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Organizations as Systems for Collective Recovery and Sustainable Work

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Abstract

Recovery is commonly treated as an individual process that occurs after work, during breaks, or through personal boundary management. That framing is incomplete when workload, temporal control, social support, and coordination are organized collectively and when one employee's ability to disengage depends on the availability and actions of others. This Original Conceptual Theory Article develops a proposed Theory of Organizational Recovery Systems to reposition recovery as a work-system problem as well as an individual experience. The theory integrates recovery research with job demands–resources reasoning, multilevel work design, relational resource processes, temporal work organization, and interdependence. It proposes that sustainable recovery depends on four linked system functions: demand containment, usable temporal release, relational replenishment, and coordination of recovery across interdependent roles. A fifth mechanism, recovery legitimacy, concerns whether formally available recovery opportunities can be used without covert penalties, workload escalation, or relational sanctions. Eight propositions specify conditional relationships among these mechanisms, accumulated strain, workload transfer, and sustainable functioning. The article distinguishes formal policy from enacted practice, individual recovery from organization-level recoverability, social care from structural workload correction, and conceptual plausibility from empirical validation. The theory is not presented as a validated causal model or universal prescription. Its principal contribution is to define organizational recovery as a proposed multilevel and temporally recursive system property whose measurement and effects require longitudinal, multilevel, and work-redesign research.

Keywords: Theoretical foundations, Workload design and temporal boundaries, Mutual care and resource replenishment, Recovery across interdependent roles, Work-system design implications, Collective

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Introduction

Recovery from work has usually been conceptualized as the process through which depleted resources are restored after effort expenditure. Contemporary recovery scholarship recognizes multiple temporal settings, including within-day breaks, evenings, weekends, and vacations, and increasingly emphasizes that recovery is shaped by context rather than by off-job time alone [1]. Yet the dominant unit of analysis remains the individual employee: whether the person detaches, relaxes, sleeps, regulates attention, or engages in restorative activity. This focus has generated important knowledge, but it leaves a central organizational question underdeveloped. If workloads, schedules, staffing, coordination demands, and communication expectations are socially and structurally produced, then recovery opportunity is partly produced by the work system that creates those demands.

Meta-analytic evidence indicates that recovery experiences are systematically associated with work characteristics and with states such as fatigue and vigor [2]. This makes recovery more than a discretionary leisure preference, but it does not establish that organizations possess a collective recovery capability. Sustainable-work reasoning further suggests that functioning should be evaluated across person, context, and time rather than as a stable individual attribute [3]. A worker may appear to cope successfully in one interval while carrying accumulating recovery debt into later periods, or may recover only because coworkers absorb displaced demands. Consequently, sustainable work cannot be inferred from short-term functioning, policy availability, or visible attendance alone.

The broader occupational stress literature has long demonstrated that work conditions are consequential for employee strain and well-being [4]. A recovery perspective extends this insight by asking not only what creates strain but also whether the structure of work permits recurring restoration. Recovery research itself distinguishes recovery processes and experiences from their outcomes and identifies contextual and temporal questions that remain unresolved [5]. These distinctions are important because an organization may provide formal time off while maintaining expectations, schedules, or dependencies that make psychological and practical disengagement difficult.

This article therefore develops an Original Conceptual Theory Article that proposes a Theory of Organizational Recovery Systems. Its core claim is not that collective recovery has already been empirically validated. Rather, it proposes that recovery can be theorized as a coordinated work-system function when demand containment, temporal release, relational replenishment, and interdependent-role coverage jointly shape whether workers can repeatedly restore resources without transferring unresolved costs to others. The contribution is deliberately bounded: it integrates established component evidence into a new multilevel architecture, specifies testable propositions, identifies rival explanations, and separates conceptual plausibility from demonstrated organizational effects.

Theoretical foundations

The first foundation is job demands–resources theory. Job demands require sustained effort and can contribute to strain, whereas job resources can support motivation and help workers manage demands [6]. For recovery theory, the key implication is not that every demand is harmful or every resource restorative. Rather, demand intensity, persistence, controllability, and recurrence influence the amount of recovery required, while resources shape how work can be performed and whether strain accumulates. The proposed theory therefore treats workload architecture and resource availability as analytically distinct from recovery itself.

