



Digital  
Brain Switch

# Managing Work-Life Boundaries and Identities in the Digital Age

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# Boundaries in the Digital Age



Potential for:

- More flexible working across place and time
- More permeable boundaries between work and home
- Constant connection through various communication channels
- Quicker boundary transitions, more like 'switches'
- Issues around on-line identity boundary management

## Our perspective

- Focus on everyday negotiation of domain boundaries including ‘hard to research’ moments
- Participant-led method using event-based experience sampling:
  - what was a ‘switch’ for them?
  - which technologies mattered?
  - what boundaries were salient?

## Our multi-modal methodology

- Video diaries capturing switches (mostly with commentary)



- Follow-up narrative interviews incorporating life history, review of videos and reflection



# Digital Brain Switch project

- Interdisciplinary study
- How do digital technologies affect our ability to manage rapid transitions ('switches') across work life boundaries?



# Participant sample



Social  
entrepreneurs (SE)



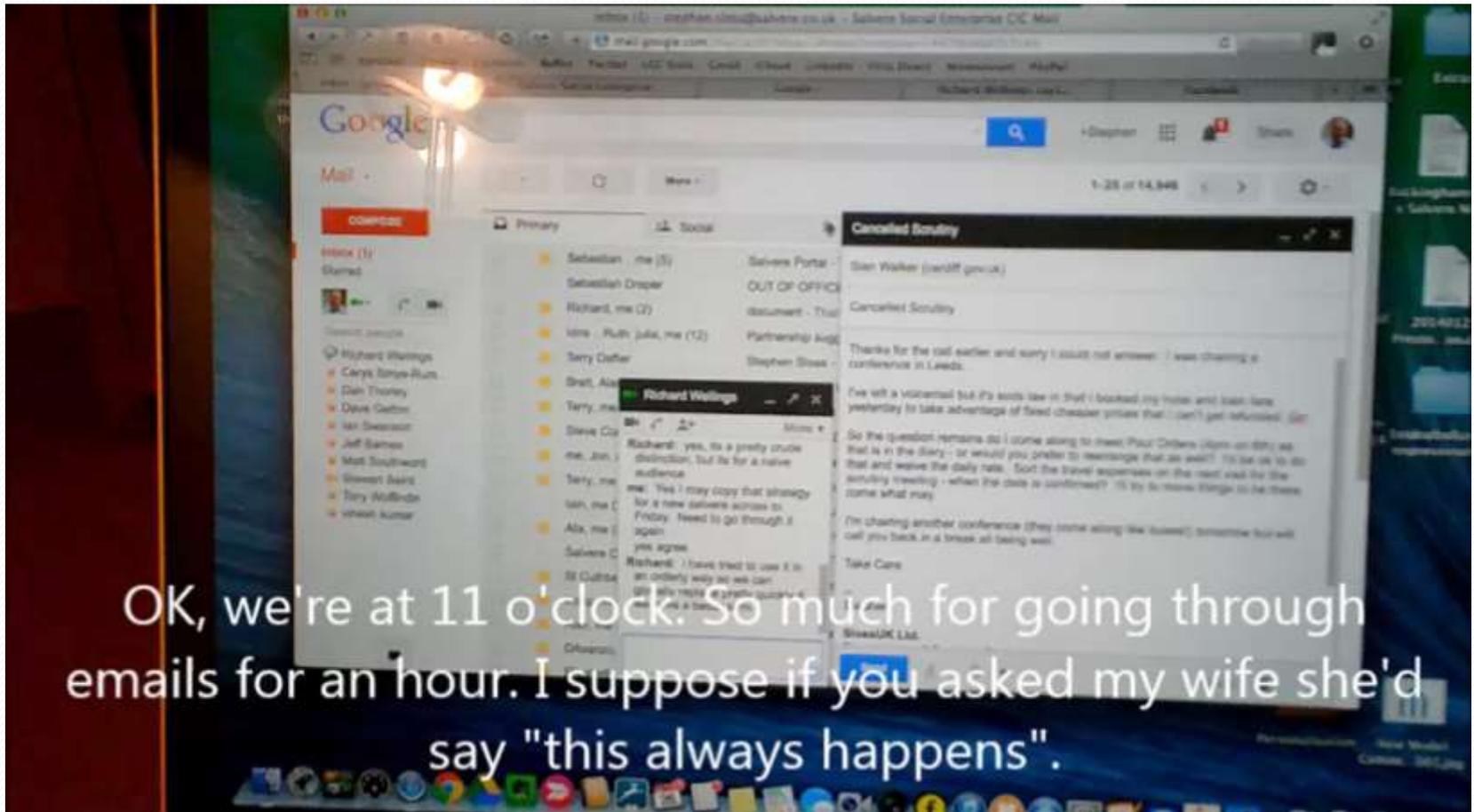
University students  
(US)



