BEING WORK INTERRUPTED: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF OFFICE MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT: This qualitative study examined the role of work interruptions in the process of unwinding from work, among managers. Six master themes were elicited using thematic analysis: (1) work interruptions, (2) attitudes towards work interruptions, (3) coping strategies, (4) unwinding from work interruptions, (5) emotional and physiological responses and (6) work values. Of particular interest was the finding that the managers reported no emotional tension and work ruminative thinking because they perceived interruptions as *part of their job.* This study also found that managers held work beliefs and an acceptance philosophy towards work interruptions. The study findings suggest the need for continued investigation into the role of work interruptions and work values in the unwinding process post work.

KEYWORDS: work interruptions; managers; thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

Unwinding from work demands at the end of a working day is a prerequisite for recovery from work. Studies show that failing to unwind from work is associated with a number of psychological and physiological load reactions including fatigue (Querstret & Cropley, 2012), difficulty in falling asleep (Akerstedt et al., 2002; Cropley, Dijk, & Stanley, 2006; Meijman, Mulder, & Van Dormolen, 1992), and difficulty maintaining sleep (Maki, Moore, Grunberg, & Greenberg, 2005). In a qualitative study, Cropley and Millward (2009) showed that high ruminators — those workers who habitually find it difficult to switch-off from work — reported that work very much dominated their lives, to the degree that it compromised their recovery time, leisure and family time. In contrast, low ruminators reported easily being able to 'switch-off' from work-related thoughts and undertook activities in leisure time. Physically or mentally unwinding from work demands appears to be related to several stressors which increase occupational strain among employees. The use of qualitative data helps to identify those stressors and stress prevention programmes that can be designed when possible. Interruptions are a prevalent stressor that has been examined in the workplace as it prevents task achievement and interferes with the completion of workload.

Interruptions refer to ''events that cause cessation and postponement of an ongoing activity'' (Zilstra, Roe, Leonora, & Krediet, 1999). In common parlance, interruptions could refer to a conflict with a colleague or phone/email interruptions which cause stress and frustration to participants as they try to complete a multitude of tasks (Mark, Gudith, & Klocke, 2008). Other studies reported that interruptions result in information overload, cognitive fatigue (Kirmeyer, 1988) and impaired wellbeing (Luong & Rogelberg, 2005; Zijlstra et al., 1999). The need to study interruptions is exacerbated due to the advances on communication technology through which work detachment becomes more difficult, as individuals can remain connected to their job-related activities twenty-four hours a day via remote access to their pc, or via emails, and telephones (Boswell & Olson-Buchanon, 2007). In Cropley and Millward's (2009) qualitative

study, the authors reported that high ruminators were connected to Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) and continually checked their emails or answered work-related phone calls during leisure time. Interruptions can be stressful and stress causes problems, but some employees are unstressed by interruptions. Studies have reported on the ubiquity of interruptions in organizations (Rouncefield, Viller, Hughes, & Rodden,1994).The authors reported that employees unstressed by routine office-work interruptions were better able to coordinate as a team to complete work tasks. Nonetheless, previous research has also shown (that some managers detach themselves from work issues when they are away from their work (Iwasaki, Mackay, & Ristock,2004).

Job Demands Resources Model
One of the most researched models of recovery is the Job Demands-Resources model (JD-R; Demerouti,Bakker,Nachreiner,&Schaufeli, 2001) which assumes that work characteristics influence employees' wellbeing and burnout. Job demands and job resources incorporate psychological, social, and organizational aspects of a job, but job demands are associated with strain and emotional exhaustion, whereas job resources play an important role in achieving work goals and stimulate learning (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands refer to work overload, time pressure and emotional reactions which require sustained physical and psychological effort either emotionally or cognitively.

Job resources refer to social support, the task itself (autonomy, feedback, skills) and the organizational rewards such as career opportunities. It could be implied that job resources promote development, and secondly revert the physiological and psychological costs. In support of this view, further work has suggested that the addition of skilling such as development and utilization which has been positively associated with management satisfaction due to role challenge has extended the model (Anderson-Connolly, Grunberg, Greenberg, & Moore, 2002). Challenge demands such as responsibility have been found to trigger positive emotions and problem-focused coping styles (Crawford, LePine, & Rich, 2010; Van den Broeck, De Cuyper, De Witte, & Vansteenkiste, 2010).

According to recent advancements of the JD-R model of work stress, control in the form of autonomy mediates the relationship between demands (workload), job resources and negative health-related outcomes such psychological strain (Boyd, Baker, Pignata, Winefiled, Gillespie, & Stough, 2011). To promote positive employee outcomes, skills must be utilised by management, for example studies have shown that 'knowledge' leads to job satisfaction (Morgeson & Humphrey, 2006). However, less is known about skill utilisation such as problem solving in task enjoyment and job satisfaction among managers.

The literature on incomplete recovery from workload demands is associated with the term allostasis which refers to the ability to produce adequate physiological stress responses upon exposure to stressors (McEwen & Stellar, 1993). Craig & Cooper (1992) defined recovery as the process of ''replenishing the depleted resources by reversing the negative effects of job demands and by bringing the individual to the pre-stressor level of functioning''. According to Craig & Cooper (1992), individuals obtain physiological levels of increased adrenaline and reduced cortisol under extreme job demands. Previous research showed that managers exposed to demands from work and home did not fully unwind after work due to the excessive workload (Frankenhaeuser, Lundberg, Fredrikson, Melin, Tuomisto, Myrsten, Hedman, Bergman-Losman, Walin (1989).

