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Recovery by Design in Digitally Connected Work Systems

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Abstract

Digitally connected work systems can extend coordination, flexibility, and access, yet they can also make work temporally porous, cognitively persistent, and difficult to leave. Recovery is commonly framed as an individual responsibility to detach, rest, or self-regulate after demands have already been generated. This Original Governance Framework Article argues that such a framing is incomplete because workload, availability expectations, escalation practices, and digital communication defaults are organizationally designed. The article proposes a Recovery-by-Design Governance Framework that treats recovery opportunity as a work-system property rather than an employee benefit or private coping task. The framework integrates four domains: workload boundaries and demand accumulation; managerial availability and escalation rules; digital disconnection and temporal protection; and organizational roles, decision rights, enforcement, and feedback. It proposes that recovery-relevant outcomes may arise through detachment, rumination, resource preservation, autonomy, urgency interpretation, and next-day appraisal, while remaining conditional on role criticality, schedule predictability, worker preferences, household circumstances, and implementation climate. The contribution is a non-empirical governance synthesis, not a validated causal model or universal prescription. Its decision principles require organizations to distinguish genuine urgency from habitual availability, formal permission from usable protection, and employee autonomy from responsibility transfer. Empirical assessment would require longitudinal, multilevel, experimental, and qualitative designs capable of testing mechanisms, enactment, distributional effects, and unintended consequences. The framework therefore offers an analytically bounded basis for organizational inquiry and design without claiming implementation readiness.

Keywords: Recovery as a work-system responsibility, Occupational recovery, Workload boundaries and demand accumulation, Managerial availability and escalation rules, Evaluation indicators and implementation conditions, Recovery

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Introduction

Occupational recovery concerns how work-related effort and strain cease, diminish, or are counterbalanced across time. Contemporary recovery scholarship depicts this process as dynamic: demands generate recovery need, off-job experiences shape restoration, and restored or depleted states influence subsequent functioning. This temporal interdependence makes recovery relevant to work-system governance, because organizations influence when demands occur, whether they remain cognitively active, and whether employees have credible opportunities to disengage. Recovery is therefore not only an individual episode after work; it is also conditioned by how work is allocated, paced, communicated, and revisited [1].

Digitally mediated and remote work complicate this responsibility. The same arrangement can provide autonomy, location flexibility, and control while also increasing isolation, boundary permeability, and persistent accessibility. Evidence on remote e-workers' well-being is correspondingly multidimensional and heterogeneous rather than uniformly positive or negative.



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Location alone cannot indicate whether recovery is protected, because the decisive conditions include task design, social connection, temporal expectations, and the fit between work arrangements and workers' circumstances [2]. A governance approach must therefore evaluate enacted conditions, not simply whether remote work is formally available.

Work-design evidence reinforces this point. During large-scale remote working, employees encountered work-home interference, communication difficulty, procrastination, and loneliness, but these challenges varied with autonomy, social support, monitoring, self-discipline, and family context. Such findings suggest that digitally connected work outcomes are shaped by configurations of demands and resources rather than by technology or remote status alone [3]. Accordingly, this article does not treat recovery protection as a detachable wellness intervention. It locates recovery within decisions about workload, communication, staffing, interdependence, and managerial practice.

Constant connectivity also has conditional meanings. Being reachable may operate as a demand when workers experience low control or persistent monitoring, yet it may function as a resource when it enables coordination or chosen flexibility. Empirical work therefore cautions against assuming that connectivity is intrinsically harmful or beneficial [4]. This distinction is central to the proposed framework: technological capability to contact an employee does not itself establish legitimate urgency, authority to interrupt nonwork time, or an obligation to respond.

Recovery experiences are associated with well-being and work-relevant outcomes, but detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control show differentiated patterns rather than a single interchangeable effect [5]. The article consequently advances an original, non-empirical Recovery-by-Design Governance Framework. Its purpose is to organize how organizations may set workload boundaries, classify urgency, protect temporal recovery, allocate decision rights, and evaluate implementation. The framework is proposed as a contestable scholarly synthesis. It does not claim exhaustive coverage, causal validation, universal applicability, or demonstrated organizational effects.

