectation to be engaged with family and work at the exact same time (e.g., a work meeting and childcare pickup at 5pm) or for an impossible sum of hours (e.g., more than one’s total waking hours) (Netemeyer et al. 1996, Greenhaus and Powell 2003, Barnes et al. 2012). As suggested in these examples, such time challenges are particularly difficult for those with more extensive engagement in or commitment to non-work roles, such as that expected for parents in general and—because of gendered norms and stereotypes—often mothers in particular (Kelly et al. 2010, Ladge

and Greenberg 2019). People may be devoted to their work, but in the face of such role conflict be unable to show this devotion through being constantly available.

Scholars across theories such as boundary (Ammons 2013, Rothbard and Ollier-Malaterre 2016), identity (Ramarajan and Reid 2013, Kossek et al. 2021a), image (Little et al. 2015) and time work (Flaherty 2003, Moen et al. 2013) have identified practices through which workers might manage role conflict and maintain devotion to their work. While these theories capture the management of various forms of role conflict, here we focus on their findings and implication with regards to time conflict, which as noted above is often experienced by professional workers in the wake of ideal worker role expectations. Moen et al. (2013) introduce the term “time work” to the work-family literature, describing how through practices such as prioritizing and shifting time, people can manage work obligations and make time for family. Such actions are similar to traditional forms of time management such as scheduling (Aeon and Aguinis 2017). Boundary management practices can also shape time, in ways such as bounding time for either work or home via a set schedule (Kreiner et al. 2009). Image management practices can be used to manage how others perceive one’s time use, such as by spending extensive time in non-work activities during a weekday without announcing this practice to colleagues (Reid 2015). Identity management practices allow people to shape their own sense of self, and in turn, perhaps alter how they experience and spend time at work (Hennekam et al. 2021).

Implicit across this research is that relationships in the workplace may be a means to realize and support these role conflict management practices. Trefalt (2013) makes this point explicit by highlighting how close colleagues can help one another maintain boundaries between work and home, for instance, by recognizing and respecting one another’s family-only time (see also Major et al. 2008, Ferguson et al. 2012, McMullan et al. 2018, Heaphy and Trefalt 2023). Similarly, studies show that supervisors can support work-home management strategies through, for example, permitting schedule flexibility (Lapierre and Allen 2006, Moen et al. 2016, French et al. 2018). These findings suggest that

people might want to strategically develop workplace relationships because they allow for improved management of role conflict. Therefore, role conflict management practices—supported by workplace relationships—can help people mitigate role conflict by making time to attend to family in the face of work demands, and in doing so, to nurture familial relationships—such as carving out time for a child on workdays (Reid 2015: 1006) or protecting time to be spent with family (Kreiner 2009: 719-720). Indeed, related research highlights how workers who face ideal worker pressures but do not bound work may end up with less time for family and more negative relationship experiences at home, with spouses (Bakker et al. 2009, Russo et al. 2018, Oelberger 2019) and children (Crouter et al. 2001, Roeters et al. 2010).

The above research on the importance of work relationships for managing role conflict has been complemented by parallel research in the family sphere that has identified how home relationships can help manage work and home demands. A spouse or partner who takes the lead in family care can limit family-to-work conflict for employees (Perlow 1998, Beckman and Stanko 2020, Beckman and Mazmanian 2020), particularly for women whose partners, historically, have been less likely to be extensively involved in family care (ten Brummelhuis and Greenhaus 2018, Ranganathan and Pedulla 2021, Thomason 2022). Findings regarding the importance of work relationships in managing role conflict have also been complemented by studies that examine how people manage the relational boundaries between work and home (Nippert-Eng 1996, Languilaire 2006), for instance, by friending (or not) a boss on social media (Ollier-Malaterre et al. 2013, Rothbard et al. 2022).

In sum, research has shown that the management of role conflict allows for the maintenance or even flourishing of family relationships by bounding work. This finding has been supported by complementary research on how home relationships can be supportive, as well as research on how people might try to shape work-home boundaries. Yet, the impact of role conflict management practices on *work* relationships remains unexamined.

Workplace Relationships and Interactions

Workplace relationships and the interactions that underlie them form the foundation of organizations (Bradbury and Lichtenstein 2000, Grant and Parker 2009, Ferris et al. 2016). They are increasingly important for white-collar workers in flatter organizations in which formal organizational ties are limited (Turco 2010), and managers increasingly emphasize the potential of the workplace to be the source of workers' most central and vital relationships (e.g., friendships) (Hochschild 1997, Pratt and Rosa 2003, Fleming and Spicer 2004, Fleming and Sturdy 2011). Workplace relationships are closely connected to positive individual and organizational outcomes, such as improved coworker trust (Levin et al. 2011) and coordination (Gittell 2002). Indeed, while there may be cultural images of ideal workers who work in isolation (Neely 2020), research often implicitly suggests that such workers rely on networks of connections to complete work as well as to be recognized as ideal workers (e.g., Reid et al. 2018, Cameron et al. 2021, Blair-Loy and Cech 2022).

Workplace relationships emerge out of an accumulation of interactions, and interactions require time. In particular, to build relationships, workers engage in interactions that cover a variety of subjects including not only immediate work tasks but also peripheral work matters and personal topics, and that occur spontaneously, synchronously, and repeatedly (Dutton and Heaphy 2003, Halbesleben 2012, Schinoff et al. 2020). While these interactions may have positive effects even beyond the building of relationships such as knowledge acquisition (Zellmer-Bruhn 2003) or sparking creativity (Schweisfurth and Greul 2023), they also take up or “spend” time while unpredictably—in timing, length, and frequency—interrupting work (Lin et al. 2013, Baethge and Rigotti 2013, Koopman et al. 2016) in ways that may disrupt and distract (Altmann and Trafton 2007, Methot et al. 2021). To make up for time lost to interactions, workers may feel pressure to extend their work hours, potentially squeezing out time with friends or family (Mazmanian et al. 2013). In these ways, interactions threaten to exacerbate role conflict

in time demands. To this point, Halbesleben et al. (2009) find that workers who extensively help their colleagues experience higher levels of role conflict. Complementary research examining organizational contexts suggests that workplaces with set quiet work hours (Perlow 1999), unassigned seating (Leslie et al. 2019, Gonsalves 2023), or telework (Windeler et al. 2017) can mitigate interactions and, potentially, help people manage work demands.

The interactional demands that build and sustain workplace relationships simultaneously have the potential to exacerbate role conflict for workers. In this study, we examine how workers handle interactions when attempting to manage role conflict, and we delineate how such actions might have negative consequences for workplace relationships. We draw on rich observational and interview data and a comparative design that allow us to examine how workers with and without experienced role conflict handle workplace interactions on a day-to-day basis, as well as the implications of such practices for both employees and their organizations.

Methods

Setting

We examine role conflict, interactions, and workplace relationship experiences in STEM. For context, in this field the ideal worker historically has been viewed as someone (typically a white heterosexual man with a stay-at-home wife) who shows devotion to work through putting in long hours and operating as an independent “genius” (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014, Damaske et al. 2014, Blair-Loy and Cech 2022).

However, scholars have highlighted that these “mythical norms” (Lorde 1984) are fictions. Scientists, for instance, often work in close collaboration with others rather than in isolation, and rely on lab members’ help and other researchers’ methods and findings (Haas and Park 2010, Sauermann and Stephan 2013, Nelsen 2016).

We draw on qualitative data from professionals in three STEM organizations: STEM departments at a major university (MU), a pharmaceutical research company (PRU), and a STEM professional services organization (STEMO).¹ At MU, we studied assistant professors in sciences who focused on publishing papers and advising master’s students, PhD students, and postdocs. At PRU, we studied scientists who oversaw and advised on drug development projects with teams of coworkers. At STEMO, we studied scientists, engineers, and technology specialists who oversaw and advised on team-based technical projects for external clients. Our design includes observations and interviews with a total of 72 STEM workers across the three settings. The STEM workers in this study were highly devoted to their work. Almost all had advanced degrees, with the majority having PhDs. Most had worked at least ten years post-PhD, and had ascended to relatively senior positions within their field. Many spoke explicitly of their passion. 63% of our sample had children who were high school aged or younger. Like many STEM fields, the organizations we studied were composed primarily of men, with each organization having 70% or more men in the organization’s STEM roles (i.e., excluding administrative and operations support roles). The organizations were also primarily white, with over 80% of workers so identifying. More details on each site are provided in Table 1.

---Insert Table 1 here---

Data Collection

The first author collected the qualitative data included in this study (Table 1 contains a summary). This study began at MU, where we were interested in examining how assistant professors with and without children organized their time given the demands of work and home. Fifteen assistant professors were shadowed and then interviewed at the end of the day. Each was also asked to complete time diaries on

¹ Names of organizations and all individuals are pseudonyms. We have changed some small details (e.g., gender of participants’ children) to preserve confidentiality.

two separate days. To expand our sample, we then conducted interviews with four additional professors. In addition, we conducted four second-round interviews with professors we had shadowed and interviewed earlier, to delve more into their experiences. This sample consisted of more than 50% of the assistant professors in MU science departments. Through an inductive analysis of the MU data, we identified patterned differences in how workers engaged in workplace interactions, which seemed to depend on whether the professor regularly provided extensive childcare. These differences in interactions seemed to have implications for their time and workplace relationships. However, our sample of 19—although roughly half of the relevant population—was small. Therefore, we expanded the study by adding two additional sites, continuing to seek out workers in these settings who both had extensive non-work commitments and those who did not.