Frankenhaeuser (1981) and Meijman & al. (1992) posited that individuals who work in stressful jobs are less likely to unwind after work compared to individuals working for a less stressful ones. One explanation for this could be that individuals are slower to unwind due to physiological stress arousal, i.e., high adrenaline levels at work, and this in turn may lead to a negative spillover effect on wellbeing post work, i.e. feeling tense or having bad mood. Further research suggests that wellbeing during bedtime is affected by workload (Sonnentag, 2001), and detachment from work issues is unlikely to occur during the evening hours due to long working hours (Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005). This implies that when individuals become mentally exhausted by job demands they will be unlikely to perform successfully (Veldhuizen, Gaillard, & de Vries, 2003) and accomplish their goals.

Job resources and coping strategies
JD-R model proposes that job resources are used by workers to cope with job demands including problem-solving demands (Demerouti et al., 2001). However, there is little research that has paid attention to how resources and in particular how the psychological processes of coping could influence managers' ability in light of work interruptions. Latack introduced two dimensions of coping including control–oriented coping strategies and avoidance coping (Latack,1986; Latack, Aldag, & Joseph, 1992). Avoidance coping comprises avoidance of thinking about a situation, focusing attention on other things, and disengaging oneself from the situation. According to Latack (1986; Latack et al., 1992), control-oriented coping refers to thinking coping which is proactive and consists of direct action. In a longitudinal study conducted to examine coping strategies among managers (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006) found that control-oriented coping identified by positive thinking coping (i.e., ''Thinking of the challenges I can find in this situation'') and direct action. Other studies have assessed the extent to which different coping strategies are associated with low levels of burnout, suggesting that avoidance and support eliminate burnout (Etzion & Pines, 1986; Leiter, 1991; Long & Gessaroli, 1981). Patton and Goddard's study (2006) among managers of different job network organizations indicated that escape-avoidance behavior was associated with increased burnout levels including emotional exhaustion (i.e., ''I feel emotionally drained from my work'') and depersonalization (i.e., ''I feel I treat some of my clients as if they were impersonal objects''). Planful Problem Solving (i.e., ''I made a plan of action and followed it'') was associated with Personal Accomplishment (i.e. ''I feel I am positively influencing other people's lives through my work''). According to De Rijk, Le Blanc and Schaufeli (1998) active coping of problems involves 'cognitively analyzing the situation and taking concrete action to solve the problems'. Srivastava, Blakely, Andrews and McKee-Ryan's study (2007) focused on active coping and well-being. Their study indicated that active coping and social support improved self-reported well-being (i.e., life satisfaction scale items '' In most ways my life is close to my ideal'' and affective well-being ''How often have you experienced positive emotions of joy, happiness elation, affection''). Social support from colleagues was positively related to subjective well-being, whereas there was a direct negative relationship between family-work conflict and active coping on well-being, suggesting that active coping strategies are beneficial for organizations as employees are more likely to engage in confronting the stressors rather than avoiding them.

In another study, Niehaus, Myburgh and Poggenpoel (2003) pointed out that managers' effective coping strategies are influenced by personal and professional competence beliefs they hold which, in turn, enable managers to solve problems. Managers who believed in succeeding

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in their professional and personal coping ability found it easy to cope with multiple role demands. Managers who hold personal competence belief also used effective coping strategies to cope with emotions including tension, frustration or agitation.

The aim of this study is to examine how job resources such as coping strategies are used by managers to deal with job demands such as work interruptions. Examining managers' accounts of coping with work interruptions may indicate how managers use resources, and therefore whether they perceive their jobs as resourceful rather than stressful. Such conclusion would extend the JD-R model by indicating the potential to include coping responses and positive thinking in the model. A positive or negative attitude to work interruptions could lead to certain beliefs or attitudes managers endorse upon the presence of work experience. This could lead to the planning of appropriate interventions aimed at confronting work demands and enhancing managers' psychological and physical well-being. Previous research on flow theory suggests the importance of the dependence of optimal work and leisure experiences on the equity between high challenges and high skill level (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Csikzentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). 'Flow' theory is used to describe a psychological condition where positive work experiences, positive affective responses and high concentration levels at work are formed (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Csikszentmihalyi & LeFevre, 1989). In Csikszentmihalyi's study, sixty-four percent of managers and forty-seven percent of blue-collar workers were found to be in flow at work, suggesting a unitary on-the-job experience. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) found several reasons for this experience: managers reported more positive experiences than in the no-flow condition because challenges and skills were high and they felt happier and more creative. Moreover, in the flow condition at work, managers experienced satisfaction and enjoyment when perceiving work as exciting rather than burdensome.

Although unwinding from work has received some academic attention, the organizational literature has not provided a deep understanding of the dynamics between work interruptions and the ease by which managers unwind post work due to coping ability and work related beliefs. There is no clear articulation of the way work- interrupted goals either affect the mental recovery, i.e. the ability to 'switch-off' at home, or the behavioral ability, i.e. the ability to rest during leisure time.

Purpose
This study explored the managers' experiences of work interruptions in terms of their ability to 'switch-off' and recover from work. The qualitative interviews for the present study examined the meanings that managers ascribe to the controlling of such work and leisure interruptions. Qualitative research can be informative to understand the nature of work interruptions that has gone unrecognized in stress research. Previous research asserts that qualitative interviews give the empirical picture of data including a detailed representation of individuals' experiences (Maracek, 2001). Although in qualitative research the phenomenon under study is predetermined (Lee, Mitchell, Wise, &Fireman, 1996), in organization studies the focus of research involves inductively extending the JD-R model. Questions are iterated, data are gathered and new research questions emerge. As Maxwell (1996) commented there is 'a tucking back and forth' between the research questions, data and concepts and what the research claims. The author used thematic analysis as an appropriate qualitative method based on data rather than a case study or a multiple case study design. Yin (1994:31) argued that case studies may lack the statistical generalization but not the analytic generalization, which comprises the generalization from empirical observations to theory. In support of thisview,

Eisenhardt (1989) argues that a cross-case analysis of four to ten cases could determine analytical generalization.

