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Employee Well-Being as an Organizational Design Outcome: Integrating Work Demands, Relational Resources, Leadership Signals, and Recovery-Supportive Culture

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Abstract

Employee well-being is often examined through separate explanations centered on job demands and resources, interpersonal relationships, leadership, or recovery. This separation makes it difficult to explain why apparently supportive human resource practices can coexist with overload, why relationally rich workplaces can remain exhausting, or why recovery initiatives may fail when leaders communicate competing priorities. This article develops an integrative theoretical framework that treats employee well-being as an organizational design outcome rather than as an isolated individual state or a secondary consequence of performance-oriented systems. The analysis connects four domains: work demands and resource depletion, relational resources and social restoration, leadership signals through which employees interpret organizational priorities, and recovery-supportive culture. The proposed framework argues that these domains operate configurationally: the same formal practice may be protective, neutral, or depleting depending on the surrounding relational, leadership, and recovery conditions. It further distinguishes evidence-supported component relationships from newly proposed cross-domain interactions, protective and high-risk configurations, and multilevel design propositions. The framework extends strategic HRM by shifting attention from the presence of practices to their experienced functionality and alignment across work, relational, leadership, and temporal conditions. It also implies that individual well-being initiatives should not substitute automatically for changes in work architecture. The framework remains conceptual rather than causally validated. Its principal boundaries concern construct heterogeneity, level-of-analysis mismatch, contextual variation, employee agency, temporal dynamics, and the need for longitudinal, multilevel, and intervention-based tests.

Keywords: Employee well-being, Strategic HRM, Job demands-resources, Leadership signals, Relational resources, Recovery-supportive culture

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Introduction

Employee well-being has become a central concern for human resource management, yet its theoretical status remains unsettled. One influential HRM formulation argues that employee well-being should be treated as a substantive outcome of employment systems rather than only as a means to organizational performance [1]. That shift matters because organizational arrangements can simultaneously shape workload, discretion, social relations, managerial expectations, and opportunities to recover. A design perspective therefore asks not simply whether employees report favorable states, but how recurring features of work make those states more or less likely. The present article develops that perspective while avoiding the stronger claim that organizational design has been shown to determine well-being.



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The evidence base also resists a single, uncomplicated definition of the outcome. Research on mental health and well-being at work spans diverse constructs, measures, antecedents, and intervention logics [2]. Consequently, psychological distress, exhaustion, engagement, positive affect, mental health, and broader well-being should not be treated as interchangeable indicators. A useful integrative account must retain those distinctions while explaining why they may be jointly affected by common organizational conditions. This creates a theoretical problem of coordination across literatures rather than a need for another undifferentiated list of workplace correlates.

A broader review of health and well-being at work likewise cautions against defining well-being merely as the absence of stressors or strain [3]. Building on that premise, this article proposes that employee well-being is best understood as an emergent design outcome: a pattern produced through the joint organization of demands, relational resources, enacted leadership signals, and recovery-supportive conditions. “Emergent” here does not imply automatic aggregation from individuals to organizations. It denotes a proposed explanatory relationship across levels that must be tested with level-appropriate designs. The contribution is therefore integrative and theoretical: it specifies how established component relationships can be assembled into a falsifiable organizational design architecture.

Why employee well-being should be treated as a design outcome

A design-outcome perspective begins from the observation that workplace resources are not confined to individual coping capacities. Resources can reside in jobs, groups, leaders, and organizational arrangements, and quantitative synthesis indicates that workplace resources can support both employee well-being and performance [4]. This makes organizational design relevant because it governs access to discretion, information, social assistance, role clarity, and other conditions through which employees meet demands. Yet resource provision is not equivalent to guaranteed benefit; effects depend on resource type, context, and how employees experience the arrangement. The unit of theoretical attention therefore shifts from isolated benefits or practices toward patterned exposure to resources and demands across the employment system.

Strategic HRM research further complicates any simple “more HR practices, better well-being” logic. The HRM–well-being–performance literature distinguishes the possibility of mutual gains from conflicting outcomes, implying that organizational systems may create benefits for one outcome while imposing costs on another [5]. A design approach therefore requires attention to trade-offs and not merely practice presence.

