

Perils of perpetual connectivity: Navigating the 'always-on' culture in the modern workplace


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Orientation: The integration of digital tools with flexible work habits has transformed modern workplaces, creating an 'always-on' culture that impacts employee well-being and organisational effectiveness.

Research purpose: This systematic review explored how continuous connectivity affects stress, work-life boundaries and institutional standards, with an emphasis on peer-reviewed studies published from 2015 to 2024.

Motivation for the study: The study aimed to explore how digital tools, such as messaging platforms and remote collaboration technologies, can lead to increased workplace stress and burnout despite their intended productivity benefits.

Research approach/design and method: The review followed PRISMA principles and utilised systematic approach to ensure rigour and reproducibility. Empirical studies from emerging economies were prioritised to improve generalisability. The inclusion prioritised peer-reviewed studies with strong quantitative or qualitative evidence.

Main findings: The analysis found that digital tools have exacerbated stress, burnout and mental weariness among knowledge workers and women handling caregiving obligations, despite their intended purpose of empowerment. Notably, 68% of research focus on individual coping techniques, such as digital detoxes, while less than 20% investigate organisational treatments, indicating a gap in policy formulation and implementation. The study proposes a dynamic model of flexibility, highlighting institutional standards, rather than individual habits, as the cause of unsustainable work patterns.

Practical/managerial implications: The study suggests techniques for balancing productivity and well-being, such as time-sensitive communication protocols, open workload indicators and regulations enforcing the right to disengage.

Contribution/value-add: The study reframes flexibility as a dual-force dynamic that requires systemic solutions. It offers evidence-based guidance for designing organisational policies.

Keywords: 'always-on' culture; burnout; digital connectivity; digital fatigue; employee well-being; flexible work arrangements; work-life balance.

Introduction

The rise of digital tools and flexible work arrangements has transformed contemporary workplaces, cultivating a 'always-on' culture marked by continuous connectivity through smartphones, instant messaging and remote collaboration platforms. Although these technologies offer the potential for increased autonomy and efficiency, they have unintentionally established expectations of constant availability (Alexander et al., 2021; Köffer, 2015). This has led to a blurring of the lines between professional and personal life, resulting in increased levels of stress, burnout and mental fatigue (Ahlers, 2016; Charalampous et al., 2019; Leonardi, 2020). The phenomenon known as the paradox of flexibility reveals a significant contradiction that differs from individual-centric models such as the autonomy paradox. Specifically, tools intended to empower employees frequently undermine well-being by legitimising unsustainable expectations of responsiveness (Adisa et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2022). This highlights the fundamental role of organisational standards in reinforcing detrimental connectivity norms.

The current body of research has largely approached these challenges by focusing on individual-level interventions, including digital detoxes and mindfulness practices (Hartmann 2022; Hilty et al., 2022; Lesia, 2023). This perspective tends to neglect the systemic influence of organisational standards in sustaining boundarylessness. For instance, the monitoring of algorithmic workloads

and the implicit support for after-hours communication contribute to increased digital fatigue, particularly for women who are managing caregiving responsibilities (Hunt et al., 2019; Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023). Despite the increasing acknowledgement of these challenges, there remains a scarcity of studies that synthesise the way institutional practices, as opposed to individual habits, contribute to the negative consequences of 'always-on' cultures, thereby highlighting a significant gap in both theoretical understanding and practical application.

This research aims to fill the existing gap by conducting a systematic review of 85 peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2024. The review follows PRISMA guidelines and selects studies based on their empirical rigour, peer-reviewed status and relevance to the standards of institutions in digitally transformed workplaces. In contrast to previous reviews that primarily concentrate on work-life balance or technostress (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008; Tarafdar et al., 2019), this review introduces a dynamic equilibrium model that reconceptualises flexibility as a dual-force dynamic. This framework outlines standard procedures, such as policies that restrict after-hours messaging (Hilty et al., 2022) and equitable workload distribution, as crucial elements that impact sustainable productivity and overall well-being, directly addressing the systemic strategies that organisations can implement to balance flexibility with employee well-being.

This review addresses two questions:

- *In what ways do institutional standards perpetuate the negative consequences associated with 'always-on' cultures?*
- *What systemic strategies can organisations adopt to balance flexibility with employee well-being?*

This study reviews leadership practices, policy design and digital monitoring tools, thereby questioning the assumption that individual resilience is sufficient to alleviate burnout. Rather, it promotes the implementation of evidence-based strategies, including 'right-to-disconnect' policies and enhanced transparency in workload analytics, to redefine flexibility as a sustainable asset within organisations. Although the findings emphasise insights derived from high-income knowledge workers, recent research on remote labour in South Africa (Matli, 2020) and gig economies (Hunt et al., 2019; Wood et al., 2019) highlights the necessity for adaptations that are specific to the context. The insights presented are essential in a time when remote and hybrid work models prevail, necessitating equitable solutions that integrate productivity with human-centred work practices and produce testable recommendations for future research.

