

ALWAYS ON, ALWAYS STRESSED? HYBRID WORK, BOUNDARY BLURRING, AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING IN THE MODERN ORGANISATION

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Abstract

Hybrid work has become a defining feature of the modern organisation, widely promoted for its potential to enhance flexibility and autonomy. However, growing evidence suggests that hybrid work may intensify employee stress by eroding traditional work non work boundaries. Drawing on boundary theory, the Job Demands Resources model, and Conservation of Resources theory, this conceptual paper develops an integrative framework explaining how hybrid work generates stress through boundary blurring. Boundary blurring is conceptualised as a multidimensional construct encompassing temporal, spatial, and psychological domains that function as chronic job demands, depleting employee resources and undermining recovery. The framework identifies key stress mechanisms including cognitive overload, impaired psychological detachment, and role conflict, and highlights individual, organisational, and institutional factors that moderate these relationships. By reframing employee stress as a systemic outcome of hybrid work design rather than an individual coping failure, the paper advances theory on new ways of working and offers insights for more sustainable, well-being oriented hybrid work practices.

Keywords: Hybrid work, Boundary blurring, Employee stress, Psychological detachment, Job demands–resources, Employee well-being.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The modern organisation is increasingly defined by hybrid work arrangements that combine remote and on-site work, enabled by digital technologies and institutionalized in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hybrid work has been widely framed as a progressive employment model offering enhanced flexibility, autonomy, and work–life balance (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015; Wang et al., 2021). However, alongside these benefits, a growing body of evidence suggests that hybrid work has intensified employee stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, giving rise to what is often described as an “always-on” work culture (Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates, 2013; Kniffin et al., 2021; Eurofound, 2023).

At the core of this paradox lies the reconfiguration of work boundaries. Hybrid work dissolves the spatial and temporal separation between work and non-work domains, enabling work to intrude into private spaces and extend beyond conventional working hours through constant digital connectivity (Wajcman & Rose, 2011; Derks et al., 2015). As a result, employees may experience persistent cognitive preoccupation with work, reduced opportunities for psychological detachment, and difficulties in recovering from job demands (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015; Barber & Santuzzi, 2017). These dynamics suggest that employee stress in hybrid work contexts is not merely episodic or workload-driven, but structurally embedded in how work is designed, governed, and normatively enacted.

1.1 Problem statement

Despite the rapid expansion of research on remote and hybrid work, the literature remains theoretically fragmented in explaining how hybrid work systematically contributes to employee stress and diminished well-being. Existing studies predominantly emphasize positive outcomes such as flexibility, engagement, and productivity, often treating stress as an unintended side effect or an individual failure of self-regulation (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Molino et al., 2020). Consequently, responsibility for managing work–life boundaries is frequently shifted onto employees, obscuring the organisational and strategic conditions that normalize constant availability and blurred boundaries (Putnam, Myers & Gailliard, 2014; Kossek et al., 2012).

While boundary theory has been applied to telework and flexible work arrangements, it has yet to fully capture the intensified and multi-dimensional nature of boundary blurring in contemporary hybrid work environments (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Allen et al., 2014). Similarly, dominant stress frameworks such as the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory have not been sufficiently integrated with boundary perspectives to explain how boundary blurring operates as a chronic job demand that depletes psychological resources over time (Hobfoll et al., 2018; Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). This theoretical gap limits our understanding of why hybrid work, despite its flexibility, is increasingly associated with sustained stress, emotional exhaustion, and impaired well-being (Kniffin et al., 2021; Eurofound, 2023).

1.2 Research objectives

In response to these limitations, this conceptual paper seeks to advance a more integrated and theory-driven understanding of employee stress in hybrid work contexts. The primary objective of the study is to examine how hybrid work contributes to employee stress through the mechanism of boundary blurring and under what conditions this process undermines employee well-being.

Specifically, the paper pursues the following objectives:

- To conceptualize boundary blurring in hybrid work as a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing temporal, spatial, and psychological domains.
- To explain how boundary blurring functions as a chronic job demand that intensifies employee stress through resource depletion and impaired recovery.
- To integrate boundary theory with contemporary stress frameworks, particularly the JD-R and COR theories, in order to develop a coherent explanatory model.
- To identify individual, organisational, and institutional factors that may exacerbate or buffer the stress–well-being relationship in hybrid work environments.

1.3 Methodological approach

To achieve these objectives, this study adopts a conceptual research design grounded in theory synthesis and integrative framework development. Drawing on prior empirical and theoretical work in organisational behavior, work psychology, human resource management, and sociology, the paper systematically reviews and integrates insights from boundary theory, stress and well-being literature, and research on hybrid and digital work. Building on this synthesis, the study develops a set of theoretically informed propositions and presents an integrative conceptual framework that explicates the mechanisms linking hybrid work, boundary blurring, employee stress, and well-being outcomes.

