The Tyranny of Technology, the New Employment Contract, and our Unconscious Consent

By

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Integrated Studies Final Project Essay (MAIS 700)

submitted to Dr. Angela Specht

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts – Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

December 2014
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ABSTRACT

The introduction and widespread adoption of mobile information and communications technologies has led to significant changes in how workplaces are organized and where and when work gets done. Organizational norms have changed, blurring the boundaries between work and personal time and increasing expectations of employees’ connectivity to work. Through an interdisciplinary literature review, this research examined the role of communications technology in the workplace, how the conditions of its use contribute to the phenomenon of techno-stress, and how organizations can address the problem. The literature links increased levels of psychological and physiological stress with the use of technology and expectations of employees’ continuous connectivity to complete work tasks. For a variety of reasons related to job fears and aspirations, employees have normalized the extension of the workday and are experiencing techno-stress. This research found that while the causes of techno-stress are understood, organizations still lack either a willingness or an understanding of how to address it at the organizational level, focusing instead on reactive strategies that encourage employees to cope better. Little is done to address the underlying causes of techno-stress and thus prevent it.
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Introduction

Few would deny that information and communication technologies (ICTs) have created new and beneficial ways of working. Across industries, there are examples of efficiencies and opportunities brought about by technology. We have access to information and the ability to share it more readily today than at any time in the past. We are largely freed in our work from the constraints of time and place. But, these benefits have come at a cost. Technology in the workplace has its “dark side” (Lee, Chang, Lin & Cheng, 2014, p. 373; Salanova, Llorens & Cifre, 2013, p. 422; Tarafdar, Tu, Ragu-Nathan & Ragu-Nathan, 2011, p. 113). As described by Ayyagari, Grover, and Purvis (2011), “The use of ICTs has produced a perpetual urgency and creates expectations that people need, or are obligated, to work faster” (p. 832, citing Hind 1998). This sense of constant urgency can result in “techno-stress” (Hung, Chang & Lin, 2011, p. 1; Shu, Tu & Wang, 2011, p. 923; Ragu-Nathan, Tarafdar, Ragu-Nathan & Tu, 2008, p. 417; Sanderlin, 2004, p. 26; Ayyagari et al, 2011, p. 831).

Psychologist Craig Brod introduced the term ‘techno-stress’ 30 years ago to describe our general fear of technology, defining it as “a modern disease of adaptation caused by an inability to cope with the new computer technologies in a healthy manner” (cited in Lee, Chang, Lin & Cheng, 2014, p. 373). The term is widely used today in reference to the stress we feel as a result of “communication and information overload” (Lee et al, 2013, p. 373; see also Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Tarafdar, Tu, Ragu-Nathan & Ragu-Nathan, 2011; Salanova, Llorens & Cifre, 2013).
from our frequent use of technology, particularly mobile technologies that enable continuous connectivity to our employers¹ (Ayyagari, 2007; Appelbaum, Marchionni & Fernandez, 2008; Bryson, Warner-Smith, Brown & Fray, 2007; Shu et al, 2011; Hung et al, 2011; Hair, Renaud & Ramsay, 2007; Mills, Helms Mills, Forshaw & Bratton, 2011; Kirsh, 2000; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Yun, Kettinger & Lee, 2012). Employees experience techno-stress within the workplace and as it extends to the home. An employee who compulsively checks email, feels pressure to complete work tasks from home, appears inattentive to others, is irritable, overworked, or in poor health may be experiencing techno-stress. Paradoxically, we may even feel anxiety associated with not having access to technology (Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Hung et al, 2007; Tarafdar et al, 2011; National Post, 2014). This form of techno-stress is considered an “over-identification” with technology (Sanderlin, 2004, p. 26). Italian researchers proposed the term “nomophobia” to describe the disquiet people feel when they are without mobile phone access (Hung et al, 2007, p. 3; National Post, 2014, para. 2).

