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A THEORY OF STRATEGIC BOUNDARY CONTROL FOR REMOTE WORK

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The popularity of remote work underscores its importance as a key strategic priority for organizations. This calls for new theory on how organizations effectively control work–nonwork boundaries while balancing employees' demands for flexibility. We draw upon boundary control theory and the strategic human resource management (SHRM) perspective to posit that organizations will seek to influence *where* work occurs, *when* work occurs, and remote employees' *attention*, based on strategic choices associated with (a) the organization's view of its human capital and (b) the degree of work interdependence. We theorize how each strategic choice influences the configuration of HRM systems for remote work, encompassing remote work policies (allowing organizations varying degrees of control over where and when work occurs) and technology processes (allowing organizations varying degrees of control over remote employees' attention). Further, we theorize how different combinations of remote work policies and technology processes enhance organizational performance, including how organizations resolve emergent tensions when considering the two strategic choices together. Taken together, we offer a framework for understanding how contemporary organizations strategically design HRM systems to establish where, when, and how work occurs.

Remote work is an increasingly prevalent feature of contemporary employment: 75% of employed adults in jobs that can be performed outside of the office are working remotely at least part of the time (Pew Research Center, 2025) and more than half of Fortune 500 companies offer remote or hybrid work arrangements (Buildremote, 2025). For employees, access to remote work—once considered a fringe benefit—is now an essential aspect and expectation of the contemporary work experience (Kossek, Perrigino & Lautsch, 2023). Yet, from the organization's perspective, only 26% of CEOs have a proactive remote work strategy, and one third adopt a "go with the flow" approach (Accenture, 2022; Makarius, Larson & Vroman, 2021). This discrepancy underscores remote work as a crucial but often overlooked strategic consideration (Hitt, Arregle & Holmes, 2021).

While work–life theory is a relevant starting point to address how organizations approach remote work, seminal works adopt the perspective of individual employees rather than that of the organization. Boundary control theory is a notable exception, emphasizing organizations' desires to keep employees on-site. Boundary control addresses how organizations "cajole, encourage, coerce or otherwise influence the amount of time employees physically spend in the workplace" (Perlow, 1998: 329). While this offers insights about how organizations can control *where* and *when* work occurs—and how to control employees' *attention* to keep focus on work (Stanko & Beckman, 2015)—it has critical shortcomings when applied to the remote work context.

First, boundary control prioritizes on-site presence to maximize organizations' control over employees'

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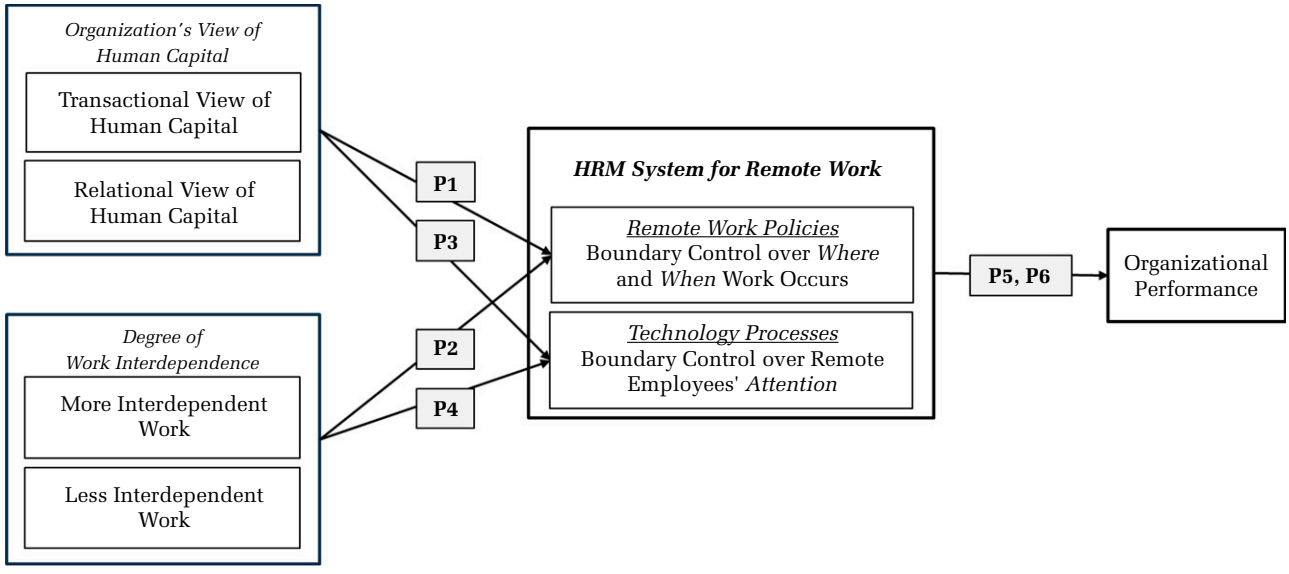
behaviors, failing to consider the viability of remote work. This view focuses on standalone organizational policies and managerial influence, neglecting how remote work aligns with broader strategic goals. Second, boundary control treats "control" as a fixed pie, sought by organizations and employees where gains by one come at the expense of the other. This overlooks the fact that organizations possess multiple controls that they can leverage in distinct ways, disregarding how boundary control in remote work contexts can yield mutually beneficial arrangements for organizations and employees. Finally, while technology is crucial for remote work, boundary control views it primarily as a distraction that diverts employees' attention away from work, ignoring its dual role in remote work contexts as both an enabler of work and a control mechanism to keep employees' attention focused on work.