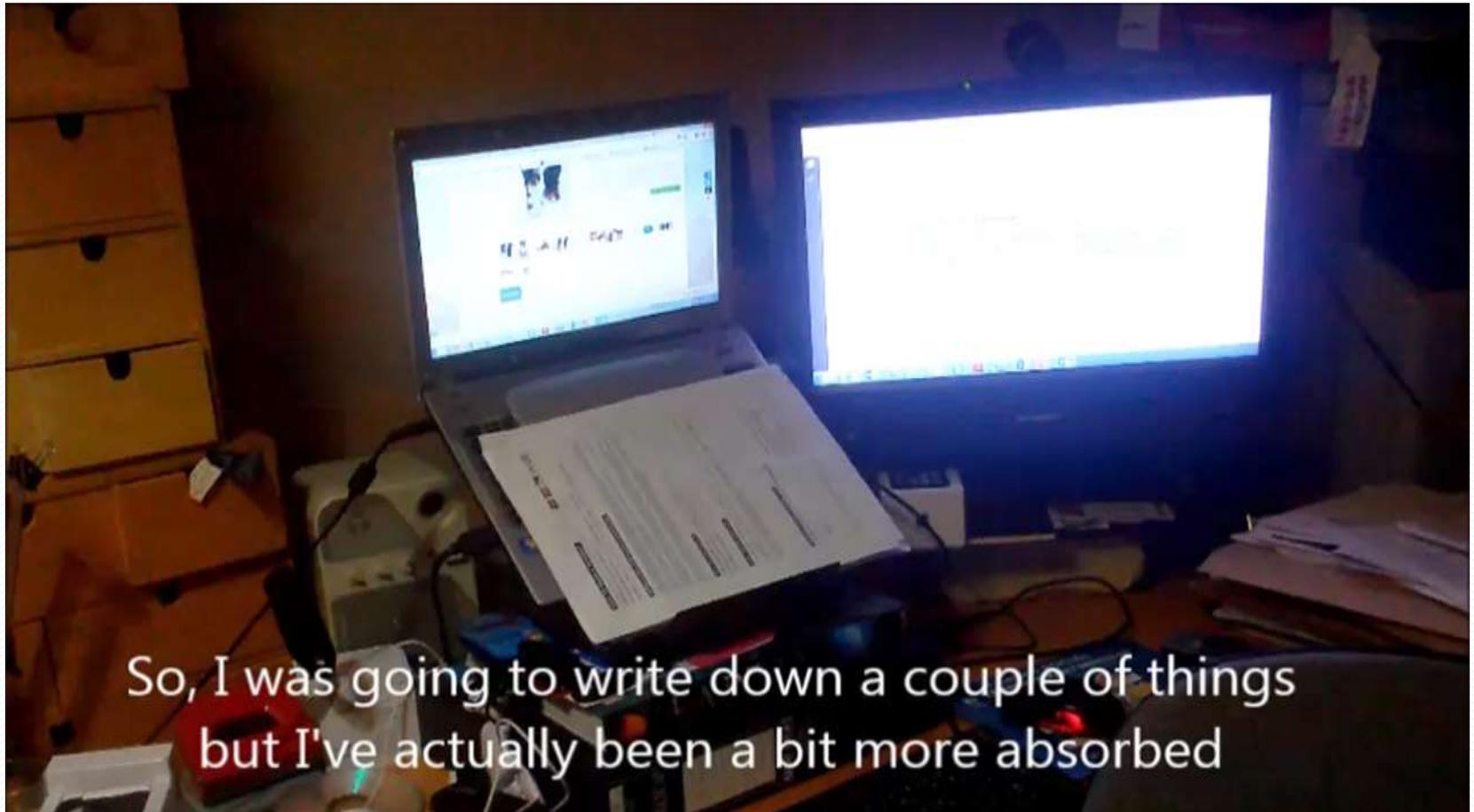
Office workers  
(OW)

