



Work Boundary Management Tactics and Work-Family Conflict Among Offshore Employees in the Oil and Gas Industry

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ABSTRACT

Managing work-family conflict is crucial for offshore employees in the oil and gas industry, where the boundaries between work and family can blur due to extended offshore assignments. This study examines the relationship between various work boundary management tactics, including behavioural, physical, communicative, temporal, and work-family conflict among offshore employees. A total of 95 offshore employees from selected oil and gas companies participated in the study. Pearson's correlation analysis was used to assess the relationships between boundary management tactics and work-family conflict. The results indicate significant relationships between behavioural, physical, and communicative tactics and work-family conflict, while temporal tactics were associated with positive but weak and non-significant relationships. These findings offer actionable insights for enhancing work-life balance policies tailored to offshore settings and suggest directions for future research in this area.

Keywords: work boundary management tactics, work-family conflict, offshore employees

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1 INTRODUCTION

Offshore oil and gas industry employees work on drilling rigs, also known as oil platforms. In the United Kingdom, offshore employment is a significant sector. Between 2014 and 2017, the number of offshore workers increased by 42%, with women comprising 3% of the 50,000 offshore workers employed by 2017 (Oil & Gas U.K., 2018). According to Garside (2019), Southeast Asia had 152 offshore rigs in 2018, making it the fifth most significant region for offshore rigs, following the North Sea, Gulf of Mexico (U.S.), Persian Gulf, and Far East Asia. This indicates a substantial offshore workforce in Southeast Asia's oil and gas industry. In 2018, Malaysia reported a 13% increase in hiring oil and gas employees (Suki, Rony, & Suki, 2019). Focus Malaysia (2018) notes a rising demand for oil and gas jobs. Offshore employees typically work in cycles ranging from seven to 14 days, with some assignments extending beyond two weeks. Most offshore workers are men, with women constituting a smaller portion of the workforce.

Typically, onshore employees have workdays equal to or shorter than their offshore shifts (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991). Research indicates that offshore employees often face work-family conflicts, which impact their ability to balance and manage the integration and separation of work and family roles (Basile & Beauregard, 2018). These conflicts arise due to their absence from family activities, particularly when extended work hours are required. Work-family conflict is a significant source of stress for many individuals. According to Carlson et al. (2000), such conflicts can lead to psychological distress, decreased job satisfaction, lower work dedication, increased turnover intention, and reduced life satisfaction. Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) identify three categories of work-family conflict: time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based. In the case of time-based conflict, offshore employees who work longer hours may negatively impact their family life.

Boundary management tactics are designed to maintain the separation between individuals' personal and work lives (Ashforth et al., 2000; Carlson et al., 2013). Kreiner et al. (2009) identified four types of boundary management tactics: behavioural, temporal, physical, and communicative. Offshore employees operate on a rotating schedule, working for a specified number of days or weeks offshore before returning home and then taking an equivalent or shorter period off (Basile & Beauregard, 2018). Ross (2009) observed that these employees rely entirely on onshore communication technology to communicate with family members at home during offshore periods. It is evident that offshore employees can experience greater social segmentation due to their physical separation from family members and other unrelated workers (Thomas et al., 2003). Therefore, this study examines whether work boundary management tactics can help mitigate work-family conflict among offshore employees in Malaysia. Basile and Beauregard (2018) state that physical, communicative, and psychological separation from home activities due to work commitments contributes to high work-family conflict. Similarly, in the home environment, workers are physically separated from their work environment, leading to less contact with colleagues and reduced participation in work activities. This can heighten the perception of tension between work and family.

Work-family conflict has become a significant concern among researchers. This is mainly due to substantial changes in both work and family domains, exacerbated by the current global economic challenges. The imbalance between these two domains can adversely affect individuals if they do not effectively manage this issue. Consequently, work boundary management tactics can serve as a valuable strategy to help individuals balance their work and family domains, thereby reducing work-family conflict (Araujo et al., 2015; Kreiner et al., 2009). However, there is a need for more research on work boundary management tactics in Malaysia, particularly among offshore oil and gas industry employees. Most existing studies have been conducted in Western countries and may not fully address the specific contexts of Malaysia (Araujo et al., 2015; Ashforth et al., 2000; Cousins & Robey, 2015; Knapp et al., 2013; Kreiner et al., 2009).