A second foundation is multilevel work design. Jobs are not produced solely through individual choice; their characteristics are shaped by occupational, organizational, social, and institutional influences [7]. This matters because opportunities to disengage can be constrained upstream by staffing, task allocation, workflow timing, communication norms, or interdependent obligations. The proposed theory accordingly treats recoverability as partly designed. That interpretation remains a theoretical extension: evidence that organizations shape job characteristics does not itself show that they possess a measurable recovery-system property.

A third foundation concerns relational resources. Organizational life can generate or deplete emotional, relational, and collective forms of energy through interaction [8]. This literature supports moving beyond a purely intrapersonal account of resource replenishment, but it also introduces measurement and level-of-analysis problems. Relational energy should not be treated as synonymous with recovery, and collective constructs cannot be inferred merely from average individual states. The present theory therefore uses relational-resource reasoning to explain possible replenishment pathways while keeping recovery processes conceptually separate.

Finally, contemporary job demands–resources theory increasingly accommodates multilevel and work–home processes [9]. This supports cross-level reasoning but does not validate the proposed organizational system. Theoretical foundations are thus used as building blocks rather than as proof. Together, they imply that recovery is plausibly conditioned by how demands, resources, relationships, and temporal opportunities are organized, while leaving the higher-order construct of organizational recoverability open to empirical challenge.

Workload design and temporal boundaries

Recovery requires more than the existence of time away from task execution. Within-day evidence shows that the content of microbreaks matters: relaxation, social interaction, nutrition, and cognitively demanding activities do not necessarily produce equivalent short-term recovery experiences [10]. This suggests that organizations cannot infer recovery from break availability alone. A formally scheduled interruption may still fail to restore resources if it is filled with continuing cognitive demands, interrupted by work, or experienced as illegitimate.

Event-based experience-sampling evidence similarly shows that recovery can change across short pre-break and post-break intervals [11]. The implication is temporal rather than prescriptive. Breaks can function as episodes of release, but their effects depend on what precedes and occurs during them. No universal break frequency or duration follows from this evidence. In

the proposed theory, the relevant construct is therefore usable temporal release: a proposed system condition in which nominally available time can actually be used to reduce continued exposure to work demands.

Temporal boundaries are also shaped by schedule architecture. Routine work-schedule instability is associated with poorer worker health and well-being, indicating that predictability itself is a meaningful work condition [12]. Unstable timing can impair planning, constrain nonwork coordination, and make recovery periods less reliable even when total scheduled hours appear acceptable. These findings do not establish a causal threshold for "safe" scheduling, but they support treating predictability and control as part of recoverability rather than as administrative details.

Recovery experiences also occur in heterogeneous daily configurations rather than along a single continuum [13]. Employees may combine detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control in different ways, which cautions against defining one universally optimal recovery profile. Recovery opportunities are shaped not only by the existence of nonwork or break time but also by the organization and predictability of temporal release [10-12]. The proposed theory therefore distinguishes formal time allocation from substantive temporal release and predicts that recovery will depend on whether the work system protects that release from continued demand activation.

Mutual care and resource replenishment

Recovery is also relational. Workplace support research distinguishes emotional support from instrumental support while showing that the two forms are related and can operate through different processes [14]. Emotional support may help workers interpret or tolerate difficult experiences, whereas instrumental support can alter the practical burden of work. For recovery-system theory, this distinction matters because reassurance without workload assistance may leave the originating demand untouched, while instrumental assistance may itself transfer effort to another person.

Daily evidence further suggests that positive collegial interactions can participate in resource-gain sequences linking prior restoration, positive affect, and subsequent work engagement [15]. This supports the idea that resource replenishment is not always solitary. However, daily associations cannot be elevated directly to team- or organization-level capacity. Collegiality may replenish some workers in some moments while simultaneously creating social obligations, interruptions, or emotional labor for others.

