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What Engagement Metrics Conceal About Employee Energy Extraction

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Abstract

Employee engagement metrics have become prominent instruments for representing workforce motivation, commitment, and organizational vitality. Their usefulness, however, can be overstated when engagement scores are treated as sufficient evidence of sustainable work. This Critical Viewpoint Article argues that engagement measurement may leave important energetic, affective, temporal, and governance dimensions outside the field of organizational visibility. It introduces Employee Energy Extraction as a proposed analytic category describing the organizational capture of cognitive, emotional, temporal, and self-regulatory effort when the costs and recovery requirements of that effort are incompletely represented. Building from evidence on engagement, job demands and resources, recovery, emotional labor, workload, people analytics, and algorithmic work design, the article distinguishes valid measurement of engagement from valid inference about employee sustainability. The central proposed contribution is an Ethical Measurement Boundary Framework, developed later in the article, that treats construct correspondence, energetic and affective completeness, temporal and recovery adequacy, level and inference discipline, and legitimate use as separable decision boundaries. The argument does not assume that demanding work is inherently extractive, that engagement is harmful, or that analytics systems necessarily conceal employee costs. Instead, it specifies conditions under which apparently positive indicators may be informationally incomplete. The article therefore advances a governance-oriented critique of measurement sufficiency and proposes multidomain indicators as a more defensible basis for evaluating sustainable work, while emphasizing that the framework requires empirical testing and does not constitute a validated causal model or universal organizational prescription.

Keywords: The limits of engagement measurement, Employee energy extraction, Emotional availability and productivity pressure, Ethical limits of measurement, Metrics, Conceal

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Introduction

Employee engagement has become a highly visible organizational signal because it appears to translate an intangible workforce condition into a manageable indicator. This visibility is not intrinsically problematic. Engagement can be operationalized as a multidimensional construct involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components, and established psychometric work supports treating it as more than a vague synonym for satisfaction or morale [1]. The problem begins when construct validity is extended into a broader representational claim: that a valid measure of engagement can also stand in for employee energy, recoverability, sustainable performance, or the legitimacy of the work conditions producing engagement. Those are different questions and require different evidence.



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The engagement literature itself counsels against such conceptual expansion. Definitions, antecedents, and outcomes have varied across research traditions, making disciplined construct specification necessary when organizational actors interpret an engagement score [2]. Job demands-resources theory similarly distinguishes a motivational process associated with resources and engagement from a health-impairment process associated with demanding work and strain [3]. These processes can coexist within the same job and may unfold at different rates. Accordingly, a workforce can appear motivated while still facing conditions that create recovery demands, emotional regulation requirements, or accumulating strain that are not captured by an engagement indicator.

This distinction matters because engagement is embedded in configurations of job demands and resources rather than existing independently of them. Integrative work on engagement and innovative behavior shows that engagement can function within demanding environments when resources support action, which means high engagement does not itself reveal whether demand levels are low, benign, or sustainable [4]. Longitudinal meta-analytic evidence further indicates that demands, resources, and well-being develop through temporal relationships that cannot be reduced to a single contemporaneous snapshot [5]. A dashboard that records current engagement may therefore be informative about a motivational state while remaining silent about the trajectory of effort required to maintain it.

Longitudinal evidence on engagement and exhaustion makes the boundary sharper. Work engagement and exhaustion are not simply mirror images, and their changes over time do not support an uncomplicated inference that more engagement necessarily means less exhaustion [6]. This does not make engagement deceptive. It makes engagement incomplete for questions it was not designed to answer. The central issue in this article is therefore not whether organizations should measure engagement, but what kinds of organizational judgments become unjustified when engagement data are granted evidentiary authority over unmeasured dimensions of work.

This Critical Viewpoint Article is a non-empirical scholarly argument that develops that problem through the proposed concept of Employee Energy Extraction. The term is used here as an original analytic synthesis rather than an established latent construct. It describes a possible organizational condition in which cognitive, affective, temporal, and self-regulatory effort is converted into valued output or availability while associated costs and recovery requirements remain partially outside dominant measurement systems. The concept is intentionally conditional: intensive, meaningful, or emotionally demanding work does not automatically constitute extraction, and employees with substantial resources may sustain high engagement without damaging depletion.

