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Designing Temporal Boundaries and Recovery Rights for Always-On Work: A Proposed Governance Framework

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Abstract

Digitally mediated work permits organizational activity to cross conventional working-time boundaries with little friction, but technological reach does not establish legitimate authority to demand continuing availability. Existing evidence connects extended availability, response pressure, boundary crossing, and impaired recovery, yet these relationships are heterogeneous and often treated as individual self-management problems. This Original Governance Framework Article develops a non-empirical approach for designing temporal boundaries and recovery rights while preserving narrowly defined operational continuity. Its principal contribution is the proposed Temporal-Boundary Governance Framework, integrating protected nonavailability, transparent availability norms, an exception-legitimacy gate, restorative duties, distributed organizational responsibility, purpose-limited monitoring, and periodic review. The framework distinguishes technological capability from legitimate demand, autonomy from responsibility transfer, recovery opportunity from guaranteed psychological recovery, formal policy from enacted managerial practice, and continuity from routine responsiveness. It proposes that after-hours demands should be governed through explicit defaults, role-specific authorization, necessity, proportionality, limited duration, nonretaliation, and restoration following approved exceptions. Organizations should evaluate not only contact frequency but also predictability, power, workload, inferred urgency, employee voice, and cumulative recovery disruption. These propositions require multilevel, longitudinal, experimental, qualitative, and comparative testing. The framework does not establish legal entitlements, safe thresholds, causal effects, universal applicability, or implementation readiness. Its original value lies in recasting always-on work as an allocative and accountability problem: who may claim employees' time, under what conditions, through which safeguards, and with what obligations after temporal boundaries are crossed.

Keywords: Temporal control and availability norms, Employee recovery rights, Legitimate exceptions and operational continuity, Managerial and organizational responsibilities, Implementation principles, Designing

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Introduction

Always-on work arises when employees remain actually or anticipatorily reachable beyond ordinary working periods through email, messaging, platforms, or informal expectations. Extended after-hours availability is associated across review, meta-analytic, and organizational-expectation evidence with impaired recovery and life-domain balance, although pathways and strength vary across settings [1–3]. The governance problem is therefore broader than message volume. It concerns who can activate another person's time, whether nonresponse is genuinely permitted, how uncertainty is distributed, and whether organizations restore recovery opportunities after exceptional demands. Reachability is not binary: an employee may receive



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few messages yet remain unable to plan, disengage, or ignore a possible escalation. A boundary may consequently appear formally intact while monitoring expectations, social cues, or workload make disengagement practically unsafe.

Individual preference is relevant but insufficient as a legitimating principle. After-hours information and communication technology use is connected to work-to-home conflict through the joint influence of integration preferences, perceived norms, and work demands [4]. Employees who prefer integration may experience some boundary crossings differently, yet preference does not establish unconstrained consent where supervisors control assignments, evaluation, promotion, or continued employment. Conversely, segmentation preference does not make all cross-boundary contact intrinsically harmful. Formal flexibility can coexist with informal penalties, and a written right to delay response can be neutralized by praise, scheduling, or advancement practices that reward instant availability. The analytic task is to separate chosen integration from compelled availability, isolated contact from an enduring norm, and technological access from legitimate organizational authority.

The prevailing self-management framing is also limited by the recovery paradox. High job stressors can simultaneously increase employees' need for recovery and reduce their capacity to recover by sustaining activation, rumination, or depleted self-regulation [5]. Advice to disconnect can therefore transfer responsibility to employees precisely when workload and expectations constrain disconnection. Organizational silence about timing may operate as a consequential design choice because employees must infer urgency, acceptable response delay, and retaliation risk. This uncertainty may be especially consequential for contingent workers, newcomers, caregivers, or employees whose performance is difficult to observe directly. A governance approach must examine the rules and actors producing these conditions rather than treating recovery solely as a private skill.

This article develops an Original Governance Framework Article, not an empirical study, legal analysis, systematic review, or validated intervention. It proposes an integrative architecture connecting temporal control, availability norms, recovery rights, legitimate exceptions, operational continuity, managerial responsibility, enforcement, and implementation. Established findings are used to bound descriptive claims; the relationships that allocate authority, restoration, and accountability are explicitly proposed and require testing. The framework asks four linked questions: what temporal protection is the default, who may authorize departure from it, what restoration follows, and how practice is reviewed. The contribution is governance integration rather than another broad inventory of outcomes associated with extended availability [2].