To address these limitations and how organizations can control work–nonwork boundaries while balancing employees' demands for flexibility, we integrate insights from strategic human resource management (SHRM) with boundary control research to develop a theoretical model of strategic boundary control for remote work (Figure 1). Building on the idea that HRM systems are critical for strategy execution (Schuler, 1992), we propose that organizations will configure HRM systems for remote work by combining remote work policies (which influence *where* and *when* work occurs) and technology processes (which influence remote employees' *attention*). We theorize that two strategic choices guide these configurations: (1) the organization's view of its human capital, and (2) the degree of work interdependence. We also explain how these configurations enhance organizational performance, including how organizations navigate emergent tensions when considering the two strategic choices together.

Our work makes several contributions. First, we highlight how remote work necessitates a strategic approach to boundary control, where organizations' strategic choices inform how they configure HRM systems to enhance organizational performance rather than to merely control employee behaviors. Second, our theory reshapes understanding of "control" in the remote work context by capturing the complexity of how organizations leverage multiple controls through remote work policies and technology processes to engage in distinct forms of boundary control. This addresses a similar rigidity in the SHRM literature, which tends to treat different types of control as mutually exclusive. Third, we shift the focus on technology from a distractor of employees' attention to a facilitator of boundary control in remote work contexts, highlighting how technology affords organizations various ways to influence remote employees' attention.

FIGURE 1
A Model of Strategic Boundary Control for Remote Work



REMOTE WORK FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ORGANIZATION

With the widespread prevalence of remote work raising doubts about the importance of a centralized office (Smite, Moe, Hildrum, Gonzalez-Huerta & Mendez, 2023), organizations face a fundamental challenge in balancing boundary control efforts with employees' expectations for flexibility. Indeed, remote work's strategic significance calls for new theory on how organizations can effectively configure HRM systems to control work–nonwork boundaries while balancing demands for flexibility. We begin by outlining foundations that inform our theory of strategic boundary control for remote work.

Boundary Control Theory

Perlow (1998) introduced boundary control to describe how organizations influence employees' division of time between work and nonwork activities. Organizations engage in boundary control by influencing where and when employees conduct their work, such as leveraging structural and normative practices to ensure employees remain on-site for longer hours. Stanko and Beckman (2015: 730) expanded this view, arguing that boundary control required more nuance and "must focus on shaping individual attention throughout the course of a given workday." Thus, boundary control emphasizes how organizations influence employees' behaviors to ensure their attention is directed toward work. This reflects an underlying, fundamental premise of boundary control theory that employees should prioritize organizational needs (Perlow, 1998).

Boundary control theory focuses on *organizations'* influence over employees' work–nonwork boundaries and is distinct from theory addressing how employees control their own work–nonwork boundaries (boundary theory). Indeed, Stanko and Beckman (2015: 713) clarify:

> Boundary control differs from boundary theory in that it takes as its perspective how the organization manages the boundary, rather than … individuals within the organization (e.g., Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2009; Nippert-Eng, 1996).