The article contributes by shifting attention from metric accuracy alone to measurement sufficiency. The question becomes whether a metric represents enough of the relevant work system to justify the organizational inference being made from it. This requires separating employee experience from organizational-level inference, visibility from performance, prediction from causation, and technological capability from legitimate decision authority. The analysis proceeds from energetic and affective inputs to dashboard representation and then to ethical decision boundaries, preserving a distinction between evidence-supported relationships and the proposed synthesis connecting them.

Employee energy extraction

Employee Energy Extraction is proposed here as a critical category for examining the gap between effort that organizations can mobilize and energetic costs that conventional engagement metrics may not register. Its empirical components are not new. Recovery research shows that employees require processes such as psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, and control after work-related effort, and these recovery experiences are analytically distinct from engagement during work [7]. The proposed contribution is to treat incomplete representation of those replenishment requirements as relevant when organizations interpret high engagement as evidence that present work intensity is sustainable.

Meta-analytic evidence reinforces this distinction by linking recovery experiences with work demands, resources, well-being, and other outcomes rather than treating recovery as merely the absence of motivation [8]. An employee may therefore be highly invested in work yet still need substantial recovery after that investment. From the viewpoint developed here, extraction is not identified by high effort alone. It becomes conceptually relevant when organizational systems value the observable outputs of effort while failing to represent the conditions required to restore the capacities on which continued effort depends. A second complication concerns how organizations label demands. The challenge-hindrance framework often distinguishes demands thought to promote mastery or achievement from demands viewed primarily as obstructive. Yet critical meta-analytic evidence indicates that so-called challenge demands can remain associated with strain, which cautions against assuming that demanding work is energetically benign simply because employees find it meaningful or performance-relevant [9]. Engagement may coexist with pressure because motivation and strain are not mutually exclusive states. Consequently, positive appraisal cannot by itself establish that the energetic burden of a demand is sustainable.

Time also matters. Research on anticipated workload change shows that employees' expectations about future workload can condition the relationship between present workload and emotional strain [10]. A static engagement score can therefore miss not only current recovery requirements but also a worsening or easing demand trajectory. The proposed extraction lens adds a temporal question: what must employees continue to supply, and under what expected future conditions, for today's visible

engagement to be maintained? This is an interpretive question, not evidence that any particular organization is extracting energy.

The resulting boundary is important. Sustainable effort cannot be inferred from engagement intensity or from a favorable demand label alone [7–9]. At the same time, recovery needs, demanding work, or emotional strain do not prove exploitation or organizational misconduct. Alternative explanations include individual differences in appraisal, resource access, job autonomy, occupational expectations, life circumstances, and self-selection into intensive roles. Employee Energy Extraction therefore remains a proposed integrative category whose discriminant validity, temporal dynamics, and organizational-level meaning require direct empirical testing.

For organizational analysis, the practical implication is restrained but consequential: energetic sustainability should be treated as a separate evidentiary domain. Engagement can indicate investment in work; recovery measures can indicate replenishment processes; workload measures can indicate demand intensity and trajectory; and strain measures can indicate experienced cost. Collapsing these signals into one favorable engagement index risks converting a motivational measure into an unsupported judgment about sustainability. The proposed concept is meant to expose that inferential move, not to replace established constructs with a new universal score.

Emotional availability and productivity pressure

Energy extraction is not exclusively cognitive or temporal. Many forms of work require employees to make emotion available to the organization by displaying warmth, calm, confidence, enthusiasm, reassurance, or composure when roles and interactions demand it. Emotional availability is proposed here as a descriptive category for this expected or enacted affective accessibility. It should not be equated with engagement. Empirical work distinguishes emotions that are expressed naturally from emotions that require more laborious regulation, indicating that similar visible displays can arise from different internal processes and effort requirements [11].

This distinction creates a measurement problem. A highly engaged customer-facing employee may display enthusiasm because the emotion is genuinely felt, because the role encourages deep acting, because surface acting is required, or because several strategies are combined across interactions. Evidence from public-facing service work suggests that surface acting can be associated with downstream behaviors under specific conditions involving self-control, autonomy, and the nature of the service relationship [12]. Such findings support caution about hidden affective costs, but they do not justify a universal claim that emotional display is depleting or that positive affect at work is evidence of extraction.

