

Managing Email Boundaries in a Boundaryless World

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Abstract

Despite the emergence and proliferation of sophisticated digital technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), work email remains a very popular tool for work communications. And we still do not know how to manage it effectively in our increasingly 'boundaryless world'. In this provocation, we challenge dominant prescriptive advice in academic and practitioner literature that largely promotes, and at times enforces, the (re)assertion of (temporal) email boundaries in ways that may contradict the very purpose of contemporary digital communications. We argue that this 'boundarylessness' of email activity is largely owed to a communication-centric flow which seems difficult to govern, and we identify three complications (flexibility paradox, time zone trap, invisible metronome) that render existing advice unsuitable (or impractical at best). We then synthesise existing literature and propose three solutions (developing a shared temporal structure, implementing task–time mapping, managing the hybridity–liminality interplay) which are better aligned with the boundarylessness of the contemporary workplace. In closing, we recommend four areas of future research (going beyond work email, generational differences in work email use, the role of AI agents in email communications, and the paradoxical impacts of digital work on the future of work).

Keywords: Boundaries, Contemporary work, Digital technologies, Email, Hybrid work, Liminal spaces.

1 Introduction

Our digital work environment is in constant flux. While Artificial Intelligence (AI) is undeniably in the limelight (e.g. Lock Lee & Dawson, 2023; Richter & Schwabe, 2025), captivating public imaginations and dominating scholarly discourse, more mainstream communication channels—such as email—warrant particular attention. With 4.48 billion email users worldwide at the end of 2024 (The Radicati Group, Inc., 2024), email communication remains foundational to everyday work and poses enduring challenges

around clarity, overload and effective use (e.g. Russell et al., 2024). Mobile technologies, remote work, and response expectations exacerbate this problem. Despite continuous attention in academic texts and popular media about the ‘right way’ to use email, individuals and organisations continue to miss the mark. Too often, workers remain captive to their inboxes, devoting 28% of the working day to email activity (Plummer, 2019)—equivalent to more than a full working day a week. Additionally, the constant checking of work emails—for instance, up to 36 times an hour (Holmes, 2014)—has been presented as an addiction (Knight, 2016), while others have argued that email overload is an increasingly prevalent problem as virtual and remote workforces rely more heavily on email communication (Castrillon, 2021). The sheer volume of email in today’s work environment increasingly leads workers to see no other way of emptying their inbox and getting a fresh start than to declare ‘email bankruptcy’. Email bankruptcy refers to the act of wiping out all existing email debt—i.e. unread emails (Holmes, 2014). And while the literature emphasises the overloaded email recipient as a negative outcome of email activity, fewer people discuss the anxious sender who awaits a response.

Overall, our premise in this provocation is that, despite unprecedented technological advances and however ‘simple’ the idea of managing our inboxes might sound, email management remains a complex challenge in the contemporary workplace. While much existing discourse frames this difficulty primarily as a boundary-management issue, we highlight that many of these challenges stem from a deeper structural feature of contemporary work: a workflow built around ongoing, unstructured, and unscheduled digital messages. As Leonardi’s (2025a, 2025b) analysis of digital exhaustion suggests, such message-centric workflows not only overwhelm individual boundary strategies but also systematically distort response-time expectations, rendering ‘inbox management’ less a matter of personal discipline and more a socio-technical design problem. Consequently, we problematise existing writings in this area—largely focused on the assertion of strong and rigid email boundaries—with the objective of (a) unpacking what it is that makes email management challenging; and (b) synthesising existing literature in a novel way that can hopefully lead to a renewed understanding that can influence researchers, practitioners, educators and policy makers. By doing so, we also draw attention to a broader puzzle: Why do organisations continue to rely on a communication-centric workflow that remains demonstrably inefficient and difficult to govern?