# Our Findings: Switching across Boundaries in the Digital Age

# Stephen: Accepting permeable boundaries



# David: Ambivalence about permeable boundaries



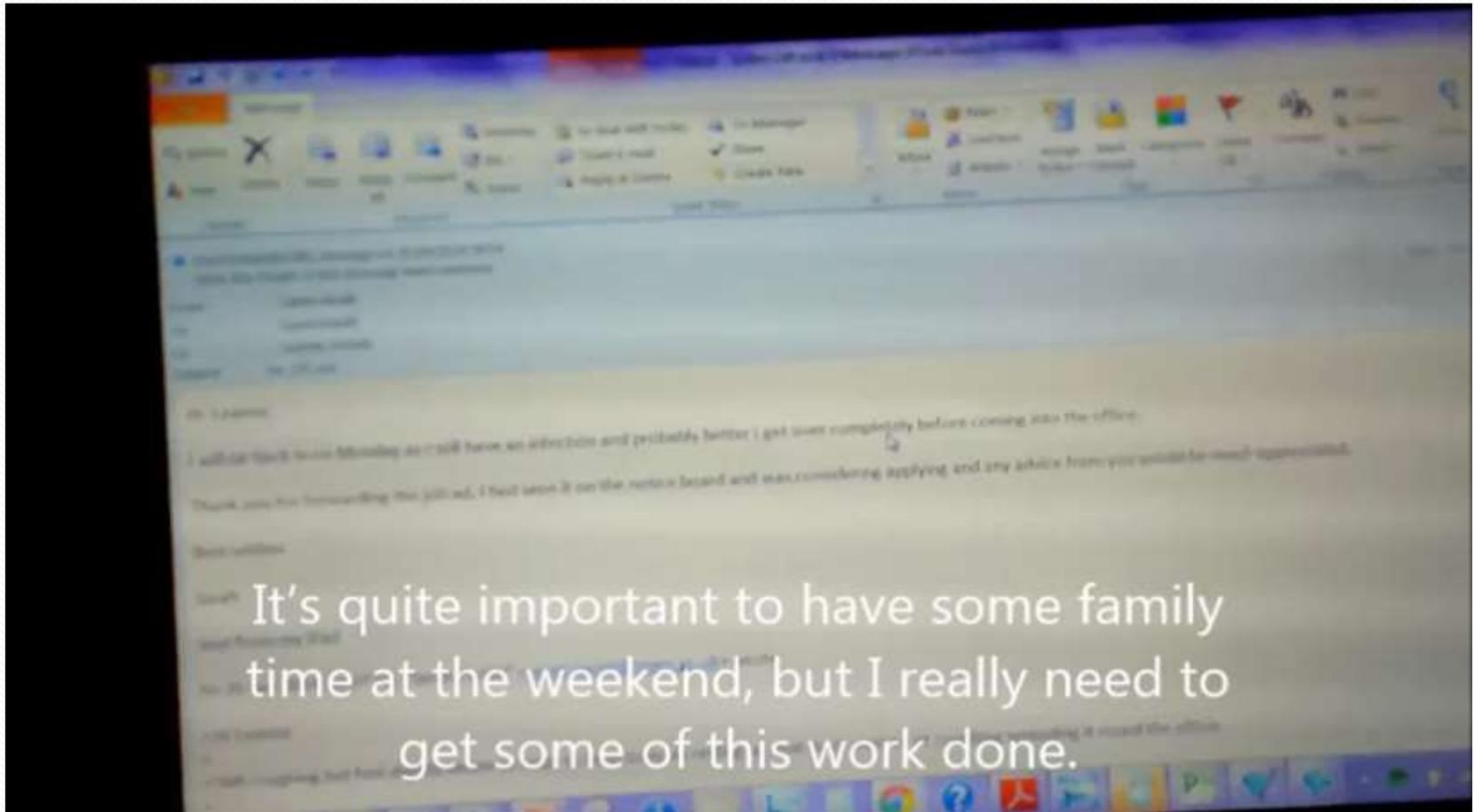
So, I was going to write down a couple of things  
but I've actually been a bit more absorbed

# Liz: Resisting permeable boundaries



So it's half past nine at night and I'm working,  
which I'm not particularly happy about,