At about the time we concluded that the sample of professors was too small, the first author had begun collecting data for a larger ethnographic project at PRU on the work of scientists. This project was framed broadly, and as she interviewed employees, the first author collected data on workers' varied experiences of time-- for example, in relation to childcare--as well as workplace interactions and relationships. In addition to interviewing and shadowing the scientists, she spent extensive time during the 15-month data collection period observing interactions in PRU's common spaces and attending social events, project meetings, and office-wide meetings. She also had hundreds of informal conversations with PRU workers through which she learned more about their experiences of time. PRU employed 23 scientists during the study's core data collection period. All, except one who did not want to be interviewed, are included in this study.

After completing data collection at PRU, the first author began a larger data collection effort on the work of scientists, engineers, and technology specialists at STEMO. Like the research project at PRU, this project was framed broadly as being on employees' work. Therefore, the first author continued to collect data on experiences of time, interactions, and relationships in the workplace to increase our

sample size as well as the generalizability of the findings. Over the course of 26 months, the first author interviewed and shadowed employees, engaged in hundreds of informal conversations, and observed project meetings, office-wide meetings, and interactions in common spaces and social events. Through these means, she collected data on the 31 STEM professionals that we include in this study. This sample represented roughly 13% of the more senior STEM workers at the organization, reflecting the fact that STEMO was much larger than PRU's and MU's relevant departments.

At all sites, the first author took extensive field notes as employees worked in their offices, visited colleagues, ate lunch, attended meetings, and conducted daily business. She typed these notes directly into her laptop (e.g., because everyone had their laptop out during a meeting) or wrote them by hand and then typed them up at the end of the day. Interviews were recorded when participants granted permission; otherwise, detailed notes were taken. All taped interviews were transcribed for analysis. Across the three organizations, initial participants were recruited via an organization-wide email sent to potential participants. Additional participants were recruited as the first author met them at social events and meetings. Eventually, as the importance of parental status emerged in our data analysis, we wanted to see how it related to gender, so we sampled in a way that allowed for variation on these characteristics until we reached theoretical saturation (Small 2009). For this reason, we oversampled on women (42% of our sample versus roughly 25% of these organizations' relevant populations). However, as described below, we eventually found that childcare responsibilities—which were correlated with gender—were underlying our findings rather than gender per se.

Data Analysis

We analyzed all field notes and interview transcripts using inductive qualitative analysis techniques (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Although the analysis of data from the first setting guided our coding, we searched for new, divergent, conflicting, and incompatible information as we read the field notes and

interview transcripts from the other two field sites. We coded for anything related to how workers thought about their time, whether and how they managed their time, and any time challenges they faced. We also began to notice the importance of workplace interactions and relationships in relation to time, and therefore we coded anything related to workplace interactions, including avoidance of and talk about them, or relationships with others at work (e.g., office location, collaboration, task dependence). We wrote extensive memos and vignettes as we tried to understand the connection between these different issues. We also created tables to compare and contrast practices, and to understand the links among emerging concepts, such as approaches to role conflict, interactions, and work relationship-related outcomes.

Following this open approach, we examined how STEM professionals *across* these three settings experienced time in relation to work and non-work activities. While there was variation in how workers experienced time, two distinct experiences emerged: those who experienced role conflict in time demands, and those who experienced limited role conflict. In our setting, childcare was the primary reason that workers experienced time conflict. We also observed that concerns about role conflict corresponded to particular approaches to initiating and responding to interactions. Therefore, we then examined the set of strategies and techniques through which workers interacted with others. After coding for and identifying these strategies and techniques, we noticed that sets of practices often occurred together. We analyzed the codes further to generate two categories of interaction practices (i.e., ways of interacting with others) that we labeled “controlling practices” and “encouraging practices.” Although how and when workers drew on and engaged with these two sets of practices varied, they remained marked and distinct approaches to social action. We then went through our data again and examined each individual separately, studying their particular enactment of these two sets of practices in relation to their non-work role demands. We found that most individuals tended to consistently engage in one set of practices and we classified each person in one or the other category.

In a separate analysis, as we examined the consequences of interaction practices, we observed that they related to experiences of not only time but also workplace relationships (Figure 1). We eventually related these outcomes to individuals' work role enactment, developing two role enactment archetypes. One—consistent with a great deal of prior literature (Williams et al. 2013, Correll et al. 2014)—entailed availability for work (“the available worker”), while the other entailed intense occupation with work (“the occupied worker”). We continued to engage with the data, writing memos and making tables, to understand and assess the links among the key concepts of role conflict, interaction practices, and role enactments. Based on these analyses, we ultimately identified two dominant patterns related to role conflict, interaction practices, and role enactment, that 59 of the 72 individuals (82%) experienced. These two patterns of experience are the focus of our paper, and are described in detail in the findings section.

--Figure 1 here--

Throughout our data analysis process, we triangulated (Mathison 1988) our data by drawing on interview, observational, and conversational data. We could, for example, examine person A's account in conjunction with observations of their day-to-day actions as well as their colleagues' accounts. Notably, for five individuals in our data, we also had spousal accounts. We did not find noteworthy differences across these varied data sources. As we performed our data analysis, we also identified additional patterns related to the sorts of interaction practices different subsets of individuals engaged in. We noticed that because childcare was experienced in gendered ways by these workers (with women doing more, consistent with findings from other studies of professionals), women were more likely to control interactions than men; but it was children, not gender per se, that underlay this relationship. In particular, 8 women (27% of women) were primary caregivers compared to 1 man (2% of men), 10 women (33% of women) were split caregivers (i.e., split caregiving equally with their partner) compared

to 8 men (19% of men), and zero women (0% of women) were secondary caregivers compared to 18 men (43% of men) (see Figure 1).

Findings

We show how workers managed role conflict by engaging in interactional control to regulate, modulate, and curb the interactions that undergirded their day-to-day relationships with coworkers. Interactions with colleagues presented the most threat to time because they could be initiated by others, were often unpredictable in frequency and length, and could be awkward to cut short. Thus, workers who experienced role conflict daily depended on a set of interaction practices that screened and controlled interactions with others. In contrast, workers who did not experience intense, daily role conflict encouraged interactions, allowing these encounters to expand across time. These contrasting approaches to interactions had implications for workers' role enactment, particularly their work time and work relationships. Below we describe how workers did or did not experience role conflict between work and family, and then explicate the two primary ways in which workers exercised interaction practices and delineate the consequences for those engaging in each form of interaction practice.

Experiencing Role Conflict

The STEM professionals in our setting spoke about how they greatly enjoyed their work, finding it both interesting and engaging. Ryan (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver), when asked what he liked about his job, exclaimed: "I like the data analysis, I like drawing up hypotheses and setting up experiments, that's a lot of fun." Shannon (STEMO scientist, primary caregiver) similarly stated with excitement, "I enjoy my work. I find it to be interesting." Vince (STEMO engineer, secondary caregiver) likewise noted: "My technical work I do, I really enjoy it." Many described the long and arduous years of study they had put

in to get to their current roles, preserving through several advanced degrees and even a postdoc so that they could perform the work they loved.

As they spoke about this devotion to their work, people also made clear that their careers were demanding. As Tina (MU scientist, splits caregiving) stated pointedly: “There is always more that can be done with research.” There was no clear, demarcated end to her work, but always more to take on. Adam (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) similarly described that there was always more work to do as a scientist: “You have to read papers, you have to do all these things [to stay up to date on science.]” He added that his job required him to “keep current [on science].... Keep reading, going to meetings, interacting.” These were activities that could, potentially, spill over from “typical” workhours into evenings, weekends, and even early mornings.

At the same time, a subset of these workers also spoke of the demands (and desires; see also de Laet 2023) they faced with regards to caring for their young children. These workers—who were parents of minor, rather than adult, children—described aiming to spend at least an hour before and three hours after work as well as weekends immersed in family care. Kyle (STEMO engineer, splits caregiving) explained that he needed to make sure his one-year-old daughter Alice was ready before the nanny arrived each morning. In addition to preparing Alice before he left for work, he also came home to relieve the nanny and then eat (and oftentimes cook) family dinner with Alice and his wife. Elizabeth (MU scientist, splits caregiving) explained that she wanted—in addition to spending extensive time with her two children every evening—to feed her kids homecooked meals (that she viewed as healthier) and to read the same preteen fiction books as her son (to remain abreast of his current interests). These people were thus both devoted workers as well as parents who spent extensive time with their children. As Elizabeth noted pointedly, “I want to be able to do science but also be with my kids.” Similarly, Cynthia (PRU scientist, splits caregiving) explained, “I am a total workaholic. I love working. I do have kids though.” These two roles—worker and parent—generated competing demands. As we describe in

the next section, workers managed these competing demands by closely screening and managing interactions in the workplace.

Interaction Practices

These varied experiences of role conflict were linked to how workers attempted to control (or not) interactions in the workplace. Professionals who were concerned about preserving time to attend to both work and family roles proactively controlled interactions in the workplace. In contrast, other workers tended not to enact such explicated and intentional strategies in their interactions with others, but rather, more passively encouraged interactions.

Controlling Interaction Practices

Workers who controlled interactions tended to do so in two ways. First, to preserve time for children, they tried to limit interactions they viewed as peripheral to work, particularly social conversations and non-urgent work-related matters, through two practices we label “avoiding” and “hiding.” Second, they tried to “optimize” the timing, length, and ordering of essential work-related interactions to save time for children, through two practices we label “organizing” and “focusing.” Table 2 provides additional examples of these “controlling interaction” practices as well as “enabling interaction” practices.

