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When Flexible Work Turns Employee Autonomy Into Organizationally Driven Self-Exploitation

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Abstract

Flexible work is commonly presented as an exchange in which employees gain control over when and where work occurs while organizations gain adaptability, retention, and productivity. This article argues that the exchange becomes ethically and organizationally problematic when formal discretion is combined with intensified expectations, permanent reachability, hidden working time, and individualized responsibility for managing incompatible demands. As a Critical Viewpoint Article, it develops an evidence-informed but non-empirical account of how autonomy may be converted into a vehicle for internalized organizational control. The proposed synthesis connects four mechanisms: autonomy pressure, availability norms, responsibility transfer, and organizational disavowal of harm. It defines self-exploitation through responsibility transfer as employee overextension represented as personal choice even though workload, evaluation systems, reciprocity expectations, or flexibility rhetoric materially generate that choice. The article further proposes that responsible flexibility requires genuine and reversible discretion, realistic workloads, protected non-work time, equitable and career-neutral access, proportionate monitoring, and credible voice, review, and remedy. These principles are normative design commitments rather than a validated model or universal prescription. Their relevance is conditional on occupation, employment security, task interdependence, household arrangements, managerial practice, and institutional context. Longitudinal, multilevel, comparative, and process-sensitive research is needed to test whether the proposed mechanisms explain when flexibility preserves autonomy and when it reorganizes control through the employee's own self-management. The contribution is a critical reframing of flexible-work harm as an organizational accountability problem rather than merely an individual boundary-management failure.

Keywords: Self-exploitation through responsibility transfer, Organizational accountability for flexible-work harm, Principles for responsible flexibility, Practical and ethical implications, Autonomy, Driven

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Introduction

The contradictory promise of flexible work

Flexible work is usually justified through a compelling promise: employees receive discretion over the location, timing, or sequencing of work, while organizations receive a more adaptable employment relationship. That promise draws legitimacy from a long work-design tradition in which autonomy is treated as a valuable job resource, but work-design research also shows that autonomy operates within configurations of demands, interdependence, feedback, and control rather than as an isolated benefit [1]. The central problem is therefore not whether discretion is desirable. It is whether an organization can grant formal choice while simultaneously structuring workloads, technologies, evaluation criteria, and responsiveness expectations so that employees must absorb the costs of making that choice workable. In such circumstances, control may become less visible without becoming less organizational.

A second difficulty concerns the meaning of autonomy itself. Genuine autonomy refers to action experienced as volitional, whereas self-regulation shaped by pressure, contingent approval, or internalized obligation is conceptually different even when the employee appears highly motivated [2]. Flexible work can blur this distinction because the employee decides when to resume work, whether to answer a message, or how to reconcile conflicting demands. The observable act may therefore look voluntary while the relevant choice set is tightly constrained. A worker who extends the day to meet an unrealistic deadline has exercised scheduling discretion, but that fact does not establish meaningful control over workload, consequences, or the legitimacy of refusing. This article defines autonomy pressure as a proposed condition in which employees are expected to use discretion in ways that satisfy organizational demands while retaining personal responsibility for the outcome.

The prevailing debate often treats flexibility as either an employee benefit or a source of work–family interference. This binary is insufficient because employees may experience the same arrangement as enabling and constraining, sometimes within the same working day. Qualitative evidence describes workplace flexibility as a paradoxical phenomenon in which discretion, security, visibility, reciprocity, and intensification are intertwined [3]. The critical issue is not simply whether employees value flexibility, but what they must provide in return, what risks they carry when using it, and whether the organization treats its own design choices as private coping problems. Self-exploitation, in the proposed usage, does not mean that employees freely choose harm in isolation. It means that organizationally generated demands are enacted through employees' own planning, availability, effort, and self-discipline.

