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A CLASSIFICATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL INTERVENTIONS TO ENABLE DETACHMENT FROM WORK

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Abstract Negative effects of extensive connectivity to work through excessive use of technology have yielded discussions about the right to disconnect for employees. Organizations are beginning to introduce interventions that aim at enabling their employees to detach from work (i.e., refrain from work-related thoughts and activities during non-work hours). However, there is limited academic research on how organizations should introduce interventions that lead to a successful disconnection of their employees. Based on an interdisciplinary literature review and reports on companies' best practices, this study proposes a classification of organizational interventions based on the level, target, and mechanism of the intervention. I include the theory of psychological detachment to propose a measurement of the success of an intervention. The classification provides researchers and practitioners with a common framework to develop and evaluate interventions aimed at fostering employees' disconnection from work.

Keywords:
constant
connectivity,
right to
disconnect,
detachment,
organizational
interventions,
classification.

1 Introduction

Information and communication technology (ICT) affords employees with high levels of autonomy to decide how, when and where they work. ‘Nomadic workers’ (Cousins & Robey, 2005) work from a client’s site, a hotel room or from home instead of from a traditional office. The flexible work environment also leads to extended availability for work which has negative effects on the employees’ well-being (Dettmers, Bamberg, & Seffzek, 2016) and the organization (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2016). Although companies increasingly expect this near 24/7 availability and sell it as part of their service (Mazmanian & Erickson, 2014), the negative effects have alarmed managers and human resource departments. As a result, organizations and governments are discussing the introduction of “the right to disconnect” (Hesselberth, 2018). France has been the first country that enacted a law regulating employees’ availability after work-hours (Hesselberth, 2018). Companies such as Volkswagen (VW) and Daimler have reduced their employees’ availability through banning emails after regular business hours or deleting emails during the holiday (Smith, 2017).

As companies are only recently dealing with the dark side of extensive connectivity, research on organizational interventions is limited. Until now, there is no systematic way of comparing disconnectivity interventions and assessing their success. This paper develops a classification of those interventions to assist organizations in identifying the most effective intervention for their employees and their organizational culture. Drawing on the theory of psychological detachment (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015), I discuss the likelihood of success of disconnectivity interventions. To my knowledge, this paper is the first that applies psychological detachment as a theoretical frame to organizational interventions that target the right to disconnect. It paves the way for an empirical validation of the classification that provides researchers and practitioners with a framework to develop, compare and evaluate these interventions. It further extends the limited research on employees’ strategies for coping with extensive connectivity by considering strategies with that organizations can support their employees’ detachment from work.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Connectivity

In the political and organizational discourse, the right to disconnect has been understood in terms of disconnecting from work-related technology (Hesselberth, 2018). However, connectivity covers more than the mere technical connection to work. Researchers understand connectivity in various ways, for example as a technical connection to a device (Al-Dabbagh, Scornavacca, Sylvester, & Johnstone, 2015), extending working hours (Dettmers et al., 2016), the internal need of being connected to others (Bayer, Campbell, & Ling, 2016), or an organizational norm of 24/7 availability (Mazmanian & Erickson, 2014). I understand connectivity as the technical and social connection to work (i.e., the technical capability to access work whenever and wherever; and the social environment that expects and drives an extended availability to work). Connectivity is the socio-technical **potential** for information and communication and the **manifest** practices that emerge upon this potential.

Extensive connectivity is an elevated, nearly constant level of this connectivity. It can lead to emotional exhaustion (Xie, Ma, Zhou, & Tang, 2018), prolonged thinking about work (Cropley & Zijlstra, 2011), work-life conflicts (Ferguson et al., 2016) and an inability to detach from work (Derks, van Mierlo, & Schmitz, 2014). These individual effects are mirrored in negative organizational outcomes. For example, using a mobile device for work during family time is associated with higher burnout rates and less organizational commitment (Ferguson et al., 2016). Well-being and recovery are important factors for the employees' productivity (Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2010). Organizations are therefore increasingly concerned regarding the connectivity practices of their employees and seek applications of the "right to disconnect".

2.2 The Right to Disconnect

Until today, France is the only country that has introduced a law for supporting employees' disconnection decisions. The law demands the enactment of "modalities by which employees exercise their rights to disconnect, and the setting up of company regulations on digital devices and tools" (Secunda, 2019, p. 28). It remains

unspecific, in that it neither prescribes explicit interventions nor specifies fines for noncompliance (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2019).

