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# The Extended Self and Workplace Possessions

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# Extended Self and Possessions in the Workplace

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This study of the meanings of possessions displayed in the offices of employees in a high technology firm suggests extensions to the concept of extended self. Work self and home self contend for dominance in these displays. Employees must decide which aspects of the self belong to the domain of work and which belong elsewhere. In these ongoing negotiations self may be extended, but it may also be retracted and hidden. Furthermore, although possessions can serve to stabilize the self, they also facilitate shifting among various self-aspects in response to workplace events. We explicate these processes and discuss implications for extended self theory.

Commenting on photos of home interiors by photographer Catherine Wagner, Anne Lamott (1993) observes: "These interiors, these surfaces, reveal so much about who we really are, what we love, how we live, what we yearn for—and the gulf between that and what *is*. In the most mundane objects and settings . . . we see the mixture of humor and irony and love and compassion and loss and sadness that makes up our lives" (13).

What then might we see in the personal possessions in a contemporary office? What are their intended meanings? To what degree do they reveal or conceal the extended self? What aspects of self do they convey? By examining these questions in the context of a contemporary workplace, this study seeks to refine and extend the construct of the extended self—a self experienced through a concrete set of persons, places, and things rather than a purely abstract set of ideas about who we are (Belk 1988). By investigating the relatively tenuous and temporary space of the office, we seek to discover how self is negotiated within a semipublic setting where we may spend a substantial portion of our waking hours away from the comfort of home and family.

Consumer research has investigated the meanings of favorite material objects in the home across diverse cultures (e.g., Mehta and Belk 1991; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Together with studies of specific types of possessions, in-

cluding collections (e.g., Belk 1995) and gifts (e.g., Belk 1996), this research has emphasized the home as the locus of the extended self (Belk 1988). Valued possessions displayed in the home have been found to extend the self less through their use value than by memorializing experiences, family, and friends, as well as life achievements (Belk et al. 1988; Wallendorf and Arnould 1988). Possessions displayed in the workplace may be increasingly like those displayed at home. The contemporary postmodern workplace blurs boundaries between home and work and thereby challenges the locus of self identity. Professional employees are now expected to conduct business away from an established place of business, with the aid of cell phones, laptops, and Internet technology. The "traveling body" (Sennett 1996, 18) is experienced differently from the body confined to a designated space, and this likely has implications for the extended self. For example, as employees transport aspects of the self back and forth between the workplace and spaces external to it, the notion of home as a privileged place for privacy, leisure, and intimacy begins to dissolve. Since the time that the extended self was first posited (Belk 1988), the boundary between work and home has become increasingly permeable (Nippert-Eng 1996). As more functional work-related possessions enter the home, more symbolic home-related possessions likely enter the workplace. Thus, we seem more apt to bring photos of family members to our office than to bring photos of work colleagues to our home.

Sennett (1998) suggests that, in the postmodern world, innovative workplaces and homes also differ with respect to time. Although employees accept the "flexibility" of a fragmented experience of time and short-term commitments at work, they resist these conditions at home, where instead they struggle to construct linear narratives of their life histories and to honor long-term commitments. Sennett (1998) notes that the lack of long-term commitments to work organizations,

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accentuated in new venture firms and technological industries, poses a challenge to a once sacred possession of individuals—their character and sense of a stable self. The experience of disrupted time challenges the sense of past that is often articulated through possessions forming the extended self (Belk 1988). As reported by workers studied by Sennett (1998, 28), in moving from place to place and job to job, new work colleagues often treated these workers as if their life was just beginning, with “the past consigned to oblivion.” The experience of the future is also altered, being more uncertain than the linear progression of time under modern conditions when we could reasonably project an image of the self into the future. This disruption of temporal flow may increase the need for personal possessions as anchors.

A further aspect of postmodern life with import to the extended self involves the privatization of public domains. Spaces once designated for collective concerns come to be dominated by individual concerns (Bauman 2000). In innovative organizations, the display of personal possessions suggests a privatization of the workplace that potentially competes with or supercedes concerns of the corporation (Bitner 1992). While possessions tied to the extended self may be part of personal disclosures inviting interpersonal contact at work, they might also be used solely for self-reflection and as reminders of aspects of identity not previously enacted at work. In other cases, such as in the display of coffee cups bearing an organization’s logo or framed statements of a department’s motto, personal possessions may symbolize concerns of the corporation. It is not clear whether such possessions are regarded as part of the worker’s extended self in the same way that more personal items might be.

Given these changes, the primacy of the home as the locus of the extended self is open to question. In a study of the offices of university professors, Belk and Watson (1998) found that there was a considerable range in the extent and type of personal possessions displayed. While some offices gave little hint of the professor’s life outside of academia, others were museums of the tastes, interests, and family activities of their occupants. Their findings hint that, in addition to seeking to extend our sense of self through possessions, we may sometimes conceal the self that is revealed in the workplace. They found that this tendency was not strictly related to gender, academic field, or seniority, and they speculated that other individual differences may account for this range of self-extension through workplace possessions.

The present study provides a more detailed examination of workplace possessions and self-extension in the context of a high tech company. This contemporary work organization, characterized by shared open spaces, nonhierarchical cubicles, a family-like atmosphere, and work assignments that can sometimes be carried out at home, represents an increasingly common type of office that can be seen to invert many of the characteristics of offices that formerly distinguished them from homes (Florida 2002). We begin by describing possession symbols and their use in extending the self at work and follow this with a discussion of the use of possessions in negotiating the boundary between home and

work. We consider both individual and organizational factors shaping home-work boundary negotiations.

In addition to the extended self, there are alternative formulations of self that might be invoked. These include life projects (Mick and Buhl 1992), personal myths (McAdams 1997), and situational selves (Schenk and Holman 1980). We take the extended self as our conceptual framework as it has been the focus of most of the prior consumer research examining possessions’ meanings in the context of the home. But Belk’s (1988, 1991) specification of sense of past and sense of future may be less relevant to the presumably more peripheral work self than the more central home self. Our findings also lead us to question the original formulation of concentric spheres of the self, in which the core individual self is surrounded by the familial self, the group or community self, and the national self (Belk 1988). A further conceptual lens is Rybczynski’s (1986) and McCracken’s (1989) concept of homeyness, which provides a potential antithetical template against which to assess the role of office possessions. By considering the extended self at work, we interrogate, modify, and add to the original formulation of extended self. We also recognize, along with Mick and Buhl (1992) and Belk and Watson (1998), that the extended self entails various life projects that introduce a dynamically changing evolving self.

