

# The Ethical Dimensions of Remote Work: Surveillance, Privacy, and the Impact of Technostress in Digital Work Environments

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**Abstract:** The rapid transition to digital work environments has fundamentally altered the psychological contract between employers and employees, exposing significant ethical vulnerabilities in modern management practices. This paper analyzes the moral implications of decentralized labor, focusing specifically on the expansion of electronic performance monitoring and algorithmic control, alongside the resulting erosion of spatial and temporal boundaries. By substituting physical oversight with continuous digital surveillance, organizations transform the domestic sphere into a visible corporate asset, heavily compromising worker autonomy and privacy. Furthermore, the institutional expectation of constant connectivity disrupts the cognitive recovery process, directly engineering technostress and emotional exhaustion among the workforce. These psychological burdens represent structural defects in work design mandated by management rather than individual vulnerabilities. The analysis argues that alleviating technology-induced exhaustion is a fundamental ethical obligation for organizational leadership. To ensure the long-term sustainability of remote work, executives must transition from behavior-based micromanagement to output-based evaluation and implement strictly enforced right-to-disconnect policies, prioritizing mutual trust over invasive tracking mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Remote Work, Electronic Performance Monitoring, Algorithmic Management, Work-Life Boundaries, Technostress, Organizational Ethics, Employee Privacy

## 1. Introduction

The global labor market has undergone a seismic shift in recent years, primarily accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This transition has moved the “office” from a centralized physical location to a decentralized, digital network. While this shift was initially a matter of survival for many multinational firms, it has now become a permanent fixture of modern work design. “Telecommuting represents a fundamental shift in how organizations have historically done business” (Allen et al., 2015, p. 40). This quote emphasizes that remote work is not merely a change of location; it is a structural revolution that challenges traditional management theories centered on physical presence and direct supervision.

As organizations have embraced this digitalization, new ethical dilemmas have surfaced. The primary tension lies between the corporate drive for productivity and the fundamental right to employee well-being. In a remote setting, traditional methods of ensuring performance are replaced by digital tools that often intrude on the private sphere. “Even when organizations do not monitor, but set up the system to facilitate monitoring at any time, a breach of control, and therefore of privacy, has occurred” (Martin & Freeman,

2003, p. 355). This sustained capacity for oversight suggests that the digital workplace is becoming a space of constant observation, in which the boundary between a professional task and a personal moment is increasingly thin.

The core problem addressed in this analysis is the “technostress trifecta” (Tarafdar et al., 2017)—the intersection of technology, stress, and organizational design. When multinational teams operate across different time zones and cultural expectations, the pressure to remain “always on” becomes an ethical burden. Leaders are now tasked with managing not just outputs, but the psychological safety of their teams in a virtual environment. This paper explores the primary ethical challenges associated with remote work, specifically focusing on how these challenges affect employee well-being and organizational practices.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1. Remote Work and Employee Well-being: Benefits vs. Risks*

The scientific community has long debated the impact of telecommuting on the individual. Remote work is associated with increased autonomy and flexibility. As Gajendran and Harrison (2007, p. 1538) note “telecommuting has a clear upside: small but favorable effects on work-family conflict,” indicating that working away from the central office empowers employees to manage their personal and professional roles more effectively. By removing the physical constraints of the traditional workplace, telecommuting serves as a significant job resource that directly reduces the interference between domains, allowing for better boundary management. This indicates that, in theory, the ability to work from home should empower employees to better balance their lives. By removing the commute and allowing for a customized environment, telecommuting serves as a vital support mechanism. It functions as a resource, which Bakker and Demerouti (2007, p. 312) define as the “physical, psychological, social, or organizational aspects of the job that [...] reduce job demands and the associated physiological and psychological costs.” Consequently, this flexibility helps stimulate personal development and protects overall well-being.

However, the advantages of remote work are frequently accompanied by specific occupational risks. There is a significant “risk of professional and social isolation as well as fragmentation of work groups” (Vayre et al., 2022, p. 4). Empirical data support this hazard, as teleworkers often report a “feeling of exclusion, marginalization and professional and social isolation” (Vayre et al., 2022, p. 13). When employees are physically removed from their peers, they lose the “social support” (Wang et al., 2020, p. 4) that is vital for mitigating stress. “High-intensity telecommuting (more than 2.5 days a week) ... harmed relationships with coworkers” (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007, p. 1524). This quote is crucial because it identifies a tipping point: too much remote work can erode the social fabric of an organization. As researchers emphasize, “online social interactions are not necessarily sufficient for reducing loneliness; ‘a psychological pain of perceived relational deficiencies in the workplace’” (Wang et al., 2020, p. 34). From an ethical standpoint, an organization that mandates full-time remote work without providing digital social resources effectively isolates its workforce, a precursor to burnout.