In addition, previous studies have focused on exploring how women negotiate the work-home interface (Araujo et al., 2015). In this study, the researchers aimed to fill other contextual gaps suggested by previous researchers. Investigation and analysis were made by Nipper-Eng (1996) and Kreiner et al. (2009) for the idea of boundary work and specific tactics from boundary tactics. The researchers also suggested exploring the effects of boundary tactics (i.e. Boundary Work Tactics) in various contexts (Araujo et al., 2015). Other previous research was on the impact of organisational capability and the absence of the highly segmented occupational environment, and one of them is offshore work, with the lengthy rotation period away from either home or work and work-life interface. The researchers suggested conducting and expanding the purview of research into highly segmented work environments such as offshore work (Basile & Beaugard, 2018). Recent studies have highlighted that these challenges have driven offshore workers to adopt stricter boundary management tactics, such as creating 'micro-borders' between work and personal time and employing more rigid time-based strategies to manage work-life integration. The intense pressure to adapt to these conditions has been exacerbated by the high risks and demands of the offshore environment, further complicated by the uncertainties of the pandemic. Moreover, the post-pandemic era has witnessed a talent crunch in the industry, with many experienced workers either leaving or reassessing their positions due to increased pressures. This has further complicated the work environment and boundary management for those who remain (Ajibade et al., 2022).

Consequently, the researchers are interested in investigating the relationship between work boundary management tactics and work-family conflict among offshore employees in the oil and gas industry. Previous studies have focused on women's boundary perceptions of work-family conflict in Western contexts. This research explores how boundary management tactics influence work-family conflict among offshore employees, extending knowledge and understanding of work boundary management tactics. According to Kreiner et al. (2009), boundary management tactics and behavioural tactics act as social activities and support to compromise and build work and family boundaries. It consists of three components. The first part involves using other people to create a boundary between work and family demands. Previous research indicates that leveraging the skills and availability of others can help delineate work responsibilities from family life. Another component involves using technology, which allows individuals to manage their digital tools and serves as a personal digital assistant to control and guide their work-life boundaries.

Additionally, these behavioural tactics facilitate differential permeability by distinguishing individual roles at work and home, thus preventing overlap and enabling prioritisation of urgent and essential demands (Carlson et al., 2013). Consequently, the researchers posit that employing behavioural tactics can reduce employee work-family conflict. Behavioural tactics encompass individuals' actions to manage the boundaries between their work and family roles. Studies by Kreiner et al. (2009) and Ashforth et al. (2000) highlight how using technology to establish barriers between work and home, prioritising tasks through triage, and setting boundaries with colleagues and family members can alleviate or exacerbate work-family conflict. These tactics assist individuals in navigating the challenges of balancing work and family responsibilities, thereby influencing their overall well-being and productivity in both domains. Temporal tactics involve managing time to delineate boundaries between work and family domains. This includes controlling work hours and taking breaks to create distance from work or home demands. Research suggests that temporal tactics help individuals maintain distinct identities for different roles, allowing them to compartmentalise responsibilities more effectively (Carlson et al., 2013). For instance, when at work, individuals focus solely on work tasks without distractions from family obligations. Practising temporal tactics can reduce conflict between work and family domains.

On the other hand, physical tactics establish clear boundaries between work and family domains both physically and psychologically. Individuals can transition between work and family roles more effectively by creating physical barriers, such as designated rooms or separate workspaces. For example, moving from a home office to a family room involves crossing a physical boundary, such as a door, which signals a shift from work to family responsibilities. Researchers anticipate that employing physical boundary tactics will help reduce work-family conflict among offshore employees. Communicative tactics primarily involve proactively managing expectations regarding work and family boundaries (Kreiner et al., 2009). Research suggests that effective communication helps individuals avoid conflicts by setting expectations in advance and managing boundary violations (Ashforth et al., 2000). By clearly communicating expectations, individuals can better focus on their current roles, establishing more precise boundaries between work and family life (Ashforth et al., 2000; Carlson et al., 2013). Therefore, it is hypothesised that communication tactics will reduce work-family conflict. These tactics include communicative approaches that set expectations and address any boundary violations. Communication entails defining work-family boundaries with key individuals, such as partners, children, parents, and colleagues. The relationship between communication tactics and work-family conflict (WFC) is crucial, as effective communication is essential for managing and alleviating conflicts between work and family responsibilities (Table 1).