According to Gibbert, Ruigrok and Wicki (2008), the problem with the analysis of multiple case studies is that they lack rigour which makes the development of a new management theory difficult to develop particularly when relationships between variables being tested (Eisenhardt & Grabner, 2007). This is why the current study utilizes thematic analysis rather than multiple case studies.

METHOD

Participants

The author conducted the study with nine managers because managerial jobs are work interrupted and interfered with life outside work. Recruitment of managers was mainly from the business sector. Managers were predominantly office-based. Out of twelve managers, three reported that they did not have time to participate. Nine managers volunteered to participate and provided informed consent. Nine one-to-one semi -structured interviews were conducted with managers (Table 1), 7 managers worked in the public business sector and 2 from the private sector. All managers came from different companies. The age range was 28-53 years, *(M = 39.75, SD = 8.92)*, and the male-to-female ratio was 5 to four respectively. All participants' names were de-identified to maintain anonymity. The interviews were arranged based on managers' time of convenience due to their work time schedule. During the interview no interruptions occurred.

Table 1. Interview Participants

Participant	Occupation	Age	Working Hours
Jenny (JR)	Account Manager	36	35
Andrew (AS)	Senior Fund Manager	31	55
Thomas (TA)	Service Manager	52	42
Richard (RA)	Project Manager	40	55
Caroline (CT)	Human Safety Technology Manager	53	36
Ben (BT)	Investment Manager	38	40
Fraser (FE)	Manager in Corporate Banking	40	55
Hannah (HB)	Sales Manager	28	50
Jo (JT)	Service Manager	46	37

Procedure

First, I approached some organizations in the business sector and requested their participation in the research. Organizations provided names of some managers. Subsequently, I emailed them to confirm their willingness to participate in the study. I approached managers at the end of their working day and informed them about the research purpose and of their right to withdraw. The interview schedule was flexible, allowing the interviewer freedom to listen actively and follow interviewees' lines of thought. Based on Faculty of Arts and Human

Sciences of University of Surrey, this study did not require formal ethics procedure. The interviews did not involve any risks to managers' health or any offensive wording.

Semi-structured, open interviews, each lasting forty five minutes to sixty minutes, were used to build rapport. Questions were broad and open-ended (Smith et al., 2009) to learn about the managers' attitudes to work interruptions. Descriptive, narrative, contrast and evaluative questions were included in the semi-structured interviews to ensure that managers understood question semantics. Questions pertained to emotional responses to work interruptions, coping strategies, post-work ruminative thinking and unwinding through leisure activities. Prompts were included to further explore certain important aspects of the subject area. Probes where necessary when responses lacked detail description or precise details were not supplied (Rubin & Rubin, 1995)**.** Participants were told that there were no right or wrong answers. Towards the end of the interview, interviewees were asked to comment on any relevant, unexplored topics. Interviewers documented and put together the interview extracts to allow transparency and retrieval (Yin, 1994), which enhanced the methodological rigour of interviews.

Data Analysis
The critical incident technique applied was based on collecting data from individuals direct observation (Flanagan, 1954). As Flanagan mentioned (pp 327), *''an incident refers to a human activity that allows interpretation about the individuals performing the act. The incident is critical only if the intention of the act is clear and its consequences do not allow doubt of its effects''*. In the present study, critical incidents obtained from managers' interviews relied on managers' verbal accounts of their observables behavior towards interruptions at work or coping with interruptions post work.

Nine verbatim interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis; a qualitative analytical approach widely used yet poorly acknowledged (Boyatzis, 1998). Thematic analysis is reported on a by-theme basis which attempts to abstract common themes across several texts of the same type (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is to be contrasted with a process of 'thematic decomposition' inspired by Stenner (1993) which aims to identify the particular themes of a text and is reported on a by-person rather than a by-theme basis. Two researchers (the author plus one academic researcher (MC) chose thematic analysis as the appropriate method as this follows a by-theme approach. Both researchers traced common themes throughout all interviews and used them to understand managers' coping behaviors to work interruptions. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), the advantage of thematic analysis is its recursive process, where analysis is developed throughout the phases, rather than shifting from one phase to another. This enables the interviewer to move flexibly backwards and forwards. It was necessary to reread previous process stages to ensure grounding of developing themes in the original data, which confirmed that the analysis was an iterative process (Tobin & Begley, 2004). The authenticity of the findings was established through member-checking (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) which involved sending each participant a summary of transcript with the request to check it for accuracy. Inter-rater reliability was employed through both researchers coding independently transcripts until we reached consensus of the identified themes. There was close agreement among researchers.

Thematic analysis is driven by the data and this makes it differ from the analytic induction which is based on working hypotheses (Robinson, 1951). The latest one refers to a logical procedure of disproving a false working hypothesis which is not in line with the facts and, thus,

requires reformulation (Robbinson, 1951). Analytic induction also includes the re definition of a phenomenon to the extent of excluding cases that contract the hypothesis and only including those which sufficiently explain the phenomenon. In such case, analytic induction is known as a type method which abstracts from a case the 'essential' conditions that explain the phenomenon and generalizes them in other cases. This is separate from thematic analysis which is a process that abstracts common themes across all cases of similar type. Thus, one could conclude that analytic induction generalizes the conditions under which a phenomenon is explained before all cases have been examined and as this is not representative of all cases to the phenomenon of work interruptions we study, we did not determine induction as appropriate method of our analysis.

Thematic analysis, based on step-by-step data analysis of the main themes across the data (Attride-Stirling, 2001), was conducted in five practical phases, as demonstrated by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, we read the data repeatedly to identify recurring patterns or meanings (semantic themes) across the data (a data-driven approach) relevant to the research questions (a theory-driven approach).