An integrative review of workplace social support shows that support effects vary by form, source, mechanism, and context, and that buffering findings are not uniformly consistent [16]. Mutual care should therefore not be treated as an unconditional protective factor. In the present theory, care becomes recovery-relevant when it either provides resources, reduces demands, or legitimates the use of recovery opportunities. It becomes potentially counterproductive when it substitutes for structural correction or creates an expectation that employees must absorb one another's overload indefinitely.

Leader behavior adds another layer. Multilevel evidence on leader support for recovery indicates that empathy for recovery, respect for boundaries, and role modelling can be associated with employee psychological detachment, with effects conditional on relational context [17]. This supports the proposed construct of recovery legitimacy: whether workers can use available recovery opportunities without anticipating relational or performance penalties. Social resources can facilitate recovery, but their function depends on the form, source, and relational context of support rather than on support being uniformly protective [14, 16, 17]. Mutual care is therefore theorized as one replenishment channel, not as evidence that interpersonal goodwill can neutralize excessive workload or inadequate staffing.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for organizations as systems for collective recovery and sustainable work.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Organizations as Systems for Collective Recovery and Sustainable Work

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Evidence basis	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Recovery process	Unwinding and restoring resources following work-related effort	Continued activation after exposure to work demands	Established recovery literature	A process or experience rather than an outcome	Foundational process contributing to recoverability	Evidence remains predominantly individual-level	Does not establish an organizational recovery capacity
Recovery outcome	Restored energy, reduced strain, or renewed functional capacity following recovery	Whether restoration has occurred	Established recovery evidence	Outcome of recovery rather than availability of recovery opportunity	Potential indicator for future empirical testing	Direction and causality vary across research designs	Not equivalent to individual or organizational performance
Workload design	Organization of demands, resources,	Upstream creation and	Established job-demands and	Broader than workload	Proposed upstream	Effects depend on occupation	No universally optimal workload

	task requirements, and work conditions	distribution of recovery need	work-design literature	quantity or working hours alone	demand-containment lever	and work context	configuration is established
Temporal release	A period in which continuing exposure to work demands can substantively decrease	Nominal breaks or nonwork time may remain work-activated	Established within-day recovery and break evidence	More than scheduled break availability	Proposed mechanism enabling substantive disengagement	Appropriate duration and quality remain context-dependent	Formal time allocation does not demonstrate actual recovery
Schedule predictability	Stability and foreseeability of when work demands occur	Uncertainty surrounding recovery opportunities	Established evidence on temporal work organization	Distinct from total work hours or schedule duration	Proposed condition supporting usable temporal release	Effects may vary substantially across occupations and arrangements	Associations do not establish a universal causal scheduling threshold
Mutual care	Emotional or instrumental support that helps employees process or manage work demands	Social and practical resource deficits	Established workplace-support literature	Not synonymous with friendliness, harmony, or generalized organizational care	Proposed relational replenishment channel	Effects vary according to source, form, and relational context	Cannot substitute automatically for workload or staffing redesign
Resource replenishment	Restoration or acquisition of resources needed to resume work demands	Resource depletion generated through sustained effort	Established individual and relational resource evidence	Broader than emotional support alone	Proposed mechanism connecting recovery experiences with renewed capacity	Collective-level operation remains insufficiently established	Individual resource gain does not demonstrate organizational replenishment
Recovery legitimacy	**Proposed construct:** shared or enacted expectation that legitimate recovery opportunities can be used without relational or performance penalties	Formal recovery opportunities may be socially unusable	Informed by leadership, boundary, and recovery-support evidence	Distinct from formal policy availability or managerial rhetoric	Proposed mechanism translating available recovery opportunity into usable recovery	Requires construct development and discriminant validation	Cannot be inferred from the existence of supportive policies
Recovery coordination across interdependent roles	**Proposed construct:** organization of coverage, timing, handoffs, and workload so that one worker's recovery does not predictably impose unresolved demands on another	Recovery opportunities may generate workload transfer in coupled work	Informed by interdependence, communication, and coworker-response research	Distinct from individual boundary management	Proposed mechanism for collective recoverability	Direct empirical evidence remains limited	Does not imply that all interdependence is harmful
System recoverability	**Proposed construct:** capacity of a work system to permit recurring restoration of role-relevant resources without systematically transferring	Fragmentation of recovery into isolated individual episodes	Original theoretical synthesis grounded in established component literatures	Not equivalent to average employee detachment or wellness-program availability	Proposed higher-order property of the work system	Measurement structure and distinctiveness require testing	Not a validated score, organizational standard, or demonstrated causal capacity