Conceptual foundations of occupational recovery

Occupational recovery should be defined with sufficient precision to prevent governance from collapsing into generic rest promotion. Meta-analytic evidence distinguishes psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control as related but nonidentical recovery experiences with different antecedents and outcomes [6]. Recovery need is the state created by expenditure or strain; recovery activities are what people do; recovery experiences describe how those activities are subjectively encountered; and recovery outcomes concern restored or depleted functioning. The proposed framework focuses on organizationally created recovery opportunity: the credible temporal, cognitive, and social space within which these individual processes may occur.

A central complication is the recovery paradox. Employees facing the highest demands may have the greatest need to recover while being least able to detach because stressors stimulate rumination, unfinished-task salience, or continued effort [7]. This account is consistent with a self-reinforcing process, but it does not establish that every high-demand period produces a loss spiral. Individual dispositions, job resources, household conditions, and meaningful engagement may alter the pattern. Governance should therefore avoid treating failed recovery as evidence of deficient discipline when work design may have constrained the opportunity to recover.

Recovery is also patterned within persons. Daily evidence indicates that detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control can combine into distinct profiles with differentiated antecedents and consequences [8]. This finding supports multidimensional evaluation, but profile membership should not be converted into a readiness score or organizational threshold. The framework distinguishes employee experience from organizational-level inference: reports of poor detachment may signal a design problem, yet they do not by themselves identify its cause. Workload, leadership behavior, technology norms, personal preference, and nonwork circumstances remain plausible explanations requiring appropriately designed evidence.

Workload boundaries and demand accumulation

Workload boundaries specify where demand generation should stop, pause, transfer, or trigger compensating resources. They extend beyond total hours to include intensity, unpredictability, unfinished work, cognitive carryover, and the timing of demands. Longitudinal evidence suggests reciprocal temporal relationships between work-related rumination and well-being, indicating that accumulated demand cannot be understood as a same-day volume alone [9]. Rumination may carry work into nonwork time, while poorer well-being may also make disengagement more difficult. Because observational panel designs cannot remove all confounding, this relationship supports monitoring temporal carryover rather than claiming a single causal pathway.

The stressor-detachment model further clarifies why boundaries require caution. Changes in job stressors and psychological detachment are linked over time, yet detachment does not uniformly buffer every relationship between stressors and well-being [10]. The proposed governance implication is not that organizations can demand indefinitely if workers are taught to detach. Instead, detachment is treated as one recovery pathway whose feasibility depends partly on upstream demand design. Workload governance should therefore examine demand volume, completion expectations, staffing, handoffs, and the recurrence of tasks that remain mentally active after scheduled work.

Temporal instability constitutes a distinct demand. Evidence from hourly service work associates routine schedule instability with poorer health and well-being through disrupted sleep, planning, income security, and work–family coordination [11]. Transfer to professional or high-autonomy occupations requires testing, but the underlying distinction remains important: predictable hours and total hours are not equivalent. A recovery-by-design approach consequently proposes that organizations monitor short-notice changes, fragmented schedules, recurrent deadline compression, and unresolved work carried across days, while avoiding universal limits unsupported by occupational context.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for recovery by design in digitally connected work systems.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Recovery by Design in Digitally Connected Work Systems.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Occupational recovery	Reduction or counterbalancing of work strain	Recovery treated as private after-work activity	Broader than rest	Proposed outcome domain	Contextual variation	Daily restoration is not guaranteed
Recovery experiences	Detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control	One undifferentiated recovery score	Experiences are not activities	Proposed indicator set	Relative importance varies	No universal proxy
Recovery paradox	High need with impaired recovery capacity	Blaming failed disengagement on discipline	Process, not inevitability	Proposed prevention rationale	Direct tests remain limited	No proven loss spiral
Demand accumulation	Intensity, unfinished work, and cognitive carryover	Workload measured only as hours	Includes persistence across time	Proposed control target	Reciprocal causation is possible	No single causal indicator
Temporal predictability	Stability and notice of work timing	Schedule disruption overlooked	Distinct from total hours	Proposed protection criterion	Transferability varies	No universal threshold
Recovery opportunity	Credible space to disengage and restore	Formal permission without usable protection	Work-system condition, not outcome	Central proposed governance property	Multilevel validation required	Opportunity does not ensure recovery

Note: Evidence-derived entries are cited; proposed roles are original synthesis, not validated decision rules.

