

The Invisible Leash: The Impact of Organizational Expectations for Email Monitoring After-Hours on Employee Resources, Well-Being, and Turnover Intentions

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Abstract

Emerging research demonstrates detrimental effects of work-related email use after-hours on employee emotions and well-being. This article extends existing literature by examining organizational expectations for email monitoring (OEEM) during nonwork hours as an antecedent of employee low work detachment, emotional exhaustion, diminished work–life balance, and increased turnover intentions. Adapting the conservation of resources perspective, we theorize that OEEM leads to negative individual and organizational outcomes via two different paths: lack of work detachment, and emotional depletion. The findings of a study with time-separated data collected from a large sample of 570 working adults support our predictions that OEEM decreases employee work–life balance through both low work detachment and emotional exhaustion, while the indirect effect of OEEM on employee turnover intentions is mediated by employee emotional exhaustion,

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and by work detachment through emotional exhaustion. We also find that decrease in work–life balance is negatively correlated with employee intentions to leave the company, but that this direct effect is not significant in the full model. Finally, we demonstrate that the time employees spend on work-related emails after-hours is not the main driver of negative outcomes. Taken together, our findings highlight deleterious implications of OEE on employee resources and subsequent organization-related outcomes.

Keywords

email, organizational expectations, emotional exhaustion, work detachment, work–life balance, turnover intentions

Electronic communication technology has become an integral part of routine work interactions, complementing and often replacing face-to-face meetings and phone conversations. While expanding job flexibility and perceived control over assignments (Mazmanian et al., 2013), it has also led to work overload due to its accessibility and increased employee connectivity after-hours (American Psychological Association, 2013; Barley et al., 2011; PR Newswire, 2014). In fact, email has become a form of “electronic tethering” to work, with at least 45% of all employed workers doing some amount of work at home (Pew Research Center, 2008, 2015). Recent research also suggests that there is an emerging e-device addiction epidemic through “telepressure”—an employee urge to quickly respond to work-related emails via communication technology (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Hu et al., 2019; Santuzzi & Barber, 2018). Thus, it is not surprising that mounting empirical evidence exposes detrimental effects of email-related overload on individual emotional and physical health (e.g., Becker et al., 2019; Bono et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2014; Dahm et al., 2015).

However, the majority of extant research has focused on time employees spend monitoring and answering emails after-hours or on frequency of email usage as antecedents of negative implications of “e-tethering” (e.g., Diaz et al., 2012; Ferguson et al., 2016; Piszczek, 2017). Although offering important insights into potential triggers of “e-tethering” that alter employee emotional states, cognitions, and behaviors, the field’s understanding of this phenomenon, and specifically, its antecedents, is far from clear. In fact, studies that examine a distinct role of organizational norms or expectations that encourage employee work email monitoring after-hours, in addition to, and separate from, actual time spent on these emails, are scarce (for an exception, see the forthcoming work of Becker and colleagues, 2019). Given a critical role of

organizational norms in shaping employee commitment, retention, and behaviors (e.g., Cialdini et al., 1991; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Sheridan, 1992), this represents a significant gap in the management literature.

To bridge this gap, our theoretical framework focuses on email-related organizational norms, conceptualized and operationalized here through employee subjective perceptions regarding organizational expectations for availability via email after working hours or *OEEM* (*organizational expectations for email monitoring*), the term coined by Becker and colleagues (2019). We follow their lead in taking a more nuanced approach than that applied in the majority of extant research (e.g., Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Derks et al., 2015; Gadeyne et al., 2018), by specifically focusing on email-related work norms to uncover their distinct effects on employee well-being, while also extending Becker and colleagues' (2019) work in several important ways. First, we apply a conservation of resources (COR) approach (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001) and examine two separate paths through which OEEM-induced resource depletion may lead to negative outcomes, namely, employee emotional exhaustion (i.e., emotional strain) and employee inability to detach from work (i.e., individual behavior that may lead to stress due to emotional, cognitive, and/or physical resource depletion)—two key mediating mechanisms in our model. Second, we specifically explore how this OEEM-triggered resource depletion shapes important individual and work-related outcomes. We thus extend the literature to demonstrate the dangerous outcomes of OEEM-induced emotional and cognitive resource depletion that may negatively affect one's well-being by creating disruptions in successfully balancing one's work and family lives and may also eventually force people to leave work as a result. Finally, we test and disentangle the effects of OEEM from those of the actual time spent on email monitoring after-hours and examine whether time exacerbates the negative effects of OEEM on our variables of interest.

The present research makes several contributions to management research and practice. First, moving the literature on the effects of work-related email on individual well-being beyond physical resource demands (e.g., actual work overload) into a psychological realm, we build upon the idea of depleting employee emotional and physical resources via each, low work detachment and emotional exhaustion, particularly when one is not able (or is not willing) to spend time outside of work on work-related communication. We apply a job demands-resources approach (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2001) and specifically, COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001; for a review, see Hobfoll et al., 2018), to argue that OEEM not only influences employee physical engagement with email but also depletes employee resources above and beyond the time invested by employees in email monitoring after-hours. At the core of our argument is the idea that organizational email-related

expectations place a strain on employee emotional and cognitive resources even when actual time is not invested, because employees cannot mentally disengage from work. This OEEM-induced resource depletion disrupts individual well-being, which also negatively affects organizational outcomes. We propose that resource depletion can happen through a direct link (i.e., high OEEM can lead to emotional depletion) and through behavior that results in lack of mental and/or physical detachment from work demands. Thus, from a theoretical perspective, by highlighting the role of normative antecedents in shaping employee individual and organization-related cognitions, such as work–life balance and turnover intentions (TOIs), we not only add empirical evidence to support the role of OEEM as a distinct job stressor (Becker et al., 2019), but also, and importantly, examine its implications on a broader resource level, while demonstrating through which path resource depletion may occur.