Perhaps without realizing it, we have come to accept the new terms of employment that contribute to techno-stress (Ayyagari, Grover & Purvis, 2011; Ayyagari, 2007; Bunting, 2004a, 2004b; Bryson et al, 2007)—we accept these terms as the new normal (Bryson et al, 2007) when we succumb to the ubiquity and the tyranny of technology. This paper explores insights into the phenomenon of techno-stress from an interdisciplinary perspective, and seeks to explain why the problem persists and what is being done to address it. Specifically: What is the role of communications technology in the workplace; how and why might the conditions of its use contribute to techno-stress among employees? How can techno-stress be addressed by organizations?

¹ Hung, Chang, and Lin (2011) call this “ubiquitous techno-stress” (p. 1).
Methodology

This research followed an interdisciplinary research process. Using Athabasca University’s online library databases and Google Scholar, the fields of organization studies, social and organizational psychology, and information science were found to be the most relevant. The peer-reviewed business literature was also consulted, as were the grey literature and the popular press. Secondary quantitative data to show the extent of the problem and secondary qualitative data that provided insights into the phenomenon were collected from literature searches across the most-relevant disciplines and interdisciplines. These sources were reviewed using thematic analysis to identify common categories and then themes. An inductive immersion approach was used, whereby the literature was read and re-read before categorizing the content.

Background

Desktop computers were introduced widely within workplaces in the 1980s and 1990s, representing a significant shift in the way office work was accomplished (Ayyagari, 2007; Koo & Wati, 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). Organizations restructured to capture efficiencies associated with the use of networked ICTs to enable the flow of information and to “break down geographic and time barriers” (Ayyagari, 2007, p. 1; Appelbaum et al, 2008; Ayyagari, 2012; Koo & Wati, 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008). Flatter, more flexible and unstable organizational structures were implemented, as were ambiguous job descriptions and increased teamwork, which demanded more versatility and task diversity from employees (Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Kirsh, 2000). A marked shift away from linear, project-at-a-time work occurred, with an expectation that employees would juggle multiple tasks with fluid deadlines in a variable operating environment (Appelbaum et al, 2008; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Kirsh, 2000).
The environment changed again with the introduction of portable laptop computers, enabling people to connect remotely to a workplace through the use of a computer modem (Ayyagari, 2007; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008). Beginning in the late 1990s, BlackBerrys and other personal digital assistants (PDAs) were selectively introduced, conferring status on recipients, and in more recent years smartphones and other mobile devices were more widely distributed. These devices changed work practices dramatically, according to Appelbaum, Marchionni, and Fernandez (2008), with “knowledge workers facing increasing amounts of fragmented, simultaneous activity, plagued with frequent interruptions and numerous inputs from their electronic gadgets” (p. 1314; see also Ayyagari, 2007; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; and Ayyagari et al, 2011). Complicating matters, these devices were not only functional for work purposes, they had social applications too, enabling people to play games, browse the Internet, take and share pictures, and use social media, among other diversions. People were less likely to put away their devices at the end of the workday, keeping them close at hand, which had the effect of enabling employers’ continuous access to employees at a time when policies to set limits on the use of devices after hours were often lacking (Ayyagari et al, 2011; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Yun et al, 2012). Thus the handheld device came to symbolize the convergence of our work and private selves, a blurring of boundaries that obscured, even erased, a once-valued distinction between life domains (Ayyagari, 2007; Ayyagari et al, 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Tarafdar et al, 2011; Yun et al, 2012; Mills et al, 2011).