2 Existing Understandings Around Email Boundary Management

Certainly, email connectivity confers undeniable advantages. It enables the coordination of tasks across temporal and spatial boundaries, enhancing flexibility (Mazmanian et al., 2013), while fostering a sense of control over interactions (Lee et al., 2018). From an organisational perspective, email also serves as an important record-keeping tool, documenting activities, and capturing decisions in ways that promote retention and accountability (Capra et al., 2013). However, the same email connectivity that enables efficiency can also erode well-being and lead us to reimagine work–life boundaries (Waizenegger et al., 2024). Persistent expectations for rapid responsiveness can pull individuals into what Mazmanian et al. (2013, p. 1338) call a ‘spiral of escalating engagement’, where autonomy and boundaries are eroded. This is the ‘autonomy paradox’ (Mazmanian et al., 2013): the freedom to work anywhere, anytime becomes an obligation to work everywhere, all the time. This paradox endures despite widespread advice encouraging setting firmer boundaries (Segal, 2021), refraining from

emailing after hours (Russell et al., 2024), organising inboxes more effectively (Plummer, 2019), work redesign, and openly discussing work routines (Kelly & Moen, 2020). Such measures may address symptoms but leave the underlying tensions intact. In line with this, we do not assume that boundary failures are the core problem; rather, we recognise them as manifestations of an email-centric workflow that increasingly depends on continuous unscheduled exchanges and reactive messaging which, in turn, shape coordination, expectation and responsiveness.

Following the above literature, we recognise that email undermines *temporal and relational boundaries* between work and nonwork. While intended to provide flexibility and control (Lee et al., 2018; Mazmanian et al., 2013), constant connectivity often produces pressures for perpetual availability, sustaining the autonomy paradox (Mazmanian et al., 2013; Waizenegger et al., 2024). The same affordances that support record-keeping and accountability (Capra et al., 2013) simultaneously erode time for recovery, family, and personal autonomy. This situation is found to create a liminal space in which established management practices may not be relevant anymore and instead developing new ‘liminal innovations’ might be required (Orlikowski & Scott, 2021). Therefore, rather than seeing email as a destabiliser of work–life boundaries, we may have to reframe it as an ongoing practice that continually redraws the lines between work and life.

Still, rather than emphasising a practice-based understanding of email management, academics and practitioners have consistently cautioned individuals about the dangers of constant connectivity and continual communication associated with email use. The flexibility and permeability of boundaries enabled by digital technologies emphasise the importance of time off and active boundary management, separating ‘work’ and ‘life’. However, herein lies a problem: Because every individual is unique in their expectations, experiences, and needs, it becomes increasingly difficult to know, navigate, and respect others’ boundaries. In other words, what constitutes work and nonwork hours is highly dependent on individual perceptions and practices, rather than traditional, rigid, and/or formalised notions of the so-called ‘9 to 5’ (Chamakiotis et al., 2024; van Zoonen et al., 2021). Despite the individual flexibility, email is a social activity that does not occur in isolation but within a dynamic social context, often resulting in a range of practices that go beyond simplistic practices such as having ‘time off’ or simply ‘segmenting’ (cf. Derks et al., 2016) work and nonwork. These tensions do not arise solely from unclear or porous boundaries, but also from a coordination system that relies heavily on ad hoc communication, making it difficult to align individual rhythms with collective needs.

While individual flexibility is generally seen as a good thing, our position is that one’s freedom to be flexible may be another’s constraint. Email use is emblematic of this, and illustrative of what Popper (2012) described as the ‘paradox of tolerance’—i.e. unlimited tolerance (here flexibility) must lead to the disappearance of tolerance (flexibility). A worker who values the flexibility to send work emails at odd hours may unknowingly erode that very flexibility by imposing constraints on a colleague’s personal time, thus turning the freedom to be flexible into an obligation for others. Hence, organisations face the challenge of setting boundaries that respect individual preferences and promote a healthy work–life balance. Shackleton (2021) sees this as an inherent problem of contemporary employment, arguing that “all employment ‘rights’ carry costs, and employers inevitably try to pass them on to employees”.