# Leanne: Managing the emotions of permeable boundaries



# Our Findings: Identity Boundaries in the Digital World

# Identity Management

... There is this emerging field of social marketing in the on-line world ... you want to form a personal relationship with your customer, so the amount of personal information you give over about yourself, that's an interesting emerging place to be, so there's a bit of an overlap between my personal stuff and my work stuff [on-line]. (Michael, SE)

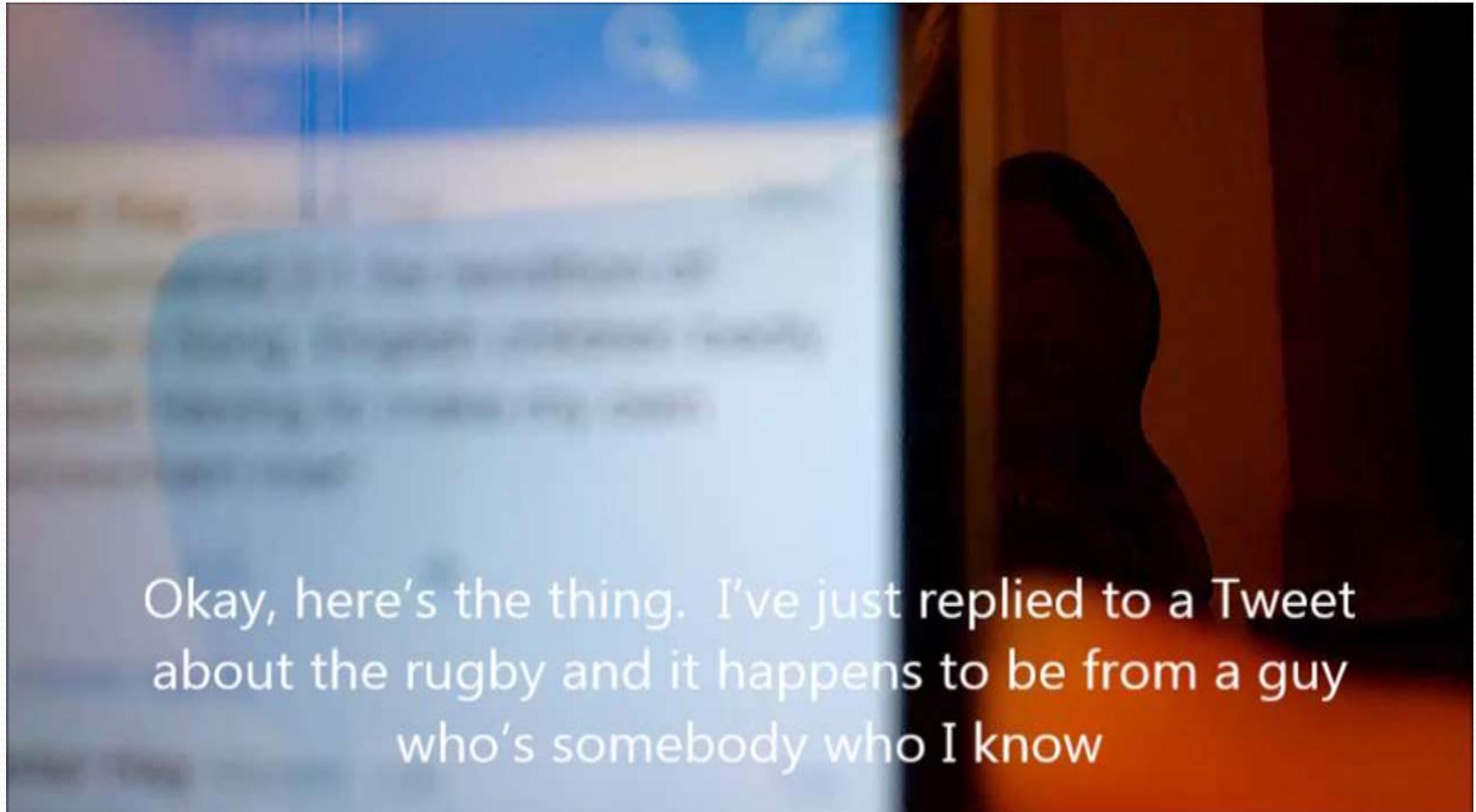
I use Facebook [as] a way of updating people as to what [my Social Enterprise] is doing. To make sure that they know that we're constantly doing things, and to keep the profile raised. (Rachel, SE)

I now have 171 un-responded to emails that have come out of LinkedIn. ...And, not only have I not responded to these various emails, but it does sometimes concern me that the people whose emails I haven't responded to might be wondering why on earth I'm not responding. (Marlon, OW)