By offering a theoretically grounded and context-sensitive framework, this paper aims to move beyond individualistic explanations of stress and reposition employee well-being as a strategic and organisational responsibility. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on the sustainability of hybrid work models and provides a foundation for future empirical research and evidence-based organisational and policy interventions.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Understanding employee stress in hybrid work environments requires an integrative theoretical lens that captures how work design, boundary management, and resource dynamics interact in digitally mediated contexts. This section draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives—hybrid work as a strategic work design choice, boundary theory, and contemporary stress and well-being frameworks—to establish a robust foundation for the proposed conceptual model.

2.1 Hybrid work as a strategic work design choice

Hybrid work represents a fundamental reconfiguration of how, when, and where work is performed, rather than a temporary or peripheral employment arrangement. Organisations increasingly adopt hybrid work as a strategic response to environmental uncertainty, talent competition, cost pressures, and technological advancement (Kniffin et al., 2021; Spurk & Straub, 2020). From a strategic human resource management perspective, hybrid work is embedded in broader organisational choices concerning performance management, coordination, and control, shaping employee expectations of availability, responsiveness, and productivity (Kelliher, Richardson & Boiarintseva, 2019).

While hybrid work is often associated with increased autonomy and flexibility, these benefits are frequently accompanied by intensified work demands and expanded performance pressures. Digital communication technologies enable constant connectivity, real-time responsiveness, and expanded surveillance, subtly reinforcing norms of continuous availability (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Leonardi, 2021). As a result, hybrid work may intensify work rather than reduce it, particularly in knowledge-intensive roles where outputs are difficult to standardize and performance is evaluated through visibility and responsiveness (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Wheatley, 2022). These dynamics suggest that hybrid work cannot be fully understood without considering its strategic and normative implications for employee behaviour and well-being.

2.2 Boundary theory and boundary management in hybrid work

Boundary theory provides a critical lens for examining how individuals manage the interface between work and non-work roles (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000). Boundaries vary in terms of their permeability and flexibility, influencing the degree to which roles are segmented or integrated (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Allen et al., 2014). In traditional work settings, physical and temporal boundaries such as the workplace and standard working hours helped regulate role transitions and protect recovery time. Hybrid work disrupts these stabilizing mechanisms by weakening or removing the spatial and temporal markers that previously structured daily work routines.

Research on telework and flexible work arrangements has shown that increased boundary permeability can lead to both positive and negative outcomes, depending on individual preferences and organisational support (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy & Hannum, 2012; Allen et al., 2015). However, contemporary hybrid work differs from earlier forms of flexibility in its scale, intensity, and digital embeddedness. Constant connectivity through emails, messaging platforms, and collaborative tools enables work to extend into evenings, weekends, and private spaces, increasing the likelihood of boundary blurring rather than deliberate boundary integration (Derks et al., 2015; Barber & Santuzzi, 2017).

Importantly, boundary blurring is not solely an individual-level phenomenon but is shaped by organisational norms and leadership expectations. When availability and responsiveness become implicit indicators of commitment and performance, employees may feel compelled to maintain permeable boundaries, even at the expense of well-being (Putnam et al., 2014; Kossek, 2016). This highlights the need to reconceptualize boundary blurring in hybrid work as a structural and normative condition, rather than a matter of personal preference or self-discipline.

2.3 Contemporary stress and well-being frameworks

To explain how boundary blurring translates into employee stress, this study draws on contemporary stress and well-being theories, particularly the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. The JD-R model posits that job demands—defined as aspects of work that require sustained physical or psychological effort—are primary predictors of strain and burnout, especially when not offset by sufficient job resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). In hybrid work contexts, boundary blurring can be conceptualized as a chronic job demand that increases cognitive load, role conflict, and emotional strain.

COR theory further explains stress as a process of resource loss or threatened resource loss, emphasizing that individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources such as time, energy, and psychological well-being (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Hybrid work may accelerate resource depletion by eroding recovery opportunities and creating persistent demands on attention and availability. When employees are unable to disengage from work, resource loss spirals may emerge, leading to emotional exhaustion and reduced well-being (Sonnentag et al., 2017; Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl & Westman, 2014).

Despite their explanatory power, both JD-R and COR theories have been criticized for insufficiently accounting for the structural conditions that generate job demands in digitally mediated work environments (Bakker, Wang & Demerouti, 2023). Integrating these frameworks with boundary theory allows for a more nuanced understanding of how hybrid work design systematically produces stress through boundary blurring. Specifically, boundary blurring amplifies job demands and accelerates resource depletion, while simultaneously weakening the mechanisms—such as psychological detachment and role transitions—that traditionally support recovery and well-being.