Temporal control and availability norms

Temporal control is proposed here as the practical predictability, negotiability, and enforceability of when legitimate work demands may claim an employee's attention. Availability norms are shared or inferred expectations concerning reachability and response speed; they may diverge from formal policy. Workplace telepressure is associated with poorer work-life balance partly through differentiated recovery experiences [6]. Telepressure should therefore be treated as an employee response process generated within a context, not as a direct measure of policy or an organization-level norm. Temporal autonomy likewise differs from control: discretion without workload relief or protection from sanctions may relocate responsibility without increasing substantive choice.

Norms can produce urgency even when senders intend asynchronous communication. Receivers can overestimate how quickly senders expect a response, creating pressure beyond the sender's actual expectation [7]. This miscalibration supports clear timing cues, such as stated response windows and delayed-delivery defaults, as plausible design controls. It does not show that all urgency is mistaken. Hierarchical power, customer dependence, safety demands, or explicit deadlines may create genuine urgency, and silence from a powerful sender may remain coercive. Governance must therefore address both perceptual ambiguity and structural authority.

Boundary crossing is not reducible to device exposure. Work-related thoughts and incomplete detachment can precede evening device use, indicating a reciprocal temporal process rather than a purely technology-driven intrusion [8]. Unfinished tasks, anticipated evaluation, or unresolved coordination may prompt checking; checking may then renew cognitive activation. This within-person sequence is compatible with unmeasured workload and does not establish that removing devices alone will restore recovery. A temporal-boundary design must combine communication controls with work-design attention to task completion, staffing, handoffs, and realistic deadlines.

Availability also sits within broader digital workload. Information and communication technology workload predicts later exhaustion, while detachment and telepressure qualify—but do not fully settle—the longitudinal mechanism [9]. The evidence is consistent with a conditional process in which workload, response expectations, and reduced detachment reinforce one another. It does not justify attributing exhaustion solely to technology, contact, or availability. Individual reports cannot by themselves prove a team norm, and team averages cannot establish each employee's experience. Evaluation should preserve these levels while testing enacted expectations, actual demands, and workload jointly.

Employee recovery rights

Recovery is not a single state. Detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control are related but nonidentical recovery experiences, while recovery itself should be distinguished as a temporal process, a subjective experience, and an outcome [10–12]. These

distinctions bound the proposed employee recovery right. The right is not a guarantee that an employee will feel restored, nor is it presented as an existing universal legal entitlement. It is a proposed organizational protection of credible opportunities to disengage, use nonwork time without routine monitoring, and access restorative conditions without adverse employment consequences. This formulation separates an organization's controllable duty to protect opportunity from outcomes also shaped by health, household conditions, preferences, and events outside work.

Recovery can be supported, but modifiability does not make it solely an employee obligation. Interventions can improve psychological detachment modestly on average, with heterogeneous effects and uncertain durability across designs and contexts [13]. Training, mindfulness, planning, or leisure-oriented activities may help some employees, yet they cannot substitute for reducing excessive demands, clarifying norms, or preventing recurring boundary violations. An organization that teaches coping while preserving punitive response expectations individualizes a work-design problem. Governance should therefore evaluate structural prevention before relying on voluntary recovery programs and should avoid interpreting participation or nonparticipation as evidence of commitment.

The proposed recovery right has three components: predictable nonavailability as the default; nonretaliation for using that protected time; and restoration when an authorized exception materially disrupts it. Restoration may include compensatory time, workload adjustment, revised coverage, or protected delay, but no universal quantity or formula is asserted. Nonretaliation includes protection from explicit sanctions and from quieter disadvantages in scheduling, assignments, evaluation, or developmental opportunity. The protected interest is opportunity rather than a mandated feeling, consistent with evidence that distinct recovery experiences have differentiated antecedents and outcomes [10]. The right remains conditional on jurisdiction, occupation, collective arrangements, and empirical testing rather than constituting an exemption from all legitimate duties.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for designing temporal boundaries and recovery rights for always-on work.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Designing Temporal Boundaries and Recovery Rights for Always-On Work.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Always-on work	Actual or anticipated off-hours reachability	Persistent temporal claim	Not every isolated contact	Governance problem	Contextual heterogeneity	No universal harm threshold
Temporal control	Proposed predictability, negotiability, enforceability of demand timing	Uncertain authority over time	More than nominal autonomy	Protected default	Measurement undeveloped	Proposed construct
Availability norm	Shared or inferred response expectation	Pressure without explicit order	Not formal policy	Make timing explicit	Norm level may be misclassified	Association, not automatic causation
Temporal boundary	Rule marking protected and claimable time	Diffuse boundary crossing	Not device prohibition	Default nonavailability	Preferences vary	Integration is not presumed consent
Employee recovery right	Proposed protected opportunity for disengagement and restoration	Responsibility transfer	Not guaranteed recovery outcome	Nonavailability, nonretaliation, restoration	Legal status varies	Normative proposal, unvalidated
Legitimate exception	Proposed authorized, necessary, proportionate, time-limited boundary crossing	Routine urgency claims	Not general flexibility	Narrow exception gate	Criteria require testing	No validated threshold
Operational continuity	Proposed rationale limited to preserving critical functions during disruption	Overbroad resilience claims	Not ordinary responsiveness	Exception input	Sectoral differences	Does not itself authorize contact
Managerial responsibility	Proposed duty to enact boundaries and avoid retaliation	Policy–practice gaps	Not employee self-management	Local accountability	Cross-level effects untested	Cannot replace organizational duty