## RESEARCH METHOD

We recruited employees from a new venture organization, hereafter referred to as Worklinks. Collecting a large amount of data on a single group facilitated detecting conceptual patterns in the analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Worklinks is a privately owned, for-profit, business-to-business organization located in a major southeastern U.S. city. It offers custom design and management of satellite network transfer of data for retail businesses. Worklinks assigns “workspaces” that create varying opportunities to display possessions. The CEO and 12 directors and vice presidents have traditional private offices. Most of the remaining employees occupy cubicles, and many complained of their spaces’ reduced sizes following a recent interior redesign to accommodate growth. With space constraints restricting choices of office possessions, each such possession was likely perceived as more critical (Belk and Watson 1998). Like many Western businesses, Worklinks combined conventional workspaces with newer trends toward open shared spaces, nonterritoriality, and dual (home and office) workspaces.

Each of 20 recruited participants received a camera along with instructions to “think about the objects or material goods in the workplace that you consider yours” and then “take photographs of 12 of these objects or possessions that are important to you; that is . . . things that you value.” Cameras and lists of photographed objects were returned within 2 wk. Subsequently, photo-elicited interviews were conducted in a nearby restaurant in order to avoid interruptions and to facilitate rapport. Diversity on characteristics likely to influence compositions and meanings of possessions was achieved among the 17 people who granted interviews (see table 1). The 17 participants encompass oc-

**TABLE 1**  
CHARACTERISTICS OF INTERVIEWED ORGANIZATIONAL MEMBERS

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Level	Functional area <sup>a</sup>	Tenure with organization	Prior employers
Laura	Female	31	Manager	Marketing	4 yr.	2
Theresa	Female	28	Administrator	Marketing	9 mo.	1
Karen	Female	38	Manager	Support	1 yr.	4
Gil	Male	39	Sales/technical	Marketing	5 yr.	4
Sarah	Female	35	Director	Marketing	2.5 yr.	4
Katie	Female	43	Manager	Support	8 yr.	1
Keith	Male	39	Director	Marketing	3 yr.	1
Ricky	Male	43	Manager	Support	6 yr.	1
Larry	Male	50	Director	Operations	1 yr.	4
Lisa	Female	30	Administrator	Marketing	5 yr.	3
Milton	Male	41	Sales/technical	Operations	8 yr.	2
Harry	Male	55	Vice president	Operations	8 yr.	3
Felisha	Female	41	Administrator	Operations	2 yr.	2
Jake	Male	38	Vice president	Operations	10 mo.	2
Darron	Male	32	Sales/technical	Operations	1.5 yr.	1
Kent	Male	36	Sale/technical	Marketing	1.5 yr.	1
Trisha	Female	28	Sales/technical	Marketing	2 yr.	1

<sup>a</sup>Marketing included the occupational domains of sales, market research, and promotion/publicity; operations housed the engineering professionals; support included the functional areas of accounting, network maintenance, and human resources.

cupants of all the types of workspaces, and they also vary in the amount of time spent in the office. With the exception of a few people in support or administrative roles, most were part of the “creative class” that creates new ideas and new technologies or solves complex problems (Florida 2002). After completing all interviews, workspaces were observed and organizational documents were collected.

Using a photo-elicitation technique known as auto-driving, the photographs of peoples’ important workplace possessions were presented to them in order to generate discussion (Heisley and Levy 1991; Rook 1991). The interviews covered personal history, work history, job and workspace characteristics, the meaning of each workplace possession photographed, the meanings of individuals’ entire workplace possession sets, and people’s perceptions of how well their displays fit with Worklinks’ culture. Questions were phrased to prompt sharing of possession-related experiences and associations (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). Transcriptions of the 1–2 hr. audio-recorded interviews provided 382 pages of single-spaced text. Categories and themes were refined by employing constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The authors separately analyzed the data and then conferred, combined, extended, and refined the two analyses. This developed as a synergistic process through inter-rogating each other’s understandings of the data.

### EXTENDED SELF IN WORKPLACE POSSESSIONS

Daniel Miller (2001) argues that haunted house tales are a genre that represents a resolution of “the discrepancy between the longevity of homes and the relative transience of their occupants” (107). Worklinks employees shared a similar awareness of transient residency:

When I’m there, I mean that office is my home, you know,

five days a week from eight to five. And I want, you know, I miss my kids when I’m away from them, so that’s why I’ve got so many pictures of them. I look at pictures of my kids all the time. I glance at them during the day, throughout the day. And, you know, if you’re in a job where you’re there that much, it just seems to me that, to me it’s a sign of permanence. I feel like, you know, this is my office, I’ve got my things here, this is my territory, and there, and it’s my personal place while. . . . I know the company owns it, I know that if I left, you know, I know if I’m not there someday, somebody could use my office, things like that. But I like having my mark that I am an employee here and I’m, it looks like I’m here to stay. (Katie)

One impetus for bringing possessions to work is to overcome feelings of alienation and transience by making a personal mark. We do this not by constructing ghost stories of prior tenants, but by installing possessions that embellish, announce, and impose our extended self on our surroundings (Belk 1988). As with cleaning a new home and installing our possessions there, this is a key possession ritual (McCracken 1986) through which we claim an office space as our own. The ritual aspects of claiming office space go beyond the status and territoriality aspects of offices that have been explored elsewhere (e.g., Sundstrom and Sundstrom 1986). They instead focus on the extended self, the key lens that emerged for understanding office possessions.

### Extending the Work-Related Self at Work

A number of valued possessions, both functional and expressive, served to sustain and bolster people’s sense of competent self-as-worker. But these office supplies and equipment were not taken for granted as has been assumed in prior studies (e.g., Jones 1985; Nippert-Eng 1996; Pel-

legram 1998). Rather, the people at Worklinks were acutely aware of their strong attachments to these objects. A case in point were "prosthetic" possessions.

*Extending Self via Prosthetic Possessions.* In Belk's (1988) formulation of the extended self, tools and weapons were used to illustrate possessions that literally extend self and thereby enhance physical performances. In the present office worker context, we find that certain self-extending possessions involve an expansion of mental capabilities that aid cognitive performance.