2.4 Integrating boundary and stress perspectives

Bringing together boundary theory and contemporary stress frameworks enables a more comprehensive explanation of employee stress in hybrid work contexts. Boundary blurring serves as the connecting

mechanism through which hybrid work design translates into sustained job demands and resource loss. This integration shifts the analytical focus from individual coping strategies to the organisational and institutional conditions that shape boundary norms and expectations.

By situating boundary blurring within the JD-R and COR frameworks, this study conceptualizes employee stress as a predictable and systemic outcome of hybrid work arrangements when boundary management is insufficiently supported at the organisational level. This integrated theoretical foundation provides the basis for the development of propositions and an overarching conceptual framework linking hybrid work, boundary blurring, employee stress, and well-being outcomes.

3. CONCEPTUALIZING BOUNDARY BLURRING IN HYBRID WORK

Although boundary theory has long recognized the permeability and flexibility of work–non-work boundaries, contemporary hybrid work arrangements necessitate a more precise and multidimensional conceptualization of boundary blurring. Hybrid work does not merely increase flexibility in where and when work is performed; rather, it reshapes the structural and normative conditions under which boundaries are enacted, often rendering them persistently ambiguous and difficult to manage (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Allen et al., 2014; Wheatley, 2022). This section conceptualizes boundary blurring as a distinct phenomenon in hybrid work contexts and differentiates it from related constructs such as flexibility, integration, and telework intensity.

3.1 Defining boundary blurring in hybrid work

Boundary blurring refers to the progressive erosion of clear temporal, spatial, and psychological distinctions between work and non-work roles, resulting in persistent role overlap and reduced opportunities for disengagement and recovery. Unlike voluntary boundary integration, which reflects individual preferences for combining work and non-work roles, boundary blurring in hybrid work is frequently involuntary and structurally induced (Kossek, Ruderman, Braddy & Hannum, 2012; Putnam, Myers & Gailliard, 2014). It emerges when organisational expectations, digital infrastructures, and performance norms collectively promote constant availability and responsiveness, regardless of physical location.

Hybrid work environments intensify boundary blurring by normalizing work across multiple locations and timeframes. Digital collaboration platforms enable continuous interaction, while asynchronous communication extends work into evenings, weekends, and traditionally protected non-work periods (Derks et al., 2015; Barber & Santuzzi, 2017). As a result, employees may experience blurred role

transitions, ongoing cognitive engagement with work, and difficulties in maintaining meaningful separation between professional and personal domains.

3.2 Boundary blurring versus flexibility and boundary integration

It is important to distinguish boundary blurring from related concepts such as work flexibility and boundary integration. Work flexibility typically refers to employee discretion over work schedules and locations, which can enhance autonomy and well-being when supported by appropriate organisational practices (Allen, Golden & Shockley, 2015; Kelliher et al., 2019). Boundary integration, by contrast, reflects a deliberate preference for combining work and non-work roles, often associated with positive outcomes for individuals who value role fluidity (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Kossek et al., 2012).

Boundary blurring differs fundamentally in that it reduces choice and increases ambiguity. In hybrid work contexts, flexibility may coexist with intensified expectations of availability, undermining employees' capacity to regulate boundaries effectively (Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates, 2013). Consequently, what appears as flexibility at the structural level may function as boundary blurring at the experiential level, particularly when organisational norms privilege responsiveness over recovery (Putnam et al., 2014; Wheatley, 2022). This distinction is critical for understanding why hybrid work does not uniformly improve employee well-being.

3.3 Dimensions of boundary blurring

Building on prior boundary research and recent hybrid work scholarship, this study conceptualizes boundary blurring as a multidimensional construct comprising temporal, spatial, and psychological dimensions. These dimensions are analytically distinct yet interrelated, collectively shaping employees' stress experiences.

Temporal boundary blurring refers to the extension and fragmentation of working time beyond formal work hours. Hybrid work enables work to be performed at any time, often leading to extended availability, interrupted rest periods, and irregular work rhythms (Wajcman & Rose, 2011; Derks et al., 2015). The absence of clear temporal boundaries increases the likelihood of work encroaching on personal time, undermining recovery processes and elevating stress (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

Spatial boundary blurring reflects the convergence of work and non-work spaces, particularly when the home becomes a primary or partial workplace. Hybrid work dissolves the physical separation that traditionally signaled role transitions, making it more difficult for employees to disengage from work-related thoughts and behaviours (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). The loss of distinct recovery

spaces may intensify stress, especially in contexts characterized by limited living space or inadequate home-office resources.

Psychological boundary blurring captures the cognitive and emotional persistence of work-related concerns beyond working hours. Even in the absence of active work tasks, employees may remain mentally preoccupied with work, anticipate future demands, or monitor digital communication channels (Barber & Santuzzi, 2017; Sonnentag et al., 2017). Psychological blurring is particularly consequential because it directly undermines psychological detachment, a key mechanism for stress recovery and well-being.