Table 1. Work-home boundary work tactics by Kreiner et al. (2009).

Type of boundaries	Description
Behavioural tactics Using other people	Utilising the skills and availability of others, such as staff members, spouses, and friends, to help manage work-home boundaries.

Leveraging technology	Employing technology to facilitate boundary management, including tools like voicemail, email, and phone calls.
Allowing differential permeability	Choosing whether specific aspects of work and home life should be permeable. For example, the individual can differentiate their workplace and home roles without mixing them
Invoking triage	Prioritising urgent and important demands from work and home, such as childcare or workplace emergencies.
Temporal tactics	
Controlling work time	Managing regular or random plans by blocking time segments and choosing when to engage in different work tasks. For example, blocking time segments and choosing when to do different work.
Finding respite	Taking time away from work or home demands, such as through vacations, self-retreats, or getaways.
Physical tactics	
Adapting physical boundaries	Establishing or dismantling physical barriers between work and home domains.
Manipulating physical space	Developing and reducing the physical distance between the realms of work and home
Managing physical artefacts	Using specific items such as schedules, keys and mail to separate or combine aspects of each domain.
Communicative tactics	
Setting expectations	Managing expectations about work-home boundaries in advance, such as making preliminary agreements about work or family responsibilities.
Confronting violators	Addressing breaches of work-home boundaries by informing individuals of the boundaries either during or after the violation, such as asking staff not to call home for minor issues.

Previous research by Araujo et al. (2015) and Bandar et al. (2016) explores how working women, particularly mothers, use various tactics to manage work and family conflicts. The study identified four boundary work tactics (behavioural, physical, temporal, and communicative) that can help reduce work-home conflicts (Araujo et al., 2015; Kreiner et al., 2009). It was found that working mothers employ these tactics to create social practices that facilitate achieving a work-family balance, and there is a significant relationship between these boundary work tactics and work-family conflict. Additionally, establishing symbols that delineate boundaries between work and home environments is crucial. Other research highlights that while there is limited study on the integration of families of offshore workers, existing publications suggest similar approaches to maintaining a cohesive family unit (Forsyth & Gauthier, 1991).

Nonetheless, a notable distinction is that offshore oil workers experience working conditions that allow them to engage more in family life than others, as their leave periods can be significantly longer. A key factor to consider is the increased frequency and length of time oil workers spend at home. However, a challenge for offshore oil workers regarding work-family conflict is that they often need to rest or sleep when they return home. At the same time, their spouse or family members may want to discuss events that occurred during their absence or share in the joy of their return.

2 METHODS

This section discusses the methods used in this study, including details about the participants, design, instruments, and procedures for investigating the relationship between work boundary management tactics and work-family conflict among offshore employees.

2.1 Participants

The study included a broad demographic spectrum of offshore employees, considering factors such as age, with participants ranging from 25 to 55. Despite the predominantly male workforce in this sector, efforts were made to include female employees who met the criteria to ensure diverse perspectives. Participants held various positions, including technical, engineering, and supervisory roles, critical to offshore operations in selected oil and gas companies in Miri, Sarawak.

2.2 Design

The study employed a cross-sectional survey design, widely used in organisational research to capture data at a single point in time. This design was selected to explore the relationship between work boundary management tactics and work-family conflict among offshore employees. Data were collected through structured questionnaires distributed to participants, allowing for the examination of both the individual and situational factors influencing these constructs.

2.3 Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study to assess work boundary management tactics and work-family conflict. The Work Boundary Management Tactics Scale (Carlson et al., 2013) consists of 12 items designed to evaluate employees' strategies to manage the boundaries between their work and personal lives. This scale includes four elements of work boundary management tactics: behavioural, temporal, physical, and communicative. Each element is assessed through three questions, adapted from the questionnaires used in previous research by Carlson et al. (2015). Participants responded to each item using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), indicating the extent to which they employ these boundary management strategies.