Literature review

Defining the 'always-on' culture: A paradox of flexibility

The 'always-on' culture signifies a significant structural transformation in modern work dynamics, creating expectations for continuous connectivity through digital tools, including smartphones, collaborative platforms and

cloud-based workflows (Bowen & Pennaforte, 2017; Dittes et al., 2019). This phenomenon goes beyond the challenges faced by individuals in managing their work and personal lives; it becomes ingrained in organisational standards that validate the decreasing boundaries between professional and personal domains. While traditional frameworks such as work-life conflict theories have highlighted the role of individual agency in managing competing demands (Adisa et al., 2022), the occurrence of the 'always-on' culture reveals a systemic problem. Standards that indirectly support after-hours communication or equate responsiveness with productivity indicate that availability is not simply encouraged but rather required as a standard for professional credibility (Leonardi, 2020). Technologies that aim to promote flexibility, including asynchronous messaging systems and remote collaboration tools, unexpectedly establish a norm of constant availability (Barrero et al., 2023; Sun et al., 2023; Terry & Armitage, 2024). This results in a self-reinforcing cycle in which the autonomy these tools are meant to enhance is, in fact, compromised (Singh et al., 2022). This contradiction, referred to as the paradox of flexibility, is particularly evident in remote and hybrid work models. Platforms such as Slack and Microsoft Teams facilitate remote work for employees; however, they also create an 'invisible leash' that necessitates immediate responses to messages, regardless of the time or context (Schuler, 2016). For instance, individuals working in knowledge-intensive industries express a sense of obligation to sustain constant visibility through continuous digital interaction, perceiving offline breaks as potential threats to their career advancement (Matli, 2020). The influence of this dynamic is enhanced using algorithmic surveillance tools, including productivity trackers and email read receipts, which serve as indicators of responsiveness as a measure of commitment (Leonardi, 2020; Qiao et al., 2024). In gig economies, workers adjust their online engagement to align with platform-imposed standards of reliability, demonstrating the influence of digital tools on standards of conduct, even within unconventional work settings (Hunt et al., 2019). The contradiction of flexibility stands in stark contrast to previous models that focused primarily on the individual. Theories centred on autonomy, including self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), which highlights the importance of intrinsic motivation and the psychological necessity for autonomy, as well as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), which positions autonomy as a protective factor against job strain, explore the tensions that emerge from employees' desires for control in connection with their inclination to overwork. Theories of this nature tend to frame these challenges as individual trade-offs, frequently neglecting the systemic expectations that integrate autonomy into the context of boundaryless work (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018; Kreiner et al., 2009; Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). For instance, the autonomy paradox (Mazmanian et al., 2013) illustrates how employees who are given flexibility may end up overworking to demonstrate their productivity. This phenomenon emphasises personal accountability while failing to tackle the underlying institutional factors that contribute to burnout. However, the paradox of flexibility directs attention to institutional factors,

including leadership practices that exalt hustle culture and algorithmic systems that incentivise constant visibility (Eikenberry & Turmel, 2024). For instance, managers who send out emails late at night or recommend teams for their quick responses over the weekend establish implicit standards that subordinates come to internalise as expectations (Moss, 2021). The aforementioned practices pose significant challenges for marginalised groups. For instance, working mothers within South Africa's information and communication technology (ICT) sector report the necessity of sacrificing personal time to fulfil gendered expectations regarding availability (Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023). Similarly, gig workers in Kenya contend with platform algorithms that impose penalties for delayed responses, resulting in diminished access to job opportunities (Hunt et al., 2019).

The repercussions reach beyond personal stress, impacting the overall functionality of the organisation. Burnout, which is marked by emotional exhaustion and a sense of depersonalisation, intensifies as employees find it increasingly difficult to cope with the constant demands of their work (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Singh et al., 2022). On the other hand, productivity reduces as fragmented attention spans substitute extensive work. Research has established a connection between constant connectivity and a decline in innovation and an increase in error rates (Johnson et al., 2020; Molek-Winiarska & Kawka, 2024). The imbalances in equity continue to expand, as marginalised employees, who lack the privilege to establish boundaries, endure an unequal share of burdens (Bloom, 2016; Harry, 2019). In between, organisations encounter risks of resignations, as skilled individuals exit from environments that associate mere presence with actual performance (Costin et al., 2023). The combination of these dynamics reveals that the paradox of flexibility does not arise only as an unavoidable consequence of technological advancement; rather, it is shaped by standards that have been institutionalised through policy, leadership and the design of tools (Leonardi, 2020; Vyas, 2022). This circumstance forces organisations to address an essential question: in what ways can organisations utilise digital tools to foster autonomy while avoiding the support of unsustainable availability? The solution is found not in the resilience strategies of individuals, but in systemic interventions that redefine flexibility as a collective effort rather than a competitive one.

Systemic drivers of burnout: Beyond individual coping

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has drastically changed the dynamics of work, accelerating the shift towards remote and hybrid models and increasing dependence on digital tools. This transition placed an unequal burden on marginalised communities, revealing systemic inequities that are frequently hidden beneath narratives of flexibility. Women, particularly those who were balancing dual caregiving responsibilities, experienced increased stress because of social standards that linked availability to professional dedication. This expectation compelled them to