A balanced argument must also acknowledge that flexible and remote work do not have uniformly adverse consequences. Well-being experiences vary across affective, cognitive, social, professional, and physical domains, while aggregate health associations differ by arrangement and implementation context [4, 5]. This heterogeneity rules out a general claim that flexible work is intrinsically exploitative. The objective of this Critical Viewpoint Article is narrower: to explain when autonomy may become a channel through which control is internalized, working time is extended, responsibility is transferred, and harm is individualized. The principal contribution is an original proposed synthesis linking these processes to organizational accountability and responsible-flexibility principles. It is neither an exhaustive review nor a validated causal model; it organizes plausible relationships, counterarguments, uncertainties, and research requirements.

Autonomy pressure and internalized organizational control

Autonomy pressure begins when formal discretion coexists with enacted expectations that materially narrow acceptable choices. Technology may allow employees to decide where and when they communicate, yet organizational expectations can still shape whether boundaries are respected and whether nonresponse is considered legitimate [6]. The distinction is between possessing a technical option and possessing consequential control. An employee may be able to silence a device but reasonably anticipate missed information, managerial disapproval, delayed coordination, or reputational loss. Internalized organizational control refers here to a proposed mechanism through which such expectations are translated into self-monitoring and anticipatory compliance. It does not require explicit surveillance or a direct order; nor does the existence of an expectation prove deliberate coercion by a manager.

Autonomy must also be interpreted within the wider work-design system. Evidence from remote-work research indicates that effectiveness and strain depend not only on discretion but also on workload, monitoring, social support, task interdependence, and the quality of managerial coordination [7]. High autonomy cannot compensate indefinitely for impossible volumes of work, ambiguous priorities, or systems that reward uninterrupted responsiveness. Conversely, closely coordinated work is not necessarily oppressive when interdependence genuinely requires predictable contact. The proposed viewpoint therefore rejects both autonomy romanticism and control reductionism. The relevant analytic question is whether employees can influence demands and boundaries, not merely whether they can choose the hour or location at which demands are met. Organizational-level inference requires evidence about design and norms rather than employee perceptions alone.

A strong counterargument is that after-hours connection may sometimes increase perceived autonomy and reduce exhaustion. Longitudinal evidence suggests that remaining connected can provide autonomy benefits under some conditions, especially when employees experience connection as useful and self-directed [8]. This matters because a right-to-disconnect account that treats every nonstandard work episode as harmful would erase variation in preferences, tasks, and temporal strategies. Some employees use evening communication to accommodate care, concentration, or personal scheduling needs. Yet conditional benefits cannot legitimate permanent reachability. The distinction is chosen connection versus expected connection: the former expands feasible options, whereas the latter may make disconnection costly. The same behavior can therefore express autonomy in one context and internalized control in another.

The proposed autonomy-pressure test asks five questions: Was the choice genuinely voluntary? Could it be reversed without penalty? Was the workload achievable within compensated time? Was refusal protected from formal or informal sanctions?

Did the employee retain meaningful boundary control? Research on constant connectivity indicates that poorer well-being is particularly associated with an inability to disengage, although relationships differ across workers and do not by themselves establish causation [9]. These questions are therefore an analytic heuristic, not a validated diagnostic scale. They help distinguish autonomous flexibility from organizationally driven self-management by examining the conditions surrounding choice. They also prevent a common attribution error: interpreting employee-initiated overwork as evidence that the organization neither generated the demand nor benefited from its absorption.

Availability norms and the extension of working time

Availability norms are shared or managerially signaled expectations concerning reachability, response speed, and attention beyond ordinary working periods; they differ from isolated messages, genuine emergencies, and freely chosen schedule shifts because norms establish what reliable or committed employees are expected to do repeatedly. Nominally voluntary after-hours technology use is often associated with work–life conflict, diminished recovery, and behavioral extension of work into non-work time [10-12]. These findings do not prove that every message causes harm or that employees never benefit from temporal flexibility. They show why formal voluntariness is an inadequate safeguard when recurring communication patterns, anticipated evaluation, and coordination dependencies make nonparticipation costly. The relevant unit is not merely the message but the organizational meaning attached to response and silence.