Findings from the literature

The literature links increased levels of psychological and physiological stress with the use of technology and expectations of employees’ continuous connectivity to complete work tasks
Specific negative effects include “attention deficit trait” (Appelbaum et al., 2008, p. 1321) and “continuous partial attention” (p. 1316) associated with multitasking and frequent interruptions (Sanderlin, 2004; Ayyagari et al., 2011; Koo & Wati, 2011; Salanova et al., 2013; Tarafdar et al., 2011). People feel more stress, make more mistakes, and are less able to think creatively (Appelbaum et al., 2008; Sanderlin, 2004; Tarafdar et al., 2011). Depression and fatigue have been observed, as well as changes in heart rate and blood pressure, pain, dizziness, sleep disturbance, weight loss or gain, and difficulty breathing (Sanderlin, 2004). Moreover, increased workload (Ayyagari, 2007; Hung et al., 2011; Ayyagari et al., 2011; Koo & Wati, 2011) and “extensification” and “overflowing” of work into other life spheres (Bryson et al., 2007, p. 1143; Hung et al., 2011; Shu et al., 2011; Mills et al., 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008; Ayyagari et al., 2011; Ayyagari, 2007; Tarafdar et al., 2011; Yun et al., 2012) leads to increased work-home conflict (Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Ayyagari et al., 2011; Yun et al., 2012). Other troubling effects include “cognitive overload” (Kirsh, 2000, p. 19; Salanova et al., 2013); compulsive behaviours (Lee et al., 2014; Salanova et al., 2013; Tarafdar et al., 2011); strained relationships (Bunting, 2004b; Kirsh, 2000; Lee et al., 2014; Koo & Wati, 2011); psychological stress, job dissatisfaction, and burnout (Sanderlin, 2004; Hung et al., 2011; Kirsh, 2000; Bunting, 2004b; Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008; Ayyagari, 2007; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Tarafdar et al., 2011); and even thoughts of suicide (Hung et al., 2011) and workplace violence (Sanderlin, 2004).

Organizations, too, experience the consequences of techno-stress: Low worker productivity, interpersonal conflict, inefficiency, higher absenteeism, higher staff turnover, less
organizational commitment, and reduced job satisfaction are seen when employees feel overwhelmed by workload and availability expectations (Ayyagari, 2007; Ayyagari et al, 2011; Hung et al, 2011; Hair et al, 2007; Sanderlin, 2004; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Tarafdar et al, 2011). Organizations incur higher costs associated with employees’ poor health and absenteeism, and with the recruitment and training of new workers as others burn out and leave (Ayyagari, 2007; Sanderlin, 2004; Ayyagari et al, 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008).

Appelbaum, Marchionni, and Fernandez (2008) found that one of the predominant behaviours associated with increased use of technology at work is multitasking (see also Koo & Wati, 2011; Ayyagari et al, 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Kirsh, 2000; Tarafdar et al, 2011). The authors cite empirical studies that show interruptions and distractions caused by technology interfere with performance, including one study that found that more than half of employees answered emails immediately or shortly after receiving them. Interruptions such as these, the authors note, amount to more than two hours of lost productivity per day per employee in the average American workplace. This finding is corroborated by Kirsh (2000) and by the work of Hair, Renaud, and Ramsay (2007), who describe a “frenetic” scene in the workplace (p. 2792). They cite research showing a majority of employees check email continuously throughout the day, answer many email messages within seconds of receiving them, and take an average of nearly two minutes to respond to each email and an additional minute to re-establish focus on the original task. Ayyagari, Grover, and Purvis (2011) discuss the inefficiencies and frustrations felt by employees whose work tasks are fragmented and frequently interrupted, resulting in

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3 The concept of “second-hand techno-stress” is used peripherally in the literature in reference to the disruptions experienced in meetings as a result of individuals’ use of technology (Camacho, Hassanein & Head, 2013).
“resumption lag” (p. 851) and an added layer of decision-making required to resolve competing demands (see also Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Tarafdar et al, 2011; Kirsh, 2000), and a loss of productivity as a result (Hung et al, 2011; Koo & Wati, 2011; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008).