Table 2 about here

For people attempting to care for a young child while also maintaining a high level of work performance, interactions that were peripheral to work tasks were often viewed as less important, and therefore, often controlled and screened out. James (MU scientist, splits caregiving) explained, regarding why he “put a low priority” on eating lunch with colleagues: “It’s like a break from work, and I would rather save up my break from work time for being home with my family, so I don’t feel like I have to work in the evening. I try to save my non-work time for them.” He added, “Instead of spending half an

hour at coffee time talking with people in my department, I'd rather finish work half an hour earlier and go home." Tara (STEMO scientist, primary caregiver) remarked several times that she did not regularly talk to colleagues regarding matters outside of shared project work. She explained that because of her children ("I have things going on [at home]") she needed to focus on the task at hand so that she could "have the productivity that people were looking for." As we illustrate below, interactions posed a unique challenge because—unlike, say, scheduling independent work to complete before a deadline or deciding not to watch television from 9-to-5—they depended largely on colleagues' actions and therefore could be initiated at and sustained for unpredictable amounts of time.

These workers rarely initiated interactions with colleagues on non-work-related topics and, in fact, tried to *avoid* colleagues' attempts to spark such conversations. Shane (STEMO scientist, splits caregiving) explained that he did not invite colleagues to lunch:

I don't really have lunch with people that I regularly work with. I eat at my desk to be quick and save time. I wouldn't ask someone 'Oh, do you want to have lunch with me?' I just try to eat much more quickly. So I'll eat lunch at my desk in 15 minutes and keep working instead of taking like half an hour or something.

Although workers like Shane rarely initiated social interactions, it was inevitable that at some point a colleague would knock on their doors, strike up a conversation in the hallway, or invite them to an office party. In such situations, they tried to end the encounter by either making an excuse to leave or simply rejecting the invitation to interact. At the end of work meetings, Susan's (PRU scientist, primary caregiver) colleagues would often discuss various matters not directly related to their projects, such as newly published papers or rumors about competitors. Occasionally Susan would chat for a few minutes with them, but often she mentioned that she had work she needed to do, stood up, and left the room while others were in the middle of conversation; if the information was important enough (e.g., a major breakthrough in their field), she would read about it on her own time when she systematically scrolled through her curated newsfeed while rapidly eating lunch, alone, at her desk. Interactions that were viewed as peripheral to core work tasks were eschewed.

Many of these workers felt awkward refusing flat-out or frequently excusing themselves from time with colleagues, and even encounters that were quickly “nipped in the bud” constituted an interruption to working time. Therefore, when they needed to focus, these people often worked in spaces where colleagues could not easily find them. As Julie (MU scientist, split caregiving) explained, “When I really need to get something done for proposals or for publications, I work at home ... because people come to my office, and it’s very distracting when I need to focus on something.” Colleagues interrupted her at her desk, but not her kitchen table. Avoiding interactions also required not eating, walking, or standing in public areas for prolonged times. Craig (STEMO technology specialist, primary caregiver) complained that if he ate lunch in the cafeteria, his coworkers would inevitably stop by his table and want to chat. Even when he sat in the far corner of the cafeteria, someone would come and talk to him. Therefore, he usually bought food and then walked directly back to his office. He explained, only half-jokingly, “I know there is a mother’s [i.e., lactation] room. We should have a [senior technical worker’s] room where we can go. For one person at a time, and a key card required to enter.” These workers sought ways to avoid interactions peripheral to more immediate work tasks.

In addition to trying to limit less relevant interactions, these workers also tried to organize core work-focused interactions according to the order, length, and frequency that would take up the least amount of time while also adequately addressing the task-at-hand. Susan (PRU scientist, primary caregiver) made sure her main project had weekly meetings where she could ask questions of all her colleagues at once, rather than having to seek them out individually. After establishing these meetings, however, she became concerned about their frequency. She realized that when meetings occurred too often conversation often shifted to off-topic discussion, which she wanted to avoid: “If a meeting is just chatting, I usually [laugh] don’t go.” But when meetings occurred at biweekly or monthly intervals, the team did not coordinate enough and work slowed. She found that weekly meetings were the sweet spot: “With just weekly meetings, things are on track.” Like Susan, these workers often formally scheduled

interactions, because it allowed them to arrange encounters in the order they thought would allow for the greatest efficiency. A common method was to schedule back- to-back meetings, so that later encounters could bound the time of earlier meetings. They also often scheduled times for subordinates to stop by and ask questions versus fielding them spontaneously, transforming ad-hoc interactions into predictable encounters. However, allowances were made when necessity required an ad-hoc encounter for work to advance efficiently. For instance, Shannon (STEMO scientist, primary caregiver) learned that she needed to visit particular colleagues in person when she had questions for them, because they never checked their email: “Some people don’t even respond to emails, but if I go and I find them, we can talk.” She needed information, and visiting colleagues in person was the fastest way to get it. As shown by the contrast between Susan and Shannon, the most efficient way to organize interactions with coworkers depended on the precise nature of the work. What was common, however, was the attempt to arrange interactions to be short but also adequately address the task-at-hand.

Despite workers’ efforts to preemptively avoid offhand conversations that threatened time for non-work activities, such encounters inevitably occurred. In response, workers actively intervened to focus attention to the immediate task to preserve valuable time. One common tool for redirecting a conversation was to remind coworkers of how many minutes had passed or were left in a meeting. Craig (STEMO scientist, primary caregiver) often relied on emailed or printed and handed out agendas for meetings he ran. Each topic was listed, with a corresponding number of minutes. When someone mentioned something that was off-topic—typically regarding a part of the work that Craig did not view as relevant to the current conversation—he could thank them, note the time, and read out the title of the next agenda item. By pointing out the time, he highlighted that only a few minutes were available to address a particular work task and then redirect attention to that work. These workers also tried to focus interactions into smaller chunks of time by emailing coworkers instead of talking in person. In general, they noted that others were less likely to bring up off-topic conversations in emails, which tended to be

more direct than in-person conversations. Dawn (MU scientist, splits caregiving), for example, relied on email to set up meetings with colleagues. Instead of going to speak to each coworker individually—with the possibility of casual chatting—it was quicker for her simply to send out one focused email. As she noted more broadly, “I don’t want distractions [when working].” Email was one way in which she cut out such distractions.

Encouraging Interaction Practices

Other workers tended to encourage interactions with colleagues in two ways. First, they crafted opportunities for encounters to occur through two practices we label “sparking” and “signaling.” Second, they accepted the “natural” ebb and flow of these interactions once they were underway through two practices we label “shifting” and “meandering.”

In contrast to workers who engaged in controlling interactions, those who encouraged interactions generally enacted such practices with little forethought, planning, or intentionality; workers tended to engage in these practices as encounters unfolded and often did not have an articulated strategy of interaction. David (MU scientist, no child) stated, “I don’t know what I’m doing with my time to an extent. So, I’m not—you have to teach, you have to prepare for teaching, you have to do research, but I mean, you don’t, I mean, you just do those things. I don’t spend so much time thinking about when to do something or how to do it.” While these workers often did not have an articulated approach to interaction, they did often express that they viewed a range of collegial interactions—including breaks and casual talk, in addition to more immediate work-focused encounters—as enjoyable and therefore worthwhile. As Ethan (STEMO engineer, no child) explained regarding one form of casual interaction:

There’s this thing that a couple of employees and I do, which is we basically chill for maybe like 15, 20 minutes each day, doing nonsense... [solving] problems that have nothing to do with our work, but it’s interesting. It keeps sort of a creative juices flowing. I do look forward to that because it’s sort of a way to step away from my work.

These workers *sparked* interactions when they responded enthusiastically to colleagues' casual conversation, office drop-bys, or hallway greetings, or when they initiated such interactions themselves. Although sometimes events were planned in advance—for instance, a birthday party or a lunch reservation at a popular restaurant—they often happened spontaneously. Charles (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) almost always talked with his colleagues immediately after formal project meetings. While “officially” the meeting had ended, he would casually ask coworkers if they had recently read any interesting or thought-provoking academic papers. In turn, colleagues would ask him similar questions. These informal conversations usually ended when whoever had booked the conference room next arrived and asked the group to leave. Typically, this occurred 15 to 30 minutes after the end of Charles's official meeting—long past the time that Susan (PRU scientist, primary caregiver), described above, had left the room. Similarly, Marcus (STEMO technology specialist, secondary caregiver) always greeted colleagues—often with more than a simple “hello”—as he walked around office hallways. On one typical day, he engaged in hallway chitchat with four coworkers and also stopped by colleagues' offices seven times for conversation not related to immediate work tasks. When people were working from home for the day, Marcus would call them—without prompting—to see how they were doing: “I'll actually call, you know, I'll treat it like stopping by the office. I don't hesitate to do it.”

Workers often *signaled* to others their openness to interaction, and sought indications of colleagues' availability as well. In doing so, they created opportunities for interaction. One common way was to work in the office (i.e., not at home) with an open door. As Jessica (MU scientist, no child) described, “I have my door open most of the time.” She added, “I want people to come by. So I'm trying to keep my door open.” Jessica wanted to encourage interactions with colleagues: “Often it will be other professors popping by to say hello and see how things are going.... It does not bother me. It's welcome. I want my door open because I'd like more of that.” When asked if she felt interrupted, she explained, “Yeah. I mean I'm always doing something so I'm always interrupted. But if it's a colleague, I will just

drop whatever I'm doing.” Notably, if Jessica was teaching, she would close the door the day assignments were due to prevent undergraduate students from asking her too many questions. It was time with colleagues—not time with just anyone—that she valued. Other workers signaled availability through electronic means. Each morning Zachary (STEMO engineer, no child) signed on to his company’s messaging software, and he remained signed in until the end of his work day. A green light next to his name communicated his availability to others, who could call him on the software. If he missed a call—for instance, because he was in a meeting or talking to someone else—he returned it as soon as he could. Similarly, he looked at the green light next to colleagues’ names to see if they were available.