Consistent with classic organization theory, boundary control assumes that "control" is a fixed pie sought by both organizations and employees, where gains for one come at the expense of the other (Anthony, 1952; Blau & Scott, 1962; Cyert & March, 1963; March & Simon, 1958). Organizations seek to maximize control over employees by dictating where (on-site) and when (long, fixed hours) work occurs (Perlow, 1998) and by ensuring employees' attention remains focused on work by removing technology-related distractions while on-site (Stanko & Beckman, 2015). Thus, *where* work occurs, *when* work occurs, and managing employees' *attention* are three critical aspects of boundary control. Extending this to the remote work context, we propose that organizations will influence where and when work occurs (through remote work policies) and influence remote employees' attention (through technology processes). Next, we introduce SHRM to highlight the role of policies and processes in boundary control for remote work.

SHRM

SHRM is "the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals" (Wright & McMahan, 1992: 298). SHRM "might be viewed at three different levels" in terms of architecture, policies, and processes (Lepak, Marrone & Takeuchi, 2004: 643). "Architecture" represents the guiding principles of the HRM system that inform policy and process decisions; "policies" are formal guidelines to direct employees' behaviors; and "processes" enable day-to-day enactment of policies. An HRM system is a combination of policies and processes, with a traditional assumption that policies and processes should align with strategic choices nested in the architecture (Boon, Den Hartog & Lepak, 2019).

SHRM views "control" through different types of control systems: behavior control systems emphasize controlling employees' actions via appraisal reliant on close supervision (or rules and procedures), while output control systems emphasize allowing employees discretion in the means to achieve desired outputs (Snell, 1992). We build on this distinction and integrate HRM architecture to propose that organizations possess different behavior and output controls through remote work policies and technology processes. Departing from boundary control theory's unidimensional view of control that emphasizes maximizing on-site work, we reconceptualize how organizations strategically engage in boundary control for remote work by leveraging behavior controls, output controls, or both. In doing so, we address calls to critically examine "control" in SHRM by offering nuanced insights around the complementarity of behavior and output controls, challenging notions that the two should be mutually exclusive and prescriptive suggestions that there is one "best" approach (Wright, Nyberg & Ployhart,

2018). Further, we respond to recent critiques about SHRM's "failure, or conceptual inability, to include novel, contemporary practices" by incorporating the remote work context (Collings, McMackin, Nyberg & Wright, 2021: 1379).

Organizational Performance

Organizational performance is a primary strategic goal for organizations (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988; Jackson, Schuler & Jiang, 2014). Indeed, a key concern for organizations when strategizing for remote work is determining how and whether their remote work arrangements impact organizational performance (Brodsky & Tolliver, 2022; Mortensen, 2023). Furthermore, organizational performance is a central outcome in the SHRM literature such that "the simplest depiction of the SHRM model is a relationship between a firm's HR architecture and firm performance" (Becker & Huselid, 2006: 899). Within this depiction, HRM systems have their "most direct effects" on employee performance, which then aggregates to organizational performance (Dyer & Reeves, 1995: 661; see also Becker & Gerhart, 1996).

Notably, organizations "do not 'perform' … it is the individuals in an organization who perform in ways that allow the organizations to achieve desirable effectiveness and performance outcomes" (Lepak, Liao, Chung & Harden, 2006: 230). SHRM research points to employee motivation as a critical mechanism linking HRM systems to employee performance (Jackson & Schuler, 2000; Jiang, Lepak, Hu & Baer, 2012). We build on this to suggest that an HRM system for remote work contains multiple controls (through remote work policies and technology processes, discussed next) affecting organizational performance via employees' motivation and (aggregated) individual performance (Crook, Todd, Combs, Woehr & Ketchen, 2011). Our focus on employee motivation as the linking mechanism between an HRM system for remote work and organizational performance aligns with the view that control systems directly influence employee motivation (i.e., behavior control promotes motivation through close monitoring, while output control does so through incentives; Snell, 1992) and enhance performance by eliciting successful task accomplishment (Walsh & Seward, 1990). In selecting organizational performance as our focal outcome, we shift the emphasis in boundary control from simply seeking to control employees to configuring HRM systems for remote work that allow organizations to accomplish the critical goal of driving organizational performance.

BOUNDARY CONTROL REENVISIONED THROUGH SHRM

Our theoretical framework in Figure 1 depicts how strategic choices influence remote work policies and technology processes, with remote work policies creating structural conditions for remote work to occur and technology processes enabling the enactment of remote work. Remote work policies and technology processes combine to form what we refer to as an "HRM system for remote work," which—by influencing *where* work occurs and *when* work occurs (via remote work policies) and remote employees' *attention* (via technology processes)—drives organizational performance. Prior to developing propositions, we address two foundational assumptions associated with strategic choices in the HRM architecture.