Managerial availability and escalation rules

Managerial availability rules determine who may interrupt protected time, for what reason, through which channel, and with what response expectation. Ambiguity is consequential because receivers can overestimate how rapidly senders expect replies to non-urgent work email [12]. A proposed governance response is to make urgency explicit through message labels, default response windows, designated escalation channels, and criteria for bypassing them. These mechanisms should remain sensitive to safety-critical work; the evidence does not imply that delayed response is harmless when genuine urgency exists. Availability is also produced through organizational expectations rather than isolated messages. After-hours email-monitoring expectations are associated with reduced detachment, strain, and spillover affecting significant others [13]. The relevant governance object is therefore the enacted norm: whether employees believe they must monitor, whether nonresponse is penalized, and whether managers model protected time. A written right to disconnect may offer little substantive protection when workload remains unfinished or informal responsiveness influences evaluation, promotion, or belonging.

Managers themselves require recovery protection. Daily leadership evidence indicates that self-sacrificial leader identity can generate valued work behavior while imposing resource costs at work and home [14]. Although this evidence does not directly test digital escalation systems, it cautions against solving employee availability by transferring unlimited interruption responsibility to line managers. The proposed framework instead favors shared on-call coverage, tiered authority, handoff protocols, and escalation rotation. These are design principles requiring empirical testing, not established prescriptions. Their purpose is to distribute legitimate availability while preserving capacity for both employees and managers.

Digital disconnection and temporal protection

Digital disconnection should be understood as a governed condition of temporal protection, not merely the act of switching off a device. Work-related technology use during nonwork time is heterogeneous: it may enable flexibility and task completion, but it can also extend demands, inhibit detachment, and intensify work–nonwork interference. Motive, timing, intensity, and context shape these outcomes, while apparently voluntary use may still occur under implicit expectations [15]. The proposed framework therefore distinguishes chosen connectivity from coerced availability and treats protected nonwork time as a default that can accommodate bounded, transparent exceptions.

A blanket prohibition would nevertheless overlook evidence that connectivity can sometimes operate through autonomy. After-hours connection may permit employees to rearrange work around preferred schedules, and experienced autonomy may be associated with lower exhaustion under supportive conditions [16]. This countervailing pathway does not establish that connectivity is restorative or freely chosen for every worker. Employees with greater control may select different connectivity patterns, and autonomy can be undermined when deadlines, managerial surveillance, or career consequences make nonresponse costly. Temporal protection should preserve meaningful choice while preventing organizations from redefining constant availability as flexibility.

Intensity also matters. The relationship between after-hours connectivity and performance may be curvilinear, consistent with limited connection supporting coordination while excessive connection generates interference and strain [17]. This evidence does not identify a universal optimum, threshold, or permissible quantity. The proposed governance principle is pattern sensitivity: organizations should examine timing, recurrence, urgency, control, and distribution rather than count messages alone. Disconnection is thus one instrument within a wider design that includes workload completion, schedule predictability, response norms, and credible enforcement.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in recovery by design in digitally connected work systems.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Recovery by Design in Digitally Connected Work Systems.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Demand accumulation to impaired recovery	Unfinished or intense work	Rumination and cognitive carryover	Resources and task meaning	Proposed lower recovery opportunity	Poor well-being may increase rumination	Repeated multilevel measurement
Schedule instability to temporal disruption	Short notice or variable timing	Sleep and planning disruption	Occupation and economic security	Proposed recovery inequity	Broader job quality	Cross-sector longitudinal comparison
Urgency ambiguity to response pressure	Non-urgent messages	Overestimated sender expectation	Criticality and power	Proposed unnecessary interruption	Genuine urgency	Field tests of explicit labels
Monitoring expectations to spillover	Enacted availability norm	Reduced detachment	Household and job context	Proposed strain beyond employee	High-demand role selection	Policy-enactment studies
Connectivity to autonomy	Chosen after-hours access	Temporal control	Actual voluntariness	Potentially lower exhaustion	Self-selection into flexible roles	Longitudinal within-person tests
Connectivity to overload	Recurrent or excessive access	Interference and depletion	Intensity and control	Proposed performance and recovery costs	Role complexity	Prospective dose-pattern analysis

Note: Expected consequences and governance connections are proposed unless the supporting evidence directly reports the association. No row supplies a validated threshold or causal estimate.

Proposed recovery-by-design governance framework

Work design allocates demands, resources, autonomy, interdependence, feedback, and temporal conditions. Because these characteristics arise through organizational choices at several levels, recovery opportunity can plausibly be treated as a proposed work-design property rather than an exclusively private behavior [18]. The Recovery-by-Design Governance Framework organizes this proposition through four connected domains: workload boundaries; availability and escalation; digital disconnection and temporal protection; and monitoring, enforcement, and revision. Its central construct, recovery opportunity, refers to credible space for disengagement and restoration. It is not equivalent to experienced recovery and does not guarantee a particular outcome.