Transcript re-reading helped the researcher to establish codes based on preliminary data scanning (Crabtree & Miller, 1992). The 'open coding' process allowed codes to be modified when inappropriate. In the data-driven inductive method, themes are elicited through the data themselves rather than solely being based on previous theory (Boyatsis, 1998). The initial template, or codebook, upon which themes were organized for interpretation, was defined by the overlapping themes captured in the interview questions. This investigation involved a deductive, *a priori* template of codes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999) both within and across the analysis (King, 2004). The initial codebook defined eight higher-order codes (referring to the main questions) subdivided into one or two levels of lower-order codes (referring to the prompts and subsidiary questions) (King, 2004).Second, both researchers (the author and an academic researcher (MC) coded all data extracts into as many appropriate different themes as possible. Some extracts were coded once, while others were coded several times. Third, broad themes were generated from the coded data extracts. Tables or thematic maps were used to form the themes under which the codes were combined. Some codes were discarded and others organized into main or sub-themes. 'Relational' coding was applied; relationships between codes, and between themes and sub-themes were identified (Gibson, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Illustrated below (Table A1) is the template analysis in the study, involving a number of code modifications.

RESULTS

Six master themes were identified using thematic analysis: (1) work interruptions, (2) attitudes towards work interruptions, (3) coping strategies, (4) unwinding from work interruptions, (5) responses and (6) work values.

Work interruptions
This theme was a level-one code, comprising one level-one code: 'communication technology'.

Communication technology. Interruptions referred to technology, for example:

Anyone can interrupt me at any time at work. When the phone starts ringing I am interrupted. It can be brokers or the clients who interrupt me by email, instant messages or phone. It can be assistant employees who ask for questions. (BT)

Emails interrupt me as there are invitations to a lot of meetings. Too many people are involved and I have to make a decision who is going to go. Sure, meetings take place to set the work load of the back office, goals that are set for the year, whether should we update the IT system etc., it's a long list. (CT)

Continuous interruptions take place throughout my working day. I start writing up a report and I have to stop what I am doing to respond to the director of service or to my staff. The director constantly informs me about new tasks that should be done throughout the day. (JA)

Attitudes towards interruptions
This key theme was a second level-one code, comprising two level-three codes, discussed below.
Positive attitudes. Five participants demonstrated favorable and responsive attitudes towards work interruptions, for example:
It depends if they are welcome or not. Usually just respond immediately. I think that positive attitude toward interruption is when you make an assessment as to whether it is something that needs urgently dealing with or not. But negative attitude is when I let interruptions disrupt my day. (JR)
I guess if someone asks me, I do answer even when I do not have available time, this   is a positive response. I do not ignore the person through emails. (HB)
Five participants emphasized the importance of accepting interruptions as *''interruptions are part of a job''*, for example:
Oh yes, you should always plan ahead of interruptions whether you like or not. ... interruptions are part of my role...yep dealing with interruptions is part of my life. (RA)
... I suppose that at the end of the day work is part of my life and it is the nature of the beast to have to cope with it. (BT)
Three managers highlighted this issue of *''urgency and importance''* or even beneficial consequences for the organization justify a favorable response to interruptions, e.g.:
Satisfying interruptions are the ones that result in a better performance or that have a direct value to the company. (HB)
I always deal with interruptions at work as appropriate. If the interruption is unimportant and I am doing something more important, I will get back to the interrupter or explain my dilemma. (TA)
When an interruption occurs and I have to intervene, I give advice or consult my clients as this causes a post effect of satisfaction. (JA)
Negative attitudes. Two managers associated interruptions with work disruptions, highlighting the negative impact of interruptions on work performance:
Problematic interruptions would include other departments coming to me with problem customers, complaints, issues, and advice... Frustrating interruptions would be the IT issues we experience... (HB)
... If phone rings I answer. But I am lost in interruptions. You see what I mean the way of dealing with them is not easy. I believe that there is no way to cover up the time that is lost and it takes me time to go back to work. (AS)

Professional attitudes. All managers responded to interrupted work activity with a professional attitude, as illustrated below:

...But I feel that all interruptions should be dealt with calmly, realistically and professionally. This I feel leads to the interruptions being more good than bad. (TA)

I think a good response to interruptions is the ability to still hit your daily goals despite them. This would be through prioritizing them or working more effectively after that interruption to counteract the lost time. (HB)

Well, if I am working on something I am quick, I say No, we must do it later on. I will deal with it... If a colleague is unable to deal quickly and responsibly, I say ''I will resolve it later''. Then I give customers time frame, it's OK for them. This is positive. This does not work for my colleagues. Under pressure they are less professional. This is not reasonable and is a negative response. (FE)

Interruption Management
This was a third level-one code, comprising one level-one code: 'coping strategies'.
Coping strategies. This level-one code ('coping strategies') was subdivided into two- order codes, of relevance to the study as it addresses the two research questions. Firstly, it identifies how managers 'catch up' with work-plans after work interruption; and secondly, it establishes how managers handle work interruptions. These level-two codes relate to a. organization and b. prioritization. All managers demonstrated that they 'catch up' with plans by making time rearrangements, delegating tasks, scheduling time for interruptions or transferring work home at the weekend.

Organization
 This subtheme is of relevance to the research question relating to how managers complete interrupted tasks.