### *2.2. Technostress and Digital Overload*

The term “technostress” is central to understanding the ethical failures of the modern digital workplace. It is defined as “stress experienced by end users of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)” (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008, p. 418). In the context of remote work, technostress is not just a technical glitch; it is an environmental condition.

Because the remote worker is entirely dependent on ICTs for communication, any failure or “overload” in these systems directly impacts their mental health.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides a framework for this. As the authors explain, “although job demands are not necessarily negative, they may turn into job stressors when meeting those demands requires high effort from which the employee has not adequately recovered” (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 312). In a digital environment, the constant influx of emails, Slack messages, and video calls constitutes a high psychological demand. As research confirms, “as individuals become more dependent on technologies (i.e., increasing technology usage), they experience higher levels of stressors” (Ayyagari et al., 2011, p. 7). This relationship highlights the ethical responsibility of the employer. If the “technostressors”—such as the expectation of immediate responses—are built into the company culture, the employer is directly fostering an environment where “the ‘always on’ working practice, encouraged by remote working, challenges employees in terms of mental and physical fatigue” (Molino et al., 2020, p. 14).

The role of mobile technology has further complicated this overload, as “the smartphone has provided employees with a tool to stay connected to work outside of working hours” (Dora et al., 2019, p. 188). By carrying their office in their pockets, employees lose the physical boundaries that once explicitly signaled the end of the workday. While this allows flexibility, it often results in a situation where “employees stay mentally occupied because of their constant alertness to incoming messages” (Van Laethem et al., 2018, p. 2). Operating under these conditions means that the vital “recovery experience” (Derks & Bakker, 2014, p. 415) is never completed. Ethically, a leadership style that ignores this persistent digital intrusion allows the slow exhaustion of its human capital. Because the brain remains in a perpetual state of readiness, employees are denied the cognitive downtime required to recover from daily work demands.

### ***2.3. Ethical Issues in Digital Work Environments***

**Monitoring & surveillance:** The transition to digital workspaces has intensified how organizations track employee output, shifting from evaluating results to observing continuous behavior. The rationale for implementing such strict oversight usually rests on maximizing efficiency and minimizing personal time theft. However, this high-pressure environment alters the psychological reality of the worker, creating a persistent state of stress that actively degrades human capital. The continuous observation required to micromanage digital interactions backfires because “people under stress are sick more often and heal more slowly, which leads to an increase in sick leave and a decrease in productivity while at work” (Martin & Freeman, 2003, p. 354). By prioritizing rigid tracking over trust, the organization damages the operational stability it initially sought to protect.

**Privacy concerns:** The expansion of tracking tools directly infringes upon spatial and informational boundaries, especially when professional duties are fulfilled within the domestic sphere. Continuous observation via webcams, keystroke loggers, and screen captures transforms the personal home into a visible corporate asset, ensuring that the “datafied and digitalised means of organising position the public-private boundary as contested terrain” (Ball, 2021, p. 41). This granular data collection strips away the right to anonymity and personal refuge. The physical space that once provided psychological detachment from professional obligations is entirely compromised by the employer’s inescapable digital presence.

**Algorithmic control:** Beyond passive observation, digital infrastructures increasingly rely on automated systems to dictate workflow, evaluate completion rates, and issue performance ratings. These systems assign tasks and discipline behavior without

human intervention or contextual understanding. Reducing complex professional judgment to basic data points that must conform to the software's predetermined rules eliminates the capacity for human appeal or negotiation. Stripped of their autonomy, "workers often experience alienation with algorithmic restricting when they lose control over their own labor and are deprived of the right to conceive of themselves as directors of their own actions" (Kellogg et al., 2020, p. 375). Enforcing universal, technology-driven standards in this manner overrides individual agency.

### **3. Ethical Challenges of Remote Work**

#### ***3.1. Employee Surveillance vs Privacy***

The abrupt shift to remote work models eliminated traditional indicators of productivity, prompting organizations to substitute physical presence with intense digital tracking. Since this model fundamentally disrupts historical business operations, managers often compensate for the loss of direct oversight by deploying software that captures screen time and communication patterns, turning the home into an observable extension of the corporate office. This granular datafication creates a high-pressure environment where individuals 'feel that they are never free of these technologies and that their time and space have been invaded' (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008, p. 421). The ethical deficit occurs because this reliance on intrusive digital micromanagement suggests a lack of fundamental trust, failing to realize that 'managers might have to change their strategies for monitoring employees from behavior-based to output-based controls' (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007, p. 1527). By choosing algorithmic policing over mutual trust, companies violate the psychological contract. Within the JD-R framework, continuous surveillance functions as a stressor where "chronic job demands (e.g. work overload, emotional demands) exhaust employees' mental and physical resources" (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, p. 313). Such reliance on "coercion and manipulation" (Brown & Treviño, 2006, p. 604) stands in direct opposition to ethical leadership, forcing staff into performative availability merely to satisfy software metrics.