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

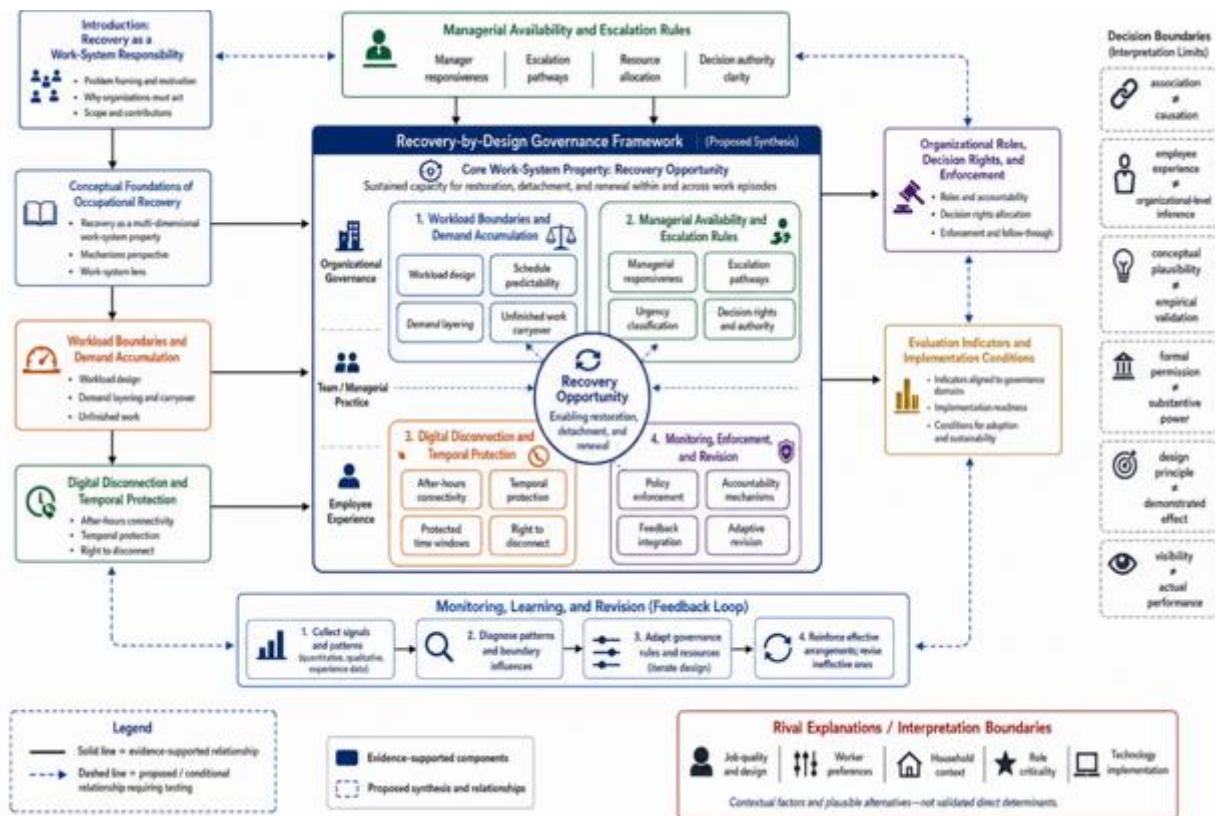


Figure 1. Recovery-by-Design Governance Framework

Digital technologies enter the framework as configurable features rather than deterministic exposures. Automation, communication platforms, monitoring systems, and virtual-work tools can redistribute autonomy, feedback, skill use, and demands according to procurement, implementation, and managerial choices [19]. The proposed framework therefore assigns technology owners responsibility for assessing temporal effects, but it does not presume that technical visibility represents employee performance or that platform access legitimizes managerial interruption.

The framework also integrates demand–resource and self-regulatory reasoning. High demands can consume regulatory capacity, while job and personal resources may enable adaptive disengagement and restoration [20]. This relationship is treated as conditional: resources can vary in accessibility and value, and individual capacity should not be invoked to justify structurally excessive demands. The framework accordingly prioritizes upstream control before optional training or coping support.