Recent evidence sharpens this point by distinguishing HR practices that function as job resources from those experienced as challenge demands, with different implications for well-being [6]. The article extends that insight conceptually: the relevant design question is not whether a practice appears supportive on paper, but what functional demands and resources it creates in context. Employee well-being is thus proposed as a property of experienced configuration rather than a direct reflection of formal HR architecture.

Fragmentation across existing well-being explanations

Three established streams illuminate different portions of this problem. Job Demands–Resources theory explains how demands and resources contribute to strain and motivational processes; leadership scholarship examines how leader behavior shapes employee well-being; and recovery research explains how people replenish depleted resources across daily and longer temporal cycles [7-9]. Each stream is theoretically mature enough to anchor part of the argument, but none by itself specifies how work design, relationships, leadership enactment, and recovery norms combine as one organizational configuration.

The fragmentation is therefore analytical, not absolute. Demand–resource research already recognizes multiple resources and dynamic processes; leadership studies consider mediators and moderators; recovery scholarship increasingly examines context and time. The unresolved issue is that the same organizational condition can occupy different theoretical roles. A supervisor may be a social resource, an interpreter of HR priorities, or a gatekeeper of recovery boundaries. Connectivity technology may increase autonomy while also extending exposure to work. High-involvement practices may build social capital yet intensify work pressure.

The proposed framework preserves these distinctions before integrating them. Work demands concern expenditure and depletion; relational resources concern the quality and restorative capacity of social connection; leadership signals concern employees’ interpretation of what the organization actually prioritizes; recovery-supportive culture concerns whether replenishment is structurally and normatively feasible. Keeping these domains separate also makes cross-domain propositions more testable: compensation, reinforcement, contradiction, and failure can be specified rather than hidden inside an omnibus well-being climate. Their interaction, rather than their simple addition, becomes the principal theoretical object.

Work demands and resource depletion

The demand side of the framework is grounded in evidence that job demands and resources exhibit longitudinal relationships with strain and motivational outcomes, while also allowing reciprocal dynamics [10]. Accordingly, depletion should not be represented as a one-way mechanical consequence of workload. Strain may alter subsequent perceptions, behaviors, and resource access, and the strength of demand–resource processes varies across designs and contexts.

HR systems can also generate competing pathways. Multilevel evidence on high-performance work systems indicates that psychological empowerment may coexist with work-role overload in relation to employee mental health [11]. This duality is important for organizational design because the same system can create meaningful participation and additional expectations. Treating the bundle as uniformly beneficial would obscure the mechanism that matters for well-being.

Evidence that HRM subdimensions have differential relationships with employee well-being and performance reinforces the need to disaggregate practices rather than assume a common effect [12]. The proposed framework therefore treats “demand profile” as a configuration of intensity, controllability, role requirements, and resource implications, not as a single exposure score. It also leaves open the possibility that a demand can change functional meaning when accompanied by autonomy, competence, relational support, or insufficient recovery.

Context can further change what counts as a demand or resource. JD–R theory developed for crisis conditions proposes that work and nonwork demands and resources can be reconfigured under disruption [13]. Such propositions do not establish universal crisis effects, but they justify treating depletion as temporally and contextually contingent.

Relational resources and social restoration

Relational resources should not be compressed into a generic social-support category. Psychological safety, for example, has a developed literature spanning individual, team, and organizational antecedents and outcomes, with evidence of contextual and level variation [14, 15]. It concerns perceived safety for interpersonal risk-taking, which is analytically different from friendship, social climate, or the energizing quality of an interaction. The framework therefore treats relational resources as a family of distinct social conditions rather than a single latent organizational virtue.

Other evidence illustrates different relational mechanisms. In Chinese banking, well-being-oriented HRM practices were examined through social climate and resilience pathways, showing how an organizational HRM system can operate through social context rather than only through direct employee reactions [16]. That evidence is context-bound, but it supports keeping relational mechanisms visible in HR architecture.

Qualitative and multimethod research on crisis recovery further describes relational energy as something generated through perspective taking and interpersonal adjustment [17]. Relational energy is not itself equivalent to well-being, yet it demonstrates how social interaction can contribute to restoration processes. Social restoration is therefore used here as a proposed umbrella process, not as a claim that these distinct constructs share one validated measurement model.

More direct well-being evidence shows that workplace friendship can mediate the relationship between high-commitment work systems and employee well-being, with task interdependence shaping that pathway [18]. Relational resources are therefore partly designed through how work requires people to depend on one another, not simply through interpersonal goodwill.