Consequently, governments around the world have attempted to regulate work email use, with France pioneering this effort in 2016 with the El Khomri ‘Droit à la déconnexion’ Law (Wang, 2017), which has since inspired similar legislation across Europe, Australia, and other parts of the world. However, as we analyse further below, these collective, top-down initiatives are ineffective for two reasons. First, they are punitive in nature, imposing penalisation on those who send emails after hours. For example, in Australia, workers have the right to refuse to engage in any type of email activity outside their agreed working hours, with penalties for non-compliance reaching AU\$18,780 for individuals and AU\$93,900 for employers (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2024). Second, such types of legislative intervention defeat the very flexibility many organisations and individuals require as part of their jobs. In these settings, email conversations are often tightly imbricated with day-to-day workflows, meaning that restricting communication windows can unintentionally impede task progress, coordination cycles, and the temporal handovers on which distributed work depends. Hence, email remains a deeply contested communication tool in organisations, where the absence of shared norms or governance often gives rise to a modern-day Tragedy of the Commons (Hardin, 1968). That is, each individual’s pursuit of convenience, responsiveness, or personal workflow preferences can benefit them, but may lead to collective inefficiencies, overload, and breakdowns in coordination. In other words, individuals optimise for personal efficiency, sending messages at all hours, expecting quick replies, or tailoring email habits to their own rhythms, but this unchecked pursuit collectively depletes a shared resource: others’ attention and capacity to respond. Regulatory frameworks that impose blanket rules—such as mandated disconnection times—fail to address the underlying coordination dilemma. Instead of resolving the issue, they risk externalising responsibility, stifling adaptability, and ignoring the situated nature of email use across roles, teams, and time zones.

In response to the need for shared norms that ensure both effective and flexible use of work email, various suggestions and ‘best practices’ have emerged over the years, aiming to guide workers and leaders. However, the problem we identify in our provocation is that these do not work in today’s working environment. Thus, in the next section, we unpack three complications that render popular email management practices unsuitable.

3 Three Complications of Email Boundary Management

3.1 Individual Flexibility and the ‘Flexibility Paradox’

While work has often been seen as a 9–5 activity, recent research shows that workers’ everyday lives are much more fluid and that knowledge workers often find themselves in either a fused work and life environment or between the two (i.e. suspended between work and life) (Chamakiotis et al., 2024). Such findings stand in sharp contrast with the idea of maintaining ‘work’ and ‘life’ as potentially separate spheres. This means that the spatial and temporal flexibility characterising today’s workplaces may be much more complex to manage than earlier. It also echoes what we saw extensively, and in intensified fashion, during the lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic a few years ago; individuals had to juggle domestic, family, work, and other commitments simultaneously (e.g. Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Chamakiotis et al., 2021). This requires flexibility to achieve individual and collective objectives. At the core of this complication, therefore, is what we may phrase as a **‘flexibility paradox’**. Although the term has been used to describe how flexible work may lead to more work for the flexible worker themselves (cf. Chung, 2022), here we use the term to describe how one’s flexibility may hinder that of their coworkers. Specifically, how does one capitalise

on email's temporal flexibility without inhibiting the flexibility of their coworkers? This tension emerges not only from divergent boundary preferences but from a workflow in which temporal coordination is largely achieved through ad hoc, asynchronous messaging.