Basically I could not live without this thing [her laptop computer]. It's my brain. I have everything in there from my calendar, which I have a separate calendar, but these are little reminder things that flash up at me. (Karen)

One's my Rolodex, which is my brains. I can't [think without] that [my Rolodex], and which is moving quicker into my PC now. (Harry)

Prosthetic self-extensions through these and other technological possessions, including special software, calculators, and phones, were not seen to threaten the chaos or loss of control that Mick and Fournier (1998) found with technological devices in the home. Rather, they were embraced as supplements for limited memory or knowledge. In helping informants overcome their limitations, these devices came to be regarded as essential prostheses, as with the references above, to "my brain." This was also true with less technological prosthetic devices such as calendars, reference books, and whiteboards. Because those studied are knowledge (creative class) workers, their prosthetics are primarily to aid mental processes, with only a few (like cellular phones and e-mail) that perform more physical functions of carrying conversations from point A to point B. Like weapons and garden tools, these mental prostheses help informants to do things they could not otherwise do. As Sarah explained:

I love this calculator. . . . OK. It's huge. It's huge. It's like this big. It's a solar calculator, it's huge. I have it always with me. . . . I like it because you can't screw up on it. You can't like not push things. I can do an ROI [return on investment] analysis right there on the spot. I can calculate a pay raise. I can calculate a bonus. I love that calculator.

While this might seem a purely functional object attachment, Sarah had carried this particular calculator through three employers. As with our physical appendages, many prosthetic possessions are transported between locations and also used in transit. Karen, who also possessed a desktop computer at work and whose job involved no travel nonetheless transported her laptop between home and work. Ricky, as the customer service manager, was always "on call" evenings and weekends at home. He kept his cell phone with him even in the office because it enabled him to manage his employees "by walking around." Thus, the knowledge and communication capabilities of these prosthetic devices facilitate phys-

ical mobility in parallel to more traditional prostheses. And as with traditional prostheses, these technological possessions were often tailored to offer a customized fit with how the owner thinks.

Now you can go and look at everyone's PC in the business, and they're customized. For instance, I have my PC set up with all my icons on my desktop. Which the IS guys just laugh at me like crazy, cause they go, all you gotta do is push the start button and do here and go there, and there it is. You know, type thing. And I say, that's not the way I like it to look. I want it to look this way. Because, you know, it makes it easier for me to work. . . . If you're talking about personal possessions at the work place, I think now in the age of computers and things like that, there is a lot of personalization. (Felisha)

*Extending Self via Atmospheric Texture.* Another type of valued personal possession was used to create an atmospheric texture that shielded people from threats to mental performance. These objects were used defensively to avoid interferences with focused mental activities. Most commonly, these possessions altered the acoustic environment, providing a sound texture that surrounded and insulated the self. Researchers have previously conceived of physical space as a consumer good, as illustrated by the sacred "closed-door" office sanctuary in the home where one wishes not to be disturbed (Jaworski and MacInnis 1991). Unable to claim space with physical walls, many Worklinks employees created walls of sonic texture to shut out noise pollution and the unwelcome contagion of others' conversations that otherwise invaded their cubicles. One informant used an electric fan less to cool herself than to provide a "white noise" like Belk and Watson (1998) found in a university office. More commonly, people reported playing radio music, explicitly pointing out that the music was often less for listening enjoyment than to drown out unwelcome sounds. Miller (1998, 8), in commenting on Tacchi's (1998) study of radio in the home, notes that it "fills the air with volume and substance and may be experienced as much as an emanation expressive of the associated individual as coming from the box itself." He further equates the radio to clothing, stating that it is "expressive of highly individualized presencing." In contrast with Tacchi's (1998) findings of using radio sound to fill "empty" space and time by offering the seeming presence of and connectedness to others, the uses of sound we encountered were instead buffers from the presence of others.

Some informants attempted to create fields of privacy through texturing that affected other senses. Felisha reported using aroma therapy devices. Lisa achieved a calming privacy by escaping from the chaotic office environment into a fantasy nature retreat.

[Commenting on her Ansel Adams print shown in fig. 1] These photographs to me are so simple, and yet complex. They're very detailed. You know, you can see every little thing in them. . . . The big one is the San Francisco Valley, like before the

FIGURE 1

LISA'S ANSEL ADAMS PRINT



big growth. And, um, I guess that simplicity, I find that calming in some way, you know, So I, it's sort of grounding to me. . . . When it's stressful, you know.

Although the sort of privacy constructed through fans, radios, scents, and nature scenes involves an extended self-boundary within the boundary-less office based on the physical senses, the next section is concerned with extensions of the self in a more psychological sense.

*Extending Self via Identification with Corporate Self.* Beyond the personal self, Belk (1988) specifies various collective levels of self. In addition to images of city or state that were common in Worklinks offices, a previously unidentified aspect of the extended self was the corporate self. Rather than the concentric spheres of self Belk (1988) envisioned, in which outer levels are more peripheral, the corporate self appears to be on the same level as family for most informants. Further, the corporate self sometimes contended as an alternative "family," a metaphor that Thorne and Hochschild (1997) argue is applicable in academic departments. Some employees even took on family roles within Worklinks. Gil saw himself as the provider. He believed that the company's survival depended on his ability to bring in revenues. He prized a champagne bottle given to all employees when he secured the company's largest contract. His retelling of the celebration emphasized his success in being the "bread winner" for Worklinks. Ricky, in contrast, saw his role as guardian of the corporate pseudo-family:

[Describing why he photographed the Worklinks sign] It means

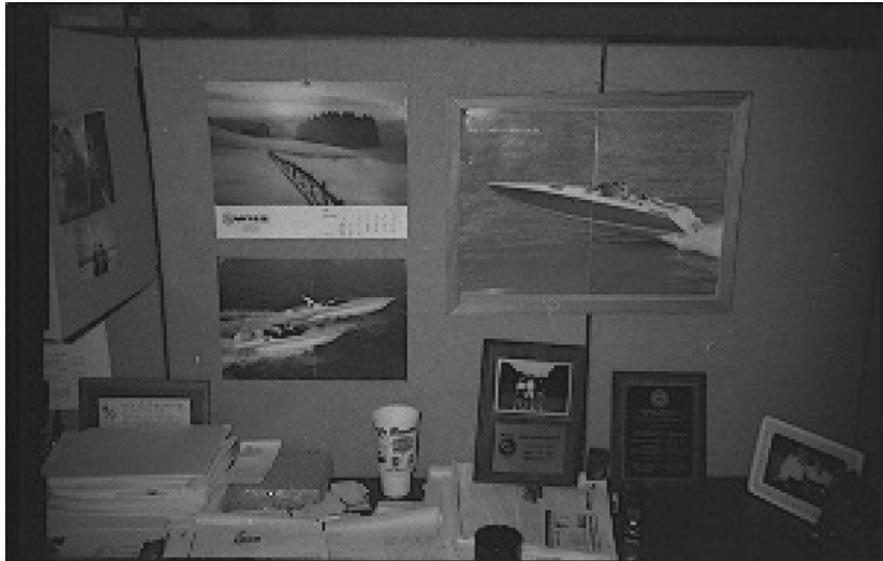
Worklinks. . . . I love Worklinks. I have worked hard, I have worked long hours, I have worked until I was just bone tired, I have worked to the point until I was so fed up and frustrated that I had to go home and run. I have had shouting matches at some points with various coworkers that I thought, you know, didn't have the right focus or whatever. But all of that is to say that my commitment to Worklinks is the fact that those things were necessary to establish my gut, and my own personal desire and enthusiasm, for making sure that I'm always watchful for what goes on with Worklinks, with Worklinks' customers, our employees, anything that affects the success of us moving forward. . . . [If this were my first year] I would probably again photograph Worklinks because that was my opportunity you know.