Note: Evidence-derived entries are cited. Cells labelled proposed or original synthesis are conceptual contributions of this article and do not represent validated constructs, legal determinations, or demonstrated organizational effects.

Legitimate exceptions and operational continuity

Protected temporal boundaries cannot mean that organizations disregard genuine threats to safety, critical services, essential coordination, or time-sensitive failures. Extended work availability is longitudinally associated with emotional exhaustion

through impaired detachment and work–family conflict [14]. This evidence supports considering restoration after exceptional availability, but it establishes neither a safe frequency nor a calculable recovery debt. The proposed governance implication is procedural: when a legitimate exception consumes protected time, the organization incurs a duty to review the demand and restore a credible recovery opportunity rather than treating availability as costless. Operational importance may justify action; it does not erase the temporal and recovery resources used to provide that action.

Voluntary commitment does not resolve legitimacy by itself. A self-endorsed calling can be linked to longer hours and reduced detachment and sleep quality, so meaningful motivation does not erase potential recovery costs [15]. Employees may value urgent service, professional responsibility, or mission-driven work and still face constrained choices or cumulative fatigue. Autonomy should therefore be assessed through the ability to decline, rotate, or recover—not inferred from enthusiasm. This boundary also avoids portraying calling as uniformly harmful: valued work may provide meaning while simultaneously extending exposure. Responsibility cannot be shifted to employees merely because they identify strongly with the mission. Exception design should distinguish planned duty from diffuse availability. Different configurations of formal and informal availability are associated with different well-being profiles, making a binary available/not-available classification inadequate [16]. Formal on-call arrangements can specify roles, windows, compensation, escalation, and handoffs; informal reachability can leave employees continuously uncertain without corresponding control. These configurations are descriptive and context-bound, not universal governance categories. Nevertheless, they justify evaluating predictability, role specificity, activation frequency, control, and recovery access rather than counting contacts alone. A well-specified duty arrangement may still be burdensome, while low-frequency informal monitoring may remain intrusive because its timing is indeterminate.

Operational continuity must also be conceptually narrowed. Business continuity, operational resilience, and organizational resilience overlap but are not interchangeable: continuity centers on preserving critical functions during disruption, whereas resilience additionally concerns adaptation and recovery over time [17]. The article therefore proposes an exception-legitimacy gate requiring authorization, necessity, proportionality, role specificity, limited duration, and subsequent restoration. These criteria are normative synthesis, not empirically validated rules. Continuity terminology can justify a bounded rationale for temporal claims, but it cannot convert ordinary workload, convenience, understaffing, or habitual responsiveness into perpetual exception. Repeated activation should trigger redesign of staffing, escalation, or service commitments rather than normalization of boundary failure.

Managerial and organizational responsibilities

Managers translate formal rules into enacted temporal norms. Leader empathy, boundary-respecting behavior, family-supportive conduct, and role modeling are associated with employee detachment and related work–family outcomes, although effects depend on enactment and context [18–20]. Supervisors influence whether nonresponse is safe by clarifying timing, redistributing urgent work, and responding consistently when protected time is used. These findings make managers consequential norm carriers, not the sole cause or remedy. A supportive supervisor cannot neutralize chronic understaffing, unattainable deadlines, punitive evaluation, or systems that reward constant visibility.