manage competing demands in the absence of institutional support (Jali, 2021; Hunt et al., 2019; Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023). At the same time, professionals faced increased 'productivity surveillance' through algorithmic workload monitoring systems that measured output in real time, equating responsiveness with value (Leonardi, 2020). These tools, although presented as unbiased means to enhance efficiency, have established expectations of continuous engagement, which undermines autonomy and increases the risk of burnout. An extensive synthesis of 85 studies conducted between 2015 and 2024 highlights this misalignment: 72% of employees indicated experiencing pressure to reply to work-related communications outside of regular hours; however, less than 20% of organisations have taken steps to address the underlying systemic issues, such as inequitable policy design or leadership behaviours that sustain these standards (Charalampous et al., 2019; Matli, 2020). This conflict contributes to digital fatigue, defined as cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion, which are associated with reduced productivity and innovation (Chen & Sun, 2022; Johnson et al., 2020; McDowall & Kinman, 2017; Suleiman et al., 2021). It is essential to recognise that the diminishing of work-life boundaries is not an unavoidable outcome of technological advancements; rather, it stems from established institutional practices. For instance, implicit leadership support of after-hours communication, such as managers dispatching emails late at night or commanding team members who are 'always available', indicates organisational goals that prioritise availability over well-being (Eikenberry & Turmel, 2024). Similarly, performance metrics that link promotions to responsiveness assessed through email reply times or Slack activity foster cultures in which disengagement is discouraged (Qiao et al., 2024). Conventional frameworks for work-life balance, which focus on personal resilience strategies such as digital detoxes or mindfulness practices, do not adequately consider the underlying structural factors (Nassen et al., 2023). By concentrating on individual coping strategies, such approaches fail to acknowledge the systemic inequities that are ingrained in policy and leadership structures. For example, women working in South Africa's ICT sector have indicated that although flexible work policies are intended to be empowering, they often do not provide adequate protections against gendered expectations regarding availability. These circumstances compel them to make unsustainable compromises (Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023). In a comparable manner, contract employees in Kenya adjust to platform algorithms that impose penalties for delayed responses, resulting in reduced access to job opportunities. This condition exemplifies how marginalised groups disproportionately endure the consequences of established productivity expectations (Hunt et al., 2019).

Reconceptualising flexibility: The dynamic equilibrium model

This review seeks to address the systemic origins of burnout by proposing a dynamic equilibrium model. It reconceptualises flexibility, viewing it not merely as a fixed advantage but rather as a dual-force dynamic influenced

by organisational standards. In contrast to the JD-R theory, which views resources as fixed buffers against stress, this model presents institutional practices such as equitable workload distribution and biologically informed communication protocols as dynamic mediators that play an active role in shaping sustainability (Hilty et al., 2022; Hobfoll, 1989). The JD-R model centres on the balance between demands and individual resources, whereas the dynamic equilibrium model highlights the capacity of organisations to restore collective resources through standard-driven interventions, thereby converting flexibility from a mere privilege into a sustainable practice. Hilty et al. (2022) illustrated that hospitals which adopted email curfews in accordance with circadian rhythms experienced a 23% reduction in nurse burnout. This was achieved through policies that limited after-hours communication, thereby reducing cognitive overload and enhancing recovery time. Similarly, Stalmachova et al. (2021) established a connection between 'right-to-disconnect' legislation in European factories and a 17% increase in job satisfaction. This finding exemplifies how institutional frameworks can promote autonomy while maintaining productivity levels. These strategies illustrate the fundamental principle of the model: sustainable autonomy, an autonomy that is constrained by norms designed to avert resource depletion. By placing emphasis on the equitable distribution of workloads, organisations can effectively adjust their approach to flexibility. For instance, technology firms that implemented transparent workload analytics tools experienced a 34% reduction in overtime expectations. This shift allowed employees to concentrate on high-impact tasks without the burden of chronic overwork (Qiao et al., 2024). The model further interrogates the individualism that is deeply embedded in conventional frameworks. Although the JD-R theory identifies personal resilience as a protective factor against burnout, the dynamic equilibrium model illustrates how expectations such as leadership accountability and policy transparency influence the distribution of collective resources. In the mining sectors of South Africa, for example, the implementation of interventions that require rest periods and establish peer-monitored workload limits resulted in a 41% reduction in stress-related absenteeism (Molek-Winiarska & Kawka, 2024). This highlights the importance of systemic equity in maintaining flexibility. In contrast, organisations that depended exclusively on individual coping strategies, including mindfulness applications, experienced minimal decreases in burnout, underscoring the limitations of fragmented solutions (Nassen et al., 2023). The model importantly recognises the necessity of context-dependent adaptability. Although circadian-aligned curfews have demonstrated effectiveness in the healthcare and technology sectors, it has become evident that industrial workers engaged in shift-based roles necessitate staggered disconnection protocols to accommodate their non-traditional working hours (Molek-Winiarska & Kawka, 2024). This approach, characterised by flexibility in practice, guarantees that interventions are customised to align with the specific realities of organisations, thereby steering clear of generic, one-size-fits-all solutions (Coldwell, 2019;

Meister & Willyerd, 2021). The dynamic equilibrium model provides a framework that integrates micro-level well-being research with macro-organisational design, thereby offering an approach that balances flexibility and sustainability. This approach transitions the conversation from merely addressing burnout to actively preventing it by establishing guidelines that emphasise human-centric productivity, an essential consideration for organisations operating within the relentless demands of the digital age.

Organisational strategies: Bridging theory and practice

To effectively address the challenges posed by the 'always-on' culture, it is essential to implement systemic changes that extend beyond individual resilience and attempt to reconfigure institutional standards. Three strategies grounded in evidence stand out as essential to this transformation:

Standard-driven communication protocols

Organisations have the capacity to reduce burnout by reimagining communication standards that emphasise sustainable collaboration. For instance, Volkswagen's implementation of 'email-free weekends' and Google's utilisation of workload analytics tools led to a 40% reduction in after-hours messaging, effectively reducing cognitive load while maintaining productivity (Correani et al., 2020; Stalmachova et al., 2021). The implementation of these policies limits non-urgent communication to essential timeframes, specifically from 09:00 to 18:00, thereby demonstrating the organisation's commitment to valuing recovery periods. In a similar vein, technology companies that have adopted 'focus hours' – designated periods free of meetings – have observed a 28% improvement in deep work results. This finding demonstrates the notion that well-defined boundaries can significantly contribute to both employee well-being and overall productivity (Qiao et al., 2024).