3.4 Boundary blurring as a chronic job demand

Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources and Conservation of Resources frameworks, this study conceptualizes boundary blurring as a chronic job demand rather than a situational or episodic stressor (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Unlike short-term workload spikes, boundary blurring persists over time and is embedded in everyday work practices and expectations. As such, it continuously consumes cognitive, emotional, and temporal resources, increasing vulnerability to stress and burnout.

Moreover, boundary blurring may trigger resource loss spirals, whereby diminished recovery capacity reduces employees' ability to cope with subsequent demands, further intensifying stress (Halbesleben et al., 2014). This perspective underscores that employee stress in hybrid work contexts is not simply the result of excessive tasks, but of sustained exposure to blurred boundaries that erode the conditions necessary for recovery and well-being.

3.5 Implications for theory development

Conceptualising boundary blurring as a multidimensional and chronic job demand advances boundary theory in several ways. First, it shifts the focus from individual boundary management preferences to the organisational and technological structures that shape boundary permeability. Second, it integrates boundary research with stress and well-being theories, offering a more comprehensive explanation of how hybrid work design affects employee outcomes. Finally, it provides a foundation for developing theoretically grounded propositions linking hybrid work, boundary blurring, employee stress, and well-being, which are elaborated in the subsequent section.

4. BOUNDARY BLURRING AND EMPLOYEE STRESS MECHANISMS

Building on the conceptualization of boundary blurring as a multidimensional and chronic job demand, this section explicates the mechanisms through which boundary blurring in hybrid work environments generates employee stress and undermines well-being. Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and research on recovery and psychological detachment, we argue that boundary blurring affects employee stress through three interrelated mechanisms: cognitive overload, impaired recovery, and role conflict and identity strain.

4.1 Cognitive overload and attentional fragmentation

Hybrid work environments characterized by blurred boundaries often expose employees to persistent and overlapping demands on their attention. Temporal and psychological boundary blurring increase the frequency of interruptions, task switching, and anticipatory monitoring of digital communication channels (Wajcman & Rose, 2011; Barber & Santuzzi, 2017). As work extends across time and space, employees are required to continuously reorient their attention between work and non-work roles, leading to cognitive overload and attentional fragmentation (Mark, Gudith & Klocke, 2008; Leroy, 2009).

From a JD-R perspective, sustained cognitive demands function as job demands that require continuous mental effort and are associated with strain when not offset by adequate recovery or resources (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). COR theory further suggests that persistent attentional demands deplete cognitive and emotional resources, increasing vulnerability to stress and reducing individuals' capacity to cope with subsequent demands (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Over time, this depletion may manifest as heightened stress, irritability, and reduced cognitive functioning.

Proposition 1:

Higher levels of boundary blurring in hybrid work environments are positively associated with employee stress through increased cognitive overload and attentional fragmentation.

4.2 Impaired psychological detachment and recovery

A second mechanism through which boundary blurring influences employee stress is the erosion of psychological detachment and recovery. Psychological detachment refers to the ability to mentally disengage from work during non-work time, allowing depleted resources to be replenished (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). Hybrid work, particularly when accompanied by temporal and psychological boundary blurring, undermines detachment by extending work-related thoughts and expectations into non-work periods (Derks et al., 2015; Sonnentag et al., 2017).

Boundary blurring reduces the effectiveness of recovery processes by creating ambiguity about when work truly ends. Employees may remain cognitively engaged with work even in the absence of active tasks, anticipating messages, deadlines, or performance evaluations (Barber & Santuzzi, 2017). According to COR theory, the inability to recover accelerates resource loss and increases the likelihood of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Thus, impaired detachment serves as a critical pathway linking boundary blurring to sustained stress.

Proposition 2:

Boundary blurring in hybrid work environments is negatively associated with psychological detachment, which in turn increases employee stress and emotional exhaustion.

4.3 Role conflict and identity strain

Boundary blurring also intensifies stress by amplifying role conflict and identity strain. Hybrid work often requires employees to simultaneously enact multiple roles—such as employee, caregiver, and household manager—within the same temporal and spatial contexts (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 2012). When boundaries are blurred, competing role expectations may overlap, creating incompatible demands and increasing role conflict (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Role conflict is a well-established predictor of stress and strain, particularly when individuals lack clear cues for prioritizing roles or transitioning between them (Allen et al., 2014). In hybrid work contexts, organisational norms that prioritize responsiveness and visibility may implicitly privilege work roles over non-work roles, exacerbating identity strain and feelings of inadequacy across domains (Putnam et al., 2014). This strain is likely to be particularly pronounced for employees with significant non-work responsibilities or limited control over their work schedules.