Task management. Three managers suggested:
Not really, I don't complete work tasks at home because I do finish them at work. I do not leave my work until I finish what I planned to do (JR)

I stay until the work is done ...I do not go home until my work is complete. (HB)

I do not do work at home. I used to work at weekends when I first started as a   manager but not so much now. I complete work tasks during the day at the office hours. (JA)

Two   managers made a time schedule to meet deadlines or re-schedule:
What I am trying to do I have several projects and I make a calendar to each of the projects. Other times, I will not check my emails. I tend to divert my work to another time or else I change the deadline if I am overloaded by lots of emails. (CT)

I prioritize my tasks. I have to make a note in my diary which day certain tasks should be completed. Some tasks are routine ones and have to get done every Monday so I do not need to record them as I easily remember them (JA)

Four managers viewed work as an endless task, for example:
My job is literally 24/7. I live with it and it is part of my life... I have to do as   much as I can during the day. (AS)

I take work home that is easy to complete and that does not need much prioritization ... (TA)

With regard to the question: ''How do you 'catch up' with interrupted work-plans?'' typical responses emphasized the importance of reminders, including making lists, delegating employees and utilizing technology. For example:

I spend time at home writing training plans / guides and appraisals, the tasks that need doing but don't add direct value to the daily sales results. (HB)

I do a to-do list before I leave my office. When I come in the morning, I have what I am supposed to do written down. Hmmm, at home I've got a Blackberry and send emails to prioritize what I should do... (FE)

A little reminder on my screen shows me what is important to get done. I ask an experienced member of staff what remained undone from the previous day and try to get on top of it if staff finds it difficult. (JA)

Prioritization

Responding to the question about 'catching up' on interrupted tasks, managers highlighted prioritization as a predominant theme, with six emphasizing the importance of completing work tasks on time, e.g.:

Yes, prioritization is a positive strategy, I suppose. I tend to finish what I am supposed to do on time... Well, it's the time of the day that I am particularly interested in completing certain tasks as they can be done at a certain time. (JR)

...I plan even that I will lose one or one and a half hour... Planning being interrupted minimizes also the excess of the extra work; this is positive... There is no such a thing to disrupt your work; even interruptions are part of my role. (RA)

I prioritize when I have to do additional work that my director usually delegates to me throughout the day. (JA)

Three managers commented on prioritizing the order of interruptions suggesting that they focus on their current activity before answering telephone calls and prioritize email responses:

If someone comes in my office, I ask him to hold on. I record what I do if I review a document. The telephone calls I deal with them afterwards. I leave emails as a late response... (RA)

I do not take work emails at home. But if I get phone calls from different people, I tell them that I will call them back later. (CT)

Unwinding from Work Interruptions

This fourth level-one code theme refers to the ease of 'switching off' mentally and physically from interrupted work tasks during post-work time. It comprises two level-two codes: 'post-work rumination' and 'leisure'.

Post-work rumination. No managers reported experiencing post-work rumination. All managers highlighted the ease of 'switching off' from post-work thinking, for example:

None. I can easily switch-off after work and I just don't think about any work plans I have to do for the following day. (JR)

I am not sure I do have thoughts. Only in terms of when I haven't achieved what I like I do have thoughts. Am I doing 100% of work when I am at work that is what I think. (AS)

I do not think about interrupted work after work. The only thought I have is that I ask myself 'Have I done this task? If not, I write it down. (JA)

Seven managers highlighted some concerns about problem solving or deadlines rather than work rumination, for example:

I try not to make any thoughts but occasionally if I am working on a deadline and I haven't finished it, it plays on my mind... (FE)

...In my forties I manage work better than when I started at twenties. I have become a bit colder in my approach with work, ''did I do as much as I could do today?'' That is my main thought. (AS)

Leisure. Mental unwinding post work appears to improve managers' health. Seven managers reported making weekend plans or doing physical exercise. Typical responses were:

...Ummm (pause) interruptions at work just have no impact on my home routine...As I said, I am very well organized so I have pre-arranged what I should do when I go home. (JR)

I always ensure that I make the most of time every second weekend as we normally travel. (BT)

Similarly, six managers scheduled appointments for relaxation and meeting friends at weekends, for example:

Yep, I normally leave my work happy. I've got my dog and I take him for an hour walk. This is very relaxing for me... When I return home after this walk, I can sleep better or even listen to some music. (AS)

Work doesn't affect me when I am home. I close the door, well ... (takes some minutes to think)...Yeah. The children are excited to see me for one and a half hour is fun; it is bath time with them. It's a great way to switch-off or I close the door and go for a run, unconsciously the solution about work pops in... (FE)

Boundaries between Work and Home

All managers prioritized family life over the need to respond to interruptions, depending on the level of urgency and importance:

Well, children and all the activities that they should be doing should be directed by myself or my wife, but my wife is quite good at taking them out when I work...Activities at home take priority over work at the weekend. (BT)

Similarly, managers responded differently to phone interruptions from relatives compared to those from colleagues depending on the degree of importance, for example:

Oh yes, if they are senior calls, I respond politely. Otherwise ... I respond with a delay; if it is a call from friends but not something urgent I tell them I will ring in a bit. (FE)

How I deal with interruptions at home? I am going away (laughs). I have very little time. I say ''don't interrupt''. I always try to limit the amount they interrupt me... If it is something urgent, a phone call from work that needs attention, I deal with it. (AS)

Responses

This theme depicts emotional and physical responses to interruptions.