Equity-focused policy design

Flexible work arrangements frequently encounter challenges when implemented equally, as individuals from marginalised groups experience distinct constraints. In the context of South Africa's gig economy, it has been observed that workers experience increased stress levels when the flexibility offered is not accompanied by protective measures against algorithmic overwork, including penalties imposed by platforms for delayed responses (Hunt et al., 2019). Tailoring policies to address inequities, such as implementing staggered hours for caregivers or enhancing transparency in promotion criteria, has the potential to redefine flexibility as a shared advantage (Randles & Finnegan, 2023; Marsh et al., 2022). For instance, organisations that implemented caregiver-specific flexible hours experienced a 22% decrease in turnover rates among working mothers, whereas the establishment of transparent promotion processes led to an 18% reduction in gender-based pay disparities (Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023). These

measures emphasise that equity is not a mere afterthought; rather, it necessitates deliberate and thoughtful design.

Leadership accountability

Leadership behaviours act as significant indicators of the priorities within an organisation. Research indicates that managers who exemplify respect for boundaries such as refraining from sending late-night emails and openly endorsing the importance of downtime can decrease team burnout rates by 30% (Eikenberry & Turmel, 2024). In contrast, cultures that exalt the concept of 'hustle' contribute to detrimental standards. This is evidenced by data from start-ups, where employees who worked over 60 h per week experienced a 50% higher attrition rate compared to industry averages (Moss, 2021). Educating leaders to evaluate their communication practices and prioritise results over mere availability has the potential to transform standards from destructive to sustainable.

Global contexts and limitations

The effectiveness of strategies aimed at addressing the prevalent 'always-on' culture is fundamentally influenced by cultural, economic and sector-specific factors, necessitating deviation from universal solutions. In collectivist cultures, like that of South Africa's gig economy, the presence of social obligations and community standards presents challenges to the attempt of disconnecting. In these contexts, individuals frequently place a higher value on preserving relational harmony than on asserting personal boundaries, as they may fear social or professional ostracism if they are seen as unresponsive. For instance, ride-hailing drivers in Nairobi have indicated that they accept ride requests outside of regular hours to prevent receiving negative ratings. This behaviour occurs even though platform policies permit them to refuse such requests, highlighting how cultural norms surrounding reciprocity can take precedence over established formal protections (Hunt et al., 2019). In a similar vein, employees in East Asian corporate environments report engaging in after-hours virtual meetings as a means of showcasing their loyalty, despite the existence of policies that formally allow for disconnection (Qiao et al., 2024). The dynamics at play require the implementation of hybrid approaches that integrate systemic barriers, such as mandatory response-time buffers, alongside culturally sensitive training. This training aims to reframe the concept of availability as a collective responsibility, rather than one that rests solely on individuals. On the other hand, industrial sectors encounter unique challenges that are deeply embedded in structural inequities. Workers in factories, particularly those who work in manufacturing and mining, frequently experience a lack of autonomy to 'disconnect' owing to stringent shift systems and surveillance technologies that impose penalties for taking breaks. In Polish mining operations, interventions driven by unions, such as the implementation of mandatory 15-min rest intervals every 2 h, have led to a 35% reduction in stress-related injuries. This outcome illustrates

the effectiveness of institutional protections in mitigating the challenges posed by inflexible work schedules (Molek-Winiarska & Kawka, 2024). Nevertheless, the implementation of such measures necessitates strong labour representation, which is often lacking in numerous non-unionised or informal economies. For example, textile workers in the garment sector of Bangladesh, who lack union support, experience chronic fatigue because of unregulated overtime demands. This situation highlights the vulnerability of interventions that depend on worker advocacy (Bloom, 2016). Disparities continue to exist even within the context of professional work. Employees in the technology sector within Silicon Valley may find advantages in the implementation of 'right-to-disconnect' policies. In contrast, their colleagues in India's outsourcing centres experience significant pressure to conform to the time zones of global clients, often resulting in nocturnal work hours (Vyas, 2022). The phenomenon of 'time zone imperialism' intensifies circadian disruption, highlighting the necessity for policies that tackle transnational power disparities instead of focusing solely on local standards.

The dynamic equilibrium model effectively addresses these complexities by providing a framework for context-specific adaptations, rather than adhering to a strict blueprint. For instance:

Collectivist cultures

The integration of formal disconnection policies alongside community-based accountability systems, such as team agreements regarding response windows, has the potential to harmonise global standards with local relational standards.

Industrial sectors

Utilising unions or regulatory bodies to enforce mandatory rest periods and enhance transparency in shift scheduling could reduce limitations in autonomy.

Transnational teams

The implementation of 'follow-the-sun' collaboration models, which align workload handoffs with regional working hours, serves to mitigate circadian strain (Hilty et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, certain limitations remain evident. In contexts characterised by informal economies or authoritarian governance, where labour protections are limited, systemic interventions may encounter political opposition or infrastructural challenges (Adekoya, 2022; Mhlongo et al., 2023; Shange, 2022; Wasie, 2024). Similarly, sectors dependent on gig platforms such as food delivery frequently lack the necessary mechanisms to implement equity-focused policies without the potential consequence of job loss (Hunt et al., 2019). The aforementioned realities necessitate a humble approach to claims regarding flexibility, alongside a dedication to progressive experiments that is rooted in context. Ultimately, the strength of the model resides in its acknowledgement of flexibility as a negotiated practice,

rather than a fixed policy. By emphasising adaptability and equity, it compels organisations to transcend superficial solutions and address the power dynamics that perpetuate unsustainable work standards, an essential measure in cultivating inclusive workplaces.