When interactions expanded in time, taking more minutes or hours than anticipated, these people shifted work activities to later in the same day, week, or month. Such reorganizing of schedules was generally not preplanned or intentional but rather a passive deference to participating in other, more preferred interactions. Dustin (STEMO engineer, no child) planned to finish his data analysis and then go to STEMO’s gym for a 6 pm workout. However, when packing up his bag, he began chatting with his coworker Ethan (STEMO engineer, no child) about a rival company’s technology that had been subject to dispute in the press. They chatted for nearly an hour before the conversation wound down. Dustin pushed his gym trip to later in the evening and moved his data analysis to the next day. In a similar example, Aaron (MU scientist, no child) planned to leave for the airport by 2 pm for a work trip, on which his wife was joining him. However, during the day he had three ad-hoc discussions with colleagues—ranging from 20 to 30 minutes—about exciting developments in his colleagues’ work and their research field at large. As a result, he and his wife, who had waited in his building’s lobby, rushed out of the office at 3 pm to grab a cab for the airport.

These workers allowed conversations to *meander* and dwell on various topics. Tanya’s (STEMO scientist, no child) colleague greeted her one morning at 8:48 am. She asked how his grandfather who

had recently been hospitalized was doing. The coworker responded that his grandfather was “pissed” about being injured. As Tanya knew from past conversations, Grandpa liked to be up and active. They then talked about where their other colleague was, as she was not yet in her office. Tanya mentioned that this colleague went away for Easter. The original coworker then noted that he and his brothers were coordinating plans for their own Easter weekend. He detailed what cities both brothers lived in. Tanya already knew the general area where they lived, but not the particular towns. The coworker picked up a small, 365-day calendar on Tanya’s desk and read the daily joke from it. They both laughed, agreeing it was funny. The interaction lasted 10 minutes. In a similar example, at 12:30 pm Scott (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) was walking back to his desk from a work meeting with a colleague, chatting about their shared project. On the way back, the two noticed March Madness on the lobby television and stopped to watch it together. A third colleague joined them, and Scott asked her about the soup she was currently eating for lunch. A fourth coworker joined the group and Scott gossiped with him about invitations to a social work outing: should an employee who handed in her two-weeks’ notice be invited? Then another colleague stopped by and said there was going to be a foosball match: would Scott like to watch? He agreed, watched foosball, and then left the match at 12:56 pm for his next meeting. A work-related discussion with a colleague had evolved into various casual conversations that spanned nearly 30 minutes.

The Consequences of Interaction Practices

These modes of interactions facilitated different work role enactments, each with specific time and relationship consequences. Those who tightly screened and controlled interactions tended to enact what we label the occupied worker role—someone who focused interactions on immediate work demands so that they worked in concentrated and less flexible amounts of time, and experienced more limited workplace belonging and exchange. In contrast, those who encouraged interactions tended to enact the

available worker role—someone who was available for and engaged in work across the day, while also experiencing more workplace belonging and exchange. Table 3 provides ideal type descriptions of the two work role enactments, as well as examples that reflect these ideals.

Table 3 about here

Controlling Interactions: The Occupied Worker

Time Consequences. Those who regularly controlled interactions often avoided interactions that interrupted work time and, as a consequence, generally retained relatively stable work hours that allowed them to care for their children. Cynthia (PRU scientist, splits caregiving), the self-proclaimed “workaholic,” noted that she left work by 4:30 pm at the “absolute latest” because of her two young children. She noted: “[Before kids] I would get home [from work] and get right back on the computer.” She described that this was because she had spent much of her evenings responding to the often-unpredictable arrival of emails in her inbox. But following the arrival of her first child, her schedule changed; now, certain times were off-limits from work. Similarly, Brent (STEMO scientist, splits caregiving) detailed how he left work early enough to care for his two children when their after-school program ended, given that his wife regularly worked an evening shift. As he noted, “My schedule is pretty much fixed.” He was able to maintain set work hours and care for his children.

Screening out and controlling interactions also helped these people to work more limited hours (e.g., less than 50 hours per week). Stephanie (MU scientist, splits caregiving) explained that she now worked between “45 and 50” hours per week, whereas before kids she “used to work a lot more, like sixty, seventy hours.” Despite now working more limited hours, however, she felt she had generally retained her productivity. As she explained:

I lack time [for work], but I think that because of the structure of my life [i.e., having children]. I think I’m not so bad at managing my time. I think with the amount of hours I have, I’m doing a pretty good job. I don’t think that I could do a lot more. Should I [pause] really work on

improving my schedule? I'm not sure, I don't know. I'm not convinced I would be able to get a lot more done.

As Stephanie described, while she worked more limited hours each day, she felt she used her time wisely and, as a result, was able to complete a great deal of work; there was really no room for improvement from a "time management" perspective since she was already highly efficient. Similarly, Craig (STEMO technology specialist, primary caregiver) had a sign hanging on his office wall that read: "Will Work for Coffee." While this sign reflected the intensity with which he needed to work to both complete project tasks and care for his sons, he was happy with his progress at work and was even approached by his manager who urged him to consider a promotion opportunity. Shane (STEMO scientist, splits caregiving), described above as eating habitually and hastily at his desk rather than with others in the cafeteria or a restaurant, explained that his work hours were limited enough for him to regularly care for his child: "I bring [my daughter] into daycare [and] I get her in the afternoon." While he occasionally worked on weekends ("if I'm catching up on things") he was able to do so when his daughter was napping or asleep in the evening. Time was available for engagement with his child and for work, if not much else.

Consequences for Workplace Relationships. Workers who regularly focused interactions on tasks while also eschewing social encounters often felt a lack of belonging at work. Their relationships with colleagues focused on their formal duties as coworker, project team member, or co-advisor. Edward (MU scientist, splits caregiving) explained that the colleague he talked with the most was a seminar co-organizer named Owen. While they usually quickly exchanged greetings when meeting—for example, asking how each other's weekend had been—their conversations focused on the seminar: "We just discuss administrative stuff." Similarly, Cynthia (PRU scientist, splits caregiving) expressed that she had a "plug and play" relationship with her coworkers; they came to her when they needed a work task to be performed and she performed it (or vice-versa) and that was it. There was no deeper connection. Tara (STEMO scientist, primary caregiver) noted that her discussions with colleagues were almost always

about ongoing projects. She never socialized with them outside of work. As she explained, “There is no one at work that I feel close or connected to. I just have like no really warm experiences with anyone at work.” Amanda (MU scientist, splits caregiving) similarly noted:

I don’t know what my colleagues do, to be honest. I just saw Lindsey [a colleague] whose office is across the hall and she’s like, ‘Oh you cut your hair.’ Yeah, like a week and a half ago. We just don’t see each other. We see each other only in meetings. ... None of my colleagues at work are after-work friends.

These people often did not feel a strong sense of belonging at work.

These workers also rarely received advice, help, information, or resources that were not directly related to formal work tasks. Stephanie (MU scientist, splits caregiving) described “being really scared” about not making tenure. In her fourth year she realized that teaching and service were not weighed equally with research despite what was formally stipulated in her contract, and she was both surprised and concerned. She had missed informal advice surrounding tenure. When workers such as Stephanie did receive or provide in-depth advice from colleagues, it was often through more formalized means (e.g., a formal mentorship committee). Professionals viewed such activities as a valuable source of support and information, but they generally occurred infrequently and irregularly. As a result, these formal structures did not provide more immediate, spontaneous help that could be useful in a pinch (e.g., if a piece of lab equipment stopped working, if a client was unexpectedly upset). These workers also often missed out on “word of mouth” opportunities, such as requests to join new projects. Brent (STEMO scientist, splits caregiving) described having difficulty finding project work that matched his expertise. He felt awkward asking his colleagues—whom he did not know well—for help: “I don’t want to be in that position.” So, he kept working on projects in which he had less interest. To be clear, it is not that these workers had *no* relationships at work; they often had one or two people they could go to. But their situation was nonetheless in stark contrast with others’ experiences of connection, as we detail below.

Organizational Implications. Those who enacted the occupied worker role performance were often very efficient at completing work tasks, and in this way may have benefited the organization; we return to this point in the “Local Understandings” section below. Reflecting the relative isolation of these workers, the expression of devotion to work through an occupied worker role performance sometimes inadvertently limited the potential connections of others. This point could often be best observed through the perspective of those who encouraged interactions. Justin (MU scientist, no child) described how his colleague Oscar—who had a child—did not come out to eat lunch with him or his other colleague, Hector—who had no children. Justin rarely asked Oscar for career advice, not only because they lacked opportunities to chat over lunch, but also because he preferred to ask people he already knew, such as Hector.

Encouraging Interactions: The Available Worker

Time Consequences. Those who encouraged interactions tended to experience time as more flexible and expandable, reflecting their accommodation of a wide variety of interactions throughout the workday. Richard (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) explained:

What is difficult when you are doing a lot of different things [i.e., work tasks], which I like to do, is thinking deeply about something. Taking a step back. But because I don't have any family [demands], I don't just play around when I'm not at work. When I'm not at work, I actually work. I'm either reading or on the weekend when I'm just sitting I can go through each project with very little email coming in, less distractions, and then all of a sudden things become clearer.

As Richard described, during the workday there were a lot of “distractions.” These were generally spontaneous interactions such as informal chats about work-related matters and daily ad-hoc games of foosball that often stretched into multi-round tournaments. It was during the evenings and weekends that he completed his focused work, while (typically) his wife cared for their daughter. Similarly, Ryan (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) explained, “Nobody ever asks you to work an evening.... But it just seems like the most interesting things transpire on a Friday.” So, he noted, “you end up Saturday maybe

doing some research at home.” His wife would take their two daughters to their weekend activities, without him. Both Richard’s and Ryan’s work hours flexed in response to how their workplace interactions unfolded.