Organizations retain authority over staffing, workload, communication defaults, escalation paths, records, and restoration resources. The framework therefore proposes a division of responsibility: senior governance establishes minimum protections and exception criteria; operations designs coverage; human resources and worker representation protect nonretaliation and appeal; technology and data governance constrain defaults and data use; managers enact rules locally; employees report demands without bearing sole enforcement responsibility. Leader evidence makes enacted practice relevant, but this allocation is proposed [18]. Its duties require adaptation to jurisdiction, occupation, collective arrangements, and service risk; they are neither exhaustive nor validated.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in designing temporal boundaries and recovery rights for always-on work.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Designing Temporal Boundaries and Recovery Rights for Always-On Work.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Response expectation → telepressure	Monitoring norm	Inferred urgency	Power; timing clarity	Reduced recovery opportunity	Workload	Multilevel temporal test
ICT workload → exhaustion	Digital demand	Reduced detachment	Control; telepressure	Greater exhaustion risk	Job intensity	Longitudinal intervention
Integration fit	Boundary demand	Preference–norm alignment	Work demands	Variable conflict	Selection	Within-person comparison
Leader support → detachment	Boundary-respecting conduct	Safety and role modeling	Team climate	Better detachment	Supportive job design	Multilevel replication

Exception → recovery debt	Authorized disruption	Lost protected time	Duration; frequency	Restoration obligation, proposed	Event severity	Prospective falsification
Continuity → scope creep	Broad continuity claim	Normalized urgency	Staffing; governance	Boundary erosion, proposed	Genuine disruption	Comparative case evidence
Resources → recovery feasibility	Staffing and managerial support	Coverage and workload adjustment	Occupation	Usable protection, proposed	Individual circumstances	Process and outcome evaluation

Note: "Expected consequence" entries labelled proposed are original synthesis. The table reports no effect size, causal estimate, universal mechanism, or validated governance outcome.

Proposed temporal-boundary governance framework

Temporal governance should be embedded in work design rather than appended as etiquette. Remote-work effectiveness and well-being depend partly on autonomy, support, workload, monitoring, and task conditions [21]. Location is therefore not the governing construct: on-site workers can be always-on, while remote workers can have enforceable temporal protection. The proposed framework organizes authority over timing through six functions—default protection, availability triggering, exception authorization, coverage, restoration, and review—without claiming that these functions are sufficient or universally applicable. It treats the temporal claim, rather than the device or workplace, as the relevant object of governance.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for temporal-boundary governance framework, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