	unresolved recovery costs						
Organizational recovery system	**Proposed configuration:** work-design, temporal, relational, and coordination conditions through which demands are contained, release becomes usable, resources are replenished, and recovery is coordinated across roles	Individualized framing of a structurally produced recovery problem	Original conceptual synthesis	Not a single intervention, benefit, policy, or employee coping strategy	Central theoretical contribution	Overall architecture remains empirically unvalidated	Does not constitute a universal prescription or implementation-ready model

Note. Entries marked proposed represent original theoretical constructs or extensions introduced in this article. Other entries summarize established domains in the literature but may be assigned new roles within the proposed theory.

Recovery across interdependent roles

Recovery becomes a collective organizational problem when work is sufficiently interdependent that one person cannot disengage without consequences for others. Research on telework and social interaction shows that interpersonal demands can contribute to exhaustion and that reducing exposure to interaction can sometimes alter this relationship [18]. The implication is not that collaboration is inherently harmful. Rather, interaction itself consumes attention, emotion, and coordination capacity. A recovery system must therefore recognize that the same relationship can be a source of resources in one context and a source of continuing demand in another.

Team-stressor research reinforces the need for level precision. Stressors can originate at individual, dyadic, team, or cross-level locations, and an average of employees' experiences is not automatically evidence of a team-level process [19]. Accordingly, collective recovery cannot be defined simply as the mean psychological detachment of team members. The proposed theory instead treats collective recovery as a coordination problem: whether the architecture of work permits multiple interdependent actors to restore resources without creating recurrent, uncompensated demand transfers elsewhere in the system.

Organization-design scholarship distinguishes task, goal, and knowledge interdependence because each creates different coordination requirements [20]. This distinction provides the structural basis for the proposed idea of recovery-related workload externalization. When an employee steps away, unfinished work may disappear, wait, be automated, or move to another role. Only the last pattern necessarily generates an immediate interpersonal redistribution. Whether such redistribution undermines recovery should therefore depend on the type of interdependence, available coverage, slack, task timing, and whether transferred work is later reciprocated or absorbed structurally.

Evidence from distributed work likewise shows that communication consequences vary with communication quality, supervisor expectations, and task interdependence [21]. Thus, continuous connectivity should not be treated as either inherently beneficial or inherently harmful. The proposed construct of recovery coordination refers to arranging timing, coverage, communication, and handoffs so that legitimate disengagement remains possible within coupled work. This relationship remains unvalidated. No selected study directly demonstrates an organizational capacity for collective recovery; the theory predicts that such capacity becomes most consequential where work cannot be sustainably decomposed into independent individual roles.

A further distinction concerns visibility and burden. An employee who remains available may appear cooperative while silently absorbing coordination costs, whereas a worker who disconnects visibly may be following a legitimate boundary that exposes previously hidden understaffing. TORS therefore does not equate availability with contribution or disengagement with reduced performance. It proposes that recovery externalization exists only when one actor's release predictably relocates unresolved demand to another actor without adequate capacity, compensation, delay, or redesign. This definition separates a proposed workload-transfer mechanism from moral judgments about who is being sufficiently helpful.

Proposed theory of organizational recovery systems

The Theory of Organizational Recovery Systems begins from a temporal observation: different off-job experiences can lead through distinct psychological pathways to next-day work states and behavior [22]. Recovery therefore should not be reduced to a single quantity of "time off." At system level, the relevant theoretical question is whether work repeatedly creates conditions in which workers can move from demand exposure into meaningful release and return without accumulating unresolved strain or simply exporting that strain to someone else.