This sense of identification with the corporation is aided by the sense that it is still a small new venture where each employee can truly make a difference, as Larry summarized:

I think I'm emotionally attached in the sense of, you know, like the fact that I'm working for a small company. But there's a lot of opportunity for the company to grow. Uh, and that's exciting, to be a part of that. . . . It's harder to do in a larger company. (Larry)

Stock options no doubt contribute to this sense of (literal) ownership, but so does the sense that Worklinks is a caring, moral, and family-oriented company. Even the Worklinks board meetings open with a prayer.

FIGURE 2  
MILTON'S DREAM BOAT



For its part, Worklinks helped fuel identification with the company by encouraging employees to wear corporate red at monthly office meetings, by using red in place settings and drink colors at luncheons, by giving corporate logo-bearing gifts, by emphasizing the team concept in posters, and by hosting an annual picnic, golf tournament, bowling night, Christmas party, and a “junk” auction. While these activities served the interests of Worklinks, they also contributed to the privatization of the workplace. For instance, sharing personal tastes and life histories ensued from Christmas gift and junk auction exchanges. However, a higher degree of privatization of the workplace was reflected in possessions that expressed self-aspects commonly thought of as belonging to the domain of home rather than work.

### Extending Home-Related Self into the Workplace

*Sense of Past and Sense of Future in Workplace Possessions.* The most frequently photographed office place possessions were photos, souvenirs, or other mementos that evoke recollections of prior experiences. Specific objects included a photo of a Halloween costume party at a former workplace, a miniature sombrero from a Mexican vacation, and a sheet of music from a Christmas cantata in which the informant had sung. As Belk (1991) contends, a sense of past is essential to managing our identities. Without it we are as lost as “Jimmy, the lost Mariner,” Oliver Sacks’s brain-damaged patient (1985), who arose each day to greet an unfamiliar self in the mirror. An anchor in the past may be especially important to those in Worklinks’ high tech industry, where job changes are common.

Possessions also played a role in creating and maintaining a sense of future. Many people joined Worklinks in return

for stock options, which they expect to “cash out” once the company begins issuing public stock or is acquired. To the extent that sense of self is merged with Worklinks (the corporate self), the possibility of a buyout also threatens a loss of self. Symbols of future aspirations mitigate effects of such threats by promising the attendant possibility of symbolic self-completion (Wicklund and Gollwitzer 1982). For many, “cashing out” would also mean acquiring their future fantasy possession. Katie’s favored photograph of Israel represented her dream of retiring there. And Milton cherished a poster of a luxurious “dream boat” (see fig. 2) and the attendant fantasy of living a life of leisure. In some cases these future fantasies were seen to compensate for current job demands on the worker’s time at the expense of family and home life. The fantasy of a future dream possession may make present sacrifices seem purposeful, temporary, and worthwhile. Aspirational possessions in the bedrooms of many teenagers (Salinger 1995) seem to offer a similar benefit. And homeless women report valuing objects that symbolize a better future and inspire striving toward ideal selves (Hill 1991).

*Possessions for Play at Work.* Other possessions served as cues to temporarily conjure playful aspects of the self. These objects facilitated shifts between self aspects accepted in traditional modern firms—asocial, serious, work-focused selves (Nippert-Eng 1996)—and those introduced into the postmodern culture of new venture organizations as their opposing counterparts: socially engaged, playful, family-oriented selves (Florida 2002).

Worklinks employees discussed shifting back and forth between their reclusive self, seeking “cognitive space” to think, and their socially engaged self, seeking to interact with others. Possessions aiding shifts to a more socially engaging self

included conversation pieces, particularly collections, and recreational goods such as soft indoor balls and bats and robotic toys. Darron, one of those who most ardently complained about office noise level, at times used his headphones to retreat to a more isolated state. But at other times he used “fun” objects to elicit enjoyable interactions with others. He expressed excitement over his novelty picture frame that rapidly interchanged photographs. Setting up coworkers to ask about the frog they had seen, he would respond (having changed the photos), “‘You mean my wife?’ It’s entertainment, cheap entertainment. You’d be amazed what you do when you get bored.”

Although Laura commented that she kept a clock to gauge her need to return to work while talking with others, she enjoyed and sometimes encouraged the social exchanges that her Pez collection (fig. 3) display attracted. And while Felisha reported extended work hours, she nonetheless took a “time-out” to engage others:

We had a guy that worked for us. . . . Comes in one morning and he had shaved his head. This guy looks exactly like Montel Williams. Exactly. So one day, some other girls in our office went out and bought him a blond wig, and gave him the wig. He was wearing it around . . . 'cause he had no hair. Well, the wig got passed around all through operations and everything and ended up on my chair. . . . Now I get a lot of comments on it. . . . I like it because it draws a lot of attention, you know, and children when they come in, they like to play with it and stuff like that.

The uneven work flow created by variability in demand in a service organization prompted this oscillation between

the reclusive self and the socially engaged self. In addition, this oscillation reflects the culture of new venture firms and the ideology of their “creative class” of workers, who recognize that “creativity cannot be switched on and off at predetermined times, and is itself an odd mixture of work and play” (Florida 2002, 14). Rather than a steady focus on work tasks for 8 hr., creativity often follows a path of intense periods of concentration that are punctuated by relaxation, allowing for the “aha” experience, and recharging. At Worklinks, possessions often facilitated the self-transitions needed with creative cycles.