Proposition 3:

Boundary blurring in hybrid work environments increases employee stress by intensifying role conflict and identity strain between work and non-work roles.

4.4 Differential effects of boundary blurring dimensions

While temporal, spatial, and psychological boundary blurring are interrelated, they may not exert uniform effects on employee stress. Psychological boundary blurring, in particular, directly undermines mental disengagement and recovery, making it a potent driver of stress (Sonnetag et al., 2017). Temporal and spatial blurring may indirectly influence stress by facilitating psychological blurring, suggesting a hierarchical relationship among the dimensions.

Understanding these differential effects is critical for theory development, as it highlights the need to move beyond aggregate measures of flexibility or boundary permeability and examine the specific mechanisms through which hybrid work affects well-being.

Proposition 4:

Psychological boundary blurring has a stronger positive association with employee stress than temporal or spatial boundary blurring in hybrid work contexts.

Taken together, these mechanisms illustrate how boundary blurring functions as a central explanatory process linking hybrid work design to employee stress and diminished well-being. By integrating boundary theory with JD-R and COR frameworks, this section positions employee stress as a predictable and systemic outcome of hybrid work arrangements characterized by blurred boundaries. The propositions developed here provide a foundation for examining the conditions under which boundary blurring is exacerbated or mitigated, which is addressed in the subsequent section on moderating and buffering factors.

5. MODERATING AND BUFFERING FACTORS

Although boundary blurring in hybrid work environments constitutes a chronic job demand that elevates employee stress, its effects are neither uniform nor inevitable. Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, and boundary management literature, this section identifies key moderating and buffering factors at the individual, organisational, and institutional levels. These factors shape the extent to which boundary blurring translates into stress and diminished well-being.

5.1 Individual-level moderators

At the individual level, employees differ in their capacity and preferences for managing blurred boundaries. Boundary management preferences, which reflect individuals' inclination toward role segmentation or integration, influence how employees experience hybrid work demands (Nippert-Eng, 1996; Kossek et al., 2012). Employees who prefer segmentation may experience greater stress under conditions of high boundary blurring, as blurred boundaries conflict with their desired separation between work and non-work roles (Allen et al., 2014).

Digital self-regulation capabilities also play a critical moderating role. Skills such as managing notifications, setting availability limits, and prioritizing asynchronous communication can reduce the frequency and intensity of interruptions, thereby mitigating cognitive overload (Derks et al., 2015; Barber & Santuzzi,

2017). From a COR perspective, such capabilities function as personal resources that protect against resource loss and stress escalation (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Psychological resilience further moderates the stress effects of boundary blurring by enabling individuals to adapt to sustained demands and recover more effectively from strain (Kuntz, Näswall & Malinen, 2016). However, reliance on individual resilience alone risks normalizing structurally induced stress and shifting responsibility away from organisational design choices.

Proposition 5:

Individual resources, including boundary management preferences, digital self-regulation capabilities, and psychological resilience, moderate the relationship between boundary blurring and employee stress, such that the relationship is weaker when these resources are high.

5.2 Organisational-level moderators

Organisational practices and norms play a decisive role in shaping how boundary blurring affects employee stress. Leadership expectations regarding availability and responsiveness strongly influence boundary permeability in hybrid work contexts (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Kossek, 2016). When leaders implicitly or explicitly reward constant availability, boundary blurring is likely to intensify stress by reinforcing norms of continuous work engagement.

Conversely, supportive leadership and perceived organisational support can buffer the stress effects of boundary blurring by legitimising boundary-setting behaviours and protecting recovery time (Eisenberger et al., 2002; Kelliher et al., 2019). Clear guidelines on after-hours communication, workload expectations, and performance evaluation criteria can reduce ambiguity and role conflict, thereby mitigating stress (Putnam et al., 2014).

Job autonomy also functions as a critical organisational resource. While autonomy may exacerbate stress when coupled with high expectations of availability, it can buffer stress when accompanied by realistic workload demands and trust-based management practices (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Wheatley, 2022). This underscores the importance of aligning hybrid work policies with supportive organisational cultures rather than treating flexibility as a standalone solution.

Proposition 6:

Organisational resources, including supportive leadership, clear boundary norms, perceived organisational support, and job autonomy, weaken the positive relationship between boundary blurring and employee stress.

5.3 Institutional and contextual moderators

Beyond the organisational level, broader institutional and contextual factors influence how hybrid work and boundary blurring affect employee stress. National labour regulations, such as the “right to disconnect,” can provide formal protections against excessive availability demands, thereby reducing boundary blurring and associated stress (Eurofound, 2023; Messenger, 2019). In contexts where such protections are absent or weakly enforced, employees may be more vulnerable to chronic stress.