Daily field evidence also connects workday events, evening relaxation, and next-morning energy, showing that recovery unfolds across temporal boundaries rather than in an isolated post-work compartment [23]. TORS extends this component evidence by proposing system recoverability: the capacity of a work system to permit recurring restoration of role-relevant resources without systematically transferring unresolved recovery costs to interdependent actors. This is a proposed higher-order construct, not an observed organizational trait.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for theory of organizational recovery systems, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

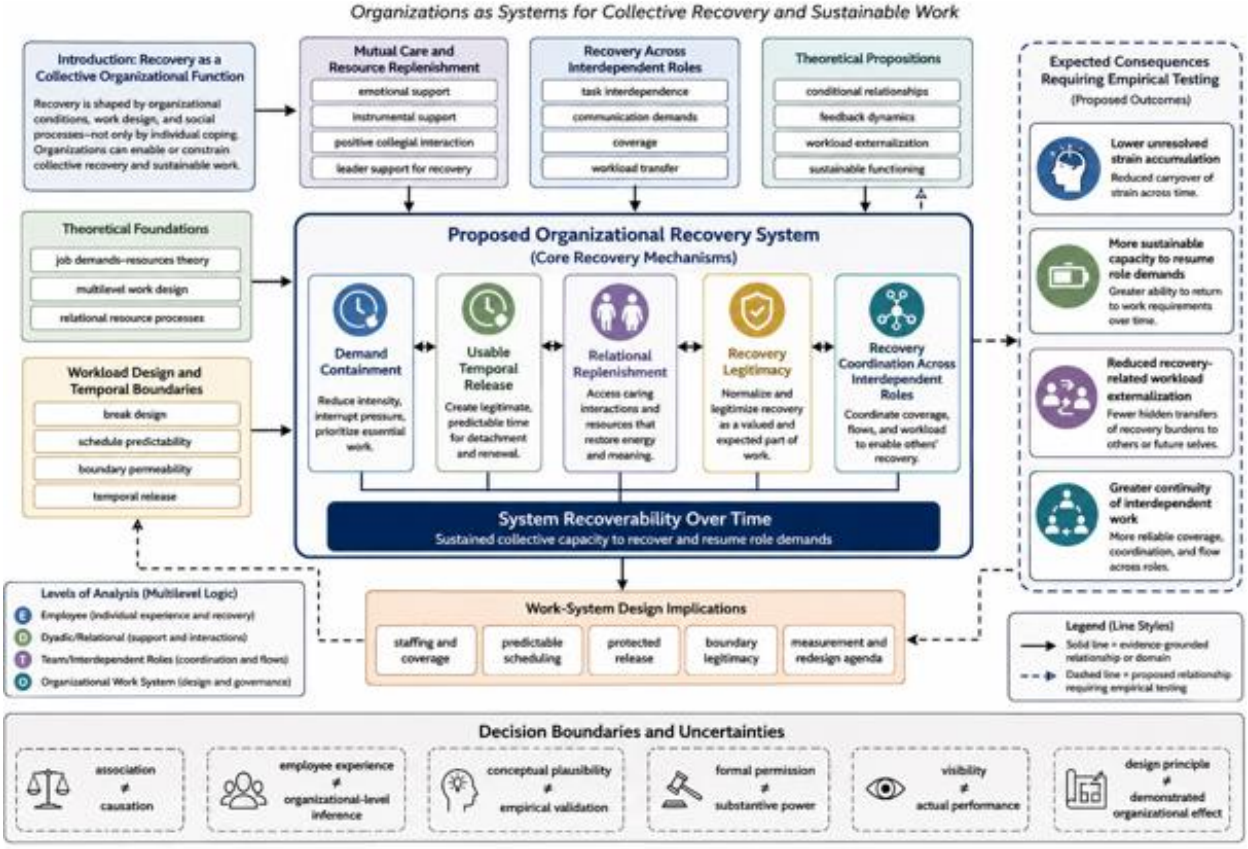

Figure 1. Theory of Organizational Recovery Systems

Intervention research indicates that psychological detachment can be modified, but evidence that an individual can learn to detach does not show that the surrounding work architecture is recoverable [24]. TORS therefore distinguishes recovery capability from recovery responsibility. Individual strategies may matter, yet they cannot establish whether demands are contained upstream, whether temporal release is protected, or whether staffing and workflow make disengagement feasible without hidden costs.