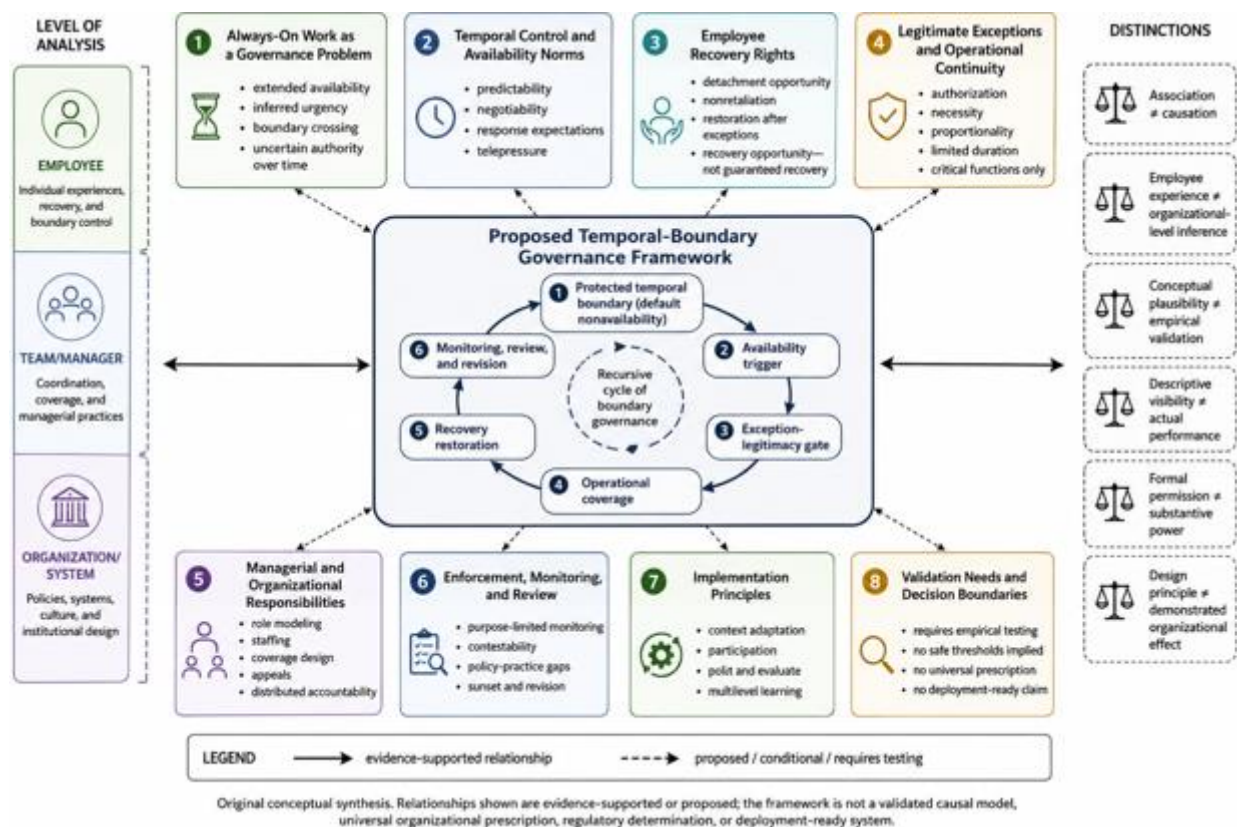


Figure 1. Temporal-Boundary Governance Framework

Technological capability cannot legitimate demand by itself. Digital systems acquire consequences through choices about autonomy, workload, information, surveillance, and human responsibility [22]. The proposed authorization layer therefore asks whether a temporal claim originates from a permitted role, concerns a qualifying condition, is necessary and proportionate, identifies a bounded response window, and activates restoration. This rule does not presume technology is neutral; it assigns accountability for configuration, defaults, and use. It also distinguishes an employee's ability to receive a message from an organization's authority to require attention. The authorization layer's legal fit, reliability, and behavioral effects remain to be tested.

Control is also exercised through categorization and evaluation. Algorithmic systems can redistribute control through direction, evaluation, and discipline while workers accommodate or contest those mechanisms [23]. Accordingly, automated urgency labels, responsiveness scores, availability indicators, or scheduling recommendations should be transparent, explainable, and contestable. Visibility must not be treated as performance, and coordination must not become unreviewable

discipline. Human review should address who defined the signal, what conduct it rewards, whose constraints it overlooks, and how errors can be challenged. Because algorithmic-control evidence does not directly establish recovery effects, the proposed link from automated temporal claims to recovery disruption remains a hypothesis requiring matched system, behavior, and employee-experience data.

Voice completes the framework's feedback pathway. Opportunity to report boundary failure differs from consequential influence, particularly when speaking appears risky or futile [24]. A credible architecture therefore requires nonretaliation, accessible escalation outside the immediate reporting line, documented response, and the possibility of changing staffing, rules, or system configuration. It should also make visible whether concerns are resolved, displaced, or repeatedly closed without structural action. These safeguards are proposed; a reporting channel alone does not demonstrate safety, remedy, or influence. The six-function cycle may organize inquiry, but every dashed relationship requires empirical testing and institutional adaptation.

The framework's central proposal is recursive rather than linear. Review may redefine the protected default, narrow an exception category, alter coverage, or discontinue a monitoring practice. Repeated exceptions are treated as evidence of a possible design failure, not proof that employees should become permanently available. Conversely, low recorded activation does not prove successful protection if employees work through informal channels or remain silent. The framework therefore links formal rules, enacted practice, experienced control, and organizational learning while preserving their distinct levels and measures. This architecture is conceptually plausible, not validated [17].

Enforcement, monitoring, and review

Enforcement should verify organizational practice without converting recovery governance into intensified surveillance. Electronic performance monitoring varies by purpose, target, transparency, timing, and invasiveness, so legitimacy cannot be inferred from technical feasibility [25]. The proposed minimum-data principle permits information needed to examine exception frequency, authorization, restoration, retaliation signals, and policy-practice gaps while rejecting continuous individual scrutiny merely because it is available. Governance data should be aggregated where possible, access-limited, time-bounded, explained to employees, and separated from unsupported performance inference. Collection should end when its stated governance purpose expires.