As interactions pushed off work tasks, they also elongated the work day or work week. When Dustin (STEMO engineer, no child) ran into a colleague and discussed the new technology instead of leaving work immediately, he delayed the start of his gym time. After the gym, he ran into a few more colleagues, and “shot the breeze” with them for twenty minutes. He noted that by the time he would get home he would “have no time for other stuff,” by which he meant time with his wife. After his commuting home, where in the meantime his wife had prepared dinner (tilapia) that was about to go bad, the two ate and then it was time for bed. Rachel (MU scientist, no child) noted, “I either start working at like 7 am or 10 am... . I probably work until 11 or midnight every night.” On the weekends, she put in “at least one full day” on job tasks. She explained, “I probably go out with [work] friends like once a week, probably one night a week, I go out and like eat and drink wine, and blow off the next morning, kind of like go out. But other than that, I’m pretty much here [at MU] [laughs] or working at home.” When she talked to her long-distance boyfriend in the evening over the phone, they both worked, exchanging quips while each graded student assignments. As shown in these examples, as work time expanded, family time was cut back.

Consequences for Workplace Relationships. Workers who encouraged interactions tended to describe a sense of belonging with coworkers. Todd (MU scientist, no child) explained that one of his colleagues was his “best friend.” He added, “My colleagues are the people I want to hang out with. That’s why I like being at MU. They are my friends.” He went on to explain, “We choose to spend time together, because we are all here together.” They ate lunch together daily and regularly discussed research work, office gossip, and weekend plans. Often at these lunches were colleagues such as Owen (described above as talking to Edward [MU scientist, splits caregiving] only about seminar organization)

and Lindsey (mentioned above as rarely seen by Amanda [MU scientist, splits caregiving]). Similarly, Wendy (STEMO technology specialist, no child) described how she talked with two of her coworkers whenever they were in the office. She visited them at their desks and they ate lunch together in the cafeteria. They discussed their personal lives, including hobbies, career aspirations, and families. Coworkers were described as “good friends,” “mentors,” “best friends,” and “colleague friends.” As Ken (STEMO engineer, no child) noted, “I’ve become friends with my coworkers. . . . I go to lunch with them each day.” When he had difficulties with a more senior colleague, he shared these challenges with this group of coworker-friends. Similarly, Brandon (STEMO engineer, no child) noted, he was “engaged with others not just workwise” but also “engaged socially,” making the “overall atmosphere of working here [at STEMO] better.” He described how he and his work friends confided in one another about their dislike of their department’s recent change in research focus.

These workers also received advice, information, and resources from coworkers. Chemist Mary (PRU scientist, no child) met with her biologist colleague Gary (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) each Wednesday for lunch for 30 minutes to an hour, despite little overlap in their project work. During these meetings, the two bounced ideas off each other, hoping to gain insight into each other’s subdiscipline. Richard (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) and Charles (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) had a similar arrangement. Zachary (STEMO engineer, no child) received information on work projects that needed to staff additional specialists—such as himself—from colleagues with whom he often talked when they passed each other in the hallways. This was in contrast to Brent (STEMO scientist, splits childcare) who, as described above, often found himself accepting work he was relatively uninterested in. Overall, richer workplace relationships—marked by closeness, trust, and attachment—facilitated the exchange of advice, help, information, and resources. These outcomes then seemed to reinforce these workers’ encouraging practices, as they continued to seek out and engage in these valued relations. These workers thus seemed to be in a positive feedback cycle of creating valuable relationships

through encouraging interactions, and then further encouraging interactions because of the value they placed on collegial relationships.

Organizational Implications. When workers encouraged a broad arrange of types of interactions and enacted an available worker role, they supported the possibility of close connection and spontaneous collaboration in their organization. Brandon (STEMO engineer, no child), described above as feeling engaged with others, explained:

The overall atmosphere of working here is better [with friend colleagues]. I'm not just coming to work, doing my work and leaving. I'm in a community of people and that produces better work because it helps with [work] problems. I know more people and I know what they know and so I get the benefit of those connections. I get the benefit of the ideas.

People were both closely connected through giving and helping, as Brandon describes. As described in many of the examples above, this entailed periods of time during the typical work day (i.e., 9 to 5) when these people were not engaged in focused, intense work. Instead, they went out to lunch, played games, gossiped, or engaged in similar off-task activities.

Variation Across Contexts

In this section we describe how certain organizational contexts support the enactment and approval of the occupied worker role as compared to the available worker role, including settings where work tasks are more independent, performance can be more clearly measured, and more workers are engaged (past, present, or anticipated future) in the caring of children.

Interaction Practices

While our main findings were consistent across the three organizations in this study, it is important to note that in those with more interdependent work tasks (PRU and STEMO) workers had more difficulty controlling interactions and therefore had a more difficult time enacting extensive interactional control compared to workers at MU, where work tasks were generally more independent. Sarah (PRU, primary

caregiver) presents a typical example. While Sarah tried to control many interactions so that she could make sufficient time to care for her children, she was not always able to enact this control because of her extensive overlapping project work with colleagues. One of her projects met weekly, and the coworker in charge of it—Richard (PRU, secondary caregiver)—regularly allowed the conversation to go off topic. While Sarah did sometimes intervene to bring focus back to the task-at-hand (e.g., by voicing her desire to present her work “now” rather than later after the conversation would have taken even more asides), she nonetheless had more difficulty extracting herself from such situations as compared to, for instance, Julie (MU, splits caregiving) who did most of her research independent of colleagues. Thus, with more task independence, the easier it was to disentangle oneself from interactions with coworkers and enact an occupied worker role. To be clear, however, all sites provided these workers with sufficient task independence that they could control interactions enough to enact some version of the occupied worker role, even if it was relatively “weaker.”

Local Understandings of Role Enactments

Across the three organizations, the available worker role was praised as an enactment of devotion to work, consistent with prior research. Adam (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver), for instance, commended those who had “been working since 5am”—putting in long hours was to be applauded. And when one STEM manager met with her employees individually to gather information for 360 Degree Reviews, people consistently complimented coworkers who were “available” to help them with work. However, many people in our data also noted that available workers, while present, were not necessarily the most efficient. Angela (MU scientist, splits caregiving) explained that she had a colleague who worked very long hours but was always stressed out, unable to accomplish work. She drew a graph representing diminishing returns on her whiteboard, explaining to one of her graduate students that—as

in this colleague's experience—working more time did not necessarily translate to producing a great deal more.

Across the three sites the occupied worker role seemed to be understood as the most pragmatically effective way parents, particularly those with young children, could show devotion in the face of extensive home demands. Jonathan (MU scientist, splits caregiving) described Stephane (MU scientist, splits caregiving)—who, as noted above, had two young children and closely managed interactions—as an exceptional performer in the face of her family demands: “[Stephanie is one of the two] people I admire, who are really very clear about what being a professor means and is really severe about sort of applying that in terms of what they spend their time doing.” He added, “She seems to accomplish an unbelievable amount.... She can get a lot of [work] done inside of an afternoon. [She] just basically knocks off stuff really quickly.” One STEM0 manager spoke of admiration for employees with younger children, such as Craig (STEM0 technology specialist, primary caregiver), who were extremely “focused” and “engaged in work.” She noted, “They’re all very very talented, highly focused. I am fortunate to have them. I know I can rely on them.” Here, intensity in executing tasks—rather than availability per se—is praised.

While across the three sites there was general recognition of these two ways of showing devotion, there was nonetheless variation in whether or not these role enactments were viewed as “ideal.” At PRU the available worker seemed to be more the expectation and perhaps the preferred role performance, while at STEM0 and MU, this expectation was not as strong. One reason for this difference seemed to be the measurability of work performance. Across all sites, workers were aiming to produce a scientific product (e.g., drug, paper, project) that would be positively received by an audience (e.g., market, academic community, client). However, production timeframes varied among the sites, with PRU's (drug development) being considerably longer than those of STEM0 (client projects) and MU (published paper). It seemed, in turn, that colleagues at STEM0 and MU could observe both

occupied workers and available workers achieving successful performance, and reflecting this, there was no marked difference in public praise for one role enactment versus the other as more “ideal.” In contrast, at PRU we saw more praise given and received when workers enacted availability, such as in Adam’s (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) quote above. Another factor seemed to be variation in demographic, and relatedly family, composition. STEMO and MU had more workers previously or currently tending to children (either their own or within their extended family), or anticipating doing so, and there seemed to be more vocal understanding and acceptance of the occupied worker. Justin (MU scientist, no child) and Todd (MU scientist, no child) for instance, were both in dual-career couples and while neither had children at the time of the study, both expressed admiration for their colleagues who managed to care for children while also attending to work. In contrast, PRU was composed mostly of men with stay-at-home wives; while people’s adjusting their work approach to care for children was not openly disparaged, it was also rarely publicly praised.

Discussion

Ideal workers are expected to be devoted, and devotion to work has typically been expressed and observed as constant availability for work. However, an increasing number of people have home and family demands that limit this availability. Scholars have identified a broad range of practices through which competing role demands and accompanying conflict can be managed, showing how such tactics might improve workers’ engagement in family relationships. However, the impact of these practices on workplace relationships has been unclear.

In this study, we examine how the management of role conflict shapes workplace relationships. For people who manage role conflict to preserve time with family, constant availability is not a tenable expression of work devotion because time must also be made for non-work activities. Instead, devoted

workers make time for work and non-work commitments through remaining diligently focused at work, and diligent focus implies interactional control over workplace encounters, which are often unpredictable in terms of timing, frequency, and length. These workers generate a particular enactment of work role devotion, which we label the occupied worker. While the occupied worker is able both to complete work in a timely way and to attend to family demands, they may experience limited feelings of belonging (e.g., closeness, trust, attachment) and exchange (e.g., of information, advice, resources) at work. We also observed people with limited role conflict. They encouraged interactions, which—because of their unpredictable and expansive nature—came to interrupt, delay, and displace work. These people made up for the time-intensity and unpredictability of workplace interactions by staying late at the office and working weekends, while also developing a rich sense of belonging at work and engaging in exchange with colleagues. Consistent with the literature, we refer to this role enactment as the available worker.