While the French law provides employers with much room for interpretation, Germany has not introduced a law at all but is relying on voluntary self-regulation policies of employers (Secunda, 2019). As a result, German companies introduced specific measures that enable their employees to disconnect. VW reacted early in 2011, when they banned emails to company-provided smartphones after regular working hours. Their competitors Daimler and Porsche followed with similar regulations (Smith, 2017).

These examples demonstrate the challenge to define the degree of specification of disconnectivity measures. France enacted an unspecific law that could be ignored by employers due to the inexistence of fines. The specific German interventions might lead to even more stress for some employees due to not accounting for interindividual differences in the preference for work-life integration (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2019). As a one-size-fits-all approach is difficult, if not impossible, to develop, it is necessary to consider differences between companies, contexts, and individuals. Furthermore, an evaluation of the success of these interventions in terms of a comprehensive disconnection from work is important for the development and budgeting of further interventions. To date, organizational disconnectivity interventions mostly target the technical connection to work although connectivity also covers social expectations of extended availability and responsiveness. A successful intervention should therefore consider both, the physical disconnection as well as the emotional and mental disconnection from work. Psychological detachment (Park, Fritz, & Jex, 2011) provides a measurement of a successful disconnection.

2.3 Psychological Detachment

The theory of psychological detachment explains that demanding work conditions (e.g. time pressure, work overload) lead to strain reactions (e.g. increased heart rate, impaired well-being) (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). Individuals can only recover from work when they are not exposed to these stressors (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015). Psychological detachment is defined as “refraining from job-related activities and mentally disengaging from work during nonwork time” (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015,

p. 72). This definition emphasizes the importance of both, the physical and the psychological facet of switching-off. The physical dimension refers to being absent from work. This includes not only staying away from the office or desk but also not answering work-related emails on the mobile phone during nonwork time or not taking the work notebook on holidays. The psychological dimension refers to stop thinking about work after work hours. Psychological detachment is one of the best researched recovery strategies and relationships to job-related outcomes and psychological well-being have been empirically supported (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015; Wendsche & Lohmann-Haislah, 2017).

The detachment literature has identified antecedents of a successful detachment (Wendsche & Lohmann-Haislah, 2017) and has been increasingly included in discourses on technology-enabled extended availability for work (Cambier, Derks, & Vlerick, 2019; Park et al., 2011). Research has found that detachment strategies can be trained and thereby integrated into an individual's daily routine (Hahn, Binnewies, Sonnentag, & Mojza, 2011). Researchers therefore called for organizational policies that support individual detachment strategies (Cambier et al., 2019).

In the following paragraphs, I discuss different types of interventions and develop a classification that helps to identify which type is likely to be successful for which situation and company. Successful in this context means a comprehensive detachment from work, physically as well as mentally.

3 Developing a Classification of Disconnectivity Interventions

Organizational interventions are “planned, behavioral, theory-based actions that aim to improve employee health and well-being through changing the way work is designed, organized and managed” (Nielsen, 2013, p. 1030). As detachment refers to both, disconnecting from physical stressors (i.e. organization and design of work) and mental stressors, interventions should also include changing the way work is experienced by the individual.

3.1 Method

Based on a literature review on existing taxonomies of organizational interventions, I collected dimensions and classes of organizational interventions that have been identified previously. By applying them to the definition of connectivity, I selected those who are relevant in the context of an intervention that enables employees' detachment and developed an initial classification. In the last step, I analyzed interventions that have been already introduced (e.g. VW, Daimler, Porsche) according to the initial classification. I refined the dimensions and classes and developed the final classification. It is important to note here, that the classification represents a first attempt to systematize detachment interventions. Empirical data has to validate the classification.

I develop a classification based on three dimensions: the level at which the intervention occurs, the specific connectivity facet that the intervention targets, and the mechanism through which the intervention works.