Second, in this research, we separate the role of time (i.e., physical involvement in monitoring and answering work-related emails) from employee perceptions of OEEM on our variables of interest. That is, we recognize that perceptions of OEEM are unique from the actual physical engagement in email. This presents a more nuanced view of email-related job demands, adding to the job resources–demands models (e.g., Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti et al., 2004), and specifically to COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989). Moreover, by demonstrating the distinct impact of OEEM on individual work-related outcomes from that of physical involvement with emails, our research helps to reconcile the mixed findings in the literature with respect to both negative and positive implications of email availability and usage after-hours (e.g., Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Chen & Karahanna, 2018).

Third, we add to the growing body of literature that examines the implications of new communication technology and the norms surrounding its use on employee and organizational functioning. Recent work in this area has looked at either the frequency of computer or mobile device usage during nonwork time (e.g., Derks et al., 2016; Diaz et al., 2012; Ferguson et al., 2016), or how time spent monitoring and answering work-related emails after-hours shapes perceptions of overload (e.g., Addas & Pinsonneault, 2018; Barley et al., 2011). Research on “telepressure” also has provided some insights on how technology-afforded email-checking addiction can lead to lower employee detachment, more burnout, and poorer sleep quality (e.g., Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Hu et al., 2019; Van Laethem et al., 2018), while other research has linked continuous availability to stress and lower productivity (e.g., “technostress”—Tarafdar et al., 2007). Taken together, while this body of literature demonstrates the dangers of constant connectivity, it does not address directly how email-related organizational norms for

availability influence employee ability to detach from work above and beyond the time spent on email or beyond actual work load. By examining specific email-related norms, rather than more general organizational norms for integration (e.g., [Derks et al., 2015](#); [Gadeyne, et al., 2018](#)), we add to the understanding of the reach and impact of OEEM on individual and organizational functioning.

Finally, our findings may inform literature on stress and recovery (e.g., [Richardson, 2017](#); [Sonnentag et al., 2017](#)) and extend knowledge on how to efficiently reduce stress and aid employee recovery and well-being by mapping the distinct effects of resource loss due to OEEM via both an emotional path and a behavioral path. Understanding the outcomes of what has been labeled as “stress” by the electronic communications literature is important. If a direct link from OEEM to emotional depletion (strain) is the main culprit of negative well-being outcomes, then our findings support the work of [Bono and colleagues \(2013\)](#) and [Butts and colleagues \(2015\)](#) on the benefits of creating a positive emotional environment that buffers emotional depletion through building of positive emotional resources ([Bono et al., 2013](#); [Butts et al., 2015](#)). However, if emotional depletion is not an important driver of negative well-being outcomes, but rather a cumulative effect of cognitive and physical resource depletion via low detachment is the problem, focusing attention on ways that allow for more work detachment and other behavioral interventions to aid recovery is warranted instead (e.g., [Sonnentag et al., 2010, 2017](#)).

COR Theory and the Negative Implications of OEEM

According to COR theory ([Hobfoll, 1989, 2001](#); [Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001](#)), individuals strive to accumulate, protect, and maintain physical, psychological, economic, and relational resources, and any threat of resource loss begets stress. Resources are things, energies, or conditions that people value and use to achieve their goals ([Halbesleben et al., 2014](#); [Hobfoll, 1989](#)). Here, we focus on “energies” as described by [Halbesleben and colleagues \(2014\)](#), which encompass individual emotional, cognitive, and physical resources. An important premise of COR theory is that human resources are limited and their constant usage leads to resource depletion and, thus, increased stress and decreased performance. The process of resource depletion, however, can be slowed down or counteracted through resource accumulation activities ([Hobfoll, 1989](#)). For instance, to restore mental and/or physical energy invested on some type of task, individuals need time to recuperate and engage in “recovery” experiences ([Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007, 2015](#)).

One of the ways to counteract resource loss is engagement in stress relieving activities that allow individuals to temporarily disconnect from work demands (Westman et al., 2005). For example, studies have shown that brief physical abstinence from work-related activities, such as relaxing during lunch breaks, may help reduce work-related fatigue and burnout (Krajewski et al., 2011). Yet, it is notable that not all research has supported these “shielding” effects. For example, Trougakos and colleagues (2014) did not find a strong link between relaxation and reduction in fatigue. Similarly, a recent study showed no positive effect of relaxation at work on buffering negative emotions and deviance (Zhang et al., 2018).

We propose that this mixed evidence can be reconciled by the possibility that in those studies even though individuals physically disengaged from work activities during breaks, it is unclear whether they were able to mentally detach as well. In essence, to restore resources used during the workday, employees need to detach both *mentally* and *physically* from work demands (Park et al., 2011; Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag et al., 2008, 2010). Accordingly, in the sections below, we explore two possible routes through which expenditure of resources due to OEEM can lead to negative individual and organization-related outcomes. The first one is a behavioral route through *work detachment*, defined here as employee cognitive and physical disengagement from work-related issues while outside of work (Sonnentag et al., 2010), with low work detachment as an outcome of either an individual’s unwillingness or inability to switch-off physically and mentally from work-related issues during off-hours. The second route, *emotional exhaustion*, is defined here as a chronic state of emotional depletion brought on by ongoing stress—the main component of burnout at work (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001; Peeters et al., 2005; Shirom et al., 2005), which can occur either as a direct result of constant emotional resource expenditure via OEEM or through lack of emotional recovery. Even when employees are not physically present at work, they still can (and often are expected to) attend to work issues due to email’s accessibility features and increased employee perceived availability (Milligan, 2016). Below, we present the arguments why OEEM is an important job demand that needs to be accounted for when examining negative well-being and organizational outcomes.

OEEM and Work Detachment

Email is known to be an impediment to the recovery process. In particular, its accessibility contributes to the experience of work overload by letting employees engage in work around the clock (e.g., Barley et al., 2011; Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2007). One of the reasons for this engagement with work

could be a normative pressure stemming from organizational email-related expectations. That is, employees may engage in work-related monitoring after-hours due to strong organizational integration norms for taking work home (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015; Derks et al., 2015; Gadeyne, et al., 2018) or in response to pressure to maintain important social relationships within their organization. For instance, when one's colleagues or bosses frequently engage in after-hours email communication and monitoring, they create a perception of an organizational norm that motivates conforming employee attitudes and behavior (Morris & Venkatesh, 2000). In addition, employee beliefs that they may either reap more rewards (e.g., promotions) or avoid punishments (e.g., being fired) by engaging in similar behavior further promotes compliance (Cialdini et al., 1991; Cialdini & Trost, 1998) and additional resource expenditure (Halbesleben et al., 2014).