Socio-economic and infrastructural conditions further shape stress experiences in hybrid work environments. Limited access to adequate home workspaces, unreliable digital infrastructure, and competing household demands may intensify spatial and psychological boundary blurring, particularly in emerging economies (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). Institutional voids may therefore amplify stress by constraining employees’ ability to manage boundaries effectively.

Cultural norms regarding work centrality and availability also moderate stress outcomes. In cultures that valorize long working hours and constant responsiveness, boundary blurring may be normalized, increasing the risk of stress and burnout (Wajcman & Rose, 2011). These contextual differences highlight the importance of moving beyond universalistic assumptions about hybrid work and employee well-being.

Proposition 7:

Institutional and contextual factors, including labour regulations, socio-economic conditions, and cultural norms, moderate the relationship between boundary blurring and employee stress, with weaker protections and constraints strengthening the relationship.

5.4 Integrative perspective

Taken together, these moderating and buffering factors demonstrate that the stress effects of boundary blurring are shaped by a complex interplay of individual capabilities, organisational practices, and institutional contexts. While individual resources can mitigate stress to some extent, sustainable reductions in employee stress require organisational and policy-level interventions that address the structural and normative drivers of boundary blurring.

This multi-level perspective reinforces the central argument of the paper: employee stress in hybrid work environments is not merely a matter of personal coping, but a predictable outcome of work design choices and institutional arrangements. The propositions developed in this section inform the integrative conceptual framework presented next, which synthesizes the relationships among hybrid work, boundary blurring, stress mechanisms, moderating factors, and well-being outcomes.

6. INTEGRATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study advances an integrative conceptual framework that explains how hybrid work arrangements generate employee stress through boundary blurring and how this process is conditioned by multi-level moderating and buffering factors. Drawing on boundary theory, the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model, and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the framework positions employee stress not as an incidental outcome of hybrid work, but as a systemic and predictable consequence of contemporary work design choices (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

At the foundation of the framework is hybrid work as a strategic work design context. Hybrid work restructures how work is organized across time, space, and psychological domains, reshaping expectations of availability, responsiveness, and performance (Kniffin et al., 2021; Wheatley, 2022). Rather than uniformly enhancing flexibility, hybrid work often embeds employees in digitally mediated environments where work boundaries are persistently permeable.

6.1 Boundary blurring as the central mechanism

The framework identifies boundary blurring as the central mechanism linking hybrid work to employee stress. Boundary blurring is conceptualized as a multidimensional construct comprising temporal, spatial, and psychological dimensions. These dimensions are mutually reinforcing and collectively erode clear role transitions between work and non-work domains (Derks et al., 2015; Allen et al., 2014).

Consistent with JD-R theory, boundary blurring is theorized to function as a chronic job demand that requires sustained cognitive, emotional, and temporal effort (Bakker & Demerouti, 2023). Psychological boundary blurring is particularly salient, as it directly undermines psychological detachment and recovery, amplifying the stress potential of hybrid work arrangements (Sonnentag et al., 2017).

6.2 Stress mechanisms and well-being outcomes

Boundary blurring activates three interrelated stress mechanisms:

- (1) cognitive overload and attentional fragmentation, arising from constant connectivity and role switching;
- (2) impaired psychological detachment and recovery, resulting from persistent work-related cognitive engagement; and
- (3) role conflict and identity strain, stemming from overlapping and competing role expectations (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Barber & Santuzzi, 2017).

Through these mechanisms, boundary blurring accelerates resource depletion and heightens employee stress, emotional exhaustion, and burnout, consistent with COR theory's emphasis on resource loss and loss spirals (Halbesleben et al., 2014; Hobfoll et al., 2018). Employee well-being is therefore positioned as

an outcome shaped by sustained exposure to blurred boundaries rather than by isolated workload pressures.

6.3 Moderating and buffering conditions

The framework incorporates multi-level moderating and buffering factors that shape the strength of the boundary blurring–stress relationship. At the individual level, boundary management preferences, digital self-regulation capabilities, and psychological resilience influence employees' capacity to cope with blurred boundaries (Kossek et al., 2012; Derks et al., 2015). At the organisational level, leadership expectations, perceived organisational support, job autonomy, and explicit boundary norms play a decisive role in legitimizing or constraining constant availability (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Kelliher et al., 2019).

At the institutional level, labour regulations (such as the right to disconnect), socio-economic conditions, and cultural norms further condition stress outcomes by shaping the extent to which boundary blurring is normalized or constrained (Messenger, 2019; Eurofound, 2023). These contextual factors highlight that employee stress in hybrid work environments is embedded within broader organisational and societal systems.