Repeated boundary violations may be consistent with work-design, self-regulation, and resource-loss accounts, making preventive governance conceptually plausible [18, 20, 21]. This is the first proposed relationship in the framework rather than an established causal chain. Monitoring should therefore test whether changes in workload, urgency classification, and temporal protection precede improvements, null effects, or unintended consequences. Evidence capable of contradicting the framework is a design requirement, not a threat to it.

Operationally, the framework proposes three decision states rather than a single disconnection rule. Routine operation protects predictable nonwork time; heightened-demand operation requires explicit time limits, compensating recovery, and workload reassessment; exceptional operation permits interruption only under predefined criticality and records the reason, duration, and distribution of burden. Recurrent reliance on an exceptional state is treated as evidence for governance review rather than proof of employee commitment. These states are proposed classifications, not validated thresholds, and occupations with continuous service obligations would require locally tested definitions and adequately resourced coverage.

Organizational roles, decision rights, and enforcement

Governance requires more than assigning responsibility; it requires specifying authority, accountability, and the ability to alter demand-producing conditions. Supervisors can influence whether formal protections become usable through emotional support, practical assistance, role modeling, and creative adjustment of work [22]. Their role in the proposed framework is to interpret urgency, rebalance tasks, protect nonresponse, and surface recurrent exceptions. Supportive conduct remains insufficient when staffing, deadlines, or performance systems continually recreate the same problem.

Responsibility must also be differentiated by source and function. Social support is associated with lower work–family conflict, but relationships vary according to whether support is organizational, supervisory, coworker, or nonwork based and

whether it is emotional or instrumental [23]. The proposed allocation therefore gives employees voice over boundary fit; line managers authority for local workload and escalation; human resources and occupational health responsibility for standards and inequity monitoring; information-technology owners responsibility for platform defaults and data access; and senior governance accountability for resources, enforcement, and unresolved risk. These assignments are proposed and require contextual testing.

Decision rights should also follow access to information and capacity to act. Employees can report lived boundary failures but may lack authority to alter staffing; managers can redistribute local work but may not control enterprise deadlines; technology owners can modify defaults but cannot determine legitimate operational urgency alone. The proposed model therefore separates voice, recommendation, authorization, implementation, and oversight. Escalation of unresolved conflicts to an independent or higher-level forum is necessary to prevent local power from converting formal protection into discretionary favor.

Leadership behavior can be modified through structured intervention, with cluster-randomized evidence indicating effects on selected forms of employee well-being [24]. Training is consequently included as an implementation component, not as proof that recovery governance works. Enforcement must examine behavior and consequences: whether nonresponse is respected, recurrent exceptions trigger redesign, managers have coverage, and workers can raise concerns without penalty. Formal permission without substantive influence is not protection. Conversely, employee voice does not imply that every preference can override safety-critical coordination or legitimate service obligations.

Evaluation indicators and implementation conditions

Evaluation should begin with proximal processes rather than wait for distant organizational outcomes. Daily evidence links prior-evening detachment and morning recovered state with how employees appraise subsequent demands [25]. The proposed indicator architecture therefore combines recovery opportunity, detachment, rumination, perceived urgency, schedule predictability, unfinished work, and morning appraisal. These measures remain subjective and should be interpreted alongside workload, scheduling, communication, and exception records; they are not objective performance scores.

Figure 2 presents the original conceptual synthesis for mechanisms, boundary conditions, and organizational consequences, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