Work detachment, on the contrary, can shield employees from OEEM and allow resource replenishment necessary for sustaining individual well-being and productivity. For instance, engaging in one's family life can be an important recovery experience from work-related demands. However, the presence of high OEEM means that employees will be motivated to spend extra energy on work during nonwork hours and, thus, detach less from work issues, which will leave them with less resources left to fulfill important social and family functions (Edwards & Rothbard, 2000; Rothbard, 2001). Therefore, building on COR arguments, we posit that OEEM adds pressure to expend individual resources (e.g., time, attention, emotional resources) on work-related activities and prevents or obstructs gaining of resources (e.g., recovery experiences). We expect that time and energy spent on monitoring or handling work-related emails depletes individual resources and precludes an individual from physical and psychological detachment from work. Furthermore, we argue that OEEM acts as a trigger of employee motivation to spend their resources (e.g., attention) on work demands during nonwork hours and, thus, prevents work detachment. Because OEEM may require attending to work issues, time spent on this should partially mediate this negative effect on work detachment.

Hypothesis 1: OEEM will be positively related to time employee spent on after-hours email.

Hypothesis 2a: OEEM will be negatively related to employee work detachment.

Hypothesis 2b: Time spent on work-related emails after-hours will partially mediate the negative relationship between OEEM and employee work detachment.

OEEM and Emotional Exhaustion

Research on job demands (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001, 2004; Spector et al., 1988; Spector & Jex, 1998) has linked external stressors, such as time pressure and work overload, to exhaustion and burnout (e.g., Sonnentag et al., 2010). Unlike low disengagement from work through lack of physical and mental detachment, emotional exhaustion is a state of strain that does not necessarily involve awareness of the stressor. People can feel burned out emotionally as a direct result of work-related demands. In fact, research had shown that work stressors, such as job overload, can lead directly to emotional exhaustion through emotional resource depletion (see a meta-analysis by Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Thus, extending existing research on job stressors and emotional exhaustion into the normative realm, we propose that high OEEM can lead to employee emotional exhaustion directly through emotional resource depletion. A constant activation of emotions and thoughts and inability to “leave work issues at work” (Fritz et al., 2010) should deplete individual resources and perpetuate stress, even when there are no actual emails to act upon or when individuals make a conscious attempt to separate work and nonwork life. That is, we argue that the mere perception of an availability norm and the anticipation of work communications create a stressor that can lead to emotional exhaustion via emotional resource depletion.

Furthermore, OEEM may also increase emotional exhaustion indirectly through lack of detachment. That is, high OEEM norms may motivate employees to engage in behaviors that prevent emotional recovery through detachment behaviors, for example, by carrying their email device with them wherever they go and constantly checking for emails or checking it any time they hear a notification (Becker et al., 2019; Kurtzberg & Gibbs, 2017). Therefore, we also expect that time spent on emails may exacerbate the positive relationship between OEEM and emotional exhaustion through lack of detachment. We expect that work detachment and emotional exhaustion will be negatively related. Taken together, we propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3: OEEM will be positively related to employee emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 4a: Work detachment will have a negative relationship with employee emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 4b: There will be partial mediation of the positive relationship between OEEM and employee emotional exhaustion through work detachment.

Diminished Work–Life Balance as an Outcome of OEEM

Work–life balance is an inclusive concept that refers to the balance between a person's work and nonwork lives (e.g., Greenhaus & Kossek, 2014). Satisfaction with the balance between work and personal life domains is important for individual health and well-being. From the COR perspective, if an individual spends too many resources in one domain without an opportunity to replenish them, other domains are at loss. Supporting this logic, empirical findings demonstrate that the inability to successfully balance work and personal domains can lead to anxiety and depression (Frone, 2003), absenteeism (Goff et al., 1990), lower work engagement (Wayne et al., 2016), and decreased job productivity and organizational commitment (Allen et al., 2010).

Here, we add to this body of literature by arguing that OEEM exacerbates the sense that work is omnipresent. That is, OEEM encourages recurring work-related thoughts outside of the workplace. Thus, OEEM should decrease work–life balance because successful management of the balance between roles requires considerable protection and recovery of emotional and cognitive resources (Wan et al., 2019). Similarly, depletion of resources inhibits the ability to effectively balance the domains and satisfaction with their respective roles in each (Greenhaus et al., 2003). Furthermore, the lack of work detachment means that despite being physically away from work, an employee is using resources (e.g., attention, mental energy) for work-related issues at the expense of non-work-related activities (e.g., time with family). This lack of detachment triggered by OEEM further depletes resources, impedes an individual from gaining resources through nonwork activities and relationships, and thus, exacerbates the problem of successfully balancing work and life domains. In addition, emotional exhaustion, which has been linked to low job performance, diminished citizenship behaviors and increased TOIs (Cropanzano et al., 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1981) and increased conflict between work and family demands (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2004; Peeters et al., 2005).

Accordingly, we propose that OEEM makes it difficult for employees to comeingle multiple roles and identities due to the state of emotional resource depletion and, thus, will negatively affect perceptions of successful balancing of work and life domains. Stated formally, we propose that OEEM will decrease employee work–life balance and that low work detachment and emotional exhaustion will mediate this negative relationship:

Hypothesis 5: OEEM will be negatively related to employee work–life balance.

Hypothesis 6a: Work detachment will mediate the negative relationship between OEEM and work–life balance.

Hypothesis 6b: Emotional exhaustion will mediate the negative relationship between OEEM and work–life balance.

Hypothesis 6c: There will be a serial mediation of the negative relationship between OEEM and employee work–life balance through work detachment and emotional exhaustion.