Intensive longitudinal research provides an additional boundary. Daily emotion-regulation strategies do not produce uniform consequences; findings differ between surface and deep acting and include relationships that are conditional, mixed, or weaker than a simple depletion account would predict [13]. The critical issue is therefore not emotional labor per se but the organizational tendency to treat visible positivity or interpersonal responsiveness as costless evidence of engagement. An engagement dashboard may register favorable affect or self-reported involvement without revealing whether employees are naturally expressing emotion, actively regulating it, or recovering adequately after sustained interpersonal demands.

Recent emotional-labor scholarship similarly emphasizes strategy, context, measurement, identity, and changing work arrangements rather than a single undifferentiated emotional-cost pathway [14]. This is especially relevant where emotional availability is digitally mediated. Hybrid meetings, customer platforms, continuous messaging, and service technologies may expand the periods during which employees are expected to remain responsive and affectively composed, but the consequences depend on role design, norms, discretion, and the technology's actual use. Technological accessibility should therefore not be mistaken for evidence that affective availability is limitless.

Productivity pressure intersects with this affective layer because employees may be expected to maintain output while also remaining relationally available. The proposed synthesis treats these as potentially cumulative demands, but it does not assume additivity or causality. Autonomy can change how pressure is experienced; personal and social resources can buffer demands; emotional strategies can differ in cost; and organizational climates can alter whether responsiveness is voluntary or compulsory. The same nominal workload may therefore have different energetic meanings across employees, teams, occupations, and institutional settings.

For measurement, the implication is that engagement should not be used as a shortcut for affective sustainability. A favorable score cannot establish whether emotional expression is spontaneous or regulated, whether interpersonal responsiveness is recoverable, or whether productivity expectations leave adequate temporal space for replenishment. Emotional availability and productivity pressure are thus proposed as separate analytic lenses for asking what engagement data omit. They remain lenses rather than validated components of a causal model, and any claim that they constitute energy extraction requires direct evidence about demands, regulation, recovery, and consequences.

What engagement dashboards fail to capture

Dashboards intensify the measurement problem because they transform dispersed employee experiences into visible organizational objects. Their value lies partly in simplification: decision makers cannot attend to every feature of work simultaneously. Yet simplification becomes risky when analytic visibility is mistaken for evidentiary completeness. An evidence-based review of HR analytics found a much smaller rigorous evidence base than the expansive managerial discourse surrounding analytics might suggest at that time [15]. The appropriate inference is not that current analytics are generally invalid, but that organizational confidence in a metric should remain proportional to the evidence supporting the specific decision for which it is used.

The production of analytics also matters. Ethnographic research inside a people-analytics team shows that enacted analytic practice can be shaped by identity, organizational expectations, and pressures surrounding how analysis is presented [16]. This finding does not make dashboards inherently performative or deceptive; its transferability is limited by context. It does, however, challenge the assumption that a formally scientific measurement process remains unchanged as data are translated into organizational presentations, priorities, and decisions. Formal methodology and enacted practice should therefore be treated as separate objects of scrutiny.

Critical synthesis of people analytics identifies potential perils for both organizations and employees, including risks associated with surveillance, reductionism, and the organizational consequences of data-driven categorization [17]. These risks become especially relevant when what is easiest to capture is granted greater decision weight than what is harder to observe. Invisible recovery effort, emotional regulation, informal coordination, thoughtful restraint, care work, and periods of necessary cognitive disengagement may be weakly represented even when digital activity or survey responses are abundant. Selective visibility is therefore proposed here as a dashboard-level problem: what can be measured may become disproportionately authoritative.

Measurement technologies may also change the work they purport to describe. A work-design perspective on algorithmic management shows that algorithmic functions can alter job demands and resources through monitoring, scheduling, goal setting, performance management, and related managerial functions [18]. Once measurement participates in the design of work, the distinction between observation and intervention becomes essential. A dashboard may not simply reveal employee behavior; it may help create the incentives, pacing, visibility expectations, or autonomy conditions to which employees respond.

Across evidence assessment, qualitative practice research, and critical synthesis, analytic capability does not by itself establish evidentiary sufficiency or responsible organizational use [15–17]. The strongest version of the argument would be wrong: not every engagement dashboard conceals harm, and not every people-analytics system misrepresents employees. The more defensible claim is conditional. Dashboards fail when users infer constructs that were not measured, collapse different levels of analysis, ignore time and recovery, treat visible activity as equivalent to contribution, or assume that prediction establishes the likely effect of an intervention.