Twitter is all about how clever you are in a public forum and I've realised how private I am about my use of technology and sharing... It's a terrible pressure to use it all the time to say 'look at me, look how clever I am' (Cressida, SE)



# Stephen: Identity merging



# David: Identities as conflictual and contested

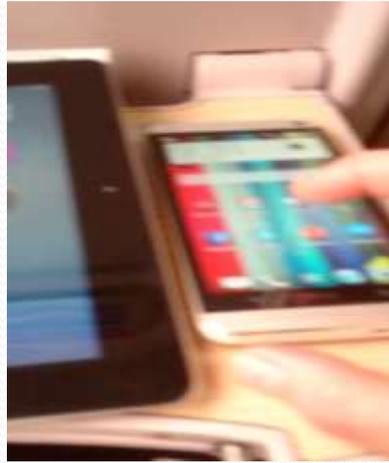


“ ...I’ll look at emails in the middle of [a] period with the kids, normally on my phone..... I think ‘oh well you know the chips are going to be another five minutes and [the children] are quite happy ... so I’ll just check the emails’.. And then you get something which is maybe a bit snotty and .. puts you in a bad mood.... And then before you know it, the chips are burning, the kids are shouting because they have detected that you’re not, sort of, in the same space.... So I’m trying to stop doing that but .. it’s very difficult because .. I think it comes back to being a social entrepreneur.. we’re not just doing it for the money... I’m quite passionate about [it] ..”

(David, SE)

# Reflexive Learning for Research Participants

# Realisation and Learning



I was surprised sometimes that I would have about three different screens on the go, so, sometimes I would have the television, the laptop and my phone, or sometimes on the train I might have the laptop, and the iPad and my phone all open at once and various things.... I always, sort of, knew I was doing it, but the filming, sort of, made me think, 'oh, that's probably a bit extreme'. (Liz, OW)



I already roughly knew that I did a lot of focusing between appointments etc either when walking or driving. What I learned from this study was the role of my conversations with people or partners which often take place in the gaps between meetings and how I use these as opportunities to reflect with other people and indirectly to reflect myself (Simon, SE)

# Changing Behaviours

I think it's triggered my going onto Twitter... I think getting through that week was quite a challenge for me, because I knew I would have to discuss my inner/outer world with other people ... You've started a process in me which is more about sane engagement with technology rather than insane engagement with technology, if that makes any sense? (Cressida, SE)



I'm also trying now every now and then to just switch off in the tube and just think so I don't even connect anymore. So that's also something that I started doing afterwards because I thought at least give yourself some time to think because when you continuously are connected you're reacting only, it's hard to be very proactive and create. (Allan, SE)

# Emergent Issues and Conclusions

# Meaning of Work in the Digital Age

- Individualised control and responsibility
- Looking beyond individual control
  - Highlighting limitations of flexibility
  - Recognising others' roles in boundary management
  - Questioning power relations

My husband would probably say my work-life balance is poor but I'm working very hard to improve it. And in my mind I shouldn't need to work from home so to me it's just a question of organising things a bit better during the day  
(Liz, OW)

# Managing Boundaries in the Digital Age

- Prioritise (not apportion) time between different areas of life including
  - ‘working lite’ (Bourne and Forman, 2014)
  - domain merging
- Possibility of ‘being yourself’ (merged identity) in all domains but
  - discovering limits to this (e.g. Ollier-Malaterre et al, 2013)
  - digital presenteeism
- Importance of personal, social and temporal context to understanding variety of boundaries and boundary management techniques
- Paradoxical nature of technology; individuals manage this tension on a daily basis without necessarily resolving it (cf Cohen et al 2008)

# Negotiating the tension: The three-legged dog

When I decided I was going to work from home I got the dog on purpose to make me leave my desk, because I knew I would have to walk her at least twice a day. So, that was a deliberate thing....I knew that it's really important for me to go and walk and be in the fresh air. So, that was perfect, and she only has three legs, so she doesn't need to walk very far. (Jane, SE)



# Overall Summary of Preliminary Findings from DBS Project



<http://www.scc.lancs.ac.uk/research/projects/DBS/dbs-exhibit/dbs.html>

# Two Videos of Preliminary Findings from DBS Project

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ima1HsT8QYA>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7w-huJ4Z544>