OEEM and TOIs

TOIs are the most well-known antecedent of the actual turnover in organizations (Griffeth et al., 2000; Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Steel & Ovalle, 1984; Tett & Meyer, 1993) with multiple studies identifying job stress and burnout as an important precursor of employee turnover cognitions and intentions (e.g., Barthauer et al., 2020; Griffeth et al., 2000). Conceptually, turnover cognitions represent employee mental contemplations as whether or not to leave the company (Sager et al., 1998). However, as both terms, turnover cognitions and TOIs, have been used in the literature to refer to the same construct and largely employed the same measurements (Bozeman & Perrewé, 2001), we use the term *turnover intentions* as a global construct to refer to both turnover thoughts and intentions.

Research on work overload has been implicated as one of the main reasons for increased job withdrawal and TOI (e.g., Avey et al., 2009). A recent study by Ferguson and colleagues specifically focused on work-related mobile usage at home as an important antecedent of TOI. Their results demonstrated that the frequency of checking mobile devices for work communication during family time decreased organizational commitment, while increasing TOI via stress and burnout. At the same time, they did not find any significant impact of the overall time employees spent on work in the family domain on TOI (Ferguson et al., 2016). Our work aims to extend these findings by applying a COR perspective to propose that OEEM may lead to increased TOI via resource depletion, as well as through a “cascade” effect of inability to successfully manage work–life roles due to OEEM, and thus, a desire to leave the company. Specifically, OEEM depletes individual resources through constant mental activation and an inability to “leave work issues at work” (Fritz et al., 2010). We further maintain that OEEM drives employee behaviors that deplete emotional resources and inhibit replenishment. This is expected even when there are no actual emails to act upon and the time spent is minimal. For example, employees may respond to expectations by carrying their email device at all times or constantly worrying

about receiving an email (e.g., Barber & Santuzzi, 2015, 2017; Kurtzberg & Gibbs, 2017). Thus, the anticipation of work creates an omnipresent stressor and the perception of high availability norms, which repetitively taps into an individual's limited psychological resource pool (Hobfoll, 1989) and increases desire to quit the job via emotional resource depletion (Barthauer et al., 2020). Supporting this logic, recent findings demonstrate that technology-related job overload, tension, and stress can increase TOI (Carlson et al., 2017; Ferguson et al., 2016).

Moreover, we think there could also be a cumulative effect of diminished work–life balance on TOI. That is, using COR logic, diminished work–life balance as a result of high OEEM should increase employee turnover cognitions as a way to replenish their depleted resources through quitting and seeking a less demanding position. This logic is supported by empirical findings that work–life conflict is associated with increase in TOIs (for meta-analysis, see Allen et al., 2000). At the same time, we do not formally predict the direction of the link between work detachment and TOI. On one hand, we expect that individuals who experience low work detachment related to high OEEM demands would have increased TOI. Complicating the relationship, however, is the fact that both work detachment and TOI are also forms of work withdrawal (Rubenstein et al., 2018). Therefore, people who already harbor withdrawal or turnover cognitions are more likely to detach from work regardless of OEEM. Similarly, individuals who are highly engaged in their work are also likely to exhibit low detachment and low TOI irrespective of OEEM. Moreover, many organizations now have explicit norms and policies in place regarding email-related expectations to ensure that employees understand their job requirements and, thus, may accept the fact that there will be low work detachment during nonwork hours; therefore, we expect that the relationship between OEEM and turnover cognitions may be obscured by these effects.

To summarize, we contend that we cannot reliably disentangle the OEEM-related link between lack of work detachment and increase in TOI. However, as individuals often overestimate their capacity to handle various tasks (Moore & Healy, 2008) and the emotional toll that this overload may carry, without awareness of the stress (Lee & Ashforth, 1996), OEEM should lead to increase in TOI via the emotional depletion route, as well as through diminished work–life balance. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

Hypothesis 7: OEEM will be positively related to employee TOIs.

Hypothesis 8a: Emotional exhaustion will mediate the relationship between OEEM and TOIs.

Hypothesis 8b: There will be a serial mediation of the relationship between OEEM and TOIs through work detachment and emotional exhaustion.

Hypothesis 9a: Work–life balance will mediate the relationship between OEEM and TOIs.

Hypothesis 9b: There will be serial mediation of the relationship between OEEM and TOIs through emotional exhaustion and detachment and through work–life balance.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We tested our predictions using a sample of working adults from a wide variety of industries and organizations that was part of a larger data collection. We recruited participants from the graduates of a U.S. southwestern business school through alumni newsletters (total distribution of over 15,000) and through direct emails to the authors' professional networks. We also asked participants to forward the study invitation to others in their own professional networks, but suspect that this was a relatively minor contribution to the participant pool because the timing of the bulk of anonymous responses corresponded with newsletter publications. In total, 570 individuals completed the initial survey. One week later, the 478 initial survey participants who provided an email address were sent a follow-up survey and 296 completed the follow-up survey. Participants ranged in age from below 25 (5%) to above 60 (3%), and the median age range was 36 to 40 years. The sample was 64% male, 67% were married, and 51% had children living at home. The 16 industry categories that were included in the survey had at least nine respondents, more or less evenly distributed, with neither category exceeding 15% of the total sample. All variables were assessed in the initial survey, with the exception of work–life balance variable, which was measured in the final survey. The larger data collection also included experience sampling surveys during the week between the initial and final surveys.

Measures

In the initial survey, participants were asked to estimate how much *time* they spent on work email during nonwork time in a typical week in hours. *Organizational expectations* to monitor and respond to email outside of work was measured with one item created for this study that was derived from Mazmanian and colleagues' (2013) qualitative study: "In this company it is expected that people will read and act on email outside of working hours" (Mazmanian et al., 2013). Responses were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Because this was

a single-item measure created for the larger data collection, we validated it using a second data collection that included two additional expectation items derived from Venkatesh and Davis (2000): “people who influence my behavior at work think that I should monitor electronic communications away from work” and “people who are important to me at work expect me to respond to electronic communications away from work.” With a separate sample of 95 U.S. working adults, the three-item measure had a reliability of .92 and the single item had a factor loading of .91 on the three-item construct of expectations. In addition, the correlations between time spent on email outside of work and expectations using the single item measure ($r = .23, p < .05$) and the three-item measure ($r = .27, p < .01$) were consistent. The validation also allowed us to estimate the measurement error of our single-indicator latent variable (Hayduk & Littvay, 2012).