Worklinks informants also reported other reasons for shifting between a more serious, straight-forward self and a humorous, playful, sometimes self-deprecating self. The serious, rationally persuasive self was invoked in instances of threat to the work self. Contrasting with the playfulness exhibited in Felisha’s “time-out,” she shifted to a more serious self in response to an interdepartmental battle in which people refused to share important information. She constructed what she called a “Wall of Wisdom” in her cubicle, where she typed and attached serious “rules for effective living” (e.g., be nice to other people, be courteous, don’t yell) intended to create a more harmonious and effective workplace. Karen reported conscientiously wearing suits at work to display her professionalism after being denied an office space to which she felt entitled. In nonthreatening situations, however, the presence of fun objects in most people’s workspaces enabled them to freely shift into their “humorous selves.” These possessions included gag gifts, cartoons, humorous ads from magazines, humorous objects like toy dinosaurs, Laura’s Pez dispenser collection (fig. 3), and buttons with humorous sayings. Shifts to the playful

FIGURE 3

LAURA'S PEZ COLLECTION



self were common when people needed to defuse tension. When Karen had to reprimand a subordinate, she first humorously teased the subordinate about the need to update her children's photographs. "It's a good place to start" before walking up and saying "Hey, you did this wrong." Laura, who relayed a number of personal successes in negotiating receipt of scarce and coveted equipment from the company, deflected criticism with the subversive humor of her button bearing the slogan: "Pushy Bitches: Self Appointed Chapter Head." In her words, "whenever I get my way and somebody razzes me about it, I always show them that." Supervisors also used humorous possessions to motivate employees facing seemingly insurmountable job obstacles. Larry kept on hand a number of toys for creating "goofing around fun" at Worklinks. When working with his group to try to solve problems, he would refer to his two posters entitled "Teaching Pigs to Fly" and "Pigs Fly" to rebuff doubt in a non-threatening manner. Generally, it appeared that Karen, Laura, Larry, and others used possessions to shift to a humorous self as a means of informal peacekeeping and to improve morale and productivity.

*Work Self and Home Self.* Despite its family-friendly reputation, the small size and fast growth of Worklinks also meant a great deal of individual responsibility, and for many, extensive hours on the job. The inevitable tensions between time at the job and time at home with family involved a difficult tradeoff. Ricky's wife gave him framed photos of the family to display in his office so that she and her children could "establish ownership" of at least a part of his identity. As Nippert-Eng (1996) found in another corporation, the company and family were commonly perceived as competing for the employee's loyalty, attention, and energy. This split identity was reflected in workplace possessions.

Shifts at work from self-as-worker to self-as-family-member were evoked by photographs, children's drawings and creations, images of pets (surrogate family members), and various gifts from family members. Like an Asian household shrine to the ancestors, these family icons often formed the equivalent of a workplace shrine to the family, with sacrifices being made on their behalf through work. Possessions used to invoke family can sometimes be thought of as transitional objects making the separation more bearable by providing a symbolic representation of the absent loved one (e.g., Gulerce 1991). Although transitional objects are most commonly thought of as things like a child's "security blanket" to ease the separation from its mother, in the workplace we found that transitional objects acted in the opposite way to ease the mother's or father's separation from their children, as expressed in prior comments by Katie. As with the children's transitional objects, object representations of family were particularly sought out in moments of emotional distress. One man reflected that, during trying times at work, he makes it a point to look at family photos in order to remember that he was doing it all for them. Others called upon varied objects that evoked their family roles to achieve escape or stress relief.

If I can look over and see something that I enjoyed before or I had a good time [with] before, or somebody [who] gave me a good feeling, then I don't stress about something as much. . . . The picture of my boyfriend . . . that helps me de-stress a lot. And Robin's pictures help me de-stress a lot. (Laura)

Self-shifting extends processes of self-cultivation (Belk 1988) and differs from self-transitions noted in prior research that reflect sustained rather than shorter term alterations (e.g., Schouten 1991). Closer to our conception is Belk's (1988) description of a Porsche owner who sometimes "tested" its effects by driving his old Peugeot. By changing cars he perceived that he went from being a "tomcat on the prowl" to a "geek with glasses." The extended self here is combined with the situational self (Schenk and Holman 1980).

Possessions that extend the home self into the workplace offer the benefits of stabilizing the self in the face of experienced or anticipated job changes, and they facilitate vacillation among a greater range of selves. Despite this enhanced stability and flexibility, such possessions did not fully resolve the conflict between home and work selves.

## NEGOTIATING THE HOME-WORK BOUNDARY THROUGH POSSESSIONS

The degree to which the extended self is revealed or concealed at work reflects a negotiation of the home-work boundary and our views of what aspects of our identity and lives belong to each domain. By installing material representations of our various self-aspects in the workplace, who we are at work is less distinct from who we are at home. Alternatively, in refraining from personal displays at work, and curtailing our ability to conjure and enact our various nonwork selves, we retract our extended self during our work hours.

Worklinks employees varied in the extent to which home aspects of the self were represented at work. Karen segmented home and work domains, keeping self-aspects from home out of the workplace. Upon arriving at Worklinks she attempted to create an environment that reflected: "It's business, business, and nothing else. They don't need to know me. They don't need to know my personal life. I come to work, I do my job, I go home." With the exception of a recently displayed photograph of her fiancé, her collection of office possessions was largely functional and work related (e.g., a laptop, a Rolodex, reference books, a calendar, a calculator). Not only did Karen keep a separate Rolodex for her business contacts and her personal contacts, she also kept the personal one inside her desk drawer, saying, "I don't want people to know."

By contrast, Katie considered her office a "home away from home." Her walls were a continually updated display of her artistic photographs and her children's crafts; her windowsill featured a plant received at a parent's funeral, and a display shelf showcased a "karate" troll doll that she received from coworkers after becoming a "black belt." She also talked of her oldest son being the "company's mascot"

because he was in the office so often. For Katie, the home-work divide was largely permeable. The boundary work of organizing aspects of self into “home” or “work,” while materially represented, is a mental activity (Nippert-Eng 1996). Underlying this boundary work were individual concerns for vulnerability and for asserting life projects, as well as organizational concerns for its own image.

