



Digital Overload and the Right to Recover: A Multidisciplinary Review of Attention, Boundaries and Sustainable Performance

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ABSTRACT

Digital work has expanded flexibility and access while simultaneously increasing interruption, boundary permeability and the expectation of constant responsiveness. This review synthesizes research on technostress, recovery, attention and occupational well-being to examine digital overload as an organizational design problem. The article proposes a three-layer model distinguishing volume overload, boundary overload and vigilance overload. Volume overload concerns the quantity of digital inputs; boundary overload arises when work repeatedly enters recovery time; vigilance overload reflects the cognitive cost of anticipating messages and alerts even when no message is being processed. The paper argues that individual coping strategies are insufficient when communication norms and work design continuously reproduce overload. It presents organizational interventions involving channel architecture, response-time norms, meeting discipline, protected recovery and leadership modelling. The review concludes that the right to recover should be understood as a condition for sustainable performance, learning and health rather than as an opposition to productivity. Keywords: digital overload; recovery; technostress; attention; right to disconnect; sustainable performance

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INTRODUCTION

Digital tools have made work more mobile, connected and immediate. They have also created a new form of organizational noise. Employees can move between email, messaging platforms, video meetings, dashboards and mobile notifications throughout the day, often while trying to complete cognitively demanding work. The result is not simply “too much technology.” It is a pattern of fragmented attention and weakened recovery boundaries.

Technostress research has long shown that information and communication technologies can generate overload, invasion and complexity (Tarafdar et al., 2007). Recovery research, meanwhile, demonstrates the importance of psychological detachment from work for restoring depleted resources (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). These literatures become more important as hybrid work makes the physical boundary between work and non-work less reliable.

This article reframes digital overload as a system-level issue and proposes a model that separates three mechanisms: volume, boundary and vigilance overload.

METHODOLOGY

A multidisciplinary narrative review was conducted across occupational psychology, information systems and organizational behaviour. The synthesis focused on mechanisms that explain why digital communication can impair attention and recovery even when individual messages appear minor. Concepts were organized according to where the load is produced: the amount of incoming information, the temporal invasion of non-work periods and the anticipatory monitoring demanded by an always-available culture.



THREE LAYERS OF DIGITAL OVERLOAD

Volume overload occurs when the number of messages, meetings, platforms and updates exceeds the individual's practical capacity to process them. The consequence is triage behaviour: people respond to what is most visible or urgent rather than what is most important.

Boundary overload occurs when work communication repeatedly enters time that would otherwise support recovery. A single evening message may seem harmless, but repeated intrusions can establish a norm of availability. The issue is not only time spent answering; it is the interruption of psychological detachment.

Vigilance overload is subtler. People may repeatedly check devices because they expect that something important could arrive. Attention is partially allocated to monitoring. Even without an actual notification, the possibility of interruption can reduce depth of focus and increase subjective pressure.

WHY INDIVIDUAL SOLUTIONS ARE NOT ENOUGH

Advice on digital well-being often emphasizes turning off notifications, using focus modes or practising self-discipline. These strategies can help, but they fail when organizational expectations contradict them. An employee cannot comfortably disconnect if senior leaders send urgent-looking messages at midnight and reward immediate replies.

This is a classic interaction between individual agency and organizational context. Recovery is partly a personal practice, but organizations shape the conditions under which recovery is socially permitted. Sustainable change therefore requires collective norms.

ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

Five interventions follow from the model. First, organizations should define the purpose of communication channels so that every platform does not become equally urgent. Second, teams should establish response-time norms, distinguishing genuine emergencies from ordinary work. Third, meeting discipline should protect blocks of uninterrupted work. Fourth, delayed-send functions and quiet hours can reduce boundary intrusion. Fifth, leaders should model the behaviour they claim to support.

A useful audit asks: How many channels must an employee monitor? Which messages truly require synchronous response? What proportion of meetings could be asynchronous? Are employees penalized informally for disconnecting? What behaviours do leaders model outside working hours?

The three-layer model is supported by adjacent evidence on telepressure, smartphone use and interruption. Workplace telepressure has been linked to poorer recovery (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015), while work-related smartphone use can interfere with psychological detachment (Derks et al., 2014). Experimental and field research on interruptions also indicates that disrupted work carries measurable attentional and stress costs (Mark et al., 2008). These findings support treating digital overload as a work-design issue rather than only an individual self-regulation problem.

Scholarly Contribution and Testable Propositions

Table 1 summarizes the proposed framework and its principal analytical dimensions.

Table 1. Analytical framework for digital overload

Overload layer	Mechanism	Typical symptom	Organizational response
Volume	Inputs exceed processing capacity	Triage, backlog, shallow attention	Channel reduction; asynchronous design
Boundary	Work repeatedly enters recovery time	Poor detachment; extended workday	Quiet hours; delayed send; coverage



Vigilance	Expectation of interruption sustains monitoring	Repeated checking; fragmented focus	Response-time norms; notification defaults
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Research propositions

- P1. Explicit response-time norms will reduce vigilance overload even when total message volume remains constant.
- P2. Boundary overload will predict impaired recovery more strongly when after-hours communication is perceived as socially mandatory.
- P3. Leadership modelling will moderate the effectiveness of formal digital-well-being policies.

DISCUSSION

The economic logic for recovery is straightforward: attention is finite, and exhausted attention produces errors, shallow thinking and slower learning. Yet the deeper argument is human. Continuous availability can transform flexibility into a condition of permanent partial presence—never fully at work and never fully away from it.

The concept of a right to recover does not imply rigid uniformity. Some roles require on-call coverage, international collaboration or unusual schedules. The design challenge is to make these requirements explicit, compensated and bounded rather than culturally unlimited. Teams can coordinate coverage so that organizational responsiveness does not require universal individual availability.

RESEARCH AGENDA

Future research should measure vigilance overload directly and distinguish it from message volume. Studies could examine whether explicit response-time norms reduce checking behaviour and improve sleep or focus. Comparative research across countries with and without right-to-disconnect legislation could clarify the interaction between legal frameworks and organizational culture. There is also a need to study AI-generated communication, which may increase message volume by making content easier to produce.

CONCLUSION

Digital overload is not merely a personal failure to manage notifications. It emerges from the architecture of work. By distinguishing volume, boundary and vigilance overload, organizations can design more precise interventions. Protecting recovery is compatible with high performance because recovery restores the cognitive and emotional resources on which sustainable performance depends.

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