Work detachment during nonwork time was measured using a four-item scale developed by Sonnentag and Fritz (2007). A sample item was, “Away from work, I don’t think about work at all.” *Emotional exhaustion* was measured using the nine-item subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). A sample item was, “I feel emotionally drained from my work.” We measured *turnover intentions* using the three-item measure from Cropanzano and colleagues (1997). A sample item was, “I would leave my job if an opportunity were available to join another company” (Cropanzano et al., 2003). We measured *work–life balance* using the five-item scale from Allen and colleagues (2010). A sample item was, “I am able to balance the demands of my work and the demands of my non-work.” This measure was included in both surveys. Responses to each of these measures were reported on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Controls. We used Bernerth and Aguinis’s (2016) approach for control variable usage in our analyses. As OEEM forces employees to blur the boundaries between work and nonwork, it was possible that gender roles and age could influence boundary management (Chesley, 2005; Turel et al., 2011). In addition, employees with higher salaries have been shown to experience greater work demands, time allocation challenges, and work–family conflict (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 1999; Dahm et al., 2015). Therefore, we controlled for gender, age, and salary in our analyses. Gender was coded as zero for men and one for women. Participant age was reported using 5-year windows where 1 was less than 25. Salary was reported using eight US\$25,000 windows where 1 was <US\$50,000 and 8 was >US\$200,000. The descriptive statistics for the study variables are displayed in Table 1. With regard to the larger data collection, there was no variable overlap between that study and this one.

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for Study Variables (N = 563).

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. OEEM	3.72	1.17	.79							
2. Time	7.60	6.17	.30**							
3. Work detachment	2.40	0.83	-.46**	-.36**						
4. Emotional exhaustion	2.73	0.86	.23**	.14**	.84					
5. Turnover intention	2.67	1.14	.06	-.08	.07	.92				
6. Work-life balance	3.30	0.88	-.32**	-.21**	.36**	.43**	.87			
7. Age	4.19	2.02	-.03	.07	-.12**	-.09*	-.21*	.91		
8. Gender	0.36	0.48	.01	-.03	.07	.16**	.06	-.07	-.12*	
9. Salary	4.04	2.13	.21**	.20**	-.29**	-.12**	-.23**	-.02	.50*	-.26**

Note. Coefficient alpha is provided along the diagonal. Reliability of the single-item expectation measure was estimated from the validation study. Time was coded as hours. Gender was coded as 0 = male; 1 = female. Age reported in 5-year windows where 1 = <25. Salary was reported using eight US\$25k windows where 1 was <US\$50k and 8 was >US\$200k. OEEM = organizational expectations for email monitoring.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Results

Our data contained multiple predictor and outcome latent variables with indirect effects through mediating variables. To simultaneously test all direct and indirect effects, we employed latent variable structural equation modeling (SEM) using Mplus Version 7.4 (Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Full-information maximum likelihood estimation was used for the analyses, which resulted in 563 observations being used for the analysis (seven observations were dropped due to their pattern of missing data, Enders & Bandalos, 2001). To verify the factor structure of our measures, we first fit a measurement model that included all variables of interest. This allowed us to include our single-indicator latent variables of expectations to monitor work electronic communications and time spent on work electronic communications outside of work. We used the validation study to estimate the measurement error for expectations and assumed similar error for time spent and calculated degrees of freedom using Green and colleagues' application (Cortina et al., 2017).¹ The measurement model fit the data well, $\chi^2(180) = 746$, root mean square error approximation (RMSEA) = .08, comparative fit index (CFI) = .93, and supported the predicted factor structure. We also tested a one-factor model which did not fit the data well: $\chi^2(189) = 3,569$, RMSEA = .18, CFI = .56. The Harmon single-factor test found that a single factor accounted for 36% of variance, which was much less than 50% and indicated that common method bias was not a major issue.

Next, we estimated the structural model that included only the predicted paths between latent variables.² The structural model also fit the data well: $\chi^2(250) = 894$, RMSEA = .07, CFI = .92. Figure 1 shows the significant path coefficients for the predicted structural model. With regard to our control variables, age was significantly related to work detachment ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$) and TOIs ($\beta = -.10, p < .05$). Gender was significantly related to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .12, p < .01$) such that women tended to report higher levels of exhaustion. Salary showed the greatest number of effects among control variables and was significantly related to time spent ($\beta = .16, p < .01$), work detachment ($\beta = -.17, p < .01$), emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.20, p < .01$), and TOIs ($\beta = -.14, p < .01$). We also ran the model without the control variables, and none of the findings were affected.

Hypothesized Relationships

Hypothesis 1 predicted that OEEM would be positively related to time spent on after-hours email. Hypothesis 2a predicted that OEEM would be negatively related to work detachment, whereas Hypothesis 2b predicted that there would

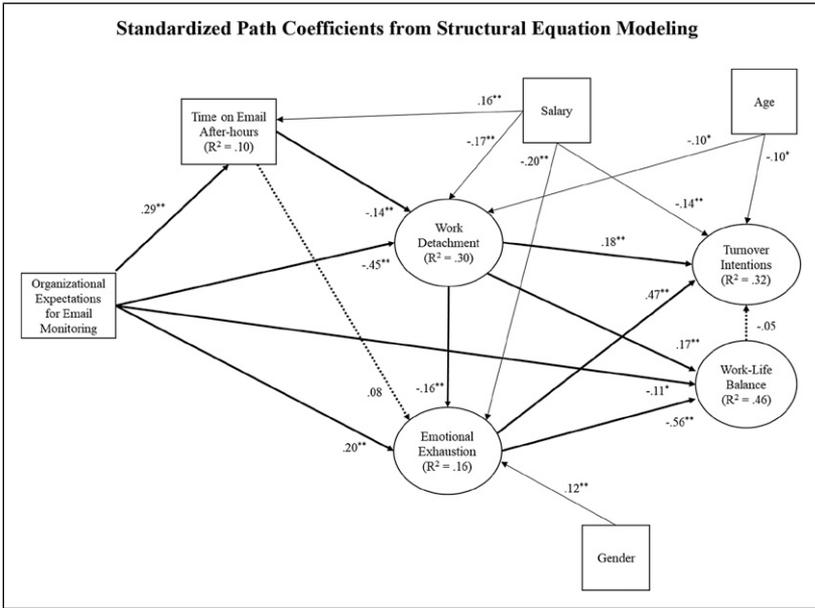


Figure 1. Standardized path coefficients from structural equation modeling ($N = 563$).