Strategic Choices for Boundary Control in the Remote Work Context

While boundary control theory focuses on controlling employees through standalone policies or managerial influence, we draw upon SHRM to suggest that strategic choices in organizations' HRM architecture are the natural starting point for theorizing how organizations engage in strategic boundary control for remote work. Since strategizing for remote work requires nuanced considerations of the appropriateness of remote work for the employees and the work itself, we posit that strategic choices pertaining to (a) an organization's view of its human capital and (b) the degree of work interdependence will influence how organizations determine remote work policies and technology processes that constitute an HRM system for remote work.

Organization's view of human capital. A dominant SHRM paradigm is that employees contribute to organizations in varied ways and, therefore, may be managed differently (Lepak & Snell, 1999). The transactional view of human capital holds that employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities are "not particularly unique" yet valuable for their utility and productive capacity (Kang, Morris & Snell, 2007: 243). Given the lack of uniqueness, employees are considered more easily replaceable. Thus, the transactional view focuses on short-term performance, with the employment relationship characterized as an economic exchange where employees provide labor and receive financial compensation. The relational view of human capital holds that employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities are unique and organization-specific, which is valuable because

they provide "a source of competitiveness" for the organization (Kang et al., 2007: 243). Given their uniqueness, employees are considered more difficult to replace. Thus, the relational view focuses on long-term performance, with the employment relationship characterized as an exchange of value: employees engage in discretionary behaviors to contribute to the organization, and in return are given incentives and benefits (Sun, Aryee & Law, 2007). Combined, a critical premise is that a single organization can hold both views, where some employees are viewed transactionally and others are viewed relationally (Huselid & Becker, 2011; Schmidt, Pohler & Willness, 2018).

Boundary control theory views employees as entities for maximizing the organization's productive output where employees "demonstrate total devotion to work" (Perlow, 1998: 331). This is a largely one-sided view, often assuming all employees in an organization are viewed similarly (Leslie, King & Clair, 2019) and that an organization will adopt a single, company-wide policy oriented around a uniform approach to boundary control for *all* employees (Kossek & Lautsch, 2018). Yet, this fails to recognize that an organization will not only view some employees as more critical to value creation than others, but also the challenges associated with differentiating its policies and processes accordingly across employee groups (Marescaux, De Winne & Brebels, 2021). Thus, integrating SHRM, we start with the assumption that one key strategic choice influencing how organizations configure HRM systems for remote work is how they view their human capital.

Degree of work interdependence. A second strategic choice is the degree of work interdependence. We focus on "reciprocally interdependent work," where task completion is contingent on interactions between individuals and involves an exchange of information, resources, and ideas (Thompson, 1967). We view this as a continuous variable: more interdependent work necessitates increased interactivity among co-workers for successful task completion, whereas less interdependent work requires limited or no interactivity for successful task completion. We highlight this as a critical strategic choice influencing how organizations configure HRM systems for remote work, as both scholarship and practice emphasize the challenges remote work poses for "back-and-forth" interactions characteristic of reciprocally interdependent work (Van de Ven, Delbecq & Koenig, 1976: 334). Indeed, the SHRM literature notes that time on "collaborative activities has ballooned by more than 50%" over the past two decades (Snell & Morris, 2021: 223), while the broader strategy literature is increasingly considering the impact of "work from anywhere" on interdependent work activities (Choudhury, 2020; Hitt et al., 2021).

While not explicit in boundary control, reciprocally interdependent work is considered one potential driver behind organizations' boundary control efforts. Perlow (1998: 331) states:

> Managers recognize that knowledge work is both interdependent and open-ended and that those they manage often need each other to complete their work on time. Managers therefore assume it is best for everyone to be present as much of the time as possible.