3.2 Geo-Temporally Dispersed Workplaces and the 'Time Zone Trap'

Work has become more global than it has ever been in organisations' quest to access locally unavailable talent, reach out to global markets, and be more effective by utilising time differences to their advantage and working 'around the clock'. In response to this trend, a significant body of literature has emerged over the last 2–3 decades, focusing on Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) of workers who work together across geographical, temporal, and organisational boundaries. Researchers in this field argue that GVT members face additional challenges compared to physically collocated members, such as the expectation to maintain optimal connectivity (van Zoonen et al., 2025). Here, again, collective priorities may not fully align with individual needs: The organisation wants to work around the clock, but this may violate individual members' desire to disconnect. Imagine a scenario in which a GVT involves members from the Americas, Europe, and Australasia, where, inevitably, not everyone will work simultaneously. In this geo-temporally dispersed environment, a **'time zone trap'** surfaces; that is, in the GVT environment, it is practically impossible for the entire (globally dispersed) virtual team to engage in email communications in real time. In this context, team member real-time unavailability is an embedded structural characteristic of the geo-temporally dispersed context; being 'trapped' in their local time zones with their virtual coworkers being unavailable, workers must send out their email communications during their own working hours even if that means that they will be received after hours. This illustrates how the email-centric workflow struggles to accommodate asynchronous collaboration at scale, turning time-zone differences into structural constraints rather than mere boundary challenges.

3.3 Technological Development, Social Norms and the 'Invisible Metronome'

Digital technologies are understood as a continuum from asynchronous to synchronous technologies (i.e. media synchronicity theory; Dennis et al., 2008). Completely asynchronous technologies (e.g. cloud computing services, storage servers/drives) are placed on the far left, completely synchronous technologies that require real-time or instantaneous interaction (e.g. video-conferencing systems such as Zoom) on the far right, and other technologies in between. While work email has traditionally been viewed as an asynchronous tool, the rise and ubiquity of smartphones and shifting social norms about usage have rendered email a malleable tool used for a variety of purposes and more instantaneous communication. As an **'invisible metronome'**, email dictates the rhythm of contemporary work, orchestrating when and how communication unfolds, and work tasks are attended to. Clearly, as email becomes embedded in organisational and social processes, its use evolves beyond its intended functions. Yet, most recommendations for effective email use draw on relatively static interpretations rooted in utilitarian (task-performance), normative (organisational culture), or idiosyncratic (psychological resources) perspectives. Email was originally accessed via our desktop personal computers (PCs). However, nowadays, email is everywhere as notifications come in on laptops, smartphones, smartwatches, PCs, and even your bathroom mirror and fridge have built-in displays to show you the latest notifications, all creating an illusion of urgency. On the one hand, the technical capabilities of the devices we use in our everyday lives have allowed email to, in a way, (subtly) intrude into our lives. On the other hand, the notion that the same

technologies are perceived and used in different ways by different individuals in the same or different contexts requires recognition that existing email management approaches fall short. What if all emails feel important and urgent? Here again, the issue extends beyond boundary erosion: Email acts as the *de facto* workflow infrastructure, setting the pace, expectations, and rhythms of work in ways that are difficult for individuals to govern through boundary-setting alone.

Having analysed the three complications above, we now turn to Section 4, in which we reflect on our analysis, debate whether the problem of boundary management is the problem in question, or a manifestation of a workflow issue, and outline three proposed practices of email boundary management based on a creative synthesis of existing Information Systems (IS) literature.

4 Coordinating conversations, redesigning workflows, or something else?

In addressing the three complications, it is helpful to draw on Ostrom's (1990) insights on governing the commons. Her work suggests that effective and sustainable practices require more than top-down policies or isolated individual strategies and should rely on feedback loops between institutional rules and everyday practice. In her view, viable norms around email must emerge through iterative, participatory processes that involve both formal guidance and localised adaptation. When policies or regulatory protocols are imposed in a top-down manner, without accounting for how individuals actually engage with email in context, they risk failing in translation. Conversely, leaving email practices entirely to individual discretion invites the very coordination failures we seek to avoid. More broadly, our analysis above raises an important question: To what extent can email-related problems be addressed by better coordination of conversations, and when do they instead require more fundamental workflow redesign?