As is widely reported in the literature and the mass media, checking email after hours and while on vacation has become commonplace (Ayyagari et al, 2011; Hair et al, 2007; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Tarafdar et al, 2011; Deutsche Welle, 2014; Daily Mail, 2014) as employees feel either the need or the duty to check in (Hung et al, 2007; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Tarafdar et al, 2011; Salanova et al, 2013). Lee, Chang, Lin, and Cheng (2013), who note that the worldwide saturation rate of mobile phones exceeds access to running water, cite a study by Oulasvirta, Rattenbury, Ma, and Raita (2012), which found that people habitually check their smartphones an average of thirty-four times a day. The sheer volume of information pushed at workers has been likened to “data smog” (Brilhart, 2004, cited in Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008). Nearly half of executives at large companies reported in one international study that they spent one-half to one day per week on emails that were unimportant to their work; a quarter of them felt that their email and voice mail had become unmanageable (Ragu-Nathan et al (2008) citing Mandel, 2005). Executives and managers in a 2001 Canadian study reported frustration with receiving more than fifty emails per day and were particularly annoyed by emails “that ‘created a false sense of urgency’ ” (Mills et al, 2011, p. 251). There is an abundance of evidence in the literature and the popular press that people are working longer hours and longer workweeks, that the traditional limits to the workday are all but gone (Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Salanova et al, 2013; Yun et al, 2012; Mills et al, 2011).

It is important to ask how we have come to reach this state, and what compels employees to consciously or unconsciously consent to these new conditions of work. Different fields of
study have explored the causes of techno-stress; organizational psychology, information science, and organization studies are the focus here, and the perspectives of each discipline are summarized in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline, sub- or interdiscipline</th>
<th>Way of looking at the problem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizational psychology</td>
<td>“Group behaviour can be reduced to individuals” (Repko, 2012, p. 123)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>People possess certain traits that predispose them (or not) to techno-stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Solutions should focus on building the capacity of the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization studies</td>
<td>Techno-stress is a product of organizational culture and norms, beliefs, and practices that are socially constructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individuals respond to stress differently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information science</td>
<td>The interface between the user and the technology, training or lack of training, and poor technological design or use contribute to techno-stress and its solutions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1: Perspectives of relevant disciplines on the phenomenon of techno-stress*

The literature theorizes about the reasons for our consent to new employment terms in which we accept increased hours of work and accessibility and multitasking. A fear of job loss and a fear of missing something important or ‘dropping the ball’ are cited; a change in organizational priorities that devalues loyalty and seniority in favour of results has also fed employees’ fears about job insecurity (Appelbaum et al, 2008; Sanderlin, 2004; Ayyagari et al, 2011; Ayyagari, 2012). Our aspirations for the good life (Morgan, 2006) and our desire to define and empower ourselves through our work and our association with something we perceive as more permanent and meaningful may explain our attachment to work-related technology (Bunting, 2004b; Morgan, 2006). We may perceive a heightened sense of control if continuous connectivity helps us to feel we are successfully juggling the demands of the job (Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Yun et al, 2012). The technology our organizations provide us with connotes status within organizational culture and may also be “teddy bears in disguise” according to
Morgan (2006), “valued possessions…symbolizing and reassuring us about who we actually are and where we stand in the wider world” (Morgan, 2006, p. 227). Ayyagari (2007) offers a more disturbing image of our job-related mobile devices, calling them “virtual leashes” (p. 7).

According to the literature, we have resigned ourselves to the new demands of employment and changing expectations (Appelbaum et al, 2008). We have normalized our longer hours of work and the ubiquity of technology and thus seldom question it (Bunting, 2004a, 2004b; Bryson et al, 2007; Ayyagari et al, 2011). As well, the literature frequently discusses our tendency not to question organizational culture in general, giving in to groupthink (Henriksen & Dayton, 2006; Morgan, 2006). “The acts of certain highly motivated individuals create unspoken norms…for the whole group or organization (for example, in terms of responding to e-mails quickly), commonly referred to as ‘tragedy of commons’ ” (Ayyagari et al, 2011, p. 841, citing Davis, 2002). Bunting (2004a; title of work) believes we have become “willing slaves” in a culture that prizes long hours of work and accessibility (see also Ayyagari et al, 2011; and Ayyagari, 2007).

The absence of policy to set reasonable limits on after-hours use of technology, and the speed with which mobile devices were adopted, combined to result in our present-day problem of policy lagging practice (Yun et al, 2012), or ‘the tail wagging the dog’. In this way, organizations established their own norms with arguably little foresight (Ayyagari et al, 2011).