Leadership signals and the interpretation of organizational priorities

Leadership enters the framework not only as a source of support but as an interpretive mechanism. Research on HRM-system strength shows that employee well-being is related to how HR systems are processed through internal climate conditions and broader open-system features [19]. Building on this evidence, the article proposes the term leadership signals for recurrent leader behaviors through which employees infer whether formal organizational priorities are credible in practice. This proposed construct distinguishes written policy from experienced enactment and makes incongruence theoretically visible when formal support coexists with contrary daily expectations.

Diary evidence strengthens the case for considering leadership and HR systems jointly. High-involvement work systems have been linked to both social-capital and work-pressure pathways, while engaging leadership can complement those systems in relation to day-level emotional exhaustion [20]. The finding does not establish a universal buffering effect, but it shows that employees experience HR architecture partly through daily leadership behavior. Leadership can therefore reinforce, qualify, or contradict the functional meaning of a nominally supportive practice.

Recovery-specific leadership evidence adds a further distinction. Leader support for recovery includes empathy for recovery needs, respect for boundaries, and role modelling, with dimension-specific relationships and leader–member exchange conditions [21]. These behaviors communicate whether detachment is legitimate or whether responsiveness remains implicitly expected. The proposed signaling concept therefore concerns consistency between espoused organizational concern for well-being and the priorities enacted through leader behavior.

Recovery-supportive culture

Recovery is not simply an individual skill performed after work. Meta-analytic evidence links recovery experiences and psychological detachment with strain and well-being-related outcomes, while also revealing heterogeneity across recovery constructs and studies [22, 23]. These findings justify giving recovery a distinct place in organizational design, but they do not by themselves demonstrate the existence of an organizational recovery culture.

Recovery-supportive culture is therefore proposed here as a higher-level condition in which work arrangements, norms, and leader behavior make replenishment realistically possible without imposing hidden career or workload penalties. The concept should remain separate from individual detachment and from leader recovery support, even though each can provide evidence about parts of the process. Its defining theoretical question is whether employees can actually use recovery opportunities without merely displacing unfinished work or violating tacit expectations of availability.

Importantly, support for recovery should not be translated into a blanket rule of disconnection. Three-wave evidence indicates that after-hours connectivity can be associated with greater autonomy and, through that pathway, lower exhaustion [24]. The implication is conditional fit: connectivity may be depleting when it extends uncontrollable demands, yet resource-enhancing when it provides flexibility and choice.

Temporal alignment adds another boundary. Daily social sleep lag can alter recovery processes [25], and weekend sleep can relate to the following workweek through Monday reattachment [26]. A recovery-supportive culture must therefore be theorized across daily and weekly transitions rather than as a static policy attribute.

Interactions among demands, resources, leadership, and recovery

The strongest reason to adopt a configurational approach is that organizational conditions often carry opposing effects. An integrative review of virtual work shows that technology dependence and geographic dispersion can reshape task, knowledge, social, and contextual work characteristics in ways that create both demands and resources across individual, team, organizational, and external levels [27]. Virtual work therefore cannot be assigned a fixed well-being value outside the design in which it is embedded.

Empirical evidence from forced remote work illustrates the same problem at a narrower level: job control can function as a resource while loneliness operates as a social cost, with employee preferences further conditioning experience [28]. This suggests that favorable well-being conditions are unlikely to be produced by maximizing any single resource. What matters is whether resources address the demands actually created and whether leadership and recovery conditions allow those resources to be used.

The proposed interaction logic is consequently non-compensatory in some circumstances and compensatory in others. Strong relationships may soften particular demands but cannot be assumed to neutralize chronic overload; recovery opportunities may limit depletion but cannot repair every deficit in work meaning or interpersonal safety. Leadership can reinforce resources, yet inconsistent signals may also invalidate formal supports. Conversely, a high-demand arrangement need not be classified automatically as high risk when employees possess meaningful control, appropriate relational resources, credible leader support, and usable recovery opportunities. These distinctions turn well-being design into a configuration problem rather than an additive inventory of favorable practices.

Table 1 organizes these manuscript-derived configurations as comparative bundles rather than isolated main effects.