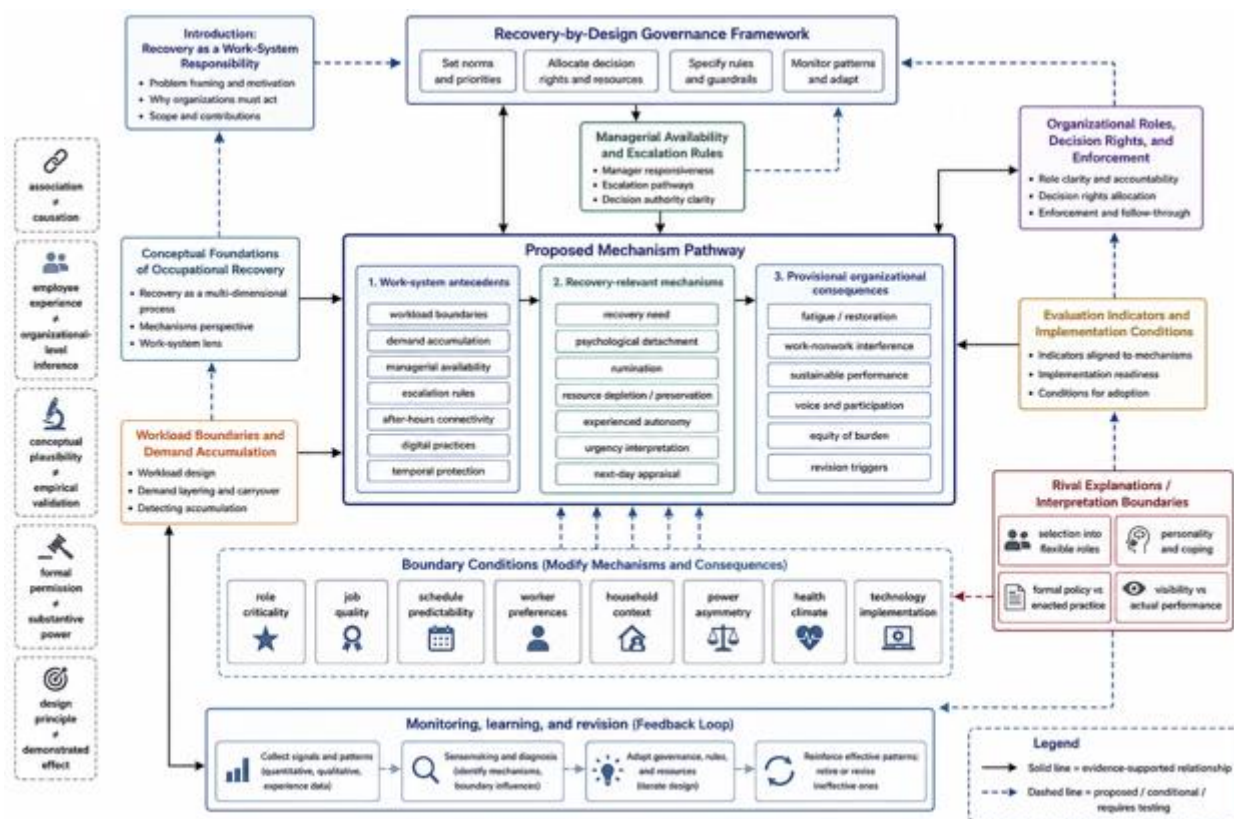


Figure 2. Mechanisms, Boundary Conditions, and Organizational Consequences

Implementation should evaluate usability rather than policy presence. Daily evidence suggests that microbreak processes depend on autonomy and perceived health climate, indicating that an available break may not be a credible recovery opportunity when workload or local norms prevent its use [26]. No universal duration or frequency follows. Relevant evidence

includes whether employees control timing, whether missed opportunities accumulate, and whether managers redistribute work when protection repeatedly fails.

Boundary fit is another condition. Segmentation preferences and unfinished tasks can shape experiences of work-home boundary violation [27]. Customization may therefore be appropriate, but preference must not be used to transfer responsibility for excessive work to employees. Minimum protections should remain nonwaivable where power differences, insecurity, or workload make apparent choice unreliable.

Implementation evaluation should jointly examine leadership enactment, health climate and break autonomy, and boundary fit with unfinished work [24, 26, 27]. This combined architecture is proposed, not an established joint effect. It should be tested for average change, heterogeneity, burden shifting, adverse effects, and persistence after initial implementation.

Evaluation must preserve levels of analysis. Employee reports can identify perceived urgency, detachment, or constrained choice, while team records can show concentration of interruptions and organizational data can reveal staffing, scheduling, or platform patterns. Improvement at one level should not be assumed at another. A fall in reported messages, for example, could reflect better protection, communication migration, suppressed voice, or unrecorded work. Mixed evidence and transparent rival explanations are therefore required before attributing change to the proposed governance design.

Table 3 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for testable propositions, evaluation criteria, and practical responsibilities.

Table 3. Testable propositions, evaluation criteria, and practical responsibilities.