On the one hand, as we have argued, many difficulties with email are symptoms of a communication-centric workflow that relies on ongoing, unstructured, and unscheduled messages. From this perspective, structural interventions, such as shifting tasks into more process-oriented tools, redesigning handover routines, or reconfiguring temporal dependencies, are clearly desirable. On the other hand, organisations often operate under constraints imposed by institutional expectations and deeply ingrained habits, making a wholesale abandonment of email neither immediately realistic nor necessarily optimal in all cases. Moreover, in many contemporary workplaces, it is difficult to neatly disentangle 'the conversation' from 'the workflow' (Leonardi, 2025a, 2025b), as email threads often serve both as coordination mechanisms and as task trajectories. This imbrication aligns well with the idea of liminal spaces wherein older routines and practices are inapplicable and instead individuals are expected to develop liminal innovations (Orlikowski & Scott, 2021). In the liminal space, it is unclear whether improving communicative practices or restructuring underlying processes could work, since both practices are often mutually reinforcing.

In this provocation, our focus is therefore deliberately pragmatic and situated. We treat email as a persistent infrastructure of contemporary work and ask how its use can be governed to make it less damaging and more sustainable. Drawing on Ostrom's (1990) insights, we see value in intermediate solutions that neither accept the current workflow as unchangeable, nor presume that it can be easily replaced. Coordinating the conversation by developing shared

temporal structures, mapping tasks to time, and cultivating an ‘async-first’ etiquette can mitigate coordination failures and reduce the burden of constant connectivity, while also opening up space for more reflective discussions about when email is—and is not—the appropriate medium.

Our proposed solutions in Table 1 should therefore be read as operating at this meso-level: They aim to reshape local rules, expectations, and practices around email in ways that both accommodate existing structural constraints and gently push toward more process-centric forms of organising. In some contexts, the practices we propose may be sufficient to render email use more sustainable; in others, they may reveal the limits of coordination-focused fixes and point to the need for more radical workflow redesign. We outline our more balanced, context-sensitive solutions in Sections 3.1-3.3.

Complication	Explanation	Proposed Practice
Flexibility paradox: Balancing individual temporal flexibility with collective coordination	Mismatch between objective and subjective perceptions of time in email response expectations	Developing a shared temporal structure (Im et al., 2005; Orlikowski & Yates, 2002) that respects both objective and subjective time to support temporal autonomy
Time zone trap: Coordinating communication across geo-temporal boundaries	Inability to synchronise real-time email communication in distributed teams	Implementing task–time mapping (Fayard, 2024; Shen et al., 2015) to align task deadlines with flexible interaction phases and anticipate time needs
Invisible metronome: Misalignment between asynchronous tools and synchronous expectations	Mismatch between objective and subjective perceptions of time in email response expectations	Managing the hybridity–liminality interplay (Chamakiotis et al., 2024) to leverage using email affordances (rehearsability, reprocessability) (Dennis et al., 2008) and promote ‘async-first’ norm

Table 1. *Email Complications and Proposed Practices*

4.1 Developing a Shared Temporal Structure

The flexibility paradox refers to the challenge of how individuals can exercise their own temporal flexibility without constraining the flexibility of their coworkers. This tension often stems from a mismatch between the temporal availability of email senders and receivers, and their differing interpretations of appropriate response rhythms. At the heart of this paradox is a broader issue: the need to recognise and accommodate both objective and subjective views of time (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002).

From an objective perspective, time is treated as uniform, measurable, and independent, typically expressed in terms of seconds, minutes, working hours, and calendar schedules. It moves forward like a ticking clock. In contrast, the subjective view sees time as socially constructed, shaped by how people perceive, experience, and manage it. It may feel fast or slow, and its meaning varies across organisational, social, and cultural contexts (e.g. institutional routines, meeting frequency, or cultural expectations around availability).

Temporal flexibility, therefore, is dynamic and can vary by conventions and norms (Ballard & Seibold, 2004). Expanding on our earlier critique that purely top-down approaches—such as universal ‘right to disconnect’ policies (e.g. Wang, 2017)—may be unsuitable in our

boundaryless world, they are grounded primarily in an objective view of time, neglecting the fluid character of today's connectivity.