3.2 Level – Individual or Organizational

A highly cited intervention taxonomy distinguishes four levels on that organizational interventions occur: legislative and policy level, employer and organization level, job and task level, individual and interface level (Murphy & Sauter, 2004). As the purpose of this paper is to evaluate organizational interventions, I focus on the employer and organization level. Employer interventions can be further distinguished into interventions targeting the whole organization and interventions targeting the individual employee (Martin, Karanika-Murray, Biron, & Sanderson, 2016). At the organizational level, interventions shape working conditions and psychosocial factors. At the individual level, interventions aid employees in responding to stressors (Martin et al., 2016). With interventions at the organizational level, management can prescribe or prohibit behaviors and introduce policies that are valid for the whole workforce or a large part of it. Examples are VW's approach to ban all email at a certain point (Smith, 2017) or changing organizational norms of a 24/7 availability by introducing charters or codes of behavior. At the individual level, organizations can encourage their employees to change their checking behavior, for example, through modifying smartphone settings so that they only get notified during a period they can determine themselves.

3.3 Target – Potential or Manifest Connectivity

Literature has distinguished organizational interventions into primary, secondary and tertiary interventions (Murphy & Sauter, 2004). Primary interventions aim at modifying job or organizational characteristics and thus eliminate or reduce the source of stress. Secondary interventions address the consequences instead of the source of the stress. Tertiary interventions aim at the rehabilitation of employees (Murphy & Sauter, 2004). Applied to connectivity, primary interventions modify the technical and social affordances to extensively connect to work, thus, target the potential connectivity. Secondary interventions target the consequences of potential connectivity, the practices employees engage in, thus, the manifest connectivity. Tertiary interventions consist of helping employees to deal with the negative effects of extensive connectivity such as difficulties to recover from work (Park et al., 2011) or burnout (Ferguson et al., 2016). These interventions are rather subject to general rehabilitation interventions instead of specific disconnectivity interventions. I therefore include only primary and secondary interventions in the classification of organizational disconnectivity interventions.

Interventions with the target of potential connectivity aim at modifying the capability to connect technically and socially to work. This includes reducing the technical possibility of getting reached during the holiday such as Daimler’s program “Mail on holiday” that deletes emails that are sent to employees who are on holiday (Von Bergen & Bressler, 2019). Reducing the potential social connectivity could be achieved by developing agreements specifying periods of unavailability of employees. Interventions targeting the manifest connectivity aim at modifying practices that have emerged upon the potential connectivity. The affordances of mobile devices can lead to practices such as frequent checking behavior (Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, & Raita, 2012). Social expectations can result in practices similar to performing work (Rosengren, 2019), where employees signal a high work commitment regardless of how much they are actually working. This might result in sending emails to managers late at night or in the email practice of “reply all” to show many people that they are working. These habits can be targeted by introducing email policies or even delete the “reply all” function (Pansu, 2018).

3.4 Mechanism – Technology or Social Detachment

Connectivity literature has understood the phenomenon as technical and social signals that are mutually influencing each other (Wajcman & Rose, 2011). Technical connectivity drives social connectivity since it enables the possibility to access work at any time so that expectations of an extended availability and short response times emerge (Dettmers et al., 2016). At the same time, employees might increase their technical connectivity due to the availability expectations. They signal an extended availability (e.g. an ‘online’ status in the chat program) to others, in as much as this work attitude signifies the image of a hard worker (Rosengren, 2019). Disconnecting from work is achieved by detaching from the technical connection as well as detaching socially from work.

Disconnecting technically refers to limiting or cutting the technical connection to work so that employees can neither access information nor be able to communicate with others. The above-mentioned intervention of banning emails that has been introduced by VW is an example of an intervention at the organizational level that leads to disconnecting from work technically. Another intervention might target the common trend of using the same device for work and private issues (Harris, Ives, & Junglas, 2012). A separation of the devices would loosen the “electronic leash” (Diaz, Chiaburu, Zimmerman, & Boswell, 2012, p. 500) that ties employees to their workplace. Disconnecting socially targets internal as well as external availability and responsiveness expectations. Interventions that work through social detachment are for example the concept of Predictable Time Off (Perlow & Porter, 2009), where employees are required to take a break, thus, they are expected to be unavailable. An overview of the classification with examples is illustrated in Table 1 in the appendix.

4 Discussion

The classification distinguishes dimensions and classes of disconnectivity interventions. As connectivity is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon (Mattern, Haines, & Schellhammer, 2019), interventions have different targets and are not equally suitable for every organization and situation. In the following paragraph, I discuss the likelihood of success for different interventions and factors that might influence the effectiveness of the intervention. Based on the definition of an organizational intervention, it is successful when well-being and health of the

employees are increased (Nielsen, 2013). A successful disconnectivity intervention should therefore result in an improved mental and physical detachment from work.