6.4 Dynamic feedback effects

Importantly, the framework acknowledges dynamic feedback loops whereby elevated stress and emotional exhaustion further impair employees' ability to manage boundaries effectively. This recursive process reinforces boundary blurring over time, creating self-perpetuating cycles of strain that threaten the long-term sustainability of hybrid work arrangements. Such dynamics align with COR theory's notion of resource loss spirals and underscore the cumulative nature of stress in "always-on" work environments (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Figure 1 presents the integrative conceptual framework developed in this study. Hybrid work arrangements are depicted as the foundational work design context influencing employee experiences. Arrows extend from hybrid work to three interrelated dimensions of boundary blurring—temporal, spatial, and psychological—representing the erosion of clear work–non-work boundaries.

Boundary blurring is shown to influence employee stress through three mediating mechanisms: cognitive overload and attentional fragmentation; impaired psychological detachment and recovery; and role conflict and identity strain. These mechanisms lead to elevated employee stress and reduced well-being outcomes, including emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Moderating and buffering factors are illustrated at three levels. Individual-level resources (boundary management preferences, digital self-regulation, resilience), organisational-level resources (supportive

leadership, clear boundary norms, job autonomy, perceived organisational support), and institutional-level factors (labour regulations, socio-economic conditions, cultural norms) are depicted as moderating the relationship between boundary blurring and employee stress.

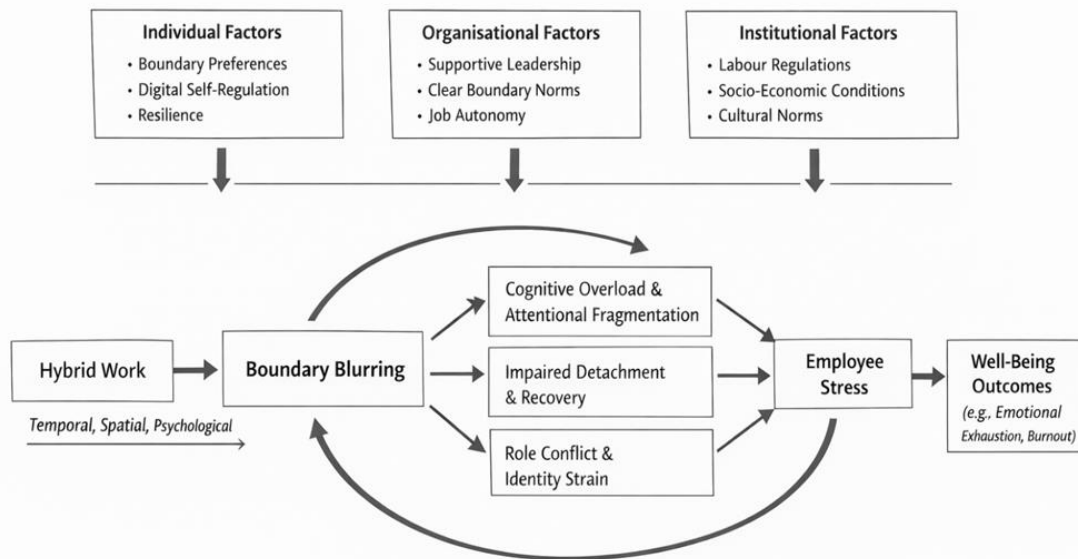


FIGURE 1. INTEGRATIVE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF HYBRID WORK, BOUNDARY BLURRING, AND EMPLOYEE WELL-BEING
Source: Author's research

Finally, feedback loops from employee stress back to boundary blurring highlight the dynamic and reinforcing nature of stress processes in hybrid work environments. Collectively, the figure visually synthesizes the paper's theoretical contributions and reinforces the central argument that employee stress in hybrid work contexts is a systemic outcome of work design and governance, rather than solely an individual coping issue.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

The integrative framework developed in this study yields important implications for theory, organisational practice, and public policy. By conceptualizing boundary blurring as a systemic and multidimensional mechanism linking hybrid work to employee stress, this paper advances scholarly understanding of contemporary work arrangements while offering actionable insights for managers and policymakers concerned with the sustainability of hybrid work models.

7.1 Implications for theory

This study contributes to theory in three significant ways. First, it advances boundary theory by reconceptualizing boundary blurring as a chronic, structurally induced job demand rather than an

individual-level preference or coping challenge. Prior boundary research has largely focused on boundary permeability and integration as matters of personal choice (Ashforth et al., 2000; Kossek et al., 2012). By contrast, this study demonstrates that hybrid work environments systematically produce boundary blurring through organisational norms, digital infrastructures, and performance expectations, thereby shifting theoretical attention toward the structural origins of boundary management challenges.

Second, the study extends stress and well-being theories, particularly the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, by integrating boundary dynamics into their explanatory logic. While JD-R and COR have been widely used to explain employee strain, they have rarely been applied to explain how digitally mediated work design generates new forms of chronic job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Hobfoll et al., 2018). By positioning boundary blurring as a persistent demand that depletes psychological resources and undermines recovery, this paper offers a more nuanced account of stress processes in hybrid work contexts.