Emotional responses

Frustration

All managers noted frustration around interrupted work tasks. Frustration was linked to fragmented daily work routines or frequent interruptions that made completion of work activity difficult. Some managers emphasized job-associated frustration:

If working on something of great importance, I feel a little frustrated that I have to stop what I am doing to deal with the interruption. Just a bit of frustration, but this is the nature of work. I just accept the interruption as part of my job. (TA)

It does (referring to the impact of interruptions on 'switching off' in the evening), if I get interrupted a lot at work and I do not get work done that makes me feel frustrated. (AS)

Specifically, frustration was associated with interrupted time due to meeting arrangements, customers' needs, and colleagues' reactions at stressful times:

Frustration is usually due to unnecessary administrative meetings and functions. Long learnt not to let work emotions impact on life and general mood. (BT)

I get a bit frustrated when interrupted; annoyed a bit is more forceful. If it is a stupid person asking silly questions on the phone this frustrates me and changes the whole of my

personality…Frustration is when a client rings me to ask for information and wants to know a lot about the market. (AS)

When things such as ideas are flowing in my head, I feel frustrated if I have to be interrupted while preparing a report for a client. (JA)

Satisfaction and Happiness

Six managers evaluated interruptions as satisfying experiences, relating them to the social dimension of the different interruption modes: emails, face-to-face interruptions and social breaks. They reported:

But I also get satisfaction when I am getting into social networking, when people dropping by my desk, when I receive personal email and when I am keen on work chit-chat while I am taking a short tea break or a lunch break.... (JR)

An interruption, hmmm (some seconds passed), I can't, I don't tend to get frustrated from something unplanned that gets me back. Satisfaction comes from a team member who succeeds in something. Let's say if a member of my team has achieved as he did last month. One of the members sold a program to a number of different suppliers. That was progressing on something, it was a success. (BT)

Satisfaction was linked to financial issues and completion of work projects:

Satisfaction would be related to the job, for example, the completion of the project and whether it is relevant to legislation. (CT)

Satisfying interruptions are the ones that result in a better performance or that have a direct value to the company... (HB)

Absence of Emotional Reactions

Five managers also reported no emotional intensity around exposure to unplanned interruptions, which they viewed as part of the job, planned, controllable and not revolving around ruminative thinking, for example:

Planned or unplanned interruptions did not have an emotional impact ...they cause me neither great frustration nor satisfaction. (TA)

He attributed this claim to the fact that:

I feel that interruptions have to be dealt with… I just accept the interruption as part of my job. (TA)

I do not have any kind of emotions and reactions. Only if I don't work on Wednesday, there is lot of emails coming in if I go for a coffee. What I do is that I switch the sound alert off my emails. Then I activate it again. But I do not have unhelpful emotions (CT)

When my administration interrupts me I do not show any reaction as this is a good response. (JA)

Physiological responses
Absence of Physiological Responses

Seven managers did not report any physical responses to interruptions, viewing them as social breaks and relaxation time, for example:

I can't think of any physical reactions. I feel pleased, happy to be interrupted particularly when personal emails dropped in my file. I can't think of any physical reactions cause it is really a break from work to go for a cup of tea with colleagues... (JR)

The only physical reaction I have is that I am grinding my teeth when the administration can not complete certain tasks. (JA)

Four managers asserted that concern about accepting interruptions at work did not necessarily indicate a physical response to the interruptions, claiming:

Well, (stops). Interruptions have no physical impact on me, just a bit of frustration but this is the nature of work. I just accept the interruption as part of my job. (TA)

You cannot see physical signs as I am working at the office when someone enters to ask a question and then I ask them to hold on until I finish. (FE)

Work Values

Five managers highlighted the importance of work values, which involved work beliefs.

Work beliefs. Four managers focused on their beliefs in the centrality of work, for example:

I always take work home that is easy to complete and that does not need much   prioritization. Take work home that can be completed using equipment I have at home and not at work. (BT)

My job is literally 24/7. I live with it and it is part of my life. Work is a never-ending task. I have to do as much as I can during the day...Very difficult (stops)... If time lost when interrupted I go back to my job... If phone rings I answer...I believe that there is no way to cover up the time that is lost and it takes me time to go back to work. (AS)

I do not take work home any more. I used to take work home at weekends, but not so much now. I achieve what I do during the day. (JA)

Likewise, five managers reported an acceptance philosophy towards work interruptions. They reported:

...I plan for the fact that I will be interrupted... Planning being interrupted minimizes also the excess of the extra work; this is positive. Then I accept interruptions when they occur, I respond urgently. (RA)

People, I told you, do not interrupt me over the years. I have got used to them after 10 years of experience I say ''I am busy''. Otherwise, I delegate to someone else, one of my trading colleagues or I even go away (laughs). But mostly I accept interruptions, I say ''wait'' and then I deal with them. (AS)

Four managers reported that reliance on team cooperation and mutual respect was an important work value that reinforced work development, for example:

I do acknowledge that part of a successful business is based on my sales team. So they have to do what I say. (HB)

Satisfaction comes from a team member who succeeds in something. Let's say if a member of my team has achieved as he did last month... (RA)

DISCUSSION

This qualitative study focused on managerial experiences of interruptions at work. Through thematic analysis, six themes emerged from the interviews with managers: work interruptions, attitudes towards work interruptions, coping strategies, unwinding from work interruptions, emotional and physiological responses and work values. Interestingly, all participants perceived interruptions as *part of their job,* and were not negatively affected by them.

A novel finding was the positive attitude towards interruptions as a theme, which to date, has not been reported in research. The descriptive subtheme of professionalism reflects a calm and realistic approach adopted when interruptions disrupt work activity. Moreover, positive attitudes towards interruptions leads managers to have optimal work experiences, resulting in work-interruption prioritization, and control over the timing of interruptions (St. John, 2005). One possible explanation draws upon the links between responsibility at work and learning

(Davies & Smith, 1984), a view corroborated in this study. In the current study managers expressed a positive attitude towards interruptions and this could be due to work experiences. Interestingly, a study based on interviews among senior managers showed that 23 out of 60 managers learned from their work experience and by undertaking responsibilities, taking action and initiatives (Davies & Smith, 1984). In addition, 16 out of 60 managers learned within an existing job as they had the freedom to start up projects with the prospect of making decisions and meeting interesting people. This is why managers' work responsibility awareness and authority over decision making and skills lead to successful learning and career development (Davies & Smith, 1984).