Whereas boundary control treats this as another reason to retain employees on-site for longer hours, SHRM treats the degree of work interdependence as a core strategic consideration that forms the basis for "coordinating the behaviors of various individuals whose jobs are interdependent" versus "specify[ing] certain behaviors that an individual or group of individuals working on independent jobs should display" (Wright & Snell, 1991: 215). Therefore, we assume a second key strategic choice that influences the configuration of an HRM system for remote work is the degree to which work is reciprocally interdependent.[1]

STRATEGIC BOUNDARY CONTROL THROUGH REMOTE WORK POLICIES

Remote work policies afford organizations spatial control over *where* work occurs. We distinguish hybrid versus remote-first policies where both entail off-site work (hence their relevance to configuring HRM systems for remote work). "Hybrid" policies require employees to work on-site some days but allow remote work on other days (Gratton, 2021). Some specify on-site days; others let employees select their on-site days to meet a weekly requirement. "Remote-first" policies do not embed on-site requirements, although some limit the distance employees can live away from corporate headquarters. Remote work policies (both hybrid and remote-first) also afford organizations schedule control over *when* work occurs, such that organizations may or may not give employees discretion over their working schedules. We conceptualize that organizations exert spatial control and schedule control in various ways, as reflected in Table 1.

[1] For simplicity and unless otherwise noted, all subsequent mentions of "interdependent work" refer specifically to reciprocally interdependent work.

TABLE 1
Remote Work Policy Controls that Influence Where and When Work Occurs

Spatial control	Schedule control
Strict on-site requirements • Majority of workdays per week required on-site • Days on-site determined by organization	*Strict schedule requirements* • Specific start and end times for remote work • Prohibition from tending to nonwork-related activities during working hours
Some on-site requirements • One to two workdays per week required on-site; employees (or teams) are allowed to choose days • Special, infrequent circumstances (e.g., team events; "when necessary")	*Some schedule requirements* • "Core" collaboration hours (e.g., four to six hours of the workday) • Requirement to be available during certain working hours
No on-site requirements • Option to work remotely or in-person • Work from anywhere for up to a certain number of days per year • Work from (and live in) any location where organization is incorporated	*No schedule requirements* • Option to take workday breaks when needed • "Nonlinear" workdays so employees can address nonwork demands when they arise • Employees can work during the time(s) of day they feel most productive

Note: Examples of control options in the spatial control and schedule control categories are illustrative, not exhaustive.

We offer examples to substantiate this. Regarding spatial control, Deloitte's hybrid policy specifies that employees should work on-site at least 50% of the time (Kumari, 2025). Other organizations require on-site work only "when necessary" (Centene Corporation, 2025) or for special "team events" (Canva, 2023). Airbnb's (2022) remote-first policy allows employees to work remotely in over 170 countries. Regarding schedule control, remote work policies vary in strictness of scheduling. UnitedHealthcare allows remote work, but prohibits "the flexibility to care for children, run errands or any other activity" during normal working hours (Garcia, 2019). Some organizations designate "core" working hours, while others encourage employees to work "when they feel most productive" (GitLab, 2025). Next, we consider how the two strategic choices (view of human capital, degree of work interdependence) influence how organizations design remote work policies as part of their HRM systems for remote work.

Organization's View of Human Capital

Under the transactional view, organizations do not consider employees' knowledge, skills, and abilities unique. Here, they are more likely to standardize responsibilities, reducing idiosyncratic actions to create reliable role behaviors that enhance performance (Snell & Youndt, 1995). We posit that organizations with a transactional view will be more likely to design remote work policies aimed at motivating employees through behavioral controls, including embedding on-site requirements as part of their remote work policies. Consistent with boundary control theory, organizations will seek to control *where* work occurs by situating employees at the physical workplace. Given the focus on short-term performance, on-site presence allows managers to directly observe employees and keep attention focused on work, eliminating distractions specific to remote environments (Nakayama & Chen, 2022). We further expect organizations to control *when* work occurs through stricter scheduling. Consistent with the view that the organization–employee relationship is an economic exchange wherein employees trade time and labor for economic gains, this rigidity enables organizations to ensure employees meet daily work obligations and do not "waste time" (Holland, Simpson, Dalal & Vega, 2016).

Under the relational view, organizations perceive that employees possess unique knowledge, skills, and abilities. Here, they are less likely to standardize responsibilities; instead, they will set targets or emphasize results, allowing employees to utilize distinct skills in nonuniform ways to "pursue opportunities that arise unexpectedly," thereby creating value and enhancing performance (Snell & Youndt, 1995: 713). We posit that organizations with a relational view will design remote work policies to motivate employees through output controls, allowing more autonomy over where work occurs and thus will be less likely to embed on-site requirements. Viewing employees as long-term assets, organizations will ensure commitment by meeting employees' flexibility expectations (Lewis & Smithson, 2001). The same logic holds for reduced likelihood

of stricter scheduling: organizations, cognizant that employees will devise ways to accomplish performance-related goals, will be less likely to check that employees are "on the clock," trusting that work will be completed on a timely basis.