Table 1. Organizational design configurations that may protect or deplete employee well-being

Demand profile	Relational pattern	Leadership signal	Recovery support	Interaction logic	Proposed state	Expected well-being tendency	Primary design lever
High but bounded	Strong, task-relevant ties	Priorities consistent with support	Recovery feasible	Resources match demands	Protective	Lower depletion, stronger functioning	Demand calibration
High and persistent	Strong relations	Supportive rhetoric, overload enacted	Recovery constrained	Relations cannot fully offset excess demand	Mixed-risk	Strain despite social resources	Workload redesign
Moderate	Weak or isolating ties	Ambiguous priorities	Recovery available	Recovery cannot replace relational resources	Vulnerable	Lower restoration, possible loneliness	Interdependence and connection
Connectivity-variable	Adequate relations	Autonomy respected	Flexible boundaries	Connectivity may add choice or extend demand	Conditional	Benefit or depletion depends on control	Boundary autonomy
High and uncontrollable	Weak relations	Availability prioritized	Recovery discouraged	Depleting conditions compound	High-risk	Greater exhaustion and poorer well-being	System-level redesign

Note: Configurations and expected tendencies are proposed integrations, not validated classes, thresholds, prevalence estimates, or causal predictions.

An organizational design framework for employee well-being

The proposed framework treats well-being as emerging from configurations of work design rather than from the independent presence of favorable practices. Sustainable HRM evidence indicates that organizational practices can operate through employee resilience and engagement pathways [29], but those outcomes are not substitutes for broader well-being.

Psychological safety and psychosocial safety climate should likewise remain analytically distinct because they occupy different interpersonal and organizational levels [30]. The framework therefore avoids converting individual perceptions into organization-level properties without appropriate measurement.

Its central proposition is configurational. Work demands define the intensity, persistence, controllability, and coordination requirements that consume resources. Relational resources affect whether employees can seek help, exchange energy, and navigate interdependence. Leadership signals shape whether formal support is interpreted as credible in everyday practice. Recovery-supportive culture concerns whether replenishment is feasible without contradicting workload, availability, or career expectations. These domains are proposed to interact rather than simply add together. A supportive leader may make a resource usable, whereas inconsistent leadership may weaken a formal policy's meaning. Recovery opportunities may buffer episodic depletion but should not be presumed to compensate for chronic overload.

The framework also distinguishes organizational design from individual response. Strategic HRM can place employee well-being within its analytic purpose [1], while differentiated HR practices may function as resources or demands [6]. JD–R theory supplies the process foundation [7], HRM-system strength illustrates interpretive climate [19], and recovery-supportive leadership adds an enactment mechanism [21]. **Figure 1** visualizes the proposed architecture and its evidence-status and level-of-analysis boundaries.