### Individual Concerns Manifest in Home-Work Boundary Negotiations

*Concerns for Vulnerability.* The process of self-disclosure through display of personal possessions, like the process of revealing personal information that builds intimacy in the course of dating (Jourard 1979), was seen to increase vulnerability. A part of what we reveal through our workplace personal possessions is our sometimes tender emotions (Scheiberg 1990). The tension between self-revelation and vulnerability was something that Sarah wrestled with:

Everyone that I work with knows that I am a religious person and that my family comes first. . . . And my motto is “You only have one family, you have many jobs. . . . So your first priority is your family.” Everyone knows that about me. I don’t cloak that. Yet, I sit around here and tell you that I don’t want anybody to know who I am, and I give it away, I give myself away constantly. Yet, I’m disappointed because I don’t trust the people that I give myself away to at all, but I do it anyway. . . . So I guess what I’m trying to work through . . . is how not to reveal everything, but to reveal what I choose to and feel good about it. So that’s what I’m trying to resolve here. I want people to know what I stand for. . . . But I don’t want them to get into the deep psychology of why that is. . . . I give myself away every moment of every day and regret it. And I just want to learn how to be able to give part of myself away and not regret a moment of it.

Clearly Sarah’s struggle to find a balance between disclosure and vulnerability was on-going.

Harry, a vice president, also struggled with this balance. He was initially embarrassed to put up a photo of his graduation from college at age 45. It took him nearly a year:

It was a very personal thing to be doing that, and to show any outward, real outward display of it. . . . I don’t have degrees hanging on the wall or anything like that. Uh, that’s not why I did it. I did it for me. But it kind of got cute, it was kind of a cute picture of the old gray-headed guy, you know, in the long cap and gown.

A part of Harry’s reluctance to display the photo was his reticence to be seen as showing off his accomplishments. But another factor seems to be the fear that it might look silly for a man his age to have gone back to college. Ultimately he became comfortable enough with it that he

could appreciate the humor in it himself. In his mind the photo changed from suggesting that he takes himself too seriously to suggesting that he does not take himself too seriously.

Feelings of vulnerability in revealing the extended self at work were related to family and work histories. Both Sarah and Karen had been socialized by their fathers to believe that home aspects of life should be kept private and out of the workplace. Karen also attributed her “segmented” view to workplace socialization during the 1980s that discouraged displays of femininity in the office. Thus, feelings of vulnerability stemmed in part from fear of crossing boundaries honored by respected mentors. However, both Sarah and Karen experienced more short-term events that left lasting concerns with the danger of too much disclosure. For Sarah, a prior coworker used knowledge of her personal life to discredit her as a candidate for promotion. For Karen, she believed that a sexual harassment incident at a former employer had been prompted by her office displays of photos from a cruise, showing her “having drinks and in my swimsuit and in my cocktail dress. And pictures of me with this guy and with that guy . . . you know, that type of thing.” While concerns about vulnerability prompt some to engage in greater segmentation of the spheres of home and work, concerns about life projects may either lead to greater segmentation or greater integration of home and work domains.

*Concerns for Life Projects.* Life projects are concerned with meanings related to the private self including home, family, and career. Life projects change in accordance with circumstances and life cycle (Mick and Buhl 1992). Home-work boundary negotiations of Worklinks employees reflected in possessions were often related to altered life projects.

Well, I gotta tell you, I mean, uh, going through my office and taking pictures of all this stuff, it sort of reminded me, a couple of jobs ago, and I guess it was a different environment. Most of the stuff I had on the walls and on my desk were, you know, either awards or degrees and all that stuff, and uh, you know, you spend so much time in the office, I looked around one day and I said, “I don’t need to be reminded of what I’m doing here and why I’m here,” and I took all that junk down off the walls and off the desk. And I said, “the kind of stuff I want in my office now is stuff that reminds me of things outside of the office as opposed to in the office.” . . . We went through a downsizing and they decided they didn’t need management of my particular department. . . . And that was when I said, “You know what? I’m not putting this stuff up on the wall anymore, I’ve been taking it too seriously. The next job I have will be the fun stuff in the office.” (Larry)

Larry altered his home-work balance in defining self by allowing more home aspects of self to cross over into the workplace as a buffer to his esteem when the work self was threatened. His choice of more family-themed decor also

seems to be an attempt to reclaim having “missed” his children’s early years while climbing the corporate ladder in his previous position. He is now intent on spending “quality time” with them. Others emphasized life projects centered on family, but more in the future tense. Their office place possessions, for example, pointed toward anticipated retirement, when they envisioned cashing out their Worklinks stock options.

In contrast to Larry’s life project concerns, Lisa’s realigned life project involved retracting her extended self in the workplace. After serving 5 yr. at Worklinks in administrative roles, she rejoiced in finally landing a position as a sales lead generator. Lisa viewed her new position as a stepping stone to becoming the first female salesperson at Worklinks. She was still deciding what to display of the possessions she moved from her former Worklinks’ cubicle. Although she was still enacting an ongoing home-work boundary negotiation, she was decisive in removing knickknacks from her desk. She saw them as inappropriate to her new position, whereas in her previous administrative role she had used them to compensate for unfulfilling work by emphasizing aspects of life outside of work.

In some instances, possessions displayed at work reflected changes that threatened life projects. Theresa had joined Worklinks 9 mo. earlier after leaving a family-owned construction business in another state. In her Worklinks office she had numerous photos of family members, and she explained that, “I really miss my family so I have, most of my pictures and stuff.” On the other hand, she had few personal belongings at her former office.

No, not nearly as many as I do here. . . . I kept my Ansel Adams calendar. I believe that was about it. I really didn’t put any pictures on my desk, but you know, my family was, you know, I was always with my family. And my friends came and went in the office. . . . I had a lot of freedom to come and go timewise. . . . I lived 15 minutes from my house. So I didn’t need the comfort of home at my office.

As Mehta and Belk (1991) found in comparing home possessions of Indians in India to Indians residing in the United States, there is little need to display mementos of family when the family is present, but there is a strong need when they are absent. In the workplace, however, the negotiation of home-work boundaries depends not only on life projects but also is shaped by organizational norms.

### Organizational Influences in Home-Work Boundary Negotiations

*Social Influence at Work.* A number of Worklinks employees believed that there could be too much as well as too little personalization of workspaces. Roxanne was singled out by Ricky for having too much: “There’s a young lady that has the cube right next to me, and it’s almost like her home. She’s got plants, and lamps, and pictures; it’s just like a homey setting.”