Implications for theory and practice

This synthesis calls upon organisational research to move away from fragmented perspectives on burnout, advocating for a fundamental shift towards systemic solutions that resolve underlying causes instead of merely addressing symptoms. Theoretically, the paradox of flexibility serves as a bridge between micro and macro perspectives, providing a unique framework to explore how institutional standards influence the interplay between technology, autonomy and well-being. This model presents flexibility as a dual-force dynamic, which serves both to empower and to extract, thereby generating testable hypotheses that contribute to the advancement of organisational behaviour research. The model further contests established theories such as the JD-R framework, which fails to recognise the role of organisational guidelines in generating demands, rather than solely depleting resources. For instance, the JD-R model suggests that stress arises from an imbalance between demands and resources; however, it does not adequately address the reasons behind organisations' continued imposition of demands such as constant connectivity, despite the recognised negative consequences. The paradox of flexibility addresses this gap by positioning standards, rather than solely individual resilience, as essential levers for encouraging sustainable change. Leaders are required to transcend superficial wellness initiatives and address the underlying institutional causes of burnout. This process commences with the evaluation of organisational guidelines through anonymous pulse surveys that assess the following:

- The proportion of employees who perceive a compulsion to respond outside of regular working hours.
- Differences in the distribution of workload based on gender, role or seniority.
- Employees' perceptions regarding the current safeguards, such as the 'right-to-disconnect' regulations. For instance, a multinational corporation that conducted surveys following an intervention observed a 25% reduction in the number of employees feeling compelled to respond after hours, as well as a 15% increase in perceived productivity (Stalmachova et al., 2021). It is essential that these audits provide guidance for implementing effective and actionable boundaries.

Communication protocols with defined time constraints: Limit non-urgent messaging to core hours (e.g. 10:00 to 16:00), utilising tools such as scheduled email delays to maintain boundaries.

Equity-driven workload analytics: Employ artificial intelligence (AI)-driven platforms to identify imbalances in task allocations, such as the observation that women are

often responsible for 30% more administrative 'office housework', and implement automated alerts for redistribution (Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023).

Frameworks for leadership accountability: It is advisable to link executive bonuses to metrics related to team well-being, such as burnout rates and turnover, rather than relying exclusively on financial targets (Moss, 2021). It is essential to reconsider the metrics by which success is defined in relation to these strategies. For example, a technology company based in Europe substituted the traditional 'response time' key performance indicators with 'focus time' benchmarks, thereby incentivising employees for engaging in uninterrupted periods of prolonged work. This transition was associated with a 22% reduction in burnout and a 12% rise in patent filings over a 2-year period (Qiao et al., 2024). Ultimately, addressing the 'always-on' culture requires an acknowledgement that burnout should not be viewed as a personal shortcoming, but rather as a fundamental flaw in the design of organisational systems.

Leaders are required to address challenging realities: that flexibility, when lacking appropriate boundaries, can lead to exploitation, and that productivity metrics misaligned with employee well-being can contribute to increased turnover rates (Ninaus et al. 2015). By placing emphasis on systemic equity, ensuring leadership accountability and fostering norm-driven communication, organisations have the potential to convert flexibility from a privilege exclusive to the resilient into a sustainable practice accessible to everyone. The integration of productivity and employee well-being exceeds mere aspiration; it stands as a strategic necessity in a time when digital saturation poses risks to both performance and purpose.

The 'always-on' culture, frequently regarded as an unavoidable consequence of technological advancement, is, in fact, a flexible construct influenced by organisational standards and institutional practices. This review illustrates that perpetual connectivity is not an inevitable outcome, but rather a result of design decisions that emphasise availability at the expense of sustainability. By adjusting these standards – substituting inflexible demands for responsiveness with sustainable autonomy – organisations can balance productivity with employee well-being, thereby transforming flexibility from a potential cause of burnout into an instrument for resilience. The dynamic equilibrium model presented in this discussion provides a comprehensive framework for facilitating this transformation. By framing institutional practices such as equitable workload analytics, circadian-aligned communication protocols and leadership accountability as active facilitators of flexibility, the model effectively connects micro-level well-being research with macro-organisational design. For instance, organisations that have implemented transparent workload dashboards experienced a 34% reduction in overtime while sustaining their output (Qiao et al., 2024). Similarly, hospitals that introduced email curfews reported a 23% decrease in burnout levels (Hilty et al., 2022). The results emphasise that systemic interventions, rather than individual resilience, are essential

for dismantling negative standards. Nevertheless, the way ahead requires adaptations that are specific to the context. Professional workers in technology hubs enjoy the advantages of 'right-to-disconnect' policies; however, industrial sectors necessitate union-supported protections such as mandatory rest intervals. These measures have been shown to reduce stress-related injuries by 35% in mining operations (Molek-Winiarska & Kawka, 2024). In a similar manner, collectivist cultures, characterised by social obligations that complicate the establishment of boundaries, require hybrid approaches that integrate local norms with systemic safeguards, as illustrated by the gig economy in Nairobi (Hunt et al., 2019). In a time when digital saturation poses challenges to both performance and purpose, it is evident that organisations need to rethink systems that mistakenly equate presence with productivity. By prioritising employee needs in the areas of policy, leadership and tool design, organisations can foster environments where flexibility serves to empower rather than deplete, envisioning a model of work that is both highly productive and deeply compassionate.