Availability norms extend work through accumulation as much as through conspicuous overtime. Employees may check a platform, clarify a task, monitor an unfolding problem, or mentally prepare a reply in brief episodes that remain outside formal records. Expectations concerning technology use can regulate boundaries even without an explicit requirement to remain online [6]. A flexible schedule can therefore conceal a fragmented workday in which attention repeatedly returns to work. Technological capability should not be confused with legitimate authority: because a message can be sent instantly does not mean an immediate response is organizationally necessary. Nor should descriptive visibility be confused with performance. Frequent digital presence may be easier to observe than thoughtful output, encouraging employees to demonstrate commitment through availability rather than through work quality.

The extension of working time matters partly because recovery is a work-design consequence, not solely a private wellness practice. Meta-analytic evidence identifies psychological detachment and recovery experiences as consequential processes shaped by work demands and associated with employee well-being and functioning [13]. Organizations therefore cannot plausibly promote flexibility while treating the capacity to disengage as entirely an employee responsibility. This does not imply one universal disconnection rule. Healthcare, global operations, crisis response, and interdependent project work may require different contact arrangements. The accountability requirement is more basic: expected availability, exceptions, escalation routes, staffing, and compensation should be deliberately designed rather than left to informal competition among employees over who responds fastest.

A proposed availability audit would examine communication windows, assumed response latency, recurring hidden minutes, exception rules, escalation coverage, and realistic recovery opportunity. Time-diary evidence is especially relevant because it captures work extension that broad attitude measures may miss [12]. The audit would not impose an invented numerical threshold or assume that all evening work is involuntary. Instead, it would compare formal policy with enacted practice and ask who carries the cost of temporal flexibility. Evidence of widespread after-hours activity would require contextual interpretation: it could indicate preference, workload overflow, time-zone coordination, understaffing, or status competition. The critical signal is a patterned inability to decline or recover without disadvantage, particularly when the organization celebrates flexibility while declining to recognize the labor that sustains it.

Self-exploitation through responsibility transfer

Self-exploitation through responsibility transfer is proposed as a process in which employees absorb organizational demands through intensified effort, hidden time, or continual self-adjustment, while the resulting overextension is represented as their personal choice. Qualitative research on home-based telework describes an orchestrated exchange in which telework is framed as a valued benefit and employees reciprocate through intensified work [14]. The relevance of this mechanism lies in how reciprocity can obscure employment obligations. When flexibility is treated as managerial generosity rather than a work arrangement with mutual duties, employees may feel indebted for receiving it. The evidence is contextual and does not establish that every organization intentionally engineers such an exchange, but it demonstrates how benefit framing can make additional effort appear morally appropriate and individually initiated.

Responsibility transfer also becomes visible when schedule control coexists with unpaid overtime. Longitudinal panel evidence indicates that some forms of flexible working are associated with increased unpaid overtime, with variation by gender, parental status, working hours, and occupational position [15]. Such variation is theoretically important. It implies that flexibility does not simply produce one employee response; its consequences depend on resources, bargaining power, job demands, and non-work obligations. Unpaid extension alone does not prove organizational intent, and some employees may voluntarily invest additional time. However, where deadlines, staffing, or evaluation systems systematically require extra labor, describing that labor as a consequence of personal scheduling choice mislocates responsibility. The employee chooses the timing of overwork, but not necessarily the conditions that make overwork necessary.

The concept must be bounded so that it does not collapse all effort, engagement, or ambition into exploitation. Work intensification includes accelerated pace, efficiency pressure, increased effort, and learning-related demands; available synthesis suggests that pace and efficiency intensification are generally associated with poorer outcomes, whereas learning-related intensification is not uniformly harmful [16]. Self-exploitation therefore requires more than high effort. In the proposed definition, organizational arrangements must materially generate unbounded demands, employees must absorb those demands through self-management, and accountability must be displaced toward individual resilience or choice. A challenging project freely accepted within realistic limits is not equivalent to chronic overload concealed by flexibility. Nor is every preference for intensive work evidence of false consciousness or organizational domination.