Note. Observations with full-information maximum likelihood estimation. Nonsignificant predicted paths are displayed with dotted lines.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

be a negative indirect effect of expectations on work detachment through time spent on after-hours email. Figure 1 shows that the direct relationships between OEEM and time ($\beta = .29, p < .01$), between OEEM and detachment ($\beta = -.45, p < .01$), and between time and work detachment ($\beta = -.14, p < .01$) were significant in the expected directions. This indicates that Hypotheses 1 and 2a were supported. The bias-corrected bootstrap results indicated that the indirect path between OEEM and work detachment through time spent was only marginally significant (point estimate = $-.04$; 90% confidence interval [CI] = $[-.10, -.01]$). Therefore, Hypothesis 2b was not supported.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that OEEM would be positively related to emotional exhaustion. Hypothesis 4a predicted that work detachment would be negatively related to emotional exhaustion, whereas Hypothesis 4b predicted that there would be a positive indirect effect of expectations on emotional exhaustion through work detachment. Figure 1 shows that the path between OEEM and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = .20, p < .01$) was significant in the predicted direction. Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was supported. The figure also

shows that the direct path between work detachment and emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -.16, p < .01$) was significant in the expected direction. Bootstrap results indicated that the indirect path between organizational expectation and emotional exhaustion through work detachment was significant (point estimate = .08; 95% CI = [.02, .13]). Therefore, Hypotheses 4a and 4b were supported.

Hypothesis 5 predicted that OEEM would be negatively related to work–life balance. Hypothesis 6 predicted that there would be multiple negative indirect effects of OEEM on work–life balance through work detachment (Hypothesis 6a), emotional exhaustion (Hypothesis 6b), and serially through work detachment through emotional exhaustion (Hypothesis 6c). In addition to the direct paths previously mentioned, Figure 1 shows that the paths between OEEM and work–life balance ($\beta = -.11, p < .05$), between detachment and work–life balance ($\beta = .17, p < .01$), and between emotional exhaustion and work–life balance ($\beta = -.56, p < .01$) were significant in the predicted directions. The bias-corrected bootstrap results indicated that the indirect path between organizational expectation and work–life balance through detachment was significant (point estimate = $-.08$; 95% CI = $[-.13, -.0]$). In a similar fashion, the indirect path between organizational expectation and work–life balance through emotional exhaustion was also significant (point estimate = $-.11$; 95% CI = $[-.18, -.05]$). The serial indirect path from OEEM to work detachment to emotional exhaustion to work–life balance was also significant (point estimate = $-.04$; 95% CI = $[-.08, -.01]$). Therefore, Hypotheses 5, 6a, 6b, and 6c were all supported, and the total effect of OEEM on work–life balance was quite strong (point estimate = $-.25$; 95% CI = $[-.32, -.19]$).

Hypothesis 7 predicted that there would be a positive relationship between OEEM and TOI. Hypothesis 8 predicted multiple indirect effects between OEEM and turnover through emotional exhaustion (Hypothesis 8a) and serially through work detachment and emotional exhaustion (Hypothesis 8b). In a similar fashion, Hypothesis 9 predicted an indirect effect between OEEM and turnover through work–life balance (Hypothesis 9a), and multiple serial indirect effects through emotional exhaustion and work detachment via work–life balance (Hypothesis 9b). Table 1 did not find a positive correlation between OEEM and TOI, and Figure 1 did not find a significant direct path between OEEM and TOI. Therefore, Hypothesis 7 was not supported. Figure 1 showed a significant relationship between emotional exhaustion and TOI ($\beta = .47, p < .01$) in the predicted direction. The bias-corrected bootstrap results found that the indirect path between expectations and TOIs through emotional exhaustion was significant (point estimate = .09; 95% CI = [.04, .16]). The serial indirect path from OEEM to work detachment to emotional

exhaustion to TOI was also significant (point estimate = .03; 95% CI = [.01, .06]). Therefore, Hypotheses 8a and 8b were supported. In testing Hypothesis 9, while Table 1 shows a significant negative correlation between work–life balance and TOI ($r = -.25, p < .01$), Figure 1 did not show a significant relationship for the full model ($\beta = -.05, ns$). As a result, Hypotheses 9a and 9b were not supported.

As discussed previously, we believed that the relationship between detachment and TOIs would be multifaceted and potentially reciprocal. For simplicity, we modeled this relationship as a direct path between work detachment and TOI. Figure 1 found that the relationship between work detachment was significant and positive ($\beta = .18, p < .01$).

Discussion

The “always on” nature of the modern workplace is a reality that organizations and employees alike must learn to manage in ways that capitalize on the increased flexibility due to technological innovations, while minimizing the potential harm to employee well-being. In this study, we focused on the potential pitfalls of OEEM. Supporting our arguments, the results suggest that OEEM was significantly and negatively related to work–life balance and positively to TOIs. Moreover, we demonstrated two distinct paths through which these negative effects of OEEM may occur—via emotional exhaustion and via the behavioral path of low work detachment. We found that emotional strain path is a driver of both diminished work–life balance and increased TOIs, whereas the low work detachment path was significant for diminished work–life balance, but only related to employee TOIs through increased emotional exhaustion. We also found that time spent on handling those emails after-hours was not as significant in driving negative individual outcomes as OEEM, only partially mediating the negative relationship between OEEM and work detachment, while having no significant direct or indirect effects on employee work–life balance or TOIs. Taken together, we believe our findings offer two main contributions: (a) highlighting the concept of OEEM as an important, and distinct from actual email usage, antecedent of job-triggered stress and (b) exposing two different paths through which OEEM can negatively impact individual and organization-related outcomes.