Proposition 1a. Organizations with a transactional (relational) view of their human capital will be more (less) likely to include on-site requirements in their remote work policies.

Proposition 1b. Organizations with a transactional (relational) view of their human capital will be more (less) likely to include stricter scheduling requirements in their remote work policies.

Degree of Work Interdependence

The co-location of employees enhances collaboration and coordination (Franzoni, Scellato & Stephan, 2018). Remote work creates challenges for interdependent work, inhibiting knowledge sharing, brainstorming, and problem-solving behaviors (Choudhury, 2022). Thus, in determining *where* work occurs, we expect that more interdependent work will be an impetus for on-site requirements. For example, Pinterest's (2025) remote work policy recommends "essential touch points for in-person collaboration." In contrast, we expect fewer on-site requirements when work is less interdependent since physical co-location will be considered less critical for successful task accomplishment.

Similarly, organizations can influence *when* interdependent work occurs—not only for on-site work (i.e., ensuring employees are on-site during the same days and times) but also for remote work (Nyberg, Shaw & Zhu, 2021; Whillans, Perlow & Turek, 2021). Since collaborative activity decreases when remote employees work in different time zones (Chauvin, Choudhury & Fang, 2024), remote work policies may require that team members "have at least four to six hours of [daily worktime] overlap" with each other (Mollman, 2023). Zillow designates 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. PST as "core collaboration hours," with the rest of the workday for independent or asynchronous work activity (Bishop, 2022). This complements our argument above: on-site requirements are ideal for more interdependent work, but geographically dispersed interdependent work is viable when there is temporal overlap across remote employees (Lupu & Rokka, 2022). In contrast, organizations have less reason to include stricter scheduling requirements for less interdependent work since successful task accomplishment is less reliant on coordination and collaboration with others.

Proposition 2a. When work is more (less) interdependent, organizations will be more (less) likely to include on-site requirements in their remote work policies.

Proposition 2b. When work is more (less) interdependent, organizations will be more (less) likely to include stricter scheduling requirements in their remote work policies.

STRATEGIC BOUNDARY CONTROL THROUGH TECHNOLOGY PROCESSES

In addition to remote work policies, we propose that an HRM system for remote work includes technology processes that allow organizations to influence remote employees' attention as a form of boundary control (Stanko & Beckman, 2015). Technology processes are a critical facilitator for influencing remote employees' attention since traditional managerial oversight is not feasible (e.g., direct observation of or "standing over" employees; Perlow, 1998). We theorize how organizations rely on two types of technologies—(1) monitoring and (2) communication—to enable remote work and influence remote employees' attention in various ways via formal control, informal control, and technical control (defined below), as conceptualized in Table 2.

Formal Control: Activity and Output Monitoring

Organizations use monitoring technology to "observe, record, and analyze information that directly or indirectly relates to job performance" (Ravid, Tomczak, White & Behrend, 2020: 100), with 70% of organizational leaders expressing comfort to use such tools for their remote employees (Toggl, 2025). Coinciding with this evidence, a *Forbes* survey revealed 43% of hybrid and remote employees reported their organization monitored active work hours, websites visited, time spent active on computer, chats and messaging logs, real-time screen monitoring, inbound and outbound emails, apps used, access to computer files, time spent on apps, transcribed calls, and periodic screen capture (Haan & Watts, 2024).

We distinguish activity monitoring and output monitoring. Activity monitoring tracks individual activities and behavioral patterns. Examples include keystroke tracking, biometric sensors that track eye movement as an indicator of attention, and photo capture to check when remote employees are at their computers (Tong, 2023). Output monitoring tracks work output and is "expressly meant to hold people accountable for performance and tie it to rewards or punishment" (Ravid et al., 2020: 103). One example

TABLE 2
Technology Controls that Influence Remote Employees' Attention

Formal control	Informal control	Technical control
Activity monitoring • Tracking active (e.g., websites visited) versus idle time on work-issued computers • Random screen capture to check on remote employee activity at a momentary point of the workday • Use of built-in webcam to directly observe remote employees	*High connectivity norms* • Expectations to respond to communications by the end of the current workday • Remain online during nontraditional hours rather than fully disconnect from work application(s) • Encouragement to check messages at all hours	*No constraints on communication* • Providing synchronous communication tools that enable frequent work-related interactions • Synchronizing software updates to ensure the communication network remains active • Allow employees to sync work applications on personal phone
Output monitoring • Tracking key performance indicators that are consolidated as results in a dashboard • Daily quotas for work-related output	*Low connectivity norms* • Email signature to diminish pressure for immediate response • Emphasis to use asynchronous communication before resorting to synchronous communication	*Constraints on communication* • Disabling access to email and work applications during nonworking hours • Auto-deleting emails sent to recipients during nonworking hours