The proposed responsibility-transfer pathway has four linked stages: flexibility is framed as a benefit; compliance is individualized as choice; additional effort becomes hidden within self-managed time; and the organization can disavow responsibility because no direct instruction to overwork was issued. Critical analysis of “agile” work shows how empowerment rhetoric may diverge from enacted worker experiences and obscure intensified demands or ambiguous responsibility [17]. This pathway is a conceptual synthesis rather than a proven causal sequence. Employee agency remains real, and employees may negotiate, resist, or value the arrangement. Its purpose is to identify a governance blind spot: indirect control can operate through freedom when organizations control objectives and consequences but delegate the practical reconciliation of incompatible demands to employees.

Organizational accountability for flexible-work harm

Organizational accountability begins where formal policy analysis ends. An employer cannot establish that flexibility is responsible merely by documenting employee eligibility or managerial permission. Employees may formally possess access while anticipating that use will signal reduced commitment, weaken promotion prospects, or expose them to unfavorable judgments. Survey evidence indicates that perceived flexibility stigma and anticipated negative career consequences are patterned rather than randomly distributed, including by gender [18]. Such perceptions do not prove objective discrimination in every organization, but they affect whether nominal options can be used without fear. Consequential flexibility therefore requires examining take-up, reversibility, work allocation, evaluation, and advancement, not only whether a policy exists. A policy may be formally neutral yet substantively coercive when employees who use it lose valued assignments, information access, sponsorship, or assumptions of reliability. Accountability therefore concerns both declared permission and the distribution of opportunities after use.

Accountability also requires resisting the psychologization of structurally produced harm. Explanations centered exclusively on resilience, boundary skill, motivation, or individual preference may identify real employee-level processes while obscuring bargaining asymmetry, workload allocation, managerial authority, and the institutional character of employment [19]. The proposed viewpoint does not replace psychological explanation with a purely structural account. Rather, it argues that an employee’s difficulty disengaging may be simultaneously personal, relational, technological, and organizational. When objectives are unreasonable or refusal is penalized, coaching employees to set better boundaries addresses the enactment of pressure without correcting its source. Organizations remain responsible for demands they create even when employees perform the final act of extending work. This allocation of responsibility is especially important where performance targets are centrally set but the practical reconciliation of work, care, recovery, and coordination is decentralized. Delegating scheduling does not delegate the employer’s duty to design attainable work.

Monitoring provides a further test. Flexible work can reduce physical visibility and motivate organizations to collect activity, communication, location, or productivity data. Yet technological capacity does not confer legitimate authority, and observable activity is not equivalent to valuable performance. Workplace privacy scholarship treats monitoring as a contested practice involving competing interests, contextual expectations, and risks of intrusion [20]. Proportionate monitoring may be justified for security, coordination, safety, or verified operational needs, but legitimacy requires a defined purpose, data minimization, transparency, access controls, contestability, and limits on secondary use. Secretive or excessive monitoring can intensify autonomy pressure by encouraging continuous demonstrations of presence while shifting the burden of disproving underperformance to the employee. It may also privilege easily counted activity over collaborative, creative, relational, or reflective contributions. Responsible governance should therefore assess the validity of the inference drawn from data, not merely the accuracy with which activity is recorded.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for when flexible work turns employee autonomy into organizationally driven self-exploitation.

