Life Swap: Swapping Life Experiences Through Data Conversations

**Abstract**
Collecting and sharing personal data offers great potential to support people in reflecting on the impact of communications technology on our ability to successfully manage our work-life balance. We conducted a series of 'Life-Swap' workshops where people brought along and discussed data they had collected, sharing their own difficulties and personal approaches to managing this balance. An initial look at how these conversations unfolded around the different types of data suggests ways in which sharing data can support participants’ understanding of their data, each other and themselves. We make some suggestions about how different types of data might best be used to support this process, and discuss the potential of such discussions to provide researchers with valuable insights into research topics of interest.

**Author Keywords**
Personal Informatics; Quantified Self; collaborative reflection; data conversations.

**ACM Classification Keywords**
H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous
Introduction

There now exists an application or device that can monitor almost any aspect of our lives, including data that might support us in becoming more aware of the ways in which we manage our work-life balance: in particular, the ways that digital and communication technologies are impacting on our ability to manage boundaries between our work and personal lives. However, there is still work needed to understand better how best to support people in making sense of and reflecting on their captured data. We argue that sharing personal data through conversation is a way to support people both in forming better relationships with their data, and with each other.

‘Wife Swap’ was a popular UK reality TV show in the 2000s which saw the wife/mother of one family swap places with the wife/mother of another and attempt to take on their roles and responsibilities. The subsequent weeks gave both the wives and their host families an insight into the other family’s life on a very personal level, leading them to reflect on and question some basic assumptions about their own routines and ways of life, and to realise that there are other ways of doing things. This often led to life-style, or behaviour, change. Whilst this kind of ‘life swap’ is impossible (and undesirable) for most of us, we believe that sharing and discussing, or ‘swapping’ personal/life-data can offer a real opportunity for people to gain insight into each others’ lives in a way that can prompt and support reflection on both their lives [1], [2].

‘Life-Swap’ Sessions

In order to facilitate such personal/life-data swaps, we organised a series of ‘Life-Swap’ workshops which we promoted as a chance to reflect on personal work-life-

balance issues. Before each of the workshops, participants were asked to collect a different kind of personal data to bring along to share and discuss: for workshops 1 + 2 this was Autographer images collected over a working week (Autographer is a wearable camera which automatically collects approx. 4 images a minute [3]); for workshop 3 this was at least 2 weeks worth of RescueTime data (RescueTime is a piece of software which logs the applications you use throughout the day on your computing devices and presents this and a ‘productivity’ score back via a webpage [4]); and at workshop 4 participants were asked to bring along at least 2 weeks worth of activity tracker data.

At the workshops, participants were organized into pairs and asked to take each other through their collected data. A series of conversational prompts on themes related to work-life-balance were provided to guide conversation. Following conversations, participants completed post-conversation questionnaires where they recorded anything surprising that had come out of the conversations, and noted any intentions of behaviours to change or strategies to try to better manage their work-life-balance. Three weeks after the workshops we sent them post-cards reminding them of these intentions, then followed up a further two weeks later to see if they had tried anything they said they would.

Data Analysis

Conversations from the Autographer workshops and the RescueTime workshop were transcribed, then coded along two main dimensions: 1) the content of the discussion and 2) the ways in which conversation unfolded around the data to support participants ‘life-
swapping’ and reflection on the data. We also extracted intentions to change or try something new from the post-conversation questionnaires, looked at how these followed from conversations, and if there was any evidence that they lead to meaningful behaviour change.

Findings
Conversations around data to support reflection on work-life balance
Conversations around the data involved: description and explanation of data, including questioning the validity of the data; shows of empathy and support; enquiry and probing to find out more about each others’ actions; and sharing of experiences and strategies in relation to the themes of work-life balance they were given. This often led to new insights and suggestions for things to try in the future.

We found that participants tended to start off by describing and explaining to the other person, and interpreting, what the data in front of them was showing and providing context beyond what was in the data. These discussions often involved questioning or challenging the validity of the data or its collection. Empathy and support ranged from simply agreeing with the other person, to elaborating on what they had said, to relating what had been said to their own, personal, experience. Enquiring and probing involved prompting the other person to give more detail, often to find out more about the other person’s routines and strategies – often to compare these with their own.

A large portion of the conversations around data involved the participants sharing their experiences and views on the work-life-balance topics and related issues that came up through looking at the data together, and also sharing the strategies and tactics that they use to try to manage their boundaries – in doing so they discovered both similarities and differences in their approaches.

Insights gained and Intentions to Change
During the course of conversation, participants showed signs of gaining new insight into their own behaviours, and most of them, through discussion with their partners, made suggestions for things they might like to try to do differently in the future. We traced these from the conversations, through the post-conversation questionnaires and follow-ups 5 weeks later. An initial inspection of the data suggests that participants were inspired to try things that came up during the conversations, and in a few cases believed that these were changes that might have lasting impact on how they manage the boundaries between their work and non-work times. The changes they made included using the pomodoro technique to manage their time better, changing when they work at home vs. at the office, fitting exercise more formally into their daily routine, and restricting access to their mobile phone to minimize distractions.

Conclusions and Future Work
Conversations around data enabled participants to share and contrast their recorded experiences by sharing the context and meaning represented by the data. They also acted as the basis for sharing of work-life-balance related issues and strategies and techniques for dealing with them, that went beyond the data, and resulted in participants gaining some new insights and prompting changes in behaviour.
We are just at the initial stages of analyzing and understanding the data we have collected in order to extract useful insights and lessons learned. We also hope to publish an online guide to life-swapping with data, and propose to apply the technique in more specific settings where we feel it could benefit participants.

**Data Relationships for Discussion**

The 'life-swap' project is concerned with person-to-person conversations around personal data. At the workshop it would be interesting to talk about two data relationships present in these conversations: 1) the person-to-person relationship as supported by personal data in the role of augmenting sharing of life-experiences and 'life-swap' discussions and 2) the person-personal data relationship as supported by another person.

**Bios**

*Rowanne Fleck* is a Lecturer in Human Computer Interaction at the University of Birmingham. Her research usually takes a qualitative approach to understanding how people use new and emerging technologies in real world settings in order to reveal and design for the future. Current interests include: work-life balance and productivity; the use of personal informatics tools to promote reflection; considering people’s sharing behaviours through technology; mobile technology and small children; and the gap between the academic study of HCI and user experience (UX) practice and research in industry.

*Anya Skatova* is a Research Fellow in the Behavioural Science Group at Warwick Business School. Her research concerns developing novel approaches to understanding everyday routines and behaviours. She works on new experience-sampling methods (e.g., using wearable sensors) and approaches to leverage information from complex datasets (e.g., retail data). She also works on issues around ethics of these new methodologies including personal data privacy and data sharing.

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**References**