In contemporary workplaces, the continuity and sequencing of time have become increasingly difficult to standardise, while the intensity and rhythm of communication vary widely across situated contexts. Temporal flexibility is neither independent of human action (as it is shaped through interaction) nor fully determined by it (as it also shapes those very actions) (Orlikowski & Yates, 2002). We argue that it is essential to align individual convenience with collective respect, developing a '**shared temporal structure**' that incorporates both objective and subjective temporalities. Through this shared understanding, a form of temporal autonomy (Mazmanian et al., 2013) can emerge among coworkers, enabling both personal flexibility and coordinated communication (Im et al., 2005).

4.2 Implementing Task–Time Mapping

In relation to temporal flexibility, it becomes increasingly important to implement '**task–time mapping**' (Shen et al., 2015) among email communicators. This is especially relevant for those working across geographical and organisational boundaries, where the so-called 'time zone trap' surfaces. In GVTs, real-time communication among all members is often unrealistic. In such contexts, time unavailability is a structural feature of geo-temporal dispersion. Team members are often 'trapped' within their local time zones and must send email communications during their own working hours, even when these messages are received outside of others' regular working hours. Consequently, GVT members face additional challenges compared to those of physically collocated members, especially when they expect to maintain optimal levels of connectivity (van Zoonen et al., 2025).

In such contexts, task–time mapping becomes critical for managing communication flows and aligning diverse temporalities. Building on Fayard's (2024) concept of time mapping, this involves the deliberate coordination of 'clock time' (objective, linear, and measurable) with 'event time' (emergent, flexible, and situational). By integrating these different 'layers of time' (Fayard, 2024), organisations can support individual flexibility, such as varying work hours, while still ensuring the coordination needed for effective team collaboration.

In practice, task–time mapping can take several forms. These include designing project timelines that interweave fixed deadlines with open phases for iteration and feedback or anticipating when participants may need additional time for creativity, reflection, or discussion, and incorporating this flexibility into the schedule from the outset. Multiple project management tools, such as Slack and Trello, support workflows that shift between synchronous and asynchronous modes, thereby reducing unnecessary email traffic. Similarly, shared collaboration platforms like GitHub and Google Docs allow team members to work on the same tasks either in real time or asynchronously, streamlining coordination and minimising repeated message exchanges. While email remains an important channel for work coordination, it may not be the best one for all types of tasks (Dennis et al., 2008). For example, simply accepting or declining a calendar invite may be more efficient than requiring email responses and can have additional benefits in terms of lightening everyone's inboxes and encouraging visibility among attendees.

Overall, task–time mapping serves as a temporal framework that helps organise when and how tasks are tackled, ensuring that flexibility in working hours does not disrupt the alignment of the team's broader objectives and deadlines. In this sense, the most effective

solution may not always be to coordinate conversations quickly, but to reduce unnecessary emails that clutter colleagues' inboxes. This shift, from communication-centric workflows to process-centric workflows, allows asynchronous collaboration to flourish while maintaining the necessary structure for team success.

4.3 Managing the Hybridity–Liminality Interplay

Email as an invisible metronome can heighten tensions: Senders may anticipate immediate responses, even after hours, while receivers may interpret the same messages as non-urgent, resulting in unnecessary tension and misunderstandings (Fiset et al., 2024). To address this, we propose the cultivation of managing the '**hybridity–liminality interplay**' (Chamakiotis et al., 2024) in email communication. This requires agency and adjustment to the collaborative communicative tempo that email communication offers. For example, building on Scott and Orlikowski's work (2021), Chamakiotis et al. (2024) found that workers often create situations of 'in-betweenness' or 'liminality' whereby they create distance between one task and another, such that workers may be drafting emails from home (thus being hybrid) while at the same time 'hiding' from their coworkers (i.e. not revealing that they are online working, but scheduling their emails to be sent out later). Thus, this liminality can serve as a mechanism to protect the flexibility offered in our boundaryless world. Team members should not only map tasks to timelines but also explicitly negotiate shared expectations around email response rhythms, thereby fostering a form of email etiquette (Sillars & Zorn, 2021). This includes clarifying acceptable response windows, identifying time-sensitive messages, and accommodating contextual constraints such as workload or time zone differences.