The long-term consequences of excessive digital surveillance inevitably manifest as severe psychological strain and the erosion of work-life boundaries. The continuous pressure of operating under a digital panopticon exhausts the cognitive resources of the workforce, pushing individuals into a state of "technostress," defined as the "stress that individuals experience due to their use of Information Systems" (Tarafdar et al., 2017, p. 7). When the employer's gaze extends directly into the domestic sphere, the psychological separation between professional obligations and personal sanctuary is effectively erased. Forced to manage these overlapping demands under constant scrutiny, "respondents who had to adjust their work hours or schedule work around others were more likely to report multiple new physical or mental health issues" (Xiao et al., 2021, p. 189), a vulnerability heavily exacerbated by the pressure to remain digitally visible. By treating workers as subjects to be continuously policed rather than trusted professionals, organizations prevent true psychological detachment, considering that "the request to stay connected to work during evening hours – undermining the possibility to psychologically detach from work – is external rather than internal" (Derks & Bakker, 2014, p. 418). This paradoxically undermines the human capital that tracking systems were originally purchased to protect.

#### ***3.2. Work-Life Boundary Erosion***

Without a physical office or a commute to serve as a psychological buffer, the home environment directly absorbs corporate obligations, fostering porous boundaries between domains. This blurring is heavily facilitated by mobile technology, given that "the

smartphone has made work more accessible in the private domain” (Dora et al., 2019, p. 188). Consequently, the lack of spatial cues allows professional demands to infiltrate evening hours, turning personal devices into an inescapable tether to the workplace.

Without explicit temporal boundaries, the cognitive recovery process required to maintain high performance is severely interrupted, creating a direct pathway to emotional exhaustion. Navigating this spatial collapse requires immense psychological effort, considering that the constant blurring of roles “can involve confusion and stressful spillovers from one domain to another” (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012, p. 161). When corporate culture rewards immediate responsiveness over defined working hours, an employee’s personal strategy for separating domains is easily overpowered by institutional demands. Consequently, constant digital connectivity becomes “a fluctuating stressor or a fluctuating demanding and energy consuming activity, impairing one’s psychological detachment from work” (Cambier et al., 2019, p. 239). Ethically, a leadership model that implicitly discourages detachment forces the worker’s brain to remain in a perpetual state of vigilance, accelerating burnout.

This sustained boundary erosion culminates in the phenomenon of technostress, where the digital tools initially adopted to liberate the worker become the primary mechanism of their cognitive overload. Ironically, organizations frequently frame these digital environments as an employee benefit, given that “flexible work arrangements (FWA) in particular have been touted as key to helping employees manage work and nonwork responsibilities” (Allen et al., 2013, p. 345). The ethical dilemma arises from this contradiction: companies offer the illusion of spatial flexibility but simultaneously impose rigid expectations of instantaneous digital connectivity. Because the demands of remote communication systems constantly interrupt personal time, “high levels of technologies use may increase workload and working pace, multitasking and interruptions, leading to stress in the long run” (Molino et al., 2020, p. 4). By doing so, the organization weaponizes its own communication tools, shifting the severe psychological burden of boundary regulation entirely onto the individual end-user.

### ***3.3. Technostress as an Ethical Issue***

Digital exhaustion is frequently misinterpreted as a personal failure of psychological resilience, a perspective that ignores the systemic roots of the problem. The virtual work environment is designed and enforced entirely by the employer. By normalizing a culture of constant connectivity, companies artificially amplify the cognitive pressure on their workforce. This framework forces staff to navigate overlapping duties directly from their domestic space, creating a high-pressure dynamic since “the challenge for employees working from home occurs when they have to play two different roles in the same space” (Kifor et al., 2022, p. 4). The pressure to remain online does not stem inherently from the technology itself but from corporate expectations. Implementing automated tracking software worsens this dynamic by centralizing decision-making, which can “contribute to lower creativity among employees” (Kniffin et al., 2020, p. 4). Consequently, cognitive overload constitutes a structural defect in work design rather than an individual vulnerability.