A lack of research into the measures that organizations can use to alleviate or prevent techno-stress, both from an individual and organizational perspective, has been identified (Tarafdar et al, 2011; Shu et al, 2011; Hung et al, 2007; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Kirsh, 2000).

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4 In a study of one large workplace in the United States, Richardson and Thompson (2012) found that workers were more likely to consider laptop use than mobile device use as work time, even though they connected with a handheld device more frequently.
Mills, Helms Mills, Forshaw, and Bratton (2011) note that the stress interventions in use in organizations are typically “reactive and serve only to mask the effects of stress” (p. 261). Indeed, the literature is replete with examples of partial solutions that may address the symptoms of techno-stress but not its underlying causes. Health and wellness programs, time-management training, stress-reduction workshops, employee assistance programs, and even psychotherapy are suggested (Sanderlin, 2004).

Training is frequently cited as a way to prevent some of the techno-stress that employees feel while at work (Sanderlin, 2004; Ayyagari, 2007, 2012; Anthony et al, 2000; Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008). Ayyagari (2007, 2012) emphasizes a need for more efficient technologies, or improved “task-technology fit” (Ayyagari, 2012, p. 20; see also Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008). Similarly, Anthony, Clarke, and Anderson (2000) suggest improving the “user-interface design” (p. 41). Kirsh (2000) describes how fixing problems with workplace infrastructure and design can lessen the burden of overwork felt by employees who multitask in busy environments. Examples include how people and workspaces are organized, how information is stored and shared, and where common spaces and tools are located.

The research of Koo and Wati (2011) and Tarafdar and colleagues (2011) found that organizational cultures that encourage innovation and learning, and which provide support, collaboration, and participative decision-making, experience lower reported levels of techno-stress among employees. Workplace stress in general tends to be lower in non-hierarchical organizations that feature open communication and decision-making (Mills et al, 2011). Additionally, Koo and Wati (2011) found that organizations that support employees in the performance of complex tasks can lower stress levels. This is similar to findings reported by Sanderlin (2004), Ragu-Nathan and colleagues (2008), and Tarafdar, Tu, Ragu-Nathan, and
Ragu-Nathan (2011), who write that reducing the regular workload of people while they are learning new technologies can be effective at alleviating techno-stress, as can involving employees in the design and planning for new ICTs. Tarafdar and colleagues (2011) recommend improving technical literacy and providing effective technical support to workers. As with the other interventions above, however, this strategy fails to address the problem of the extension of the workday into personal time.

Some European workplaces have experimented with radical approaches that force a break in the continuous connectivity between organizations and their employees, which suggests that managers (and perhaps employees) cannot, in fact, voluntarily set and adhere to reasonable limits. BMW, Volkswagen, Puma, and Deutsche Telekom introduced email blackout periods that shut down the companies’ email servers after hours (Deutsche Welle, 2014; Telegraph, 2013; Daily Mail, 2014). Daimler employees were given the option of having their emails deleted while on vacation (Daily Mail, 2014). BMW adopted a practice by which employees and managers would reach agreement on after-hours availability, for which employees would be paid (Deutsche Welle, 2014). The German labour ministry implemented a policy to prohibit managers from calling or emailing employees after hours except in emergencies (Telegraph, 2013).

Ayyagari, Grover, and Purvis (2011) recommend interventions that are more policy based and focused on changing cultures and group norms that would otherwise permit continuous access to employees. Such measures include policies that accept a 24-hour response time to email rather than an immediate response, and that allow employees to block off a portion of their day during which they cannot be interrupted, either by technology or by colleagues.5 Crucially,  