Table 1. Core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for When Flexible Work Turns Employee Autonomy Into Organizationally Driven Self-Exploitation.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Genuine autonomy	Voluntary, meaningful, reversible discretion.	Formal choice masking pressure.	Not schedule variability alone.	Normative baseline.	Voluntariness is difficult to observe.	Policy availability is insufficient.
Autonomy pressure, proposed	Discretion paired with compelling output or responsiveness expectations.	Internalized control.	Not ordinary motivation.	Diagnostic construct.	No validated measure.	Requires empirical testing.
Availability norms	Expected reachability and response.	Fragmented, extended work.	Not emergencies or chosen contact.	Proposed pathway.	Norms vary by role.	Access does not establish expectation.
Work extension	Work beyond expected or compensated periods.	Hidden labor.	Not redistribution of unchanged hours.	Audit indicator.	Measurement sources differ.	No safe threshold proposed.
Work intensification	Greater pace, efficiency pressure, or effort.	Demand escalation.	Not learning or temporary challenge.	Possible pathway and outcome.	Measures are heterogeneous.	High effort alone is insufficient.
Responsibility transfer, proposed	Organizational demands reframed as personal choice or reciprocity.	Displaced accountability.	Not freely chosen extra effort.	Central mechanism.	Intent is often unobserved.	Organizational generation must be shown.
Organizational accountability	Responsibility for workload, time, stigma, monitoring, health, voice, and correction.	Individualized harm.	Not eliminating employee agency.	Governance duty.	Institutional duties vary.	Normative, not universal legal conclusion.
Responsible flexibility, proposed	Integrated safeguards for choice, workload, time, equity, monitoring, and remedy.	Preserving benefits without transferred harm.	Not blanket promotion or prohibition.	Principal contribution.	Not validated.	Adapt, test, challenge, or reject contextually.

Note: Evidence-derived entries use approved sources; entries marked "proposed" are original conceptual synthesis. The table contains no ranking, threshold, prevalence estimate, or validated causal relationship.

Principles for responsible flexibility

Responsible flexibility should preserve differentiated boundary strategies without making employees individually responsible for constructing all necessary protections. Longitudinal evidence from working at home indicates that boundary preferences and material circumstances matter for work–nonwork balance [21]. Uniform rules may therefore frustrate employees who benefit from temporal integration, just as unrestricted availability may harm those who need segmentation. The first proposed principle is genuine and reversible discretion: employees should be able to vary arrangements and decline nonessential connection without career or relational penalty. Reversibility applies in both directions; neither remote work nor office presence should become an irreversible status marker when task and organizational conditions permit alternatives. Employees should also be able to revise earlier preferences as roles, health, care responsibilities, or team arrangements change. Differentiation is legitimate only when reasons are explicit and contestable.

The second and third principles are workload realism with compensated time, and protected non-work time with explicit availability rules. Evidence on working-at-home health emphasizes interacting individual, job, home, and organizational conditions rather than a single exposure or remedy [22]. Accordingly, protection cannot rely only on wellness advice or individual boundary training. Organizations should align workload with paid capacity, specify response expectations, staff predictable exceptions, and distinguish genuine urgency from routine convenience. Protected time does not require identical schedules. It requires that periods of nonavailability be legitimate, that unavoidable contact be allocated transparently, and that hidden work be recognized rather than absorbed as the price of flexibility. Workload realism should be judged against ordinary capacity, not against the exceptional effort of employees who repeatedly compensate for understaffing or poor coordination.

The fourth and fifth principles are career-neutral and equitable access, and transparent, proportionate monitoring with data minimization. Career neutrality means that equivalent contribution should not be discounted because an employee uses an approved flexible arrangement. Equity does not mean identical arrangements; it requires attention to job feasibility, employment security, disability, care obligations, status, and access to suitable space and technology. Broader workplace scholarship shows that remote and flexible work intersect with leadership, job design, inequality, health, and work–family systems [23]. Monitoring should therefore be justified by a specific organizational purpose and assessed for whether it measures performance or merely visibility. Employees should know what is collected, how it is interpreted, and how errors can be challenged. Career neutrality additionally requires examining who receives developmental work, informal access, sponsorship, and promotion opportunities, because equal outcome metrics can coexist with unequal opportunity structures.

The sixth principle is voice, review, remedy, and withdrawal. Employees need routes to report workload overflow, invasive monitoring, stigma, or repeated boundary violations without being required to prove individual harm before design is reconsidered. Organizations should review enacted practice, compare it with formal policy, correct demands and norms, examine unequal consequences, and revise or withdraw arrangements that cannot be made responsible. Remedy must include organizational correction, not only confidential support for affected individuals, because recurring harm can indicate a design failure rather than an isolated coping problem. **Figure 1** presents the original conceptual synthesis for principles for responsible flexibility, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