Because leadership controls the digital infrastructure, mitigating this intense pressure represents a direct managerial obligation. Reducing technology-induced exhaustion to a simple productivity metric ignores the moral implications of coordinating human labor. An ethical approach requires configuring digital tools to protect human resources rather than deplete them. Effectively combating burnout requires proactive strategies focused on engagement and utilizing “organizational assessments that include tools for early detection” of overwork (Maslach, 2011, p. 44). To implement these measures, management must

define exact boundaries, given that “ethical leaders clarify responsibilities, expectations, and performance goals, so that subordinates know what is expected from them” (Kalshoven et al., 2011, p. 53). By establishing strict rules regarding the right to disconnect, leadership prevents the digital ecosystem from generating a state of chronic anxiety.

Creating a healthy work environment depends entirely on executive commitment to protecting team well-being. Qualitative analyses demonstrate that “executive ethical leaders are perceived to be first and foremost people-focused” and prioritize treating individuals with respect in operational decisions (Treviño et al., 2003, p. 14). Ignoring the erosion of boundaries between professional and private spaces contradicts these fundamental principles and validates a toxic organizational culture. Senior management behavior directly influences the rest of the organization, considering that lower-level managers “will be prone to emulate and imitate the behaviors of top management such that ethical behaviors of leaders will cascade” throughout the company (Mayer et al., 2009, p. 3). Integrating respect for recovery time into internal policies transforms the management of technostress from an administrative human resources task into an absolute moral responsibility.

#### **4. Mitigating Ethical Risks: Frameworks for a Sustainable Digital Workplace**

Transitioning to a sustainable remote work model requires abandoning surveillance-heavy tactics in favor of trust-based performance metrics. Instead of measuring keystrokes or active screen time, organizations must prioritize output-based evaluation, ensuring that “such an approach does not have to neutralize the autonomy of the telecommuter” (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007, p. 1537). This shift allows workers to regain their professional independence and mitigates the anxiety associated with constant digital visibility.

Protecting employee well-being in a highly connected environment demands explicit institutional policies that regulate communication. The responsibility for preventing work-home interference cannot rest solely on the individual’s capacity to ignore notifications. Organizations must actively intervene by designing workflows that respect personal time. Establishing clear communication protocols is essential because unchecked corporate pressure easily overwhelms personal coping strategies. When a company normalizes constant digital availability, it fosters “conformity to a standardized approach, where employer values regarding boundary management generally take precedence over family,” resulting in workers perceiving “less control to regulate boundaries” (Kossek & Lautsch, 2012, p. 161). Implementing a formal right to disconnect ensures that the technological infrastructure supports psychological recovery rather than facilitating chronic exhaustion.

The successful application of these policies depends entirely on the integrity and commitment of the management team. Leaders dictate the organizational culture through their daily decisions and communication habits. If executives routinely send directives late at night, subordinates feel compelled to respond, rendering any formal disconnection policy meaningless. Cultivating a healthy environment requires alignment across all levels of the hierarchy, considering that “ethical leadership may flow, or cascade, from the top level of management, to immediate supervisors” (Mayer et al., 2009, p. 9). When managers actively model appropriate boundary management and prioritize the psychological safety of their teams, they establish an ethical foundation that enables sustainable remote work without exploiting the workforce.

#### **5. Conclusions**

The normalization of decentralized work has fundamentally altered the psychological contract, exposing severe ethical vulnerabilities through the substitution of physical oversight with invasive electronic performance monitoring. This analysis has demonstrated

that the use of tracking technologies and the resulting erosion of spatial boundaries— heavily facilitated by mobile devices—transform the domestic sphere into a visible corporate asset. These dynamics strip individuals of their right to psychological refuge and generate a state of constant vigilance, suggesting that technostress is a structural byproduct of operational design rather than a failure of personal resilience.

The assumption that granular tracking yields higher output is a fundamental managerial miscalculation, as digital micromanagement triggers the exact productivity losses it seeks to prevent through accelerated burnout. Because the employer designs and enforces this digital environment, alleviating the resulting pressure constitutes a direct moral obligation. True efficiency requires a paradigm shift from behavior-based policing toward trust-based, output-oriented evaluation. Leadership must take active responsibility for the psychological toll of their demands, ensuring that technological infrastructure supports rather than exploits the workforce.

The long-term viability of remote work depends on abandoning extractive surveillance in favor of human-centric design. Establishing a formalized right to disconnect is a critical first step in restoring professional dignity and ensuring organizational stability. Future academic inquiry should investigate the longitudinal impacts of algorithmic restriction across diverse cultural contexts and evaluate the practical efficacy of emerging boundary-management policies. By embedding respect for psychological detachment into the corporate hierarchy, organizations can transform remote work from an invasive demand into a sustainable practice.

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