This viewpoint therefore treats dashboard failure as an inference problem rather than merely a software problem. Better interfaces cannot solve construct underrepresentation if the underlying model excludes energetic, affective, or temporal information. Nor does adding more employee data automatically solve the issue; expanded surveillance can itself create work-design and legitimacy concerns. The objective is not maximal measurement but disciplined measurement: collect information that is necessary for a defensible purpose, distinguish what it can and cannot support, and prevent attractive summary metrics from acquiring authority beyond their evidentiary scope.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for what engagement metrics conceal about employee energy extraction.

Table 1. Core constructs, proposed relationships, evidence requirements, and boundaries for What Engagement Metrics Conceal About Employee Energy Extraction.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Engagement	Cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment in work [1]	Motivational visibility	Not recovery, strain, or sustainability	One signal, not master proxy	Meaning varies by measure and context	Valid engagement measurement does not establish sustainable work
Employee Energy Extraction	Proposed: organizational capture of effort while associated cost and recovery remain incompletely represented	Hidden energetic inputs	Not equivalent to effort, engagement, or exploitation	Critical interpretive category	Construct validity untested	Must be empirically distinguished from established constructs

Emotional availability	Proposed: role-contingent affective accessibility or regulation	Hidden affective effort	Not synonymous with positive affect or engagement	Identifies possible unmeasured affective input	Costs vary by strategy and context	Emotional display does not prove depletion
Productivity pressure	Present and anticipated output or workload demands	Temporal demand intensity	Pressure can be challenging, hindering, or differently appraised	Context for interpreting engagement	Effects are conditional	High demand does not automatically imply extraction
Dashboard visibility	Representation of selected employee states or behaviors for organizational interpretation	Selective measurability	Visibility is not performance or causal explanation	Identifies possible construct underrepresentation	Depends on design and use	Measurable activity should not acquire unsupported authority
Recovery capacity	Processes supporting replenishment after work effort [7, 8]	Sustainability across time	Not simply low engagement	Complementary sustainability signal	No universal threshold	Recovery indicators require contextual interpretation
Ethical measurement boundary	Proposed: limit on what evidence justifies a consequential inference or use	Overreach from measurement to action	Not a scoring rule or regulatory test	Governance decision boundary	Not validated	Later framework remains conceptual and testable

Ethical limits of measurement

Measurement becomes ethically consequential when descriptive information is converted into decisions that alter opportunity, workload, evaluation, autonomy, or employment conditions. Algorithm-based human-resource decisions raise concerns about personal integrity that extend beyond whether an algorithm predicts accurately [19]. This distinction is central to the present viewpoint. A technically valid engagement measure may still be used for a purpose that exceeds what the underlying construct can justify. Ethical adequacy therefore cannot be inferred from measurement reliability or predictive performance alone.

The organizational setting of measurement also matters because algorithms can function as mechanisms of control rather than passive instruments of observation. Research synthesizing algorithms at work identifies mechanisms involving restriction, recommendation, recording, rating, replacement, and reward, together with varied worker responses [20]. An engagement dashboard embedded within these systems may consequently participate in governing behavior. The ethical question is not whether measurement always constitutes control, but whether employees can understand how data are interpreted, whether alternative evidence can enter decisions, and whether a metric has become more authoritative than its evidentiary scope warrants.

Inference discipline provides another boundary. Critical research on algorithms in human-resource management distinguishes descriptive or predictive capability from evidence about causal processes and intervention effects [21]. A model that predicts disengagement, for example, does not establish why disengagement occurs or what managerial intervention will improve sustainable functioning. Likewise, multilevel research on artificial intelligence in organizations shows that consequences differ across individuals, jobs, teams, organizations, and platform arrangements [22]. Individual experience should therefore not be translated automatically into organizational-level conclusions merely because aggregation is computationally convenient.