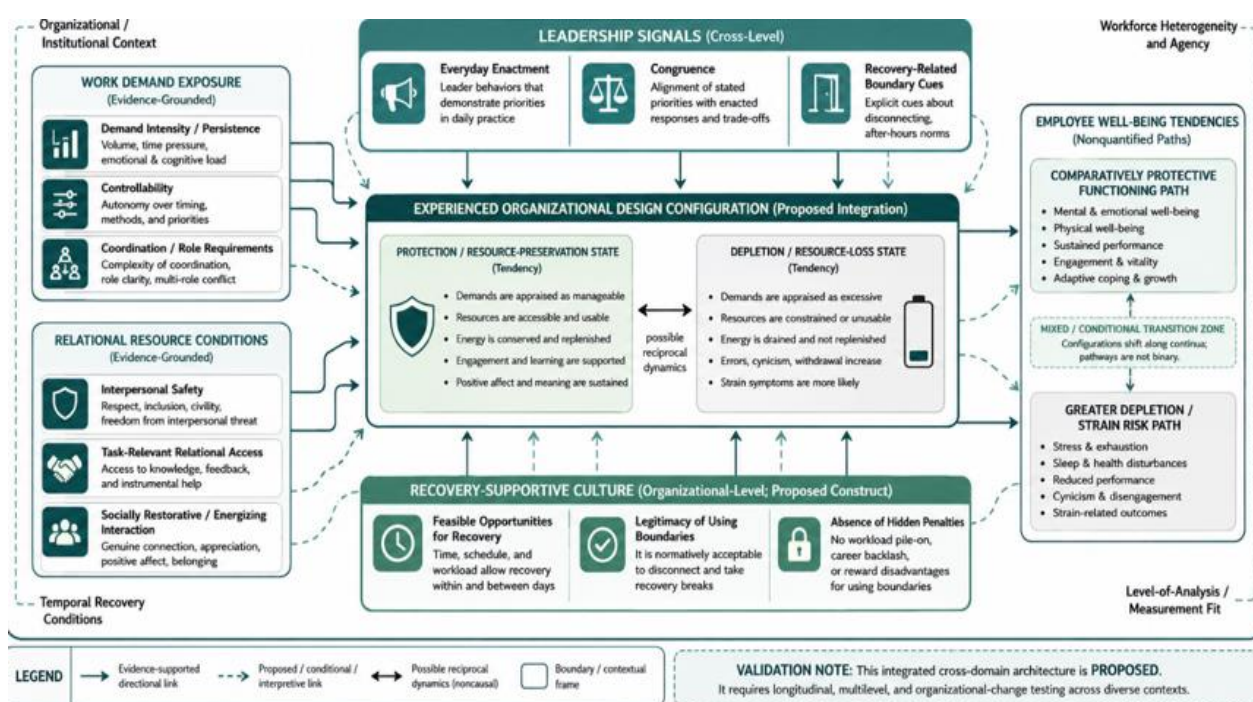


Figure 1. Employee well-being depends on alignment among demands, relational resources, leadership signals, and recovery support

Protective configurations and high-risk configurations

A configurational account changes how protection and risk are defined. Protection means that demands remain sufficiently bounded, relevant resources are accessible, leadership enactment is congruent with stated priorities, and recovery can occur without hidden penalties. A high-risk configuration arises when depleting conditions reinforce one another—for example, uncontrollable demands, relational isolation, availability-oriented leadership signals, and restricted recovery. These are proposed configurations, not validated classes or diagnostic categories.

The framework also accommodates mixed states. High-involvement systems may generate empowerment and overload simultaneously [11]. Engaging leadership can complement an HR system without eliminating work-pressure pathways [20]. After-hours connectivity may provide autonomy rather than operate solely as a demand [24]. Virtual work likewise combines potentially beneficial and harmful work characteristics [27], while remote-work evidence shows job control and loneliness as opposing pathways [28]. Protection therefore depends theoretically on fit among conditions rather than universally “good” practices.

This logic cautions against relocating organizational problems entirely to employees. Cross-sectional UK evidence provides no basis for assuming that participation in individual-level mental-health initiatives reliably produces better well-being independent of surrounding work conditions [31]. Because that evidence is observational, it cannot establish ineffectiveness.

The narrower implication is that individual remediation should not substitute automatically for examining the design configuration that produces demands and constrains resources.

Figure 2 distinguishes proposed protective, mixed-risk, and compounding-depletion states while retaining conditions that can shift a configuration's meaning.