Contributions

This research makes three contributions. First, we identify interactional control as a means to manage role conflict. Interactional control is a daily, often subtle, means through which people attempt to modulate, regulate, or otherwise control their work interactions so that they can get more done during work hours and avoid working evenings and weekends. Interactional control is an additional practice distinct from but complementary to previously identified role conflict management practices focused on time (Moen et al. 2013), boundaries (Kossek and Lautsch 2008), identities (Reid 2015), and images (Ladge and Little 2019). In contrast to these other practices, it mitigates role conflict through *interactions*. With regards to time conflict in particular, interactional control indirectly shapes time by managing interactions in ways that protect and preserve time (e.g., by hiding in one's office to minimize interactions and ultimately saving time that can be allocated to home life). This is in contrast to more direct practices of managing time to avoid role conflict such as time work (Moen et al. 2013) and time

boundary management (Kreiner et al. 2009). Interactional control differs from boundary practices that aim to manage relational boundaries because, unlike these practices, interactional control focuses squarely on managing interactions at work rather than on managing whether or not relationships are integrated or segmented across home and work (Rothbard et al. 2022). However, as shown in our findings, interactional control can also have implications for the character of workplace relationships.

In addition to research on role conflict management, our findings on interactional control add to and complement literature on interruptions (Jett and George 2003, Koopman et al. 2016, Methot et al. 2021). While prior literature has highlighted many contextual and individual-level factors that lead to interruptions having negative work or wellbeing related consequences (see Puranik et al. 2020), our findings highlight the importance of considering individuals' out-of-work roles as well. As we show, a person's parental role in particular might lead them to experience interruptions as disruptive to their work and work-family role management, whereas those with different non-work roles might not experience these negative consequences. Additionally, we also add to findings regarding how interruptions at work can be curbed. Existing literature has focused on organizational-level changes, such as periods of "quiet time" (Perlow 1999) or particular seating plans (Gonsalves 2023). We identify a separate but complementary series of person-to-person practices through which interactions can be regulated. In doing so, we emphasize the importance of considering workers' pragmatic responses to interruptions.

Second, we identify the consequences of managing role conflict through interactional control for workplace relationships. Prior research has shown, explicitly or implicitly, how managing role conflict can improve family relationships (Moen and Sweet 2003, Kossek and Lautsch 2008, Rothbard et al. 2013) and that the relegation of such practices can lead to negative effects on home life (Russo et al. 2018, Oelberger 2019). A parallel but smaller line of existing research has considered how positive workplace relationships can help manage role conflict (Lautsch et al. 2009, Hammer et al. 2013, Trefalt

2013), complemented by similar research showing that family relationships can manage this conflict as well (Mazmanian and Beckman 2020, Thomason 2022). Here, in contrast, we show how managing role conflict through achieving efficiency in time can harm workplace belonging and exchange of resources. In particular, we identify how through interactional control people may limit opportunities for moments of spontaneity, synchronicity, and availability that allow for the growth and maintenance of workplace relationships. Our findings suggest, more broadly, that various practices aimed at managing role conflict may have previously unidentified drawbacks related to limiting interactions and, in turn, work relationships. As an example, attempts at time work or time boundary management that involve scheduling family activities (see Kreiner et al. 2009, Moen et al. 2013) implicitly entail blocking off time from workplace activities, and by extension, potentially limit a worker's availability for the synchronous, spontaneous, and time-intensive interactions involved in developing workplace relationships.

Third, with regards to literature on the ideal worker, we expand understandings of how devotion is enacted in the workplace. The ideal worker is devoted to work, and this devotion has been identified in previous research as performed and demonstrated through availability (Williams 2001, Reid 2015, Feldman et al. 2020)—that is, being the “available worker.” We find that in addition to the available worker, people who are devoted to their work might also complete tasks in a very focused way, prioritizing work tasks over interactions that are peripheral to, distracting from, or interruptive of work—what we call the “occupied worker.” This finding complements existing research that highlights how those with extensive caregiving roles may be devoted to work but cannot demonstrate this devotion through long hours (Stone 2007); we offer a description of how these workers show their devotion. This finding is in line with recent research that highlights how some workers are redefining what it means to achieve excellence in work in ways that are more compatible with maintaining time for family (Perlow and Kelly 2014, de Laat 2023, Heaphy and Trefalt 2023). Of course, the particular display of work devotion that we identified may or may not be accepted and praised among organizational members or

society at large as “ideal” However, our data suggest that occupied workers might be more accepted in particular organizational contexts, including workplaces where performance is more easily discernable (see also Bailyn 2006) and more workers are involved in caregiving (past, present, or anticipated future). Identifying the occupied worker builds on research findings that workers’ engagement in multiple roles might lead to cross-domain improvements in resources, as proposed by theories of work-family enrichment (Greenhaus and Powell 2006, ten Brummelhuis and Bakker 2012, Dumas and Stanko 2017). Such findings highlight how engagement in multiple roles (parent, work) might allow for particular expressions of positive role performance (the occupied worker).

Boundary Conditions, Limitations, and Future Directions

Responding to calls for more qualitative inductive research on work-family issues (Allen et al. 2014, Allen and French 2023), this study of STEM professionals spans three organizations, showing the validity of our findings in varied contexts (i.e., they are not the artifact of one organization). Nonetheless, there remain important boundary conditions to this research. One, as described in the findings, is that the work can be completed satisfactorily without the constant, continuous need to engage with others. While this relative independence is common in many professional occupations (e.g., accountants, architects, therapists), for people whose work entails constant interactions, we would expect workers to have more difficulties tightly controlling interactions (e.g., because there are more opportunities for informal conversations that one cannot easily exit). Additionally, particular organizational features that we have highlighted—ambiguous measures of performance and a low concentration of those with past, present, or anticipated childcare responsibilities (see also Bailyn 2006)—might view the occupied worker more negatively compared to the available worker role. This might explain, for example, why studies of business (i.e., not STEM) consultants—whose work involves

intensive interdependence with clients and team members, may have ambiguous measures of quality, and are often dominated at the senior ranks by men with wives who perform the majority of household work—find that people tend to manage role conflict by making structural or group-level changes (e.g., going part time or, as a team, redefining what constitutes appropriate work hour practices) (e.g., Perlow 2012, Heaphy and Trefalt 2023) rather than the bundle of more individual-level practices we describe in this study. Individual-level practices may be more heavily penalized in such contexts.

Relatedly, our study raises important questions regarding the longer-term implications of interaction practices and the occupied worker role on peoples' career and home outcomes. While we observed most workers over the course of one to two years (Allen and French 2023, Smith et al. 2022), it would be useful to examine their trajectories over a longer time horizon so that career, organizational, and family outcomes could be examined in more detail. For instance, do those who act as occupied workers experience more stress or earn lower salaries or receive fewer promotions (as could be inferred from research on flexibility stigma experienced by workers with more constrained hours, e.g., Leslie et al. 2012, Chung 2020)? Or perhaps those who act as occupied workers and are embedded in a context with supportive organizational conditions (e.g., task, demographics) are able to mitigate negative repercussions, as suggested by our findings as well as research that shows that parental status might serve as a basis for positive identification among workers (Ladge et al. 2012). Are available workers more attached to their current employers because they have stronger ties with work colleagues? With regards to family life, we suspect that those who enact the occupied worker will have higher needs and expectations of emotional and psychological fulfillment from home; future research could examine this. At the same time, while we saw evidence that workers' approaches to interaction practice map to a life course perspective (Moen et al. 2008) (e.g., contrasting the experiences of those who had children in the home with those who now had adult children and were classified as not having childcare responsibilities in our sample) this issue remains underexplored due to the nature of our data. Future research might

examine these long-term possibilities, particularly through drawing on other data sources (e.g., repeated surveys).

Finally, our study raises questions about experiences of those outside of this particular group of workers. The people in our study who experienced role conflict were those with more extensive childcare responsibilities. We think the conditions experienced by our workers are relatively representative of many other professionals (e.g., high devotion to work, which might limit engagement in time-consuming hobbies, and higher income which might help pay for eldercare support). However, in other samples, additional non-work role demands might emerge as salient, such as eldercare, non-work friendships, volunteer positions, or hobbies. Further, our focus was on time conflict because it emerged as prominent among these professionals. However, our research raises important questions as to how interaction practices and related role enactments shape other forms of role conflict (e.g., strain and behavioral, Greenhaus and Beutell 1985).

Practical Implications

This research offers important insights for managers and organizations regarding the promotion and reinforcement of work devotion that depends on constant availability, adding to existing research that suggests that such an emphasis should be reconsidered (Kelly et al. 2010, Kelly and Moen 2020). In particular, we show that emphasizing only the available worker may have the unintentional negative consequence of ignoring a particular alternative or additional displays of work devotion, specifically, the occupied worker. Occupied workers, too, are devoted workers who can help an organization's bottom line and productivity; they just enact their roles through focused, intense, and efficient work rather than through routine availability. To focus exclusively on the benefits of availability sidelines the positive impact of such workers, and as other research has shown, leads them to be less likely to receive career rewards such as promotions or raises (Munsch et al. 2014, Reid 2015). This point echoes important

research on the career histories of women who either temporarily or permanently leave the workforce after having children because, despite their devotion to and commitment to work, they cannot practically display their devotion through the widely expected display of availability to work now that they also have childcare commitments (Blair-Loy 2003, Stone 2007).