The Work-Family Conflict Questionnaire (Carlson et al., 2000) is an 18-item scale used to measure the level of conflict between work and family responsibilities. It evaluates three dimensions of conflict: time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based, providing a comprehensive understanding of the work-family conflict experienced by participants. Responses were collected on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

2.4 Procedure

Participants were provided with clear instructions on how to complete the questionnaires, including an explanation of the study's purpose and the importance of honest and thoughtful responses. They were informed that participation was voluntary, and their responses would remain anonymous to encourage candid feedback. Each respondent was given approximately 20-30 minutes to complete the survey. Follow-up reminders were sent to ensure a high response rate, and technical support was made available to participants who encountered difficulties accessing or completing the survey.

3 RESULTS

Table 2 shows the results of descriptive statistics of the respondents' demographic profile, including age, gender, marital status, job status, working tenure, offshore working days, and the number of children.

Table 2. Demographic profile of respondents (N=95).

Variables	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age		
21-30 years old	49	51.6
31-40 years old	29	30.5
41-50 years old	13	13.7
51-60 years old	4	4.2
Gender		
Male	87	91.6
Female	8	8.4
Marital status		
Single	21	22.1
Married	73	76.8
Others	1	1.1
Job Status		
Permanent	91	95.8
Contract	3	3.2
Others	1	1.1
Working tenure		
≤ 5 years	36	37.9
6-20 years	46	48.4
>20 years	13	13.7

Offshore working rotation		
Less than 7 days	20	21.1
7-14 days	6	6.3
>14 days	69	72.6
Number of children		
None	39	41.1
1	19	20.0
2	13	13.7
3	11	11.6
4	9	9.5
5	4	4.2

Most of respondents are married, with 73 individuals (76.8%). Regarding job status, a significant majority of respondents are permanent staff, with 91 respondents (95.8%). Regarding tenure, the largest group has been working for 6-20 years, representing 46 respondents (48.4%), followed by those with less than five years of experience, comprising 36 respondents (37.9%). Regarding offshore working days, the largest of respondents, 69 individuals (72.6%), reported working more than 14 days offshore. This is followed by those working fewer than seven offshore days (21.2%) and six respondents (6.3%) working 7-14 days offshore. Additionally, 39 respondents (41.1%) indicated that they do not have children.

This study utilised the Pearson Correlation Coefficient to test the relationship between the two parameters of work boundary management tactics and work-family conflict, respectively. Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant relationships between work boundary management tactics and work-family conflict. Specifically, behavioural tactics exhibited a moderate positive correlation with work-family conflict ($r = .392, p < .05$), indicating that increased use of behavioural strategies is associated with higher levels of conflict. Communicative tactics also showed a significant positive correlation with work-family conflict ($r = .376, p = .000$), suggesting that these tactics can exacerbate work-family conflict. In contrast, temporal tactics did not significantly correlate with work-family conflict, and physical tactics exhibited a weak positive correlation.

4 DISCUSSION

The present findings revealed a significant positive relationship between behavioural tactics and work-family conflict, with a moderate positive correlation. This indicates that higher use of behavioural tactics is associated with more significant work-family conflict among offshore employees. Behavioural tactics encompass various strategies to manage work and family life boundaries. However, these strategies may inadvertently exacerbate the conflict between these domains due to the demanding nature of offshore work, which often involves long hours and extended periods away from home. This makes it challenging for employees to balance their work and family responsibilities effectively.

The implications of these findings are significant for both employees and employers. Recognising that specific behavioural tactics may unintentionally increase work-family conflict can prompt employees to seek alternative strategies or support systems to manage their dual roles better. For

employers, these insights can guide the development of policies and programmes to reduce work-family conflict, such as offering flexible work arrangements, providing employee assistance programmes, and fostering a supportive work environment. By identifying and addressing the factors contributing to this conflict, both employees and organisations can work towards creating a more balanced and supportive work environment (Kreiner et al., 2009).