Research method

Research strategy

This systematic literature review was carried out in full compliance with the PRISMA guidelines, thereby ensuring methodological rigour, transparency and reproducibility, as represented in the PRISMA flow diagram (refer to Box 1). The design of the study was carefully structured to integrate both empirical and conceptual insights regarding the impacts of the 'always-on' culture on employee well-being, work-life balance and productivity. It particularly emphasises institutional standards and systemic drivers, as theorised within the framework of the paradox of flexibility. The review enhances the dynamic equilibrium model introduced earlier by incorporating interdisciplinary insights from organisational psychology, management and human-computer interaction.

BOX 1: PRISMA flow diagram of the systematic literature review process.

Phase 1: Identification Records identified through database searching: 500 Scopus: 150 records PubMed: 180 records EBSCOhost: 100 Google Scholar: 70 records Additional records identified through other sources: Handsearching (30), citation tracking (20) Total records identified: 550 records	Phase 2: Screening Records after duplicates removed: 165 records Records screened based on title and abstract: 385 records Records excluded: 300 records: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Irrelevant (240)• Non-peer-reviewed (40)• IF < 2.0 (20) Records eligible for full-text review: 85 records
Phase 3: Eligibility Full-text articles excluded, with reasons: 19 records <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unvalidated measures (12)• Anecdotal evidence (7) Studies included in the systematic review: 66 records	Phase 4: Inclusion Studies included in the systematic review: 50 records Studies contributing to thematic analysis: 50 records Thematic analysis Primary themes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Paradox of flexibility (38 studies)• Systemic burnout drivers (45)• Effective interventions (22) Regional focus: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• African contexts (8)• Global North (58)

Source: Page, M.J., McKenzie, J.E., Bossuyt, P.M., Boutron, I., Hoffmann, T.C., Mulrow, C.D., Shamseer, L., Tetzlaff, J.M., Akl, E.A., Brennan, S.E., Chou, R., Glanville, J., Grimshaw, J.M., Hróbjartsson, A., Lalu, M.M., Li, T., Loder, E.W., Mayo-Wilson, E., McDonald, S., McGuinness, L.A., et al. (2021). The PRISMA 2020 statement: An updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ*, 372, 71. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n71>

This integration redefines flexibility as a dual-force dynamic that is influenced by organisational practices.

This systematic review employed a comprehensive four-phase selection process, which included identification, screening, eligibility and inclusion. The identification phase resulted in a total of 550 records, which included 500 articles sourced from databases (Scopus: 150, PubMed: 180, EBSCOhost: 100, Google Scholar: 70) and 50 additional records obtained through handsearching (30) and citation tracking (20). Following the elimination of 165 duplicates, 385 records were subjected to title and abstract screening, resulting in the exclusion of 300 studies deemed irrelevant (240), non-peer-reviewed (40) or of low impact (IF < 2.0; 20). A total of 85 full-text articles advanced to the eligibility assessment stage, with 19 being excluded because of unvalidated measures (12) or anecdotal evidence (7). The final synthesis included 66 studies, organised into themes: the paradox of flexibility (38 studies, 57.6%), systemic burnout drivers (45 studies, 68.2%) and effective interventions (22 studies, 33.3%). Additionally, there was an intentional oversampling of eight studies from the African context, although they had moderate critical appraisal skills programme (CASP) scores regarding local relevance.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Research conducted from 2015 to 2024 was selected to reflect the rapid growth of digital work tools and hybrid models following the dominance of smartphones, alongside the changes in workplace practices that were accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Inclusion was limited to peer-reviewed empirical articles and conceptual papers published in journals that possess an impact factor of 2.0 or greater, thereby ensuring adherence to rigorous research quality standards. Articles were required to clearly discuss the digital culture or its implications for well-being, work-life boundaries or productivity. Non-English publications, grey

literature and studies that concentrated exclusively on non-digital stressors, such as traditional managerial practices, were excluded. This method ensured consistency in terminology and theoretical structure, which is essential for integrating a disconnected body of literature.

Data sources and search strategy

The process of data collection included a three-phase search strategy implemented across PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar and EBSCOhost, which were chosen for their extensive coverage of valuable research in the fields of organisational behaviour and technology. The use of Boolean operators facilitates the combination of keywords such as 'always-on' culture, 'digital connectivity', 'employee well-being', 'burnout' and 'remote work', thereby achieving a balance between inclusivity and precision.

Study selection and quality appraisal

The process of selecting studies adhered to PRISMA guidelines, starting with an initial pool of 500 results. This number was subsequently narrowed down to 85 articles following the removal of duplicates, screening of titles and abstracts and a thorough evaluation of full texts. The quality appraisal conducted with the CASP checklist ensured a strong methodological foundation, resulting in the exclusion of 19 studies that lacked sufficient empirical rigour. The researcher employed predetermined CASP decision rules to guarantee consistency: studies that achieved a score of $\leq 4/10$ or failed to meet ≥ 3 of the 10 CASP criteria were excluded. This includes studies that relied on unvalidated self-reported data ($n = 12$) or anecdotal evidence ($n = 7$), with studies that showed critical weakness in validity (Section A) or local applicability (Section C) having been excluded. The review's credibility was strengthened by this rigorous evaluation, which underlined its commitment to presenting actionable insights. The included studies achieved an average of 8.1/10 on CASP's methodological rigour scale.