Being liminal may allow for leveraging the affordances of email, particularly rehearsability (i.e. the ability to thoughtfully compose messages) and reprocessability (i.e. the ability to revisit and reflect on prior communications) (Dennis et al., 2008). These affordances can reduce feelings of urgency and anxiety associated with immediacy. For example, through rehearsability, senders can frame messages with cues like 'No rush; reply when convenient', which help establish non-urgent norms. Through reprocessability, receivers can engage with emails on their own time without feeling as though they are 'sitting on a bomb'. Promoting an 'async-first' culture, where asynchronous communication is the default rather than the exception, can reconcile individual flexibility with collective coordination. This temporal practice of aligning communicative rhythms helps reduce the friction that arises when rigid clock time expectations clash with the inherently slower and more variable pace of asynchronous interaction.

5 Discussion

In line with the view that the 'digital' is not something separate, but an embedded characteristic of (organisational) life (e.g. Orlikowski & Scott, 2016), our provocation has uncovered three complications which explain why existing advice on email boundary management and the underlying issue of workflows based on constant communication are insufficient in today's contemporary work environment characterised by hybridity, fusing traditionally separate spaces (home and work) together (e.g. Zamani et al., 2025), but also liminality (Orlikowski & Scott, 2021), creating liminal spaces in which older management practices are no longer relevant, reinforcing Nandhakumar's (2010) 'contrarian thinking', which urges us to question dominant assumptions in IS research. In this regard, much like

wallpaper, email is everywhere in organisational life, but because it is so commonplace, its complications often go unrecognised.

Traditional dichotomies, like objective versus subjective time, fall short when it comes to capturing the complex temporal dynamics that shape digital collaboration. For instance, Fayard's (2024) study of distributed teams introduces the idea of 'stretching time', where team members are encouraged to pause and reflect after formal online discussion. Similarly, Diriker et al. (2023) emphasise the role of 'punctuation' in communication, those deliberate breaks that invite deeper thinking and often spark innovation. Moreover, Baygi et al. (2021) put forward the concept of 'kairotic' time, which focuses on the importance of seizing the opportune moment to sustain momentum. Unlike linear clock time or personal perceptions of time, kairotic time highlights the strategic use of timing in collective action. These perspectives suggest that rigid adherence to clock-based norms no longer aligns with the realities of contemporary organisational life. Instead, what is needed is a more layered and flexible view of temporality, one that can account for the tensions of asynchronous digital communication, such as those found in email, and one which acknowledges that the management of email boundaries may be only a manifestation of a deeper issue—that of email-centric workflows that are emerging in today's liminal space. Embracing this flexibility may help ease the strain of the temporal flexibility paradox, where workers seek greater autonomy over their time (Mazmanian et al., 2013) while also facing growing expectations to always be available.

Temporal dimensions—such as separation, scheduling, precision, pace, orientation toward the present or future, linearity, scarcity, urgency, delay, and flexibility (Ballard & Seibold, 2004)—are central to how email is used and experienced. Yet temporality is a social construct that does not exist in a vacuum. It is shaped through the interplay of task demands, organisational structures, cultural norms, and individual routines. For example, Chamakiotis et al. (2020) find that GVTs with short project timelines benefit from tight coordination and frequent check-ins to manage uncertainty. Conversely, teams working on longer-term projects thrive with more flexible collaborations, leveraging asynchronous tools to bridge time zones. Lee et al. (2021) show that, in 'coopetitive' interorganisational contexts, email is often preferred, not just for facilitating information sharing, but also for managing discretion and reducing the risk of information leakage.