Coworker research provides a further theoretical bridge because changes made by one employee can elicit attribution and reaction from others [25]. TORS extends this principle cautiously to recovery arrangements: individual boundary choices may have interpersonal consequences when work is coupled. A system account therefore requires simultaneous attention to how work is designed, how roles are coupled, and how recovery unfolds across time [7, 20, 23]. The proposed architecture contains five mechanisms: demand containment, usable temporal release, relational replenishment, recovery legitimacy, and recovery coordination. Their recursive combination, rather than any single practice, constitutes the proposed basis of system recoverability.

The five mechanisms are intentionally nonredundant. Demand containment concerns what enters the recovery cycle; usable temporal release concerns whether exposure can actually stop; relational replenishment concerns resources exchanged through supportive interaction; recovery legitimacy concerns the social consequences of using recovery opportunities; and recovery coordination concerns how release is synchronized with coupled work. TORS proposes that system recoverability emerges only from their configuration over repeated cycles. High support with uncontrolled workload, generous leave with continuous digital activation, or protected breaks without role coverage would therefore represent partial conditions rather than evidence of a complete organizational recovery system. The configuration claim itself remains theoretical and may ultimately prove unnecessary if established work-design constructs explain the same variance.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in organizations as systems for collective recovery and sustainable work.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Organizations as Systems for Collective Recovery and Sustainable Work

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Supporting evidence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Proposed: Workload architecture → demand containment	Intensity, recurrence, timing, and distribution of work demands	Upstream reduction of avoidable carryover and unnecessary demand continuation	Occupational and task context	Less unresolved demand entering recovery periods	Established job-demands and work-design evidence	General job quality, autonomy, or resource abundance	Longitudinal measurement of workload architecture and subsequent recovery
Proposed: Temporal design → usable temporal release	Break structure, schedule predictability, and boundary conditions	Actual reduction in exposure to continuing work demands	Temporal autonomy, predictability, workload intensity	Greater opportunity for substantive disengagement and restoration	Established within-day recovery and scheduling evidence	Individual recovery preference or self-regulation	Objective timing data combined with repeated recovery measurement
Proposed: Boundary legitimacy → substantive recovery use	Formal availability of breaks, leave, or nonwork boundaries	Reduced expectation of relational, availability, or performance penalties	Leader behavior, peer norms, local work climate	Greater use of otherwise available recovery opportunities	Leadership and recovery-support evidence	General supportive leadership or positive organizational climate	Multilevel measures distinguishing legitimacy from generic support
Proposed: Social resources → relational replenishment	Emotional and instrumental support	Resource provision, reassurance, practical assistance, or demand processing	Source, relationship quality, and nature of support	Improved short-term replenishment under appropriate conditions	Established workplace-support and collegial-interaction evidence	Positive affect, selection, or pre-existing relationship quality	Temporal mediation and source-specific support tests
Proposed: Interdependence → recovery-related workload redistribution	Coupled tasks, goals, knowledge, communication, or role dependencies	Transfer, postponement, or reassignment of unfinished demands	Staffing coverage, slack, task separability, timing	Possible externalization of recovery costs to other workers	Established interdependence and coworker-response research	Ordinary coordination requirements unrelated to recovery	Workflow-linked multilevel studies tracing workload before and after disengagement
Proposed: Recovery coordination → reduced uncompensated externalization	Interdependent recovery needs	Planned coverage, handoffs, timing, and workload balancing	Degree and form of task interdependence	More sustainable recurring recovery across coupled roles	Indirect evidence from communication and organization-design research	Staffing adequacy or workflow quality alone	Quasi-experimental or longitudinal redesign studies
Proposed: Repeated recovery cycles → sustainable functioning	Recurring sequences of demand exposure and release	Restoration across repeated work cycles	Individual differences, nonwork demands, work context	More stable capacity to resume role demands over time	Established temporal recovery and sustainability evidence	Healthy-worker selection, sleep, coping, or general work quality	Multilevel longitudinal models spanning repeated demand–recovery cycles
Proposed: Recovery legitimacy × temporal release	Formal opportunity for recovery	Conversion of nominal opportunity into substantively usable release	Leader and peer expectations	Stronger correspondence between available time and experienced recovery	Component evidence from recovery-support and break research	Employees with stronger boundary preferences may both perceive legitimacy and recover better	Cross-level longitudinal or experimental tests
Proposed: Interdependence × individual temporal release	Individual disengagement within coupled work	Redistribution of unresolved work to other roles	Coverage capacity, workflow flexibility, reciprocity	Weaker individual recovery benefit when release creates substantial	Component evidence from interdependence and coworker-response research	High workload rather than interdependence may explain both transfer and poor recovery	Simultaneous measurement of individual recovery and coworker