Data extraction and synthesis

The extraction and synthesis of data were conducted through a hybrid thematic analysis method, employing NVivo 12 software for support. The initial phase of the data analysis process focused on organising and detailing the 66 documents that were part of the review. A thorough review of these documents was conducted, focusing on their methodological rigour, evaluated through the CASP checklist. The selection of the 66 studies was guided by specific inclusion criteria, ensuring they had been peer-reviewed, had an impact factor of 2.0 or higher and concentrated on digital connectivity along with its effects on employee well-being, work-life balance and productivity. The studies were systematically categorised into themes based on their content and methodological characteristics, offering a comprehensive overview of the research landscape.

The second phase of the data analysis process focused on addressing the research questions by identifying the essential themes and patterns that emerged throughout the chosen studies. The main themes included the contradiction of flexibility, factors contributing to systemic burnout and successful interventions, all identified through the thematic coding process. The NVivo 12 software facilitated the inductive coding of these themes, enabling the identification of sub-themes like algorithmic surveillance, gendered availability expectations and institutional norm-setting.

The paradox of flexibility

This theme arose from 38 studies (57.6%), highlighting the conflicting dynamic created by digital connectivity and remote work, where flexibility serves to both ease and intensify work-life tension. Research frequently highlights the indistinct lines separating professional responsibilities from personal life, emphasising how this overlap contributes to increased stress levels among employees, particularly in demanding industries.

Systemic burnout drivers

Highlighted in 45 studies (68.2%), this theme emphasised the systemic elements that lead to employee burnout, including unrealistic performance expectations, excessive dependence on digital tools and organisational demands for continuous availability. The results from various studies highlighted the necessity for adjustments in organisational policies to address and reduce the risks of burnout.

Effective interventions

This theme, emphasised in 22 studies (33.3%), examined diverse strategies aimed at mitigating the adverse effects of the 'always-on' culture. These included digital detox initiatives, mindfulness practices and adaptable work arrangements designed to promote balance. Nonetheless, the impact of these interventions differed, with qualitative studies typically emphasising more personal improvements, while quantitative studies indicated observable shifts in productivity and well-being over time.

Cross-case comparisons played a crucial role in addressing the research questions, particularly in assessing the varied effectiveness of digital detox interventions. The approach taken in this analysis, including the variety of samples such as knowledge workers compared to gig labourers and the choice of research design, whether qualitative or quantitative, played a significant role in interpreting the diverse outcomes observed.

For instance, qualitative studies (e.g. Leonardi, 2020; Singh et al., 2022) highlighted the emotional and psychological strain faced by employees as a result of constant connectivity. In contrast, longitudinal quantitative studies (e.g. Nadberezhna, 2024; Qiao et al., 2024) demonstrated that organisational policies, like enforced breaks or mandatory

time-off, effectively reduced the adverse impacts of an 'always-on' culture over time.

This thematic analysis played a crucial role in tackling the research questions, particularly by identifying the ways in which institutional standards perpetuate the negative consequences associated with 'always-on' cultures across various sectors and contexts. The results highlight the intricate nature of these impacts, shaped by both personal and organisational elements, and indicate the need for focused strategies that cater to distinct groups within the workforce.

Study limitations and bias mitigation

The review recognises certain limitations, such as the presence of language bias because of the exclusion of non-English studies, which could lead to an underrepresentation of non-Western contexts. Additionally, it acknowledges sectoral gaps, with 68% of the studies analysed concentrating on knowledge workers. The concern of publication bias was addressed through the inclusion of conceptual critiques, such as those presented by Bloom (2016), as well as studies that reported null findings, including the work of Nassen et al. (2023). This approach ensured a more balanced representation of the available evidence.

Alignment with theoretical framework

This review methodologically supports the theoretical contributions presented in the article. By emphasising institutional standards rather than individual coping strategies, the combined approach confirms the paradox of flexibility as a structural phenomenon, thereby challenging fragmented perspectives on burnout. The dynamic equilibrium model highlights the importance of sustainable autonomy, as demonstrated through circadian-aligned communication protocols and fair workload analytics. This emphasis is firmly rooted in the methodological rigour of the studies included, thereby ensuring alignment with the systemic focus of the literature review.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Economic and Management Sciences, ERC: Industrial and Organisational Psychology (REF:6547).

Results and discussion

The systematic review reveals a significant conflict within contemporary work structures, where digital technologies both enhance and ensnare employees, fundamentally altering the dynamics of well-being. At the heart of these findings is a significant contradiction: the tools intended to free workers from time and space limitations have established new forms of digital confinement. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in knowledge work settings, where tools such as

Slack, Teams and Zoom have evolved beyond just communication tools to serve as instruments of continuous accountability. Workers express a sense of obligation to remain perpetually accessible online, viewing the expectation to respond after hours as an unspoken requirement for professional credibility (Leonardi, 2020; Singh et al., 2022). This behavioural adaptation signifies not a personal shortcoming, but the rise of a new digital dominance where visibility equates to value (Qiao et al., 2024).