6 Future Research Ideas

Our provocation has revealed four fertile areas of future research relative to work email use which we have not explored in depth and which, we think, deserve further exploration.

6.1 Going Beyond Work Email

Our first recommended direction is about extending our findings to other popular communication media at work. While evidence suggests that work email continues to be the dominant communication medium for workers (The Radicati Group, Inc., 2024), other platforms are gaining popularity and it would thus be interesting to explore whether our findings here apply to different communication media. Ongoing research suggests that identical messages are perceived differently on different platforms; for example, the same message may come across as more uncivil in email compared to Instant Messaging (IM) platforms like MS Teams (Fullman, 2025). Thus, an evident research direction is to study whether our propositions here apply to different media, including modern IM tools like Slack.

6.2 Generational Differences in Work Email Use

Our second recommendation focuses on the generational factors influencing work email boundaries. While there is a dominant view in the literature that younger individuals are more open to using new technologies at work (e.g. Fazi et al., 2025), Treem et al. (2015) reveal that older users are more inclined to adopt enterprise social media compared to younger workers due to their individual technological frames. Future research could study what communication media are preferred by different generational groups and how can these technologies serve as liberating resources (supporting individual needs and collective/organisational goals), rather than becoming digital fetters that erode autonomy?

6.3 The Role of AI Agents in Email Communications

We opened our paper by acknowledging that AI is currently in the limelight—and, as a result, researchers across multiple (historically) different disciplines are coming together to conduct research and write papers on various different aspects of AI use at work (Dwivedi et al., 2021). Our third recommendation for future research is therefore about the link between AI and work email, in particular, exploring how AI agents—whose presence in teams is already a reality (Richter & Schwabe, 2025)—could play out in work email communications. For instance, Microsoft (2025) promises that AI agents could help to address existing problems such as email overload and we would encourage researchers to conduct research in this area.

6.4 From Work Emails to Digital Exhaust and Digital Footprints

Our final future research idea is one that goes beyond the topic of email boundary management and considers the wider implications of the evolving context of digital and virtual work. Scholars have argued that the widespread uptake of virtual work in recent years has led to an unprecedented generation of (recorded) digital activity. Leonardi (2021) presents this as ‘digital exhaust’ that creates individual ‘digital footprints’ which, if studied over time, can lead to (mis)representations of how one works. Wang et al. (2020) argue that this could lead to ‘digital Taylorism’ as a new form of work, reproducing the principles of Taylorism—such as “surveillance and the detailed measurement of the execution of tasks and compensation of workers based on their output” (p. 1382)—in the digital environment. Our view is that this could be the opposite of the flexibility we have focused on here. Researchers could therefore explore these paradoxical tensions of the possible impacts of digital work on the future of work.

7 Conclusion

Clearly, as email continues to dominate workplace communication, and given the underlying issues we have identified, traditional boundary-setting strategies are no longer appropriate. Instead, we propose a practice-based understanding of email boundary management in today’s contemporary—and ‘liminal’ (Orlikowski & Scott, 2021)—work environment which requires individual creativity and improvisation as an everyday practice. Our provocation advocates for a more pragmatic approach, one that recognises process and workflow issues, and integrates task–time mapping and shared temporal structures to strike a balance between individual flexibility and collective team needs. By setting clear expectations around response times, leveraging contemporary project management tools more effectively (e.g. Slack), and aligning communication practices with global work rhythms, organisations can create a work environment where email is a tool for productivity, not stress, and flexibility enhances, rather than hinders, collaboration. While our own propositions in this provocation do not provide a

one-size-fits-all solution, we are hopeful that our creative synthesis of existing literature—developed to address the issues identified above—can provide a fresh understanding that not only guides future research and pedagogy, but also encourages practitioners on the ground to revisit their email management practices.

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