This study revealed that managers did not find interruptions as challenging experiences but they completed work tasks despite work interruptions: managers prioritized work tasks, set deadlines and certain time slots to complete work tasks on time. This strategy minimized the risk of distraction from email interruptions and reinforces attention to work activity. This collaborates with Niehaus's (1994:77) view that managers utilize problem solving strategies to manage problems and therefore are likely to control their emotions of frustration and tension by engaging in emotion-oriented coping strategies.

In addition, the interview data also indicated that all managers had 'infrequent' work ruminative thoughts, but when they did, their work related thoughts outside of work were viewed as a positive and not as a hindrance. Managers did not report any emotional intensity followed by such 'infrequent' post work ruminative thinking style. Previous research classified three different types of post work thinking (Cropley & Ziljstra, 2011): affective rumination, problem-solving pondering, and detachment. Detachment is not thinking about work during leisure time. In our study, interview data suggest that managers reported infrequent work ruminative thinking and absence of emotional intensity due to problem solving amidst the completion of interrupted work. According to Cropley and Zijlstra, the key difference between the affective and problem-solving pondering is to do with emotional arousal. In the affective state, emotional arousal remains high, whereas the problem-solving state is proposed to exist without emotional arousal. Problem-solving pondering identifies an adaptive cognitive problem solving approach with no aspects of emotional arousal as in affective rumination. Cognitively pondering about work allows individuals to find solutions to problems outside of work (Cropley & Zijlstra, 2011). This thinking style is common among managers in this study, and problem-solving pondering was more prevalent than other forms of ruminative thinking.

The present findings expand the JD-R model which suggests that problem solving, responsibility and control guide the way in which our managers complete work tasks. In our study managers' coping skills and responsibility fostered task completion and facilitated the unwinding process of being physically and mentally disengaged from work demands post work. The form of problem solving thinking allows managers to use their skills and knowledge. As a result, this form of thinking is linked to reported satisfaction due to completion of tasks at work, and acts as a mediator between the JD-R model and the unwinding process. Based on such coping strategies and skills as resources, managers empowered to cope with their jobs and perceive jobs more as resourceful rather than a stressful activity.

Another innovative aspect of this study was the finding that the managers held work beliefs including centrality of work and an acceptance philosophy. One reason for the absence of emotional tension and problem solving thinking may be these core work beliefs, which can be

integrated into the philosophical framework of accepting work interruptions as *''part of the job'*. This finding raises the questions of whether such managerial thinking style accounts for the lack of tension. Indeed, the problem-solving pondering process and acceptance of interruptions indicate that managers mentally evaluate a work problem during free time without eliciting emotional arousal. In the study, the seven managers who emphasized problem solving pondering also arranged physical activities for their leisure time: While thinking about work problems, they switch-off from mental or emotional strain. This ability to control thoughts and actions facilitates managers' post-work recovery.

Moreover, it appears that this philosophy of acceptance towards work interruptions helped managers to formulate coping strategies. This is in line with meaning-oriented strategies which are another form of coping ability that Neihaus (1994:77) pointed out. Meaning strategies refer to a cognitive change of perceptions in line with the job demands, therefore managers understand the problem by assessing the implications. In the current study, coping strategies were constituted in the form of planning time for interruptions, delegating tasks or indicating a delayed response to interruptions. ''Coping strategies'' appeared to reduce workload, and contribute to good work/home-life balance. The work value of acceptance and coping strategies such as *''working fast and smart''* seem to be linked to reciprocal relationships between work ideology and interruption management, and between work values and recovery mechanisms.

Additionally, the present study provides support for the finding that managers plan activities and this reflects a type of proactive thinking (in the form of planning weekend breaks or social activities and the pursuit of relaxation activities). They incorporate physical and recreational activities to structure their free time. In addition, previous research focused on coping strategies in the workplace found that managers undertook direct and preparatory action as coping strategies (McDonald & Korabik, 1991). If this reflects 'flow' at work and is enjoyable, managers are inclined to recover at home. For example, past research has shown that social activities during the weekend reduce exhaustion and improve work performance after the weekend break (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2005).

The leisure theme was also important among managers who engaged in physical activities and planned weekends/leisure time. This finding implies that these managers do not sacrifice their unpaid post-work time for work issues. Moreover these managers unwind as they engage in recreational activities including socializing during leisure time. This may be similar to the 'flow' state as described by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). This inner state of being draws upon immersion in activity including work and hobbies or unwinding. Managers perceive time as a 'flow' state during which they regularly undertake challenging activities and are focused on task accomplishment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Qualitative studies are conducted on small unrepresentative samples (Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2013) and such weakness can be complemented by employing quantitativedesigns. Future research might assess the empirical generalizability of the findings. The sample of nine managers is not heterogeneous as they appear to show a resilient attitude towards work interruptions under which coping strategies are adopted. As managers show a positive attitude towards work interruptions, these results cannot generalize for all managers from different organizations. Future research should identify any contrasted attitudes towards work

interruptions such as filtering interruptions, refusing interruptions to interfere with the job, letting oneself overwhelmed. This would enhance the understanding of the consequences of such attitudes at the professional and personal level. Previous qualitative research however has utilized a small sample of managers to provide insight in the experience of managers regarding responses and coping mechanisms to stress in a manufacturing organization (Maki et al., 2005). Smith (1996) suggested that a small number of participants is appropriate in qualitative studies. Additionally, thematic analysis, as a method of qualitative analysis, seeks to defend a set of interpretations grounded in the data (Yardley, 2000). Our interpretations link with theoretical work in the area of JD-R model, illustrating that the analysis is sound and defensible (Yardley, 2000).