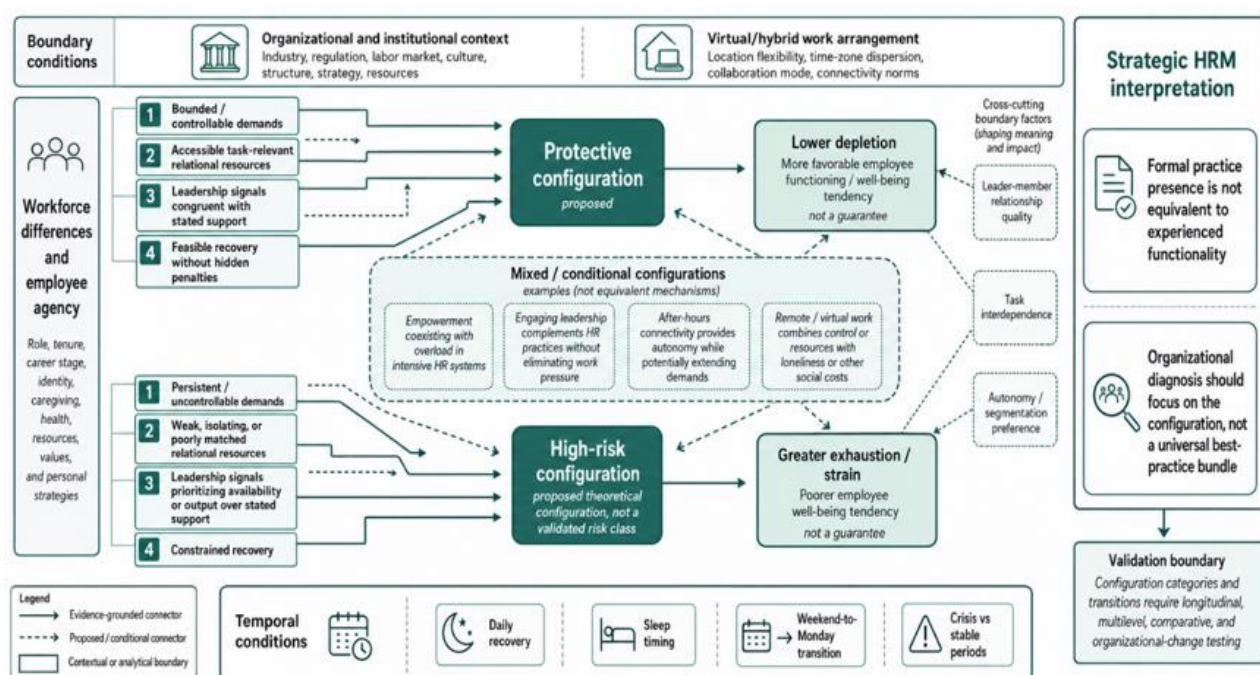


Figure 2. Protective configurations buffer depletion while high-risk configurations compound incompatible demands

Organizational and workforce boundary conditions

The framework does not imply that employees respond uniformly to the same design. Employees can shape aspects of their own well-being by savoring, reflecting on, and capitalizing on positive work experiences [32]. Organizational design therefore constrains opportunities without fully determining individual responses, and a configuration that permits recovery or connection will not be used or valued identically by everyone.

Boundary conditions also arise from organization and employment context. HRM-system strength evidence is embedded in particular institutional settings [19], while recovery-supportive leadership can depend on leader–member exchange and the dimension of support enacted [21]. After-hours connectivity illustrates a preference-sensitive boundary because autonomy can alter its implications for exhaustion [24]. Virtual-work arrangements redistribute task, social, knowledge, and contextual characteristics across levels [27], and evidence from forced remote work should not be generalized automatically to voluntary hybrid arrangements [28].

Time is a further boundary. Relational resources observed during crisis recovery may not reproduce identically under stable conditions [17]. Daily sleep-timing misalignment can condition recovery processes [25], and weekend recovery may affect Monday reattachment [26]. The proposed architecture should therefore be tested dynamically. Country, occupation, contractual status, care responsibilities, work location, schedule control, and workforce heterogeneity may also alter configuration meaning, but such effects require direct empirical examination.

Implications for strategic hrM theory

The framework extends strategic HRM theory by separating the existence of an HR practice from its experienced functionality. Treating employee well-being as an explicit HRM concern already challenges purely performance-centered accounts [1]. The present synthesis adds that practices should be theorized according to the demands and resources they create, rather than presumed beneficial because they carry a supportive label [6]. Contradictory outcomes thus become theoretically expected rather than anomalous.

It also moves analysis from isolated practices toward alignment among formal architecture, social experience, and managerial enactment. Mutual-gains and conflicting-outcomes perspectives show why employee and organizational outcomes cannot be assumed to move together [5]. Evidence that HR systems can produce empowerment alongside overload demonstrates that beneficial and depleting processes may coexist [11], while HRM-system strength research shows that employees interpret systems through surrounding climates [19].

The proposed implication is that well-being-oriented HR architecture should be conceptualized as an enacted configuration whose meaning depends on work demands, relational conditions, leadership signals, and recovery feasibility. This does not

replace established HRM theories; it supplies a cross-domain logic for explaining why formally similar systems may yield different employee experiences.