				uncompensated workload transfer			workload change
Proposed: System strain feedback → work redesign	Recurrent incomplete recovery, coordination failure, or workload transfer	Recognition and adjustment of upstream work architecture	Decision authority, organizational learning, implementation capacity	Reduced recurrence of mismatched demands and recovery opportunities	Established work-design and longitudinal recovery reasoning	Performance slack or broader organizational improvement	Pre/post redesign evaluation with competing explanatory variables

Note. All relationships labelled proposed are theoretical predictions requiring empirical testing. Expected consequences are not demonstrated effect sizes or validated organizational outcomes. The table does not imply universal applicability, causal proof, or implementation readiness.

Theoretical propositions

The first propositions concern the difference between formal and usable opportunity. Daily microbreak research indicates that perceived health climate can shape microbreak autonomy and the way employees use short breaks [26]. **Proposition 1.** Holding demand exposure constant, work systems that contain recurring avoidable demand carryover will permit more complete recovery than systems that rely primarily on downstream employee recovery behavior. **Proposition 2.** Formal recovery opportunities will translate more strongly into recovery when temporal release is predictable, sufficiently autonomous, and protected from continued work activation.

Temporal direction also requires caution. Longitudinal evidence on work-related rumination and well-being indicates that relationships can unfold across extended periods and may include reciprocal dynamics rather than a simple one-way pathway [27]. **Proposition 3.** Emotional and instrumental resources will facilitate recovery when they reduce demands or replenish resources, but this benefit will weaken when providing care itself creates additional obligations or substitutes for structural correction. **Proposition 4.** The recovery benefit of an individual worker's temporal release will decrease when high role interdependence transfers unresolved demands to coworkers without compensating coverage or workload adjustment.

Formal absence is likewise not equivalent to restoration. Longitudinal vacation research shows that spillover work and individual characteristics can alter exhaustion and mood trajectories around time away [28]. **Proposition 5.** In highly interdependent work, coordinated recovery opportunities will support more sustainable recurring recovery than individually negotiated recovery when unilateral disengagement otherwise produces substantial workload externalities. This proposition concerns a proposed comparative mechanism, not a demonstrated superiority effect, and it may fail where tasks are easily separable or adequate slack already exists.

Proposition 6. Formal recovery opportunities will translate more strongly into actual recovery when enacted supervisory and peer expectations make their use legitimate and do not attach availability, performance, or collegial penalties to disengagement. **Proposition 7.** Sustainable functioning will depend more on repeated cycles of demand containment, usable release, and replenishment than on isolated high-intensity recovery episodes after prolonged demand accumulation. Both propositions require tests that distinguish perceived legitimacy from formal policy and recurring system patterns from individual differences in segmentation, coping, sleep, or nonwork demands.