4.1 Success Factors

The classification helps to identify success factors for different interventions. Before introducing an intervention, companies should define what type of intervention they need to improve their employees' ability to detach. Interventions at the organizational level are only successful when they target general challenges that hinder the employees' ability to detach such as a high workload (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015) or availability norms (Mazmanian & Erickson, 2014). Interventions at the individual level are successful when employees differ in their ability to detach due to factors such as segmentation preferences (Park et al., 2011). Employees who prefer strict boundaries and want to prevent work-home spillover are more likely to detach from work (Park et al., 2011) than those who appreciate an integration of both spheres and might engage in an extended technology use for work (Derks et al., 2014). The same preferences can be found among organizations, with some organizations promoting clear boundaries and others a work-home integration (Kreiner, 2006). Interventions at an organizational level are useful to target organizational integration norms. If only some employees report difficulties in disconnecting, it would be helpful to introduce individual interventions for those with a high integration norm.

The decision between targeting potential or manifest connectivity requires an examination of the current level of connectivity in the organization. Potential connectivity should be at a requisite level, thus, at a sufficient level for achieving tasks (Kolb, Collins, & Lind, 2008) which is dependent on the situation (e.g. a higher level is necessary in global teams that are operating across different time zones). Once a requisite level is achieved, interventions can target the individual practices that emerge upon the potential connectivity. Targeting manifest connectivity without considering first potential connectivity, does not treat the cause of the problem but only the symptoms. For example, restricting the practice of replying to all in an email in a situation of many possibilities and expectations to connect would only lead to workarounds via other tools.

Mechanisms of interventions interact and can enhance each other (Pawson, 2013). Disconnectivity interventions are therefore likely to be successful when they work through both mechanisms, social and technical detachment. A comprehensive disconnection from work is only possible when employees physically leave work and stop thinking about work (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2015). Thus, employees fully disconnect from work when they are neither technically tied to their work nor mentally or emotionally attached through availability expectations emerging upon social connectivity.

4.2 Limitations and Future Work

The proposed classification of organizational disconnectivity interventions is the first approach to this topic and will benefit from further research. Due to the complexity of the phenomenon of extensive connectivity, it is difficult to propose a one-size-fits-all approach. Organizations vary in size, culture, and industry, all of which can influence the fit between employees and interventions as well as the likelihood of success. Also, organizations are restricted in their actions due to budget decisions and the capacity of human resources for the introduction of those actions. Future research should validate the classification. A validation requires to systematically analyze various interventions that are already in place. This will include to collect information about the interventions from the companies' management to see whether there are differences between the interventions and whether they can be categorized according to the classification. To evaluate the success of an intervention, interviews and questionnaires regarding the detachment of the employees (e.g. Recovery Experience Questionnaire (Sonnetag & Fritz, 2007)) should be conducted.

5 Conclusion

This paper proposes a classification for organizational interventions that aim at enabling employees to disconnect from work. The classification aims at providing researchers as well as practitioners with a common understanding of intervention types. It can guide further research and the development and evaluation of disconnectivity interventions. The classification contributes to literature on connectivity that is only beginning to examine organizational interventions as discussions regarding employees' rights and needs to disconnect are recently

emerging (Hesselberth, 2018). I hereby add to the limited literature that takes a positive perspective and examines coping strategies for extensive connectivity (Russo, Ollier-Malaterre, & Morandin, 2019). I combine the psychological theory of detachment with literature on connectivity and organizational interventions. I hereby propose a means for evaluating the success of an intervention and provide theoretical backing for the development of such interventions. In addition to the theoretical contributions, this paper helps managers, human resource departments and occupational health practitioners to specify which intervention is suitable for the level and distribution of connectivity among their employees. This prevents a premature decision and increases the likelihood of success. Acknowledging that companies are not completely free in their choices of introducing interventions, the classification creates awareness of the necessity to clearly define the level, target and mechanisms of the intervention.

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*Appendix***Table 1: Classification of Organizational Interventions**

Dimension	Class	Example
Level	Individual	Detachment Coaching
	Organizational	Banning Emails
Target	Potential Connectivity	“Mail on Holiday”
	Manifest Connectivity	Delete “reply all” function
Mechanism	Technical Detachment	Separating business and private phone
	Social Detachment	“Predicted Time Off”