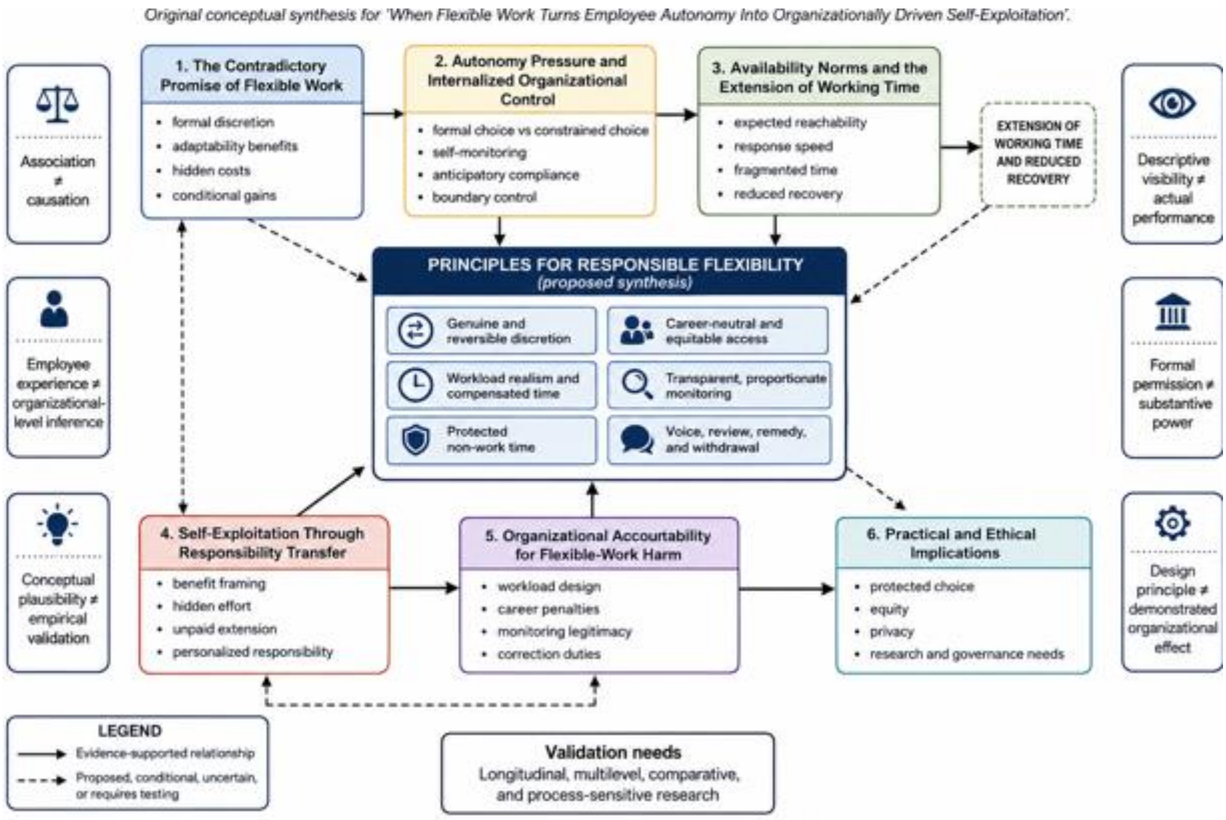

Figure 1. Principles for Responsible Flexibility.

The figure is an original conceptual synthesis developed for "When Flexible Work Turns Employee Autonomy Into Organizationally Driven Self-Exploitation." Arrows and grouping indicate evidence-supported or proposed relationships rather than measured effect sizes. The figure does not represent a validated causal model, universal organizational prescription, regulatory determination, or deployment-ready system.

Practical and ethical implications

The practical and ethical issue is not whether organizations should permit flexibility, but whether benefits and burdens are distributed fairly. Flexible-work effects are conditioned by gendered care allocation and household strategies for combining paid and unpaid work [24, 25]. These patterns are context dependent and cannot be attributed to organizations alone, yet organizational schedules, meeting norms, promotion systems, and assumptions about availability can reinforce them. An arrangement that appears equally accessible may produce unequal usable autonomy when workers differ in care responsibility, household bargaining power, space, security, or occupational status. Ethical evaluation should therefore examine substantive capability to use flexibility, not merely equal formal eligibility. It should also consider whether employees with less bargaining power receive narrower options, more intrusive oversight, or greater pressure to prove commitment than higher-status workers performing comparable work.