Research Contributions and Theoretical Implications

We believe our research has a number of important implications for management scholars and practitioners. First, grounded in job demands-resources models, and specifically in the COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), our findings

support the idea put forth by Becker and colleagues (2019) that constant activation via organizational norms is a work stressor that can be detrimental to individual well-being and carry organizational-level implications, regardless of whether or not employees spend actual time handling their work via email. Unlike others stressors that employees may leave at work by physically leaving the work space (e.g., workload, task or relationship conflicts, toxic culture, etc.; Demerouti et al., 2004, 2001; Spector et al., 1988), OEEM is an insidious stealer of resources. In addition, our findings clearly indicate that employees do not have to spend physical time and resources to become a victim of this stressor, and thus our research underscores a critical role of normative demands in shaping individual attitudes and behaviors. Depleted and exhausted employees are likely to have performance problems, engage in deviant behavior, reduce citizenship behaviors, withdraw from work, and leave their jobs (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2016; Wayne et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2018).

Second, the findings around time spent on emails as an outcome of OEEM and as a partial antecedent of low work detachment lend support to our arguments that employee perceptions of constant connectivity via OEEM, and not the actual time spent engaged in work tasks, is the main culprit for negative email-related outcomes. Thus, spending time on email and finishing up tasks are not necessarily detrimental for employees. Accordingly, our research extends existing literature and helps to reconcile prior findings with respect to pros and cons of email monitoring after work. Having access to work email may be beneficial in some instances, such as allowing employees to put unfinished work issues to rest and truly mentally detach during “off” hours (Richardson & Benbunan-Fich, 2011; Syrek & Antoni, 2014), and detrimental in others, such as leading employees to burnout due to constant resource expenditure (e.g., Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015) and manifested through intentions to leave the company and diminished work–life balance perceptions.

Third, this is the first study, to our knowledge, to use COR theory to demonstrate that OEEM-induced strain can occur through different resource depletion paths, with each having a distinct impact on individual and organizational outcomes. For instance, the fact that we found the emotional depletion path to negatively relate to each of our variables of interest, while we saw low work detachment to be significant only with respect to diminishing work–life balance and increasing TOIs only indirectly, may suggest that unlike emotional strain, the premediated lack of work detachment may not necessarily be a uniformly negative factor. For example, individual differences (such as personality traits, organizational culture, or segmentation preferences) may moderate the valence and the strength of low work detachment effect on individual outcomes. Furthermore, job attitudes may affect

the relationship between work detachment and TOI independently of OEEM because highly engaged employees likely experience low detachment and TOI, while those who are dissatisfied with their job would be expected to report high detachment and TOI (Rubenstein et al., 2018). On the contrary, regardless of those differences, our finding that work detachment showed an indirect effect on TOIs through emotional exhaustion speaks to the ominous nature of OEEM that increases emotional, cognitive, and physical resource expenditure and the potential of its cascade effects to not only increase employee desire to leave the job but also manifest itself in other negative individual and organizational outcomes.

Taken together, we believe that our findings call for further investigation of antecedents and outcomes of OEEM. Specifically, our findings regarding unequivocally detrimental effects of OEEM on work–life balance and TOIs invite scholars to conduct more research on significant factors that may shape these and other work-related outcomes. That is, the type of occupation (e.g., software development vs. nursing), job titles (e.g., top management vs. administrative staff), or company structure (e.g., small start-up vs. a large corporation) may significantly shape employee reactions to OEEM. Moreover, parsing out of the nature of OEEM with respect to the types of norms that have the most profound effect on shaping employee mental states and behavior may be an important avenue for future research. For instance, understanding the distinct effects of the two broad categories of organizational norms—descriptive norms, which are usually conveyed through formal policies and contribute to one’s understanding of what other people do in a given context (Cialdini et al., 2006) and injunctive (or prescriptive) norms that reflect a perceived degree of social approval or disapproval of behavior (Cialdini et al., 1990, 1991) in various organizational cultures and climates—will add to the field’s understanding of which norms, and under what circumstances, may be especially dangerous for organizations to uphold and which norms may not be as detrimental. Furthermore, discovering some positive implications of certain types of norms in certain environments is also plausible. Taken together, we hope that our findings will inspire scholars to further explore this area of research.

Finally, our findings highlight organizational norms for availability after-hours via email as another antecedent of resource depletion and stress. Accordingly, we suggest future research also examine whether perceived norms for availability may be a vehicle that reinforces the presence and activation of other stressors that were typically constrained to the physical workspace in the past. In the modern world, these stressors can cross the space boundaries via electronic means with greater ease, making them more likely to exacerbate mental and physical resource depletion and impede replenishment. A recent

meta-review of work-related stress associated with job design and work management by [Hassard and colleagues \(2018\)](#) exposes the startling magnitude of its social cost with respect to decreases in productivity and increases in health care costs ([Hassard et al., 2018](#)). More research on ways to manage stress in the modern workplace, aid employee recovery, and enhance employee and family well-being seems warranted.

Practical Implications

The widespread reliance of organizations on communication technology and mounting scholarly evidence of potential side effects of such use for individual employees indicate that our results offer important insights to practitioners. Below, we offer several suggestions for both organizational leaders and employees on how to optimize employee and organizational functioning in such high-pressure fast-paced environment.

Organizational level. Our finding that OEEM influences well-being regardless of the actual time employees invest in monitoring their work emails after-hours is of practical importance for organizations, suggesting firms can manage employee sustainability by managing the norms around email communication after-hours. The fact that TOIs were related to expectations through emotional exhaustion, but not time, suggests that managers need to take lead in enforcing organizational practices that will help to mitigate these negative effects and protect their employees in the long-run. For instance, if completely banning email after-hours is not an option (e.g., Huffington Post; Volkswagen after-hours smartphone ban for German-based workers; [Morris, 2017](#); [Tsukayama, 2011](#)), organizations could establish formal policies and rules on availability for after work hours, such as weekly “email-free days” or specific rotating schedules that will allow employees to (a) recuperate emotionally from work-related thoughts, reducing chances of emotional depletion and (b) manage their work and family time more efficiently; both policies may aid in increasing employee engagement and commitment to an organization.