Monitoring also lacks a general performance justification. Meta-analytic evidence does not show a general performance advantage from electronic performance monitoring and indicates mixed associations with worker attitudes and strain [26]. Average findings do not establish that every monitoring design is ineffective or harmful, but they undermine an assumption that greater visibility necessarily improves work. Evaluation should compare intended governance purposes with unintended adaptation, concealment, gaming, anxiety, or substitution toward measurable activity. It should also test whether monitored employees receive usable remedies rather than merely producing more auditable records. No universal acceptable level of monitoring follows from this evidence.

Surveillance must be assessed as a relationship of power, not only a data practice. Workplace surveillance implicates privacy, power, trust, and employee responses across heterogeneous technologies and settings [27]. Oversight should therefore specify data purpose, permitted users, retention, secondary-use prohibitions, contestability, and deletion. Accuracy is only one criterion: even accurate data may be illegitimate when collection is excessive, power is asymmetric, or consequences cannot be appealed. Worker representatives or independent reviewers may be needed where internal authority is concentrated. The proposed safeguards do not establish universal invasiveness thresholds and should be evaluated under applicable law, collective arrangements, occupation, and technological context.

Review should examine recurring exceptions, unequal exposure, denied restoration, inconsistent managerial enactment, voice outcomes, and emergent workarounds. It should ask whether apparent compliance reflects genuine protection or silence, hidden work, and migration to informal channels. Review should compare units and roles cautiously, because different service demands can produce different activation patterns without proving better or worse governance. Metrics remain locally specified and prospective; no contact target, recovery score, or readiness cutoff is proposed. Review must preserve the distinction between auditing the governance system and surveilling individuals [25].

Implementation principles

Implementation requires an explicit account of the problem, mechanism, and context. Organizational interventions should ask what works, for whom, through which mechanism, and under which circumstances rather than rely on a single average judgment [28]. A staged design can map temporal claims, identify vulnerable roles, define minimum protections, pilot exception and restoration processes, and evaluate intended and unintended effects. Contextual adaptation is necessary because service obligations, bargaining arrangements, scheduling systems, and power differ. Adaptation should not become an unfalsifiable explanation or a means of removing core protection without evidence. Claims about success should identify which mechanism changed and for whom.

Resources and responsibilities must operate across individual, team, leader, and organizational levels. Evidence concerning workplace resources supports a multilevel approach to well-being and performance rather than a single-actor intervention [29]. For temporal governance, relevant resources may include coverage capacity, manageable workload, scheduling discretion, supervisory competence, accessible appeal, and protected time for restoration. The bundle is proposed and context-dependent; resource provision does not guarantee dual gains, and employee resilience training cannot compensate for absent structural capacity. Evaluation should determine whether resources are usable by those with less status, less schedule control, or greater exposure to customer and care demands.

Process quality is part of the intervention theory. Organizational interventions should be participatory, context-aware, theory-based, iterative, and evaluated through both process and outcomes [30]. Participation means more than consultation: affected employees and representatives should influence definitions, exception criteria, data practices, and revision decisions. Evaluation should combine administrative patterns with qualitative accounts and longitudinal employee-level outcomes while protecting privacy and distinguishing formal adoption from enacted practice. Pilots should include pre-specified failure conditions, independent review, and the possibility of revision or sunset. These principles guide disciplined testing; they do not establish effectiveness, transferability, or readiness.

Conclusion

This Original Governance Framework Article reframes always-on work as a question of legitimate temporal authority and accountable recovery protection. Its proposed framework connects a default protected boundary with transparent availability norms, a bounded exception-legitimacy gate, operational coverage, restoration, nonretaliation, distributed responsibility, purpose-limited monitoring, and review. The contribution lies in joining domains often separated: work design, recovery, managerial enactment, continuity, employee voice, technological control, and implementation learning. It also makes responsibility follow authority rather than placing boundary management primarily on individual employees.

The synthesis remains conceptual. Evidence supports selected associations, mechanisms, distinctions, and contextual cautions, but it does not validate the complete architecture, quantify recovery debt, establish legal rights, determine safe thresholds, or demonstrate organizational effects. Testing should compare formal policy with enacted practice, preserve individual and organizational levels, examine unequal exposure, and permit alternative explanations and framework rejection. Temporal boundaries should therefore be treated neither as inflexible prohibitions nor as private preferences. They are proposed governance arrangements for deciding when work may cross protected time, who bears the resulting obligations, and how authority remains contestable. Their value depends on transparent testing, credible remedies, and willingness to revise or abandon unsupported components.

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