Organizations can operationalize the viewpoint through a bounded audit of enacted practice. Relevant questions concern workload completed outside compensated time, expected response latency, repeated exceptions, recovery opportunity, use-related career penalties, monitoring purpose, data access, and credible employee voice. Privacy governance is especially important because monitoring can be normalized as a technical solution to reduced visibility even when its relationship to performance is uncertain [20]. These domains are proposed evaluation targets, not validated predictors or universal compliance criteria. Evidence should be disaggregated by role, contract, gender, care status, disability, and other contextually relevant conditions, while small groups require safeguards against identification. Employee reports should trigger investigation of design conditions rather than automatic attribution to coping deficits. Triangulation across time records, communication patterns, workload data, qualitative accounts, and career outcomes can reduce reliance on any single imperfect indicator while preserving privacy and contextual interpretation.

For managers, responsibility entails controlling demands as well as supporting choice. They should clarify priorities, model legitimate nonavailability, avoid rewarding performative responsiveness, and escalate workload problems that cannot be solved locally. For human-resource functions, responsible flexibility requires career-neutral evaluation, transparent monitoring rules, periodic equity review, and remedies that do not depend solely on individual negotiation. New ways of working alter several dimensions of employee experience and should be studied as evolving configurations rather than isolated practices [26]. Accordingly, the proposed framework requires longitudinal, multilevel, qualitative, comparative, and natural-experimental testing. It should be refined where mechanisms differ, and rejected where evidence fails to distinguish responsibility transfer from preference, engagement, or necessary coordination. Research should also examine whether safeguards generate unintended costs, such as reduced flexibility, coordination delays, exclusion from international work, or new forms of managerial standardization.

The ethical boundary is equally important. Organizations should not treat flexibility as a favor that silently purchases uncompensated effort, nor infer consent from an employee’s continued responsiveness. At the same time, responsible governance should not paternalistically prohibit chosen temporal strategies or erase employee agency. The defensible objective is protected choice: employees retain meaningful discretion while organizations retain responsibility for workload, time, privacy, equality, and correction. This position remains normative. Its value depends on whether future evidence demonstrates that the proposed principles identify preventable organizational conditions more accurately than competing explanations centered on self-selection, personality, household preference, occupational autonomy, or temporary disruption.

Conclusion

This Critical Viewpoint Article has argued that flexible work becomes organizationally driven self-exploitation not simply when employees work intensely, but when formal autonomy is combined with unbounded demands, expected availability, hidden time, and transferred responsibility. The proposed synthesis distinguishes genuine discretion from autonomy pressure and identifies responsibility transfer as the process through which organizational requirements may be enacted as employee choice. It consequently relocates flexible-work harm from the margins of personal boundary management to the center of organizational accountability.

The proposed Principles for Responsible Flexibility integrate reversible discretion, workload realism, protected non-work time, equitable and career-neutral access, proportionate monitoring, and credible voice and remedy. They are organizing commitments, not a validated causal model, legal standard, universal prescription, or implementation-ready system. Flexible work may support autonomy, health, inclusion, and temporal fit, and the argument does not justify blanket restriction. Its applicability is conditional on task interdependence, occupation, employment security, managerial capacity, household arrangements, employee preferences, and institutional context.

The central decision boundary is whether employees control meaningful choices while organizations remain answerable for the demands and consequences surrounding those choices. Establishing that boundary requires evidence beyond policy statements or individual perceptions. Comparative longitudinal, multilevel, process, and intervention research must test competing explanations, identify unequal effects, and determine whether the proposed principles prevent harm without removing valued discretion. Until then, responsible flexibility should be treated as a contestable organizational obligation: preserve choice, expose hidden costs, and refuse to rename transferred risk as autonomy.

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