In contrast, organizational policies that ambiguously state “flexible after-hours policies” may do more harm than good. For instance, in some organizations that implement “take all the time you want” vacation policies, employees do not take any time off due to ambiguity associated with the norm, which creates anxiety on what is acceptable ([Nightingale, 2016](#)). It seems managers might benefit from providing systems that allow employees to manage email after-hours if desired, while also clearly communicating that such activities are not expected nor rewarded. Similarly, the idea of flexible

work–life balance management can be undermined by conflicting signals from supervisors or colleagues who put in long working hours during “off time” or on weekends (Milligan, 2016).

Taken together, although there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution, we maintain that by (a) making the expectations clear and specific through communication and self-behavior (such as refraining from unnecessary emailing during after-hours or on weekends) and by (b) tailoring the norms in a way that takes into account employee need for recovery and recuperation, organizational leaders may increase employee trust, organizational commitment, work engagement and, ultimately, their productivity (e.g., Kurtessis et al., 2017; Putnam et al., 2014; Sonnentag et al., 2017).

Individual level. Although we believe organizations need to address this problem on a systematic level both through organizational policies and through leader or managerial behaviors, we also offer some suggestions on how employees might optimize their strategies for coping with the stressful environment of high OEEM. The direct implication from our model findings is that to function successfully in such environment, individuals need to be able to replenish their emotional and cognitive resources. Accordingly, we suggest (a) setting clear boundaries for work and life activities and (b) being fully present while engaging in each activity as the two key components of successful coping with high OEEM. We believe that employees need to be proactive about protecting their resources and their lives, and thus, they may want to set up specific times after work when monitoring of work-related emails and subsequent activities is necessary and inform their superiors and colleagues, as well as their significant others of this schedule. This should help employees to reduce work-related interruptions and thoughts during nonwork time.

In addition, to successfully recuperate from work pressures and replenish resources, individuals need to not only engage in nonwork activities they enjoy but also be mentally and emotionally present during those activities. Emerging research on the effects of mindfulness on employee well-being and organizational functioning clearly demonstrates the importance of mindfulness for restoring individual emotional, cognitive, and physical states, as well as for individual performance and organizational functioning (for a review, see Good et al., 2016). Furthermore, pursuing activities that individuals enjoy generates positive emotions (such as joy, happiness, excitement, and gratitude, among others), buffering effects of which are critical for replenishing lost emotional and cognitive resources, counteracting fatigue and negative emotions, while also having a positive effect on attitudes and work-related behaviors, such as helping individuals to successfully bounce from adverse

events, increase cognitive performance, or promote organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., [Belkin & Kouchaki, 2017](#); [Butts et al., 2015](#); [Fredrickson et al., 2000](#)).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This research included design choices that were consistent with the goals of the current study but, nevertheless, represent potential limitations. For one, we obtained our sample through a nonrandom sampling methodology. We choose this method to get a large and diverse sample of employed individuals from different organizations and industries. This method did not provide control over who was invited to participate, and it is possible that individuals who were concerned with electronic communications were more likely to participate in the study and to pass on the study invitation to others in their network. Accordingly, we invite researchers to replicate our findings using different employee samples, such as getting access to random number of employees from one or several organizations.

Our use of one-item measures for time spent on email and OEEM could be an additional concern with respect to reliability. However, a single item should be sufficient to appropriately tap the underlying phenomenon that is derived from explicit information (i.e., time) or a single clear estimate (e.g., [Jones et al., 2007](#); [Meier & Gross, 2015](#)) and is a valid and reliable predictor frequently used in social psychology and organizational behavior research ([Wanous & Reichers, 1996](#)). We attempted to allay concerns over our one-item OEEM measure by completing a follow-up data collection comparing our one-item measure with a three-item measure, which supported our one-item measure and allowed us to model its measurement error in our analysis.

Another limitation involves the self-reported nature of the study, which may create concerns with common method bias even though these threats may be overstated ([Podsakoff et al., 2003](#); [Spector, 2006](#)). We attempted to minimize susceptibility to this bias by choosing well-established measures where possible and separating the measurement of one of our outcome variables from the other variables by approximately a week ([Conway & Lance, 2010](#)). Furthermore, our tests of method bias did not suggest any significant concerns. In addition, we predicted and found evidence for indirect effects, which is unlikely if the observed relationships result primarily from common method variance ([Rupp & Spencer, 2006](#); [Siemsen et al., 2010](#)). Nevertheless, adding behavioral measures and performance-related outcomes in the follow-up studies or taking a multisource approach could help scholars to better understand the separate effects of time spent on emails as opposed to OEEM and strengthen the conclusions of this research.

Conclusion

Given the pervasiveness of email and reliance on virtual work around the clock in modern organizations, understanding how email-related organizational norms drive dysfunctional individual work-related outcomes appears more pressing than ever. Our research empirically demonstrates the critical role of OEEM in diminishing employee ability to detach from work during nonwork hours, increase in emotional exhaustion, and impede employee ability to successfully balance work and nonwork domains, as well as increase TOIs. Our adaptation of the COR perspective provides a nuanced explanation of these outcomes, while helping to disentangle the effects of time and expectations related to the handling of work emails during nonwork hours. This research puts the negative impact of OEEM at the forefront of the research agenda that needs to focus further on the examination of how the modern workplace with its many “conveniences” may be hurting employees and, ultimately, organizations.

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Notes

1. We also performed sensitivity analysis and determined that our results held even if no measurement error or even greater error was present in the time or expectation variables.
2. To maximize our power, we used the Time 1 measure of work–life balance for those participants who did not complete Survey 2. We also ran the model with only Time 1 or only Time 2 work–life balance measures and found the same pattern of results.

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