A related important implication is how organizational design might come to suit the needs of both available and occupied workers. Almost all organizations will contain both sorts of workers; this represents not only the fact that organizations hire workers of a variety of socio-demographic circumstances, but also the fact that many workers may alter their work role enactment through their life course (e.g., someone who is hired before having children, has a child and faces childcare demands, and then has a teen or adult child who requires less time). For available workers who engage in more social interaction, a workplace that allows for and facilitates social interaction (e.g., through more open workspaces or more formal social events) might be preferable, whereas for occupied workers the ability to work at home or in isolated spaces would be more preferred. Prior research suggests that the best way to manage these varying interests and constraints is to provide workers with flexibility in and autonomy over the conditions of their work (Lovejoy et al. 2021, Fox et al. 2022), because this allows them to customize their work situation to their personal and familial needs (Kelly and Moen 2007). For instance, providing workers with the ability to work either remotely or in person will allow people to customize their work experience to their particular life situation. Another example would be creating spaces that allow for the potential for interaction (e.g., an open cafeteria or lunch eating space) without forcing all workers to be in such physical spaces consistently.

Our research also helps managers and organizational leaders consider the potentially negative effects of mandating workers to return to the office following the COVID-19 pandemic. Such mandates are often purported to be aimed at improving collegial relations (Robinson 2023), but our findings suggest that such an outcome is not assured; simply providing more opportunities for interaction does

not mean workplace relationships will actually develop. For those with role conflict, requiring a commute to and from the office may only exacerbate this conflict, and may lead workers to eliminate even more interactions in order to attend to both work and home demands. Furthermore, in-person work environments create more extensive opportunities for interaction, which take more time, effort, and energy for these workers to modulate rather than being able to focus on work itself. Given these limitations, our research suggests that instead of mandating a return to the office, organizational leaders and managers should maintain remote work opportunities.

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Table 1. Summary of Research Settings and Data Collection Methods

	Major University (MU)	Pharmaceutical Research Unit (PRU)	STEM Organization (STEMO)
Organization	STEM departments of research university	Research division of pharmaceutical company	STEM professional services organization
Workers Studied	Science Professors (19)	Scientists (22)	Scientists, Engineers, and Technology Specialists (31)
% of Relevant Population Sampled	56%	96%	13%
% with Children in Sample	63%	73%	55%
% Female in Sample	58%	36%	36%
Observation of:			
Individual Daily Work Routines	Extensive	Extensive	Extensive
Interactions in Common Space	Limited	Extensive	Intermediate
Social Events	Limited	Extensive	Intermediate
Work Group Meetings	Limited	Extensive	Extensive
Informal Conversations	Limited	Extensive	Extensive
Interviews	All participants	All participants	All participants
Time Diaries	Yes	No	No
Archival Data (e.g., emails, reports)	Some	Yes	Yes

Table 2. Additional Evidence of Interaction Practices Across Professionals

	Controlling	Encouraging
Alter when interactions are triggered	<p>Avoiding: Turning down colleagues’ invitations to interact, and not inviting others to interact</p> <p>Sarah (PRU scientist, primary caregiver) had not accepted any social invitations from her colleagues, apart from one “women’s night” hosted by PRU and held a block from the office. She had also not invited anyone to do anything social after hours (e.g., getting drinks at the local bar or going to a baseball game like her coworkers). During the workday, she often worked from one of the small conference rooms at PRU rather than at open-seating space, so that others would not interrupt her.</p>	<p>Sparking: Enthusiastically responding to or initiating interactions with others</p> <p>Mary (PRU scientist, no child), immersed in her work, was interrupted when a colleague greeted her. She immediately looked up from her laptop and asked about the colleague’s biggest project, which Mary did not work on but was interested in learning more about. She eagerly asked four follow-up questions. The two talked for 11 minutes, before Mary left for a meeting. Mary explained, “I like interacting with people, like talking to [coworker]. It was social, but I also got a lot of information that could help with my future work. I hate email.” She loved passing time with colleagues, and also spent time with them outside of work hours (e.g., going to a baseball game).</p>
	<p>After project meetings, four of Amber’s (STEMO engineer, primary caregiver) colleagues congregated in the hallway and chatted about their project. However, Amber walked past them, quickly escaping back to her office. While such informal gatherings were common after project meetings, she never initiated them and rarely joined others who were already talking.</p>	<p>Wendy (STEMO technology specialist, no child) and a coworker started chatting casually after she finished a meeting. A third colleague then stopped by and the three started talking about how much Wendy’s two coworkers could charge for some project work they were doing. Wendy offered some advice based on her own experience. As Wendy explained about her colleagues: “We don’t work on the same projects, but we will chat throughout the day.” She added, “It will just be like, ‘Oh by the way, guess what happened last night.’”</p>
	<p>Hiding: Working in locations where coworkers are less likely to be present</p> <p>Edward (MU scientist, splits caregiving) often worked at home or in a coffee shop to get away from coworkers: “I hate having someone knock on my door when I’m trying to focus.... People are always coming to ask me questions. That is why I like going to the coffee shop [laugh].” He noted, “Going to the coffee shop is a strategy.” He explained with exuberance how wonderful Dropbox was, because it allowed him to work at home more easily, instead of only at the office.</p>	<p>Signaling: Indicating availability for interaction</p> <p>Justin (MU scientist, no child) worked with his door open almost the entire workday. Unscheduled, three coworkers stopped by, separately, and entered his office, initiating conversation with him. As each person did so, he engaged with them, and did not excuse himself from the interaction. Notably, however, when Justin was not in his office he always closed his office door. While an open door signaled his presence and availability, a closed one indicated he was not available for interaction.</p>
	<p>April (STEMO engineer, splits caregiving) worked from home two days a week, where she was better able to focus on work without “distractions” like coworkers. When she was in her office, she tended to keep her door closed and rely on email and phone calls: “If I don’t get an answer through email, I will call.” She tried not to leave her office unless doing so was necessary for work.</p>	<p>Natasha (STEMO engineer, no child) explained that a coworker was a “personal friend” with whom she had regular “social” conversations. He was away for a week on vacation. Knowing that he would likely stop by to chat about his trip—he had taken his girlfriend to meet his family for the first time—she left her office door open, except for one 30-minute meeting. The coworker stopped by, came in, and described how the vacation had unfolded.</p>