Proposition 8. Repeated incomplete recovery, coordination breakdown, or workload transfer will contribute to sustainable functioning only insofar as feedback produces adjustment of upstream work design; otherwise, additional individual recovery effort may leave the originating demand architecture unchanged. This recursive proposition is intentionally falsifiable. Apparent support could instead reflect resource-rich organizations, healthier-worker selection, general management quality, or performance slack that simultaneously permits recovery and better functioning. TORS therefore predicts conditional relationships, not a deterministic sequence or a universal optimum.

The propositions also imply distinct levels of measurement. Demand containment and schedule predictability may be observable characteristics of work arrangements, legitimacy may be perceived and shared to varying degrees, relational replenishment can occur dyadically, and recovery outcomes remain partly individual. Any empirical test must therefore establish when aggregation is justified and when cross-level effects are being proposed. Failure to distinguish these levels could create apparent support for TORS simply by relabeling correlated employee perceptions as an organizational property.

Work-system design implications

The theory redirects attention from asking whether employees use recovery strategies to asking whether work design makes recovery feasible. Evidence from work-redesign interventions shows heterogeneous mechanisms and outcomes and cautions against assuming that organization-level effects follow automatically from individual-level changes [29]. Accordingly, TORS does not prescribe a fixed intervention bundle. It identifies candidate design variables—demand containment, predictability, protected release, coverage, support, and coordination—that can be measured and manipulated in future research.

Organizational interventions can also interact with circumstances outside work. Randomized intervention evidence indicates that changes involving work control and support may have different implications depending on employees' caregiving conditions [30]. System recoverability must therefore be evaluated against heterogeneous nonwork demands rather than assuming that identical formal arrangements produce identical recovery opportunity. A policy may increase discretion for one employee while remaining unusable for another whose work or nonwork dependencies constrain when that discretion can be exercised.

Work-design scholarship further emphasizes that better work can be pursued through multiple pathways and levels [31]. For recovery systems, this suggests placing responsibility upstream as well as downstream. Organizations could examine whether staffing permits coverage, whether schedules are predictable, whether communication expectations reactivate work during release, whether leaders enact boundary legitimacy, and whether one employee's protected time systematically redistributes demands. These are design questions for investigation, not demonstrated best practices or readiness criteria.

The design implication is diagnostic rather than prescriptive. A proposed recovery mechanism should be examined only where the corresponding problem exists: coordination where work is coupled, temporal protection where work intrudes into recovery periods, and demand containment where recurring overload is structurally generated. This preserves a decision boundary between a theory-guided question and a demonstrated organizational solution.

Empirical testing should combine employee recovery measures with schedule records, workload indicators, workflow dependencies, handoff patterns, and repeated observations across teams and time. Team or organizational recoverability should not be inferred from aggregated individual detachment without theoretical and statistical justification. Strong tests would compare TORS against simpler explanations such as autonomy, general support, job quality, staffing adequacy, and resource abundance. Longitudinal, multilevel, natural-experiment, and work-redesign designs are especially important for separating temporal ordering, selection, reciprocal effects, and genuine system-level mechanisms.

Conclusion

Organizations create many of the demands from which employees later need to recover. This article has proposed that the same organizational architecture may also shape whether recovery is possible, usable, relationally supported, and sustainable across interdependent roles. The Theory of Organizational Recovery Systems reframes recovery from an exclusively individual experience into a proposed multilevel work-system property organized around demand containment, usable temporal release, relational replenishment, recovery legitimacy, and coordination across coupled roles.

The theory does not imply that organizations can guarantee recovery, that all interdependence is harmful, or that social support can compensate for excessive demands. Individual differences, nonwork conditions, occupational requirements, temporal dynamics, and alternative explanations remain consequential. System recoverability is therefore a proposed construct whose distinctiveness from established work-design and support constructs must be demonstrated rather than assumed.

The central theoretical claim is deliberately bounded: sustainable work may depend not only on reducing demands or encouraging employees to recover, but also on coordinating recurring opportunities for restoration without systematically shifting unresolved costs elsewhere in the work system. Establishing whether that proposition is useful will require multilevel measurement, longitudinal evidence, and rigorous tests against simpler explanations.

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