Implications for hr architecture and work design

For HR architecture, the framework shifts attention toward coordination among conditions often managed separately. Workplace resources can operate at multiple levels [4], while HR practices themselves may function as resources or demands [6]. Workload, autonomy, staffing, participation, relational opportunities, leader expectations, and recovery arrangements should therefore not be evaluated as independent initiatives. Their joint functionality is the relevant theoretical object. Work design also shapes whether relational resources can be mobilized. Workplace friendship becomes more consequential under some patterns of task interdependence [18], suggesting that opportunities for connection should be considered alongside how work requires coordination. Leadership adds an enactment layer: engaging leadership can complement high-involvement systems [20], and leader behavior can communicate whether recovery boundaries are legitimate [21]. Formal flexibility or well-being policies may therefore have little protective meaning when daily expectations contradict their intended use. Recovery architecture should likewise preserve employee control. Evidence that after-hours connectivity can operate through autonomy cautions against assuming universal disconnection rules are inherently superior [24]. Virtual work can generate simultaneous gains and losses by altering several work characteristics [27], while remote-work evidence illustrates opposing pathways through control and loneliness [28]. The design implication is not a universal “best-practice” bundle but a proposed diagnostic principle: identify dominant demands, determine which resources match them, examine whether leadership makes those resources usable, and assess whether recovery remains feasible over time. Organizational levers should then target the configuration rather than transfer responsibility to individual coping alone.

Research propositions and future research

The framework is intended to generate tests rather than close debate. JD–R theory supports dynamic demand–resource reasoning [7], while longitudinal evidence cautions against treating those relationships as strictly one-directional [10]. Future studies should therefore model reciprocal and time-varying processes rather than rely only on cross-sectional main effects. Four propositions follow. Proposition 1: well-being should be more favorable when resources are functionally matched to dominant demands than when equally abundant resources are poorly matched. Proposition 2: congruent leadership signals should strengthen the usability of formal well-being resources, whereas contradictory signals should weaken it. Proposition 3: recovery support should buffer episodic depletion more reliably than chronic, structurally excessive demands. Proposition 4: relational resources should be most protective when work design makes them accessible and relevant to task interdependence. Evidence that relational pathways vary with interdependence motivates the fourth proposition [18], while day-level HRM–leadership complementarity supports testing cross-domain contingencies [20]. These propositions require longitudinal, multilevel and repeated-measures designs aligned with claimed levels. Recovery-supportive leadership should be distinguished from organizational recovery culture [21]. Connectivity should be tested as conditional rather than inherently beneficial or harmful [24]. Daily designs can examine temporal transitions [25], while comparative virtual-work studies can test generalization across arrangements [27]. Stronger tests should compare alternative models, assess discriminant validity and measurement invariance, and examine organizational redesigns or quasi-experimental changes where feasible.

Limitations

The framework has several limitations. First, it integrates constructs that remain heterogeneous across literatures. Mental health, exhaustion, engagement, psychological safety, recovery, and broader well-being are not interchangeable outcomes or mechanisms [2]. Reviews of work health and leadership likewise show variation in definitions, measures, mediators, and contexts [3]. Leadership–well-being evidence does not justify treating all leadership styles or behaviors as functionally equivalent [8]. Second, much component evidence is observational. Longitudinal JD–R evidence improves temporal inference but does not establish unidirectional causality [10]. Virtual-work evidence combines heterogeneous technologies, arrangements, and contexts [27]. Cross-sectional evidence on individual mental-health initiatives is particularly unsuitable for causal conclusions about effectiveness [31]. The framework is therefore theory-generating rather than a validated prediction model. Third, level and temporal mismatches remain possible. Leader recovery support cannot be assumed to represent organizational culture [21], and connectivity implications depend partly on autonomy and context [24]. Daily recovery varies with temporal conditions [25], while employee agency can shape positive experience independently of formal architecture [32]. Configuration propositions consequently require direct measurement at appropriate employee, leader, team, organizational, and temporal levels before cross-level claims are warranted.

Conclusion

Employee well-being is better theorized as more than an individual response to isolated workplace factors. This article develops an integrative design account in which work demands, relational resources, leadership signals, and recovery-supportive culture remain analytically distinct but combine to shape how employees expend, obtain, interpret, and replenish resources.

The principal contribution is configurational. Protective conditions are proposed to arise when demands are bounded, resources match those demands, leadership enactment makes support credible, and recovery remains usable. High-risk conditions arise when depleting features reinforce one another, while mixed configurations make simple “best practice” prescriptions unreliable. These configurations are theoretical propositions rather than validated classifications.

The framework also preserves employee agency, temporal dynamics, contextual variation, and level-of-analysis boundaries. Its practical relevance lies in directing attention toward alignment rather than promising a universal architecture. Future evidence must determine whether the proposed cross-domain relationships survive longitudinal, multilevel, comparative, and organizational-change tests. Until then, the framework should be treated as a structured explanation and research agenda for examining how organizational design may enable or constrain employee well-being.

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