The results also demonstrated that communicative tactics positively correlate with work-family conflict. This finding indicates that communicative tactics, which involve strategies for effectively negotiating and communicating between work and family roles, significantly impact work-family conflict. Offshore employees who use communicative tactics may experience increased work-family conflict, possibly due to the complexities and demands of maintaining open lines of communication across work and home boundaries (Carlson et al., 2013). Overall, the results reveal varying degrees of relationships between different tactics and work-family conflict among offshore employees.

While temporal tactics do not significantly impact work-family conflict, physical and communicative tactics exhibit significant positive correlations, though at different strengths. Physical tactics show a weak positive correlation, indicating a significant influence, whereas communicative tactics show a moderate positive correlation, reflecting a more substantial impact on work-family conflict. These insights highlight the importance of understanding employees' specific strategies to manage work and family roles and their varying effectiveness in mitigating conflict. The study revealed significant weak to moderate positive relationships between work boundary management tactics (behavioural, communicative, temporal, and physical) and work-family conflict among offshore employees. This suggests that increased use of these tactics correlates with higher levels of work-family conflict. Kreiner et al. (2009) characterised behavioural tactics as social practices for managing work-family boundaries, which include using others' tactics to establish boundaries, leveraging technology, prioritising urgent matters, and allowing selective permeability between work and family life. According to Carlson et al. (2013), physical tactics involve creating clear physical boundaries between work and family domains. These tactics may include establishing physical barriers, manipulating physical space, and using specific items like schedules or emails to differentiate between the two domains (Kreiner et al., 2009). Communicative tactics aim to manage expectations and interactions between work and family through communication with colleagues and family members (Carlson et al., 2013). Kreiner et al. (2009) describe these tactics as involving setting clear expectations and addressing violations of established boundaries. However, physical boundary tactics appear less effective for offshore employees, especially during their onshore days when they may miss their families. In these situations, offshore workers might neglect physical boundaries, contributing to work-family conflict.

Similarly, communicative tactics need help establishing effective boundaries between work and family in this context. Temporal tactics, such as controlling work hours and taking breaks, did not significantly correlate with work-family conflict in this study. The alternating work schedules of offshore employees—extended periods offshore followed by time at home—help create clear separations between work and family life. This alternating pattern allows employees to concentrate on work while offshore and family matters while onshore, potentially reducing conflicts between the two domains.

This study underscores the need for further research on work boundary management tactics in the Malaysian context, particularly within the oil and gas industry. Previous studies, predominantly conducted in Western countries, may only partially apply to Malaysian settings. This study addresses this gap by examining these tactics specifically within Malaysia. Future research could investigate potential mediator or moderator variables, such as family support or organisational support, to better understand how these tactics influence work-family conflict. Expanding the research to include aspects such as family-work conflict, cultural considerations, loyalty, and well-being among offshore employees could provide further insights. Differentiating findings by organisational position and gender perception might also yield valuable information.

Furthermore, conducting longitudinal studies could offer a more comprehensive view over time. Experimental research exploring conflicting behavioural norms and testing new strategies, such as emotional focus or coping mechanisms, could enhance understanding and present alternative approaches to mitigating work-family conflict among offshore employees. The study employed temporal separation of measures to mitigate potential biases inherent in self-report surveys, such as common method biases. This approach involved varying the timing between assessing predictor variables, such as work boundary management tactics, and outcome variables, such as work-family conflict. By minimising the likelihood of consistent response patterns, the study aimed to improve the robustness and validity of its findings. While the study focuses specifically on Miri offshore operations, it is essential to consider the generalisability of the findings to other offshore categories or regions. The dynamics observed in Miri may be similar to those in other offshore operations, particularly regarding work boundary management tactics and their impact on work-family conflict. However, variations in operational environments, cultural factors, and organisational practices among offshore settings could influence these dynamics differently. Future research could explore similar dynamics in diverse offshore contexts to enhance generalisability, such as different types of offshore rigs or operations in various geographical regions. Comparative studies provide insights into how contextual factors shape the effectiveness of work boundary management tactics and their implications for work-family conflict across different offshore environments.

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