Third, this study contributes to the growing literature on new ways of working by challenging the dominant assumption that flexibility inherently enhances employee well-being. The framework highlights the paradoxical nature of hybrid work, demonstrating how flexibility can coexist with intensified control and heightened stress (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Kniffin et al., 2021). In doing so, the study responds to calls for more critical and theory-driven examinations of hybrid work and its unintended consequences.

7.2 Implications for organisational practice

The findings of this conceptual analysis have important implications for organisational leaders and human resource practitioners. First, organisations should recognize that employee stress in hybrid work environments is not solely an individual resilience issue but a work design and governance challenge. Hybrid work policies that emphasize flexibility without addressing boundary norms risk normalizing constant availability and eroding employee well-being.

Second, leaders play a critical role in shaping boundary expectations. Managerial behaviors that implicitly reward responsiveness outside standard working hours can intensify boundary blurring and stress (Kossek, 2016; Mazmanian et al., 2013). Organisations should therefore encourage leadership practices that legitimize boundary-setting, model healthy disconnection behaviors, and clarify expectations around availability and performance.

Third, organisations should invest in structural supports for boundary management. These include clear guidelines on after-hours communication, workload planning that accounts for hybrid work realities, and performance evaluation systems that prioritise outcomes over constant visibility (Kelliher et al., 2019). Providing employees with digital self-regulation tools and training can further mitigate cognitive overload, although such interventions should complement rather than replace structural changes.

Finally, organisations operating in resource-constrained or emerging economy contexts should be particularly attentive to spatial and infrastructural challenges associated with hybrid work. Failure to account for unequal access to adequate workspaces and digital resources may exacerbate stress and reinforce existing inequalities (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Wang et al., 2021).

7.3 Implications for policy and regulation

Beyond organisational practice, the study has important implications for public policy and labour regulation. As hybrid work becomes institutionalized, existing labour frameworks may be insufficient to protect employees from chronic stress associated with blurred boundaries. Policies such as the right to disconnect provide a promising mechanism for constraining excessive availability demands and safeguarding recovery time (Messenger, 2019; Eurofound, 2023).

Policymakers should also consider how labour regulations can be adapted to account for the spatial and temporal fluidity of hybrid work. This includes clarifying employer responsibilities for employee well-being in remote and hybrid settings and ensuring that occupational health and safety standards extend beyond traditional workplaces.

In emerging economies, where regulatory enforcement and infrastructural support may be uneven, policy interventions are particularly critical. Without institutional safeguards, hybrid work risks transferring stress-related costs from organisations to employees, households, and society at large. From a broader societal perspective, addressing employee stress in hybrid work contexts is essential not only for individual well-being but also for sustaining productivity, social cohesion, and decent work standards in the digital economy.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is subject to two primary limitations. First, as a conceptual paper, it does not draw on primary empirical data, which limits the ability to test the proposed framework and propositions. While the theoretical integration is intended to advance understanding of stress in hybrid work contexts, the relationships articulated remain inferential and require empirical validation, particularly to capture the temporal and micro-level dynamics of boundary management. Second, the framework is largely grounded in literature on knowledge-intensive and professional work, where hybrid arrangements and digital connectivity are most prevalent. As a result, its applicability to frontline, manual, or highly regulated occupations, as well as across diverse cultural and institutional contexts, may be constrained, warranting future research that tests and refines the model in varied occupational and national settings.

9. CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper advances a theory-driven explanation of employee stress in hybrid work environments by positioning boundary blurring as a central and systemic mechanism through which contemporary work design undermines employee well-being. Moving beyond individualistic and episodic accounts of stress, the study demonstrates how hybrid work restructures temporal, spatial, and psychological boundaries, generating chronic job demands that erode recovery, intensify cognitive and role strain, and accelerate resource depletion.

By integrating boundary theory with the Job Demands–Resources and Conservation of Resources frameworks, the paper offers a unified conceptual model that captures the dynamic and multi-level nature of stress in “always-on” work contexts. The proposed framework highlights that the stress effects of hybrid work are contingent upon individual resources, organisational practices, and institutional protections, underscoring that employee well-being is fundamentally shaped by work design and governance choices rather than solely by personal coping capacity.

As hybrid work becomes a permanent feature of the modern organisation, the findings underscore an urgent need to rethink assumptions about flexibility, availability, and performance. Without deliberate structural and normative interventions, hybrid work risks reproducing unsustainable patterns of stress that compromise both employee well-being and organisational effectiveness. By reframing employee stress as a predictable outcome of hybrid work design, this study provides a foundation for future empirical research and informs more humane, sustainable approaches to organizing work in the digital era.

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares that he has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI AND AI-ASSISTED TECHNOLOGIES IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work the author used AI GRAMMARLY for language editing. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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