Some might argue that one limitation of the current research is that it dealt with employees in managerial positions and therefore results may not be generalizable in samples of lower- level managers. A possible avenue for future research, therefore, is to draw as sample a diversity of managers' levels or jobs with high level of complexity while using structured interviews to examine past and specific coping strategies that form managerial competence in both skills, behaviorally as coping skills, and cognitively as work beliefs.

Although the present study suggests that managers cope with interruptions efficiently, it cannot be sure that managers' responses are the enacted ones. For example, managers' responses could represent a manufactured social desirability image of good performance towards work interruptions. To complement these findings, other methodologies could be used, for example, daily diaries or biological measures. Future studies could monitor the frequencies of interruptions at work per day or per week, monitor physiological reactions e.g., cortisol, blood pressure levels or physical tension among managers and explain how work interruptions interact with leisure activities. However, based on the qualitative nature of data, it was not the purpose of this study to examine as to whether all managers had more or less the same type , duration and number of interruptions at work.

IMPLICATIONS

In the he present study I have expanded the JD-R model and demonstrated how challenge demands such as work interruptions strengthen their interaction with resources such as problem solving, coping strategies, work values and unwinding themes (in the form of mental disengagement from work, organizing leisure time and setting boundaries) and give an excellent opportunity to impact on unwinding post work. It follows that the availability of job resources increases managers' performance and reduces exhaustion. Hence, it is conceived that although managers are confronted with work interruptions they perceive their jobs as resourceful. To improve their performance managers from different levels of organization could attend workshops on resources so they learn how to utilize coping strategies in light of work interruptions. Further peer feedback might yield beneficial results for managers' performance. Peer feedback would help managers recognize which performance is good or bad, thus, increasing knowledge of the aspects of pressure in the workplace and, thus, enabling them to manage it effectively. By seeking feedback, managers might better develop a broader repertoire of coping strategies such as control-coping (Armstrong-Stassen, 2006) and direct action coping (Latack et al., 1992). According to Latack et al. (1992), direct action coping consists of problem-solving efforts or task-oriented efforts to complete a job.

It is also important to tailor worksite interventions in line with managers' work ideology. Managers who persist with behaviors that are consistent with their work values are likely to demonstrate psychological flexibility (Hayes, 2004; Hayes, Strosahl, Bunting, Twohig, & Wilson, 2004) to work-related stress. This emphasizes the importance of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) as a worksite intervention. Utilizing acceptance should be promoted as much as a coping strategy, which, in turn, may prevent occupational stress and improve performance and flow with work interruptions. Organizations could also do well if they focus on training programs on stress management interventions by giving priority to time management skills. Managers need to be able to achieve targets within certain deadlines and by giving them opportunities during which they examine present time management problems might help them perceive how time pressure affects them.

It also appears important that organizations should be aware of the managers' fit and match it with the organizations preferred work values. Our findings point to the direction of the theme of work values as important feature of work ideology among managers. In the organizational setting, interview questions based on work values and strategies might play an important role in personnel selection.

It is important to restate here that the effects of interruptions can be debilitating or they can be enhancing: research supports both of these assertions. As Baethge and Rigotti (2013) argued, daily interruptions are a stressful phenomenon as they are associated with mental demands and time pressure on interrupted tasks which results in strain reactions i.e. irritation. The intention of the current research was not to make the case that managers handle easily work interruptions or to try to debunk the literature that demonstrates the debilitating effects of a difficulty in handling work interruptions. Moreover, these findings do not suggest that handling or not handling work interruptions are necessarily ineffective strategies. Rather, what this research does suggest is that a resilient attitude towards work interruptions under which coping strategies are adopted serves as an additional variable in determining the unwinding process. In particular, coping strategies are used to reduce the impact of interruptions on performance and health and, thus, managers are likely to perceive their job as resourceful. The findings point to promising directions for strategies in the field of occupational psychology. It was found that managers are interested in completing work tasks and prioritize their work despite the occurrence of work interruptions. As a result, they follow deadlines, to-do lists and even extend work home at certain time slots to achieve the completion of projects. As Plowman and his colleagues (2007) pointed out, managers' mental framework interprets the world as an unknowable place and for this reason managers should learn to accept surprises as this opens the door for creative approaches. Based on our findings, managers viewed interruptions not as a threat, but as an inevitable part of the role they have, and our managers welcomed interruptions rather than avoided them. It seems that managers in the present study perceived interruptions as an opportunity for creative solutions which facilitates the achievement of work tasks and success in performance.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that managers accept interruptions as *part of their job*. The overall finding is that managers cope with interruptions with equanimity and they not find them as challenges. Additionally, our study is the first to highlight that problem solving pondering is prevalent among managers who do not get distressed by interruptions. This study shows that interruptions

do not have negative effects on work and post work time in our group of managers. Finally, the current study needs objective evidence using other methodologies in order to corroborate our findings.

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Appendix 1
Table A1. Template of Work Interruptions and Managers' Experiences.

1. Work interruptions
   1 Technology Interruptions
2. Attitudes towards interruptions
1 Positive attitude towards interruptions
2 Negative attitudes towards interruptions
3 Professional attitudes towards interruptions
3. Interruption management
1 Coping strategies
   1. Organization
      1. Task management
      2. Prioritization
4. Unwinding from work interruptions
1 Post-work rumination
   2 Leisure
   1. Boundaries between work and home

Table A1. *Continued*

5. Responses to interruptions
1   Emotional responses
1. Frustration
2. Satisfaction and happiness
3. Absence of emotional reactions

2   Physiological reactions

1 Absence of physiological reactions

6. Work values from managers' perspective

        1 Work beliefs