Similarly, Katie observed that Roxanne’s cubicle was so “totally loaded with personal stuff” that she had little space to work: “We kid her, you know, ‘All you need is a fireplace in here and you’d be home.’” Adding to Ricky’s inventory, she noted that Roxanne also displayed a candy jar, a vase, and dolls. Karen contrasted herself to Roxanne: “Well, it looks like she’s sitting at home. . . . I don’t want anybody to get the idea that I’m so comfortable sitting at my desk that I’m willing to stay there 24 hours a day. [laughs] This is not my home, I do have a life.” All three suggest that Roxanne’s office is an oxymoron: a homey office. As McCracken (1989) defines it, homeyness is a look that is cultivated through such decorative elements as plants, photos, gifts, knickknacks, crafts, lighting, and bookshelves that are designed to give space an intimate nestlike quality and to counter any inclination to instead pursue status or modernity through furnishings. Other coworkers referred to Roxanne’s homey office space as “a living room” or “a den” and kidded her that she should bring in a loveseat as the next logical addition. With this kidding of Roxanne, subtle pressure was brought to bear to suggest to her that she had gone too far.

Peer pressure was also likely to be brought to bear on coworkers regarded as having too few personal possessions. Katie, who had chided Roxanne for having done “too much” to personalize her office, chided others for not displaying enough of their lives outside of work.

I kid people a lot if they don’t have anything in their office. You know, like John, he was a great photographer, but he didn’t have one single picture of his in his office. And I kept, you know, harassing him, you know, “You have these beautiful pictures, why don’t you ever bring any of them and decorate your office?” . . . Sometimes I’ll kid around with them. . . . I like looking at the personal things that they have. And people come into my office, and they always stop. . . . They look at kid pictures and comment on them. . . . I like to have fun. I like to have a sense of humor. You know, kid around with people, and, you know, sometimes that’s an ice-breaker when someone comes into my office.

Katie’s account not only suggests the sort of nonthreatening pressure that she and coworkers bring to bear to encourage coworkers to display personal things at work, but it also highlights some of the rationale for doing so. This includes possessions providing a “time-out,” extending an invitation to interact and making the office more fun and less intimidating.

*Informal Corporate Governance.* While Worklinks has no written policy pertaining to possession displays, there were instances in which it either encouraged or discouraged them. Informants perceived that the company atmosphere welcomed possessions symbolic of their home lives. Katie contrasted this to her prior workplace:

It was all your cedar block walls at [former company], tile floors, metal desks; it wasn’t a really homey atmosphere. I don’t think people felt at home enough to bring their personal

things there. They didn't fit in. You know, Worklinks is a much more homey atmosphere. And we try really hard to be a family-oriented company. So people are much more comfortable bringing personal objects in.

But Worklinks also discouraged expression of the home-related possession displays during times and in places within the office where visiting clients were likely to form an impression of the company. The apparent intent of such corporate impression management was to appear successful, competent, and technologically sophisticated. One expression of this desire was the high tech Network Management Center, described by several informants as being "Star Trek." Although it is a functional command center for managing the services provided by Worklinks, it is also a showpiece full of plasma monitors, computers, and electronic displays designed to impress. Like a formal living room, it is tidy because no living really occurs there (Riggins 1994). It is also a space in which engineers move between consoles rather than having a personal office space of their own. At least one engineer so wanted a personal space beyond the small locker that Worklinks provided that he moved into any vacated cubicle in the office until the next occupant arrived, even though that was usually only a matter of days or weeks.

Another way that Worklinks sometimes discouraged personal possession displays was by making employees aware of upcoming visits by clients. At these times clothing was expected to be more "professional" as well as corporate red to express team spirit. While many felt like Sarah, who claimed to "wear red all the time" because "it's going to pay off for us all," a few publicly conformed yet privately disapproved. Karen found the display juvenile, chiding, "Is this like a cult or what?" Besides clothing appropriately, those with offices near the conference room or in other visible areas were expected to hide personal possessions during client visits. An exception that was not "tucked away" was the Japanese souvenirs proudly displayed to signal the company's relationship with a large Japanese firm. Even though some of these might be aptly described as knickknacks, they were thought to impress and engage clients in interactions.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER THEORY AND RESEARCH

Even though work often occupies as much of our time and energy as family, the focus of prior research and theory on the extended self has been the home. We find that negotiating the home-work boundary through personal possessions is an attempt to reconcile these competing spheres of identity. Even a one-person business run out of the home entails distinctions between time, space, and possessions devoted to work versus family. This is also true of the postmodern corporation, which invites or imitates homeyness at work while it simultaneously encourages conducting work at home. Such permeable boundaries between home and

work mean that we can no longer assume that the extended self resides primarily within the intimate privacy of our homes. Corporations like Worklinks, with its open, shared, nonhierarchical spaces, and semblances of corporate family, challenge us to reexamine the concept of extended self. We discuss the implications of our findings in terms of how the body of the extended self is conceived and how home-work boundaries are negotiated through possessions.

## The Postmodern Body and the Extended Self

On a superficial level, employees like Katie seek to mark their offices with personal possessions in order to establish a sense of ownership and possession. But postmodern jobs and offices, especially in high tech firms like the one we studied, present unique challenges and opportunities for extending self in the workplace. Although it might seem that the body is a constant referent, no matter how the workplace changes, it is not. Our changing conceptions of the body mirror our changing conceptions of the self in contemporary environments.

*Prosthetic Possessions.* The body was recognized as a possession and part of the extended self in its initial formulation (Belk 1988). However, the body, before the 1989 mapping of the human genome and the 1997 birth of the first cloned body, was assumed to mean the "natural body," from *natus*, that which is born. The prosthetic limb devices recognized in Belk's (1988) conception of the extended self were seen to restore individuals to a complete natural body. In contrast, prosthetic possessions at Worklinks include those that buoy performances of the body, including cognitive ones, to standards of machines—a ubiquitous symbol of the man-made, the unnatural. This body historically opposes the Western cultural view of the machine as morally suspect (Cole-Turner 1993). The notion of the body as a unique, sacred, unalterable vessel has been technologically forfeited, if still debated on theological grounds.

In addition to the technological prosthetic possessions revealed in our study, pharmaceutical goods that alter cognitive functioning (perhaps "stigma objects" hidden from the present investigation) offer a glimpse of future prosthetic possibilities. As such goods suggest, not all attempts to extend the self through prosthetic possessions are visible. Paralleling the construction of invisible home security fences to ward off intruders (Sennett 1996), our informants manipulated atmospheric texture with noise and music from radios, fans, and personal stereos. This is not a pursuit of the disciplined body in terms of physical appearance and health (Thompson and Hirschman 1995), but in terms of work efficiency. Attachments to the postmodern work organization, which is part organism, part machine (Haraway 1991), also reflect a postmodern body that extends beyond the body endowed at birth.