Proposition or criterion	Unit and context	Observable indicator	Falsification condition	Organizational responsibility	Misuse risk	Readiness boundary
Predictable workload improves recovery opportunity	Team over repeated cycles	Deadline compression and unfinished carryover	Protection changes without recovery change	Managers and workforce planning	Blaming workers for backlog	No readiness without demand data
Explicit urgency reduces avoidable interruption	Communication episodes	Labeled urgency and response timing	Labels do not alter inferred urgency	Managers and platform owners	Relabeling routine work urgent	Safety exceptions specified
Protected time is substantively usable	Employee and team	Nonresponse penalties and exception recurrence	Formal policy with unchanged norms	HR, managers, senior governance	Treating silence as compliance	Voice and remedy available
Managerial coverage is sustainable	Managerial network	Rotation, handoffs, and interruption concentration	Burden shifts to few managers	Senior governance	Heroic availability norms	Resourced backup exists
Break opportunity reflects climate and autonomy	Employee-days	Break control and missed opportunities	Availability without use or benefit	Managers and occupational health	Universal break prescription	No fixed threshold inferred
Boundary adaptation remains equitable	Worker groups and households	Preference fit and unfinished tasks [27]	Gains concentrated among powerful groups	HR and employee representatives	Calling coercion preference	Minimum protections preserved
Leadership support is enacted	Work units	Work reallocation and protected nonresponse	Training without behavioral change	Leaders and learning functions	Substituting training for redesign	Structural controls retained

Note: All propositions, responsibilities, falsification conditions, and readiness boundaries are original proposed contributions. Evidence citations support indicators or implementation conditions, not validation of the full framework.

Discussion

The framework's principal contribution is to move recovery from the margins of individual self-management into the domain of work-system governance while retaining individual heterogeneity. Boundary-management scholarship indicates that segmentation and integration strategies vary with preferences, household circumstances, role demands, and perceived control [28]. Recovery by design should therefore provide adaptable arrangements within nonwaivable protections. Customization is legitimate when it expands agency; it becomes responsibility transfer when employees must absorb excessive work, negotiate alone against power, or waive protection to remain visible.

Digital practices also require granular analysis. A within-person field experiment found fatiguing effects of camera use in virtual meetings, with implications for voice and participation [29]. The relevant conclusion is not that cameras or virtual meetings are inherently harmful. Rather, concrete platform practices can produce consequences that broad labels such as "digital work" conceal. Evaluation should examine specific defaults, requirements, meeting purposes, and worker conditions before making organization-level claims.

Individual capability building may complement structural design. An online self-training intervention indicates that effective remote-working strategies can be developed through scalable support [30]. Such interventions remain bounded: motivation, baseline work design, and access may shape engagement, while training cannot correct understaffing, unstable schedules, coercive monitoring, or recurrent after-hours demand.

Taken together, boundary-management context, practice-specific technology evidence, and individual strategy interventions show why universal recovery prescriptions are unwarranted [28-30]. Alternative explanations include selection into flexible roles, personality, job quality, household resources, occupational criticality, and exceptional pandemic conditions. Future research should combine longitudinal multilevel designs, stepped-wedge or randomized organizational interventions where feasible, communication and workload traces with privacy safeguards, and qualitative analysis of enactment and voice. Tests should permit null, heterogeneous, adverse, and distributionally unequal outcomes. The framework should be refined or rejected when its proposed mechanisms fail, protections merely relocate burdens, or organizational consequences do not follow.

Conclusion

Recovery by design reframes the capacity to disengage and restore as partly produced by organizational decisions about workload, timing, communication, authority, and technology. The proposed framework integrates demand boundaries, escalation rules, temporal protection, differentiated decision rights, enforcement, and feedback around the construct of recovery opportunity. It distinguishes that opportunity from individual recovery outcomes and treats autonomy, role criticality, household context, job quality, and implementation climate as consequential boundaries.

The contribution is an original governance synthesis rather than a validated intervention, causal model, or universal right-to-disconnect prescription. It does not establish that one communication rule, workload limit, leadership program, or technology setting will generate recovery or organizational performance. Its practical value lies in making organizational assumptions explicit and contestable: what qualifies as urgent, who bears availability, when exceptions trigger redesign, and whose experience counts in evaluation. Research must test these propositions across occupations, work arrangements, institutional settings, and levels of analysis while examining unintended and unequal effects. Until such evidence accumulates, recovery by design should be treated as a framework for disciplined inquiry and bounded organizational deliberation, not as an implementation-ready standard.

Its ultimate test is whether it enables organizations to expose and revise demand-producing arrangements without converting recovery into another monitored obligation. A credible application would therefore remain reversible, report uncertainty, and preserve the possibility that local evidence may support modification, restriction, or rejection of the proposed architecture.

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