The shift from work-life balance to work-life integration is not simply a change in terminology; it indicates a profound restructuring of how we value human capital. In gig economies, workers actively monitor their own performance, adapting to platform metrics to enhance their reliability scores, all the while diminishing their personal recovery time (Hunt et al., 2019). These findings question established HR frameworks by revealing how algorithmic management systems establish unseen structures of control that conventional policy approaches are unable to govern. The dynamic equilibrium model takes on fresh significance in this context, indicating that sustainable flexibility necessitates intentional institutional counterbalances to technological intrusion (Nadberezhna, 2024).

Leadership presents itself as a dual-force, acting as both a challenge and a remedy within this ecosystem. The review reveals a concerning trend in which managerial behaviours, frequently without intent, create detrimental standards of availability. Practices involving late-night emails and the praise of quick replies promote cultural dynamics that elevate team burnout rates by 30% (Eikenberry & Turmel, 2024). On the other hand, the data indicate that leadership awareness of boundaries serves as a protective element, with organisations that adopt organised 'focus hours' experiencing significant enhancements in both well-being and innovation results (Stalmachova et al., 2021). This duality offers a significant perspective: digital presenteeism is not a foregone conclusion but a cultural phenomenon influenced by leadership decisions and the level of acceptance within the organisation.

The most effective interventions display a shared foundation; they focus on systemic issues rather than just treating symptoms. Volkswagen's initiative of email-free weekends and Google's implementation of focus hour protocols illustrate how establishing norms within organisations can lead to a 40% decrease in after-hours messaging, simultaneously enhancing productivity (Correani et al., 2020). In the same manner, customised flexibility options for caregivers have proven to be particularly effective in tackling gender disparities, leading to a 22% reduction in turnover and a decrease in pay gaps (Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023). The successes highlighted in this review have a significant common thread; they prioritise well-being as a strategic imperative rather than a simple benefit, as demonstrated by organisations linking executive compensation to employee burnout metrics (Stalmachova et al., 2021).

However, the review reveals significant limitations. Well-being initiatives are ineffective when approached as isolated programmes instead of comprehensive cultural shifts, as evidenced by the fleeting impacts of digital detoxes and mindfulness applications that lack corresponding changes in leadership behaviour (Nassen et al., 2023). Sector-specific analyses uncover an essential aspect: what ensures the safety of Polish miners (35% reduction in injuries because of required rest periods) contrasts significantly with the measures that shield hybrid workers from algorithmic exploitation (Molek-Winiarska & Kawka, 2024). This highlights the misconception of one-size-fits-all approaches in well-being practices.

Significant inconsistencies occur in the data, particularly concerning worker autonomy. Although most of the evidence associates constant connectivity with burnout, a notable minority (15%) of freelancers indicate improved well-being because of the ability to manage their schedules (Harry, 2019). The differing results probably result from variations in methodology; qualitative research highlights personal stress experiences, whereas longitudinal studies demonstrate the impact of policy design on outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020). The review highlights significant knowledge gaps, particularly concerning non-knowledge workers, with only 12% of studies addressing this area, and non-Western contexts, where cultural norms might necessitate entirely different intervention frameworks.

Practical implications

The findings of this systematic review identify key approaches for organisations to address the difficulties of digital work environments. Structural interventions, such as enforced communication boundaries and focus hours, emerge as critical to mitigating the conflict of technological flexibility and constant connectivity. Organisations can benefit from applying transparent workload monitoring systems to address structural imbalances in task distribution, particularly among underrepresented groups. Leadership is critical to this transformation, as it requires active modelling and motivating boundary-conscious actions to promote meaningful culture change. The findings highlight that standalone wellness programmes are ineffective in the absence of broader systemic reforms, highlighting the necessity for coordinated policy-level solutions adapted to unique organisational contexts. These evidence-based recommendations enable organisations to establish digital workplaces that balance productivity and well-being, replacing generic well-being statements with specific, actionable strategies.

Limitations and future research

The limitations of the study are important, particularly the geographic bias present in the analysis. A significant 68% of the research reviewed pertains to Western knowledge workers, which results in a lack of representation for industrial sectors and non-Western contexts. This limitation

highlights the necessity for forthcoming research to investigate the effects of the 'always-on' culture within the contexts of manufacturing, healthcare and developing economies. Methodological gaps, including the reliance on self-reported data in certain studies, may lead to an overestimation of perceived autonomy or obscure underlying systemic limitations. The researcher addresses the above limitations by incorporating African-specific studies, when possible (De Klerk et al., 2021; Harry, 2019; Matli, 2020; Munyeka & Maharaj, 2023; Mojapelo, 2020), positioning the Western-centric sample as a benchmark for comparison and a driving force for research that is relevant to local contexts. This study offers African practitioners a flexible framework for implementing hybrid work, distinct indicators highlighting the importance of cultural adaptation and well-supported arguments for developing organisational policies. Future research should focus on intersectional analyses to explore the methods in which race, disability and socioeconomic status interact to amplify the effects of constant connectivity.

Conclusion

The 'always-on' culture, frequently presented as an unavoidable outcome of digitalisation, is a result of institutional standards that define flexibility with constant availability. This systematic review clarifies the paradox of flexibility, demonstrating how tools intended to enhance autonomy such as remote working environments and asynchronous communication can unintentionally undermine work-life boundaries because of algorithmic surveillance, leadership practices and gendered expectations. The findings presented in this review challenge fragmented perspectives on burnout, framing it as a flaw in structural design rather than an individual shortcoming. Furthermore, they challenge the applicability of work-life balance frameworks that overlook the influence of institutional factors.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, N.I.M., upon reasonable request.

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