These concerns motivate the article's principal original contribution: the proposed Ethical Measurement Boundary Framework. It organizes responsible interpretation through five conceptual gates. Construct correspondence asks whether the measure actually represents the construct being claimed. Energetic and affective completeness asks whether consequential effort or emotion-regulation costs are omitted. Temporal and recovery adequacy asks whether the observation window captures replenishment and changing demands. Level and inference discipline asks whether aggregation, prediction, or causal interpretation is justified. Legitimate use asks whether consequential application is proportionate, explainable, contestable, and governed by accountable human authority. These gates are proposed decision principles rather than validated necessary-and-sufficient conditions.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for ethical limits of measurement, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

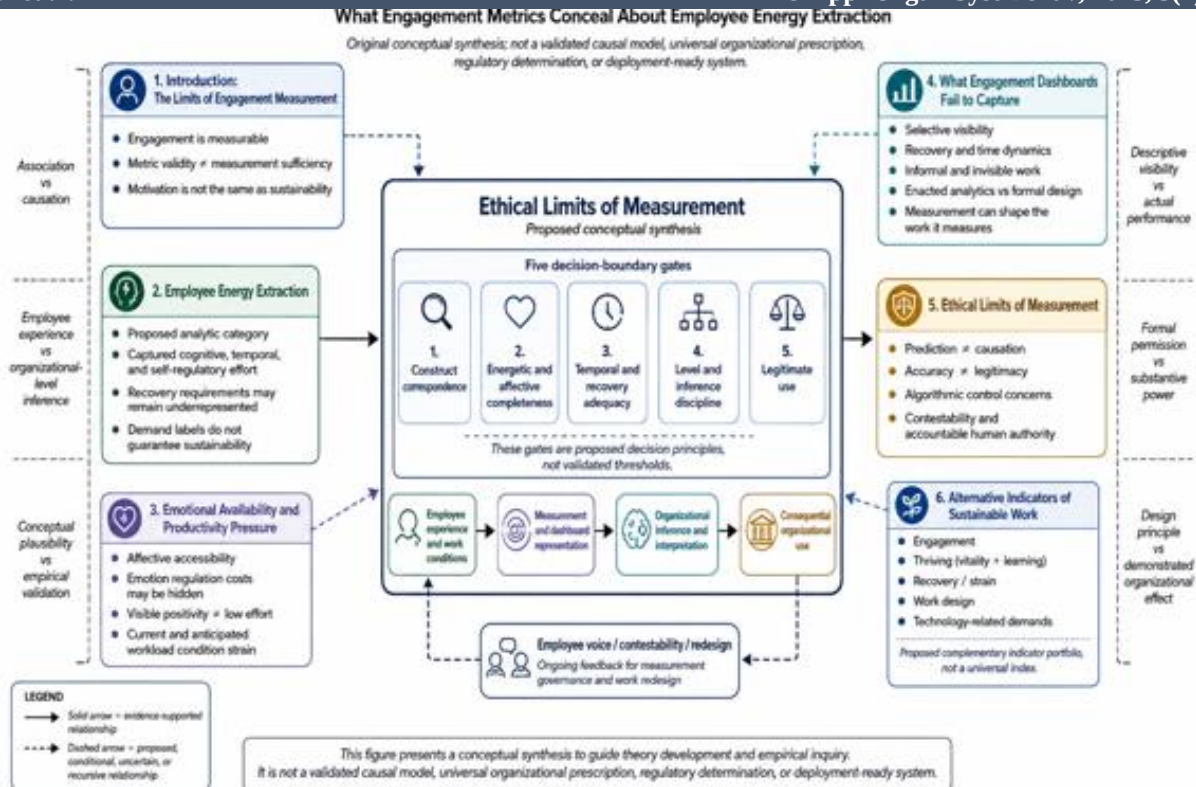


Figure 1. Ethical Limits of Measurement

The framework intentionally creates stopping points rather than a path toward automatic deployment. Failure at one gate does not prove misconduct, but it weakens the justification for stronger organizational inference. Nor does passing a gate establish that subsequent gates are satisfied. A measure can correspond well to engagement yet remain temporally incomplete; an analytically sophisticated model can remain difficult to contest; an ethically defensible purpose can still rely on inappropriate aggregation. This sequencing is an original governance proposition requiring direct examination in organizational settings.

Alternative indicators of sustainable work

The limitations of engagement measurement do not imply that organizations need a single superior metric. Replacing engagement with another summary score would reproduce the same representational problem if distinct aspects of sustainable functioning were again compressed into one indicator. A more defensible approach is a proposed complementary indicator portfolio in which positive functioning, energetic recovery, work design, and experienced demands remain analytically separable.