5 Kirsh (2000) doubts the merits of this: “blocking out sacred time segments and sealing ourselves off from outside contact and even filtering email is not a serious solution in most organizations” (p. 22).
Ayyagari and colleagues (2011) note that the behaviour of managers must change: They should be expected to model appropriate work-home boundaries, which would signal employees to do likewise. Policies that set “explicit work norms” (p. 853) related to ICTs and after-hours availability are needed, they write, to change the system that values long hours and avoid the burnout that results when employees have no down time (Ayyagari et al, 2011; Richardson & Thompson, 2012; Yun et al, 2012). Yun, Kettinger, and Lee (2012) agree, noting that “the organizational atmosphere and a type of peer pressure encouraging the separation of personal life from work can help to decrease work-to-life conflict” associated with after-hours connectivity (p. 142). It is not enough for individuals to value this segmentation in their lives, they explain; the organization must facilitate it.

**Discussion and analysis**

The disciplines and interdisciplines consulted for this research project each provide a perspective on techno-stress. The integration of these perspectives provides a fuller understanding of the phenomenon, our own role in its escalation, and the various interventions that may be effective. Mills, Helms Mills, Forshaw, and Bratton (2011) explain that stress interventions in workplaces occur on three levels: individual, organizational, and the point of interface (or the terms and relationship) between them. The former are reactive in nature, whereas organizational-level interventions target the source of the problem rather than its symptoms alone (Mills et al, 2011). The authors note that organization-wide changes are less common than individual-level tactics, and interventions at the point of interface are rarer still. This is consistent with the findings of this research.

Examples of organizational policy and practice to challenge the culture of overwork are scarce in the literature. In the main, the common interventions fail to address technology’s
creeping incursions into life domains outside of work. While techno-stress receives attention in the literature and in practice, the current interventions emphasize helping workers to cope or take responsibility for reducing the techno-stress they may feel. “Employees should not take on more assignments than they can reasonably complete by organizational deadlines,” Sanderlin (2004, p. 27) writes, overlooking the fact that employees seldom control their own schedules or deadlines. Moreover, Yun, Kettinger, and Lee (2012) note that organizations are missing a fundamental point of technology: There are better, more productive, uses for it than simply its round-the-clock functionality. Rather than focusing on continuous connectivity, organizations could instead direct their attention toward developing applications within mobile ICTs that would truly enable people to “work smart,” such as applications that can accelerate decision-making (Yun et al, 2012, p. 145). Overall, much less attention is given to removing stressors in the first place through fundamental organizational change, including to management behaviours and expectations, to re-establish a distinction between work and home life while still allowing the flexibility that many employees and workplaces enjoy.

Conclusion

The widespread adoption of mobile ICTs has led to significant changes in how workplaces are organized and how work gets done. While creating flexibility in terms of where and when work is accomplished, technology has also placed increased, often tyrannous, demands on employees, with its enabling of round-the-clock availability. Organizational norms have changed, resulting in a blurring of boundaries between life domains, while policies to set reasonable limits on continuous connectivity are lacking. “Our workplaces are supposed to help us cope with these problems,” Kirsh (2000) writes. “But our tools and resources remain
inadequate” (p. 22). Instead, many organizations offload responsibility for managing stress to individual employees (Mills et al, 2011).

For a variety of reasons related to our job fears and aspirations we have given our tacit consent to these new employment terms and have normalized our longer hours of work and after-hours connectivity. The result has been a rise in techno-stress among individuals, felt and seen within the workplace and the home. The blurring of boundaries and the extension of the workday are creating significant harmful effects on workers—compromising their relationships, their productivity, and their overall well-being. It is in the interests of individuals and organizations that this be rectified.

Kirsh (2000) writes, “Cognitive overload is a brute fact of modern life. It is not going to disappear” (p. 48). This research has found that while we understand the problem of techno-stress and what has caused it, we still lack either an understanding or a willingness to address it at its source. The measures in use today do little to fulfill an employer’s obligation to provide reasonable working conditions that must surely include some limits to the workday. Doing so would require an admission that organizations, not individuals, benefit most when employees, baited by technology, ‘consent’ to continuous after-hours accessibility under the pretext of flexibility (see Ragu-Nathan et al, 2008; Salanova et al, 2013; Yun et al, 2012).
References