*The Extraterritorial Body of the Extended Self.* As Bauman (2000) observes, work organizations are no longer dependent on occupying a fixed space. Many Worklinks informants were able to carry out work functions without their body being present in a designated work space, via

cell phones, laptops, and e-mail, all widely disseminated since the original conception of the extended self. These same devices that bring work into the home (e.g., Grayson 1998) can also bring home into the workplace, by calling or e-mailing family and friends, surfing the Web, or doing online banking, for example. The exterritorial body gives the extended self access to its varied aspects, which may over time become transported from one domain to another, both psychologically and physically, via possession symbols. Individuals' transportation of selves was evident at Worklinks through the privatization of workspaces.

Additionally, possession displays of the extended self become a way of managing social interactions that multiply with an exterritorial body. Such interactions accentuate the sense of "overload" in cubicle environments of postmodern workplaces. Beyond atmospheric extensions used to buffer against interactions, people at Worklinks engaged their extended self-possession in other ways to manage the frequency and timing of social interactions.

*The Individual Body as a Part of the Collective Body.* Worklinks used the physical bodies of its members to extend its own collective identity. By encouraging corporate red clothing, Worklinks sought to use bodies for corporate signage. Likewise, employees' workspace decor may be influenced by the corporate desire to express a particular collective extended self. At Worklinks, organizational norms combined with peer influence to shape the timing and degree of personal possession displays. As counterparts, within private families, teens may face constraints on their attempts to decorate their rooms (Salinger 1995), and neighborhood associations may demand conformity in home design and landscaping (Owens 1999).

The corporate body is also understood at Worklinks as being a familial body. The corporate mythology of being a big happy family suggests that it is the employees who are the children in this family, being dressed and decorating space to please the "parents" and their friends. The use of the metaphor of corporate family also underscores the attempt to align employee loyalties to the corporation and potentially away from personal family.

### Boundaries between Home and Work

Contrary to the original formulation of extended self as involving concentric spheres of progressively more distal aspects of collective self (Belk 1988), we found that work and home selves vie with one another as alternative sources of identity. Rather than forming a well-integrated whole, home and work selves often compete and seek to impose themselves in the physical domain of the other. This is articulated most often as revealing versus concealing the non-work extended self in the workplace.

*Revealing versus Concealing.* Although some design concepts seek to impose austere "industrial" decor in the home, the home is generally the place where consumers feel free to express and "be themselves," in part through pos-

sessions. As we have seen, both the corporate culture at Worklinks and social pressures from colleagues encouraged workers to express something of their home lives and family in the workplace. New workers, as well as some who felt insecure or vulnerable due to previous bad experiences in revealing their more personal sides at work, were especially reluctant to do so. We suspect that the retracted or unrevealed self is also a phenomenon found outside the workplace, and this remains a topic for future research. Social pressures to reveal self in the office appeared to be motivated by a desire to humanize the workplace and to relate to coworkers more expressively rather than simply functionally. Corporate encouragements to reveal self may partly be seen as a sincere attempt to build a collegial and familial feeling that motivates employees. But such encouragements may also be intended to help workers feel less guilty about the amount of time and energy they devote to work rather than to their families at home. For employees, workplace "shrines" to their families helped to alleviate feelings of guilt and provide justification for sacrifices. Employees also valued transitional objects that helped them feel less anxiety due to being separated from their children.

Both social pressures and corporate concerns also helped to establish limits to the extent of personal representation in the workplace. Even those who did not yet have vested stock interests in the company saw Worklinks as a place primarily for work rather than socializing. They also shared with the company a concern for projecting a professional image to visiting clients, although some drew the line at wearing corporate red. For the postmodern corporation built on team spirit there is likely to be some similar self-governance by employees.

*Working versus Playing.* Like intimacy, gift giving, and expression of personal tastes, play is no longer associated only with home. In postmodern firms, play has a role in nourishing creativity and innovation. Rather than segmenting work and play by office versus home location, Worklinks employees segment time at work into serious and playful periods. In addition to managing self, such time segmentation helps diffuse tensions, makes work more enjoyable, and builds a sense of camaraderie. If we can work at home, we can also play at work. In addition to having "time-outs" and friendly interchanges prompted or facilitated by office toys and humorous items, the corporation can schedule fun activities, as Worklinks did with picnics, parties, auctions, and golf outings. These activities, in turn, facilitate feelings of being part of a pseudofamily, as well as allow nuclear families to have some sense of identification with a caring corporation.

Beyond managing aspects of identity and offering cathartic benefits, play seems also to assert a form of resistance to organizational practices that impose discipline on workers' bodies and minds (see De Certeau 1984). Extended-self possessions of the workplace emerge as the instruments of playful tactics. Such tactics spontaneously and inventively seize opportunities for play "on the spot" from the homey environment through which the postmodern organization colonizes more

time and space. Other corporate practices that make claim to workers' time by blurring the boundary between home and work, like those tied to creating a "family-like" culture, create a context that offers both opportunity and incentive for workers to enact playful tactics. While the organization may promote the notion of a "work family" to encourage worker responsibility in being dependable and accessible, workers also draw from the notion of family to seek pleasure in amusement and recreation.

*Conclusion.* As postmodern professional work makes increasing incursions into the home, it should not be surprising that the expression of self is increasingly evident in the workplace. This is not the case for all types of workplaces however. Banks, the military, fast food outlets, and other businesses have thus far resisted these trends. At the same time, many hospitals, universities, and supermarkets have more readily embraced such displays. The corporation we investigated revealed how different employees choose to segment versus integrate their home and work lives, as revealed through their office place possessions. Even for those with more segmented lives, the work self and the home self are apt to merge to some degree. We have derisive expressions (e.g., "Get a life") for those who fail to reveal some of their extended self in the workplace.

Future work on the extended self can benefit by considering retracted as well as extended self, by investigating further factors that bear on styles of integrating versus segmenting home and work selves, by addressing the effects of the postmodern body on identity, and by recognizing the situational management of self through such possessions as toys, transitional objects, and sonic boundaries. The contesting roles of home and work selves, as well as the characteristics of the postmodern corporation, call for boundary permeability between these key spheres of life. How we manage this boundary has a great deal to say about who we are.

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