Thriving provides one useful positive complement because it combines experiences of vitality and learning rather than treating motivation alone as evidence of sustainable functioning. Meta-analytic research supports thriving as a meaningful construct associated with individual and workplace variables [23]. Yet thriving should not become another universal proxy. It can add information about whether employees experience energy and development, but it does not independently establish low strain, adequate recovery, legitimate workload, or favorable working conditions.

A second requirement is multilevel contextualization. Integrative scholarship on thriving emphasizes that employee functioning is embedded within individual, relational, team, and organizational conditions and that multilevel evidence remains uneven [24]. This matters for any sustainable-work dashboard. Individual scores should not be assumed to aggregate automatically into team health, and organizational averages can hide meaningful distributions. A sustainable indicator architecture should therefore preserve level of analysis and, where possible, reveal dispersion rather than allowing an average to erase concentrated demands.

Work design constitutes a third domain. Research on automation, algorithms, and digital work emphasizes that technology's consequences depend substantially on the jobs and work systems through which it is implemented [25]. Indicators of autonomy, workload, task complexity, role clarity, coordination requirements, and opportunities for recovery may therefore explain conditions that an engagement score can only indirectly reflect. These indicators are not proposed as deterministic causes. Their value lies in keeping organizational design visible when interpreting employee states.

Evidence from new ways of working further illustrates why multiple constructs can be considered simultaneously. Research examining technostress, need for recovery, engagement, and well-being treats these variables as distinguishable rather than substitutable signals [26]. The relevant lesson is methodological rather than causal: engagement can contribute useful

information while recovery and technology-related demands provide additional perspectives on sustainability. Observational mediation estimates should not be converted into claims that one universal causal pathway has been demonstrated.

The proposed portfolio therefore contains at least four analytically distinct domains: motivational engagement; vitality and learning; recovery and strain; and work-design or technology-related demands. Organizations could add occupation-specific indicators where theory and evidence justify them, but this article proposes no universal weighting, threshold, aggregate index, or traffic-light rule. Sustainable-work assessment should combine positive functioning, work design, and recovery or strain rather than relying on a single engagement proxy [23, 25, 26].

Such a portfolio also creates new governance responsibilities. More measurement is not automatically better. Additional surveys, passive sensing, monitoring, or behavioral capture may increase burden or surveillance while producing only marginal informational value. The normative principle is therefore minimum sufficient multidimensionality: measure enough distinct domains to support the intended inference without collecting unnecessary employee data. Whether this principle improves decision quality, trust, health, or organizational outcomes remains an empirical question.

Testing the proposed approach requires research capable of comparing engagement-only inference with multidomain alternatives. Intensive longitudinal designs could separate momentary engagement from effort, recovery, and strain; multilevel studies could test when individual indicators can be aggregated; quasi-experimental designs could examine changes in measurement systems; and qualitative process studies could investigate how managers interpret conflicting indicators. Evidence that engagement-only systems perform as well as carefully designed multidomain approaches for sustainable-work decisions would challenge a central proposition of this article.

Conclusion

Engagement remains an important organizational construct, but importance should not be confused with representational sufficiency. This Critical Viewpoint Article has argued that engagement metrics become problematic when they are asked to carry claims about energetic sustainability, emotional cost, recoverability, work quality, or organizational legitimacy that the underlying measure does not establish.

Employee Energy Extraction was introduced as a proposed critical category for examining situations in which valued cognitive, emotional, temporal, and self-regulatory effort becomes visible to organizations while associated costs and replenishment requirements remain less visible. The concept is deliberately bounded. High engagement is not evidence of extraction; demanding work is not inherently harmful; emotional availability does not necessarily imply depletion; and dashboards do not automatically conceal organizational harm.

The proposed Ethical Measurement Boundary Framework extends this argument by separating construct correspondence, energetic and affective completeness, temporal and recovery adequacy, level and inference discipline, and legitimate use. Its central implication is that measurement quality and decision legitimacy are related but non-equivalent questions. A valid metric can still be insufficient for a consequential inference.

A complementary indicator portfolio offers one possible response, but it is a design principle rather than a validated solution. Future research must determine whether the proposed constructs possess discriminant value, whether multidomain assessment improves organizational inference, how employees experience such systems, and under what conditions additional measurement creates more knowledge than surveillance or burden. Until those questions are tested, the contribution is best understood as an evidence-bounded critical framework for deciding what engagement metrics can legitimately show—and what they should not be asked to prove.

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