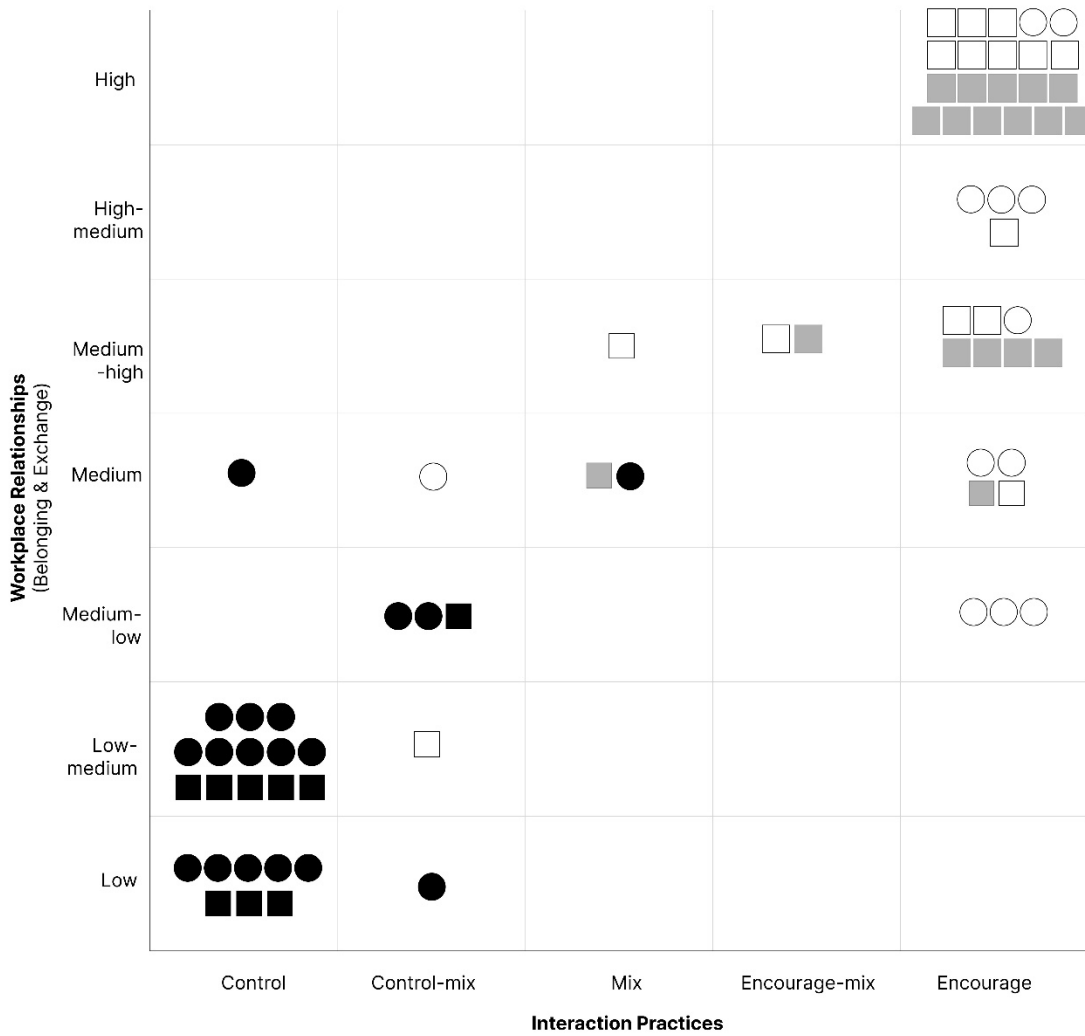
	Controlling	Encouraging
Alter the timing, length, and ordering of interactions	<p>Organizing: Arranging work-focused interactions in the order, length, and frequency that is most efficient</p> <p>Tyler (STEMO scientist, splits caregiving) did not schedule any meetings on Wednesdays and very few on Fridays so he could perform more intensive focus work without interruption at home. While he limited meetings with those in his department with whom he had less work overlap, he also often tightly scheduled meetings (i.e., back-to-back) with his coworkers on shared projects.</p> <p>To protect quiet periods of time for research, Julie (MU scientist, splits caregiving) scheduled a weekly meeting with each of her three lab members: “If they have interesting data, or they need to discuss something, then I’ll have like a half an hour or an hour meeting with them, and I usually do that with each of them once a week.” She also had a two-and-a-half-hour group meeting each week. Time was allocated to and focused on activities with subordinates in a structured way, rather than allowing lab members to stop by her office to chat on a whim.</p> <p>Focusing: Directing attention to the task-at-hand</p> <p>Heather (PRU scientist, primary caregiver) had a long list of tasks that she wanted to complete within the two-and-a-half hours before she left the office. She sat down at her desk and worked solely on the listed tasks. During this time, three coworkers stopped by to ask her questions related to her task list. For each colleague, she provided the relevant information—typically in a curt sentence or two—and then returned to typing on her laptop, rarely looking up. She did not ask her coworkers how they were, tell a joke, or otherwise engage in informal conversation. Her return to typing signaled that the conversation was done, and the coworkers all immediately left.</p> <p>Jonathan (MU scientist, splits caregiving) spoke of the importance of being “extremely disciplined and extremely focused” to improve one’s “research output.” During meetings with his students—as well as colleagues—when conversation veered off topic, he would gently remind the interlocuter of the focus of the conversation (e.g., by mentioning they needed to finish X research task). One Wednesday, when a meeting was running too long—and had gone off topic—Jonathan simply said, “I have to go, we can follow up on Friday.”</p>	<p>Shifting: Delaying work activities to make time for interactions</p> <p>Ethan (STEMO engineer, no child) took a break with three of his colleagues each afternoon. There was no set time for these casual encounters. Instead, “when somebody is completely dead” that person would leave their office and go get the others. Ethan, in response, would stop his work and take a break with his coworkers, provided he was not attending a prescheduled meeting. Other work activities were pushed to later in the day.</p> <p>Throughout her workday, Rachel (MU scientist, no child) paused her work three times to chat with colleagues. In one typical example, a coworker stopped by her office and the two discussed their joint lunch plans for Thursday. Rachel had also decided earlier that day to—instead of immediately going home after work to do grading for her class—go to an evening party at the faculty club with a colleague. She would perform her grading instead late that night once she returned home after the party.</p> <p>Meandering: Allowing conversations to move across and dwell on various topics</p> <p>Immediately after project meetings, Adam (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) and three of his colleagues regularly wandered into the office kitchen. There they often eagerly reviewed the meeting that had just unfolded while sipping coffee: Did the next steps they agreed upon really make sense? Did this work relate to a recently published paper? Did any of them need help with their part of the project? These conversations sometimes lasted five minutes and other times half an hour, depending on how much there was to discuss.</p> <p>Aaron’s (MU scientist, no child) colleague stopped by his office, and the two discussed yesterday’s research seminar. After chatting about the seminar’s quality, as well as who from their department attended, the two drifted to discussing a form the colleague had sent Aaron to fill out. Then, the two shifted back to the seminar, discussing the seminar’s history, including the professor after whom the seminar was named. The colleague noted there was a photo of the professor in the hall. The colleague eventually left Aaron’s office, but Aaron wandered over to his office less than an hour later to discuss a research question.</p>

Table 3. Work Time and Work Relationships of the Available Worker and the Occupied Worker

	Occupied Worker	Available Worker
WORK TIME	<p>Rigid: More set hours.</p> <p>James (MU scientist, splits caregiving) almost always stopped working in the early evening to be home for family dinner with his wife and daughter. He rarely engaged with colleagues outside his set work hours. This was notable, for instance, by the fact that he rarely went to department social hours, which often took place in evenings.</p> <p>Greg (PRU scientist, splits caregiving) stated, “I prefer working earlier in the morning and then getting home to be with my family. So I leave [PRU] at quarter to 5, 5 o’clock.... My work-life balance rules are that my evenings I have with my family.... I’m home at least to help prepare dinner and play with the kids and all that.” He rarely engaged in work activities that took place in the evenings.</p>	<p>Flexible: More flexible hours.</p> <p>Justin (MU scientist, no child) varied the time he spent at work based on his interactions with his colleagues. On some days, he would finish his work tasks early enough to go home to eat dinner with his girlfriend. But on other days, he would spend hours interacting with his colleagues—talking about work, eating lunch together, or going out for beers—and would not return home until 9:30pm.</p> <p>Scott (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) worked roughly ten-hour days, with varying start and end times depending on how long it took him to complete his work, which was broken up each day by various social interactions including foosball games, watching sports with colleagues on the office television, and going out for lunch. His wife cared for their young son while Scott was working, and he spent time with his son primarily on weekends.</p>
	<p>Less: More limited hours.</p> <p>Heather (PRU scientist, primary caregiver) said, “I’m usually in here [the office] by 7am.... I also have a family commitment with two young kids at home, so I try to leave here by 4 pm... I try to use [weekends] as my alone time or my personal time.”</p>	<p>More: More extensive hours.</p> <p>Larry (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) explained, “I would say one way or another I start to work around 8 am. So I will either be [at PRU] for an 8 o’clock meeting or I will be doing emails and come in later, something like that.... And then I probably don’t do much after sort of 9 pm, 9:30 pm... I make quite a lot of calls in the evening as well. It just kind of plays out.” How it “plays out” seemed to reflect, largely what interactions came to break up his workday.</p>
	<p>Tara (STEMO engineer, primary caregiver) explained that she almost never worked more than 40 hours a week. While she often worked at home so she could focus on her work tasks uninterrupted, when she did go into the office she did not take time to engage extensively with others on matters that were not directly related to work projects.</p>	<p>Rodney (STEMO technology specialist, secondary caregiver) worked often on the weekends and evenings, and came into the office by 7:30 each morning. He did not work uninterrupted during these times, however, but would often make jokes and talk office politics with his colleagues.</p>

	Occupied Worker	Available Worker
WORK RELATIONSHIPS	<p>Limited belonging: Feels on the peripheral of the department. Colleagues as coworkers, but not friends. “The facts,” with generic banter.</p> <p>Angela (MU scientist, splits caregiving) described her department as “individualistic.” She did not interact with her colleagues much, but she also did not see the sense in trying to do so with these seemingly distant people whom she did not know and did not think would help her. When asked if she knew what her colleagues were up to, she replied, “You don’t see behind the mask. I don’t know.”</p> <p>Tyler (STEMO scientist, splits caregiving) explained that he talked to colleagues primarily about “work-related things.” He added, “Sometimes family-related things come up but these are not the people I would think of opening up to and discussing family matters or family concerns with.” They were not coworkers, not friends.</p> <p>Exchange limited to task at hand: “Light” professional advice, basics of collegial and departmental activities, and resource sharing only when there was an obvious connection.</p> <p>Heather (PRU scientist, primary caregiver) was surprised to learn in a meeting that Jeremy (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) had never received his PhD, although they had worked together for three years. She let out a small gasp when she heard; everyone else in his position had a PhD, and she had assumed he had one too. She had not talked to him enough before to know.</p> <p>Amber (STEMO engineer, primary caregiver) had three colleagues—including Dustin (STEMO engineer, no child)—who were discussing whom to ask for help on a new project. After the three colleagues considered several possible alternatives, Dustin suggested that they could perhaps add Amber because she had relevant experience. While Amber was considered for the project, it was largely on the basis of her formal skills (and after considering other people), versus a more personal connection. She rarely interacted with her colleagues, so such a connection was lacking.</p>	<p>Extensive belonging: Feels like a fully integrated member of the department. Colleagues as friends. Detailed sharing of personal information and office politics.</p> <p>Rachel (MU scientist, no child) explained, “I really like my department. ... There is a good dialogue going in the department, across all levels. My opinion is respected. ... This is a good place to work.” She regularly ate lunch with her colleagues in their floor’s breakroom.</p> <p>Cody (STEMO engineer, no child) talked to a coworker about his weekend plans, which included going to a birthday party for a neighbor’s child. The coworker talked to Cody about his three daughters’ weekend plans, including the basketball game he was going to coach for his eldest child.</p> <p>Extensive exchange: Personalized career help, in-depth awareness of colleagues and departmental activities, informal and formal information about work opportunities.</p> <p>Scott (PRU scientist, secondary caregiver) described the educational background and career history of each of his coworkers. He noted that Jeremy had in fact never received a PhD, which was rare for people in their field. But, he noted, Jeremy had been involved in the development of one drug that had made it to market—a relatively rare feat in the drug development world. He knew about this history from extended prior conversations with Jeremy, in which they had discussed their educational and work experiences.</p> <p>Dustin (STEMO engineer, no child) and two close colleagues were developing a new project for a client. One of his colleagues had nurtured the connection with the client, and had brought Dustin and the other colleague on to help early in the project development phase (i.e., before formal contracts had been signed). The three talked regularly, for instance, when they ran into each other in the hallway or ate lunch together.</p>

Figure 1. Relationships among Childcare Status, Interaction Practices, and Workplace Relationships



LEGEND:

Childcare status
 ■ Primary or Split ■ Secondary □ No Child

Worker Gender
 ○ Woman □ Man