Note: Examples of control options in the formal control, informal control, and technical control categories are illustrative, not exhaustive.

is customer relationship management software that uses databases to archive and consolidate output-related data like successful sales conversions and the number of resolved customer service inquiries (Buttle & Maklan, 2019).

Informal Control: Connectivity via Communication Technology

Communication technology is pivotal for remote work, enabling employees to connect across different locations; without it, remote work is not viable. The ubiquity of tools that facilitate synchronous (instant messaging, video conferencing) and asynchronous (email) interactions underpins the infrastructure of modern remote work (Russo, Ollier-Malaterre, Kossek & Ohana, 2018). Communication technology affords "connectivity"—the ability to initiate and receive communication at any time. This does not presuppose employees are constantly engaged in work tasks, but, rather, that they are able to focus attention on work-related matters when required or requested (Ollier-Malaterre, Jacobs & Rothbard, 2019).

In the remote work context, connectivity afforded by communication technology is a "default state" that allows employees to shift attention to work anytime, anywhere (Foucreault, Ollier-Malaterre & Ménard, 2018). We contend that communication technologies enable organizations to wield informal control by establishing normative expectations that influence when and how frequently remote employees engage in work-related communication with colleagues. The 56% of C-suite executives reluctant to disconnect at the end of the workday embody high connectivity norms by creating top-down expectations (e.g., 54% of hybrid employees feel they must be online "all the time"; Dialpad, 2023). In contrast, United Kingdom (UK)-based consulting firm Yellow Sky's expectation that "the flexibility of remote work shouldn't translate into an expectation of out-of-hours availability" is an example of a low connectivity norm (Velocity Global, 2025).

Technical Control: Constraints on Communication Technology

Technical control refers to "rules" that organizations embed in their technology infrastructure (Stanko & Beckman, 2015: 714), reflecting that technology can constrain the very same (remote) work processes it enables (Orlikowski, 1992). Organizations possess technical control to influence remote employees' attention by constraining communication, such as limiting or suspending functionalities for temporary periods (Glassman, Prosch & Shao, 2015). For example, in response to complaints about blurred work–nonwork boundaries (Perrigino & Raveendhran, 2020), Volkswagen disabled email access on work-issued devices 30 minutes after the end of a shift and enabled it again 30 minutes before the start of the next shift (Barber & Santuzzi, 2015).

Organization's View of Human Capital: Formal, Informal, and Technical Control

We argued above that organizations motivate employees under the transactional (relational) view

through behavior (output) control. In recognizing that (a) both behavior and output controls are applicable to remote work contexts, and (b) organizations can view remote employees either transactionally or relationally, we extend this logic to theorize how organizations strategically control remote employees' attention through technology processes.

Formal control. Under the transactional view, organizations will emphasize day-to-day work processes to ensure a focus on work and rely on behavior controls to motivate employees (Snell & Youndt, 1995). Activity monitoring, by allowing organizations to closely track what employees do, will function as a form of control that frequently directs employees' attention toward work-related tasks (Ravid et al., 2020). For example, these tools can provide a "detailed activity breakdown report [and] an in-depth analysis of behavioral patterns based on mouse and keyboard activity" (Intelogos, 2025). Thus, we posit organizations with a transactional view will use activity monitoring to control remote employees' attention ensuring their focus is on work.

Under the relational view, organizations anticipate that employees will be productive to the extent that they are allowed autonomy to accomplish tasks, calling for output controls to motivate employees (Snell & Youndt, 1995). Organizations will be more likely to focus on results instead of the momentary details of everyday activity (Niehoff & Moorman, 1993). This is also rooted in the idea that organizations care about employees' long-term commitment, trusting them to effectively manage their time to complete work. Thus, we posit that, for organizations with a relational view, output monitoring will function as a form of control orienting remote employees' attention toward results. We propose:

Proposition 3a. Organizations with a transactional (relational) view of human capital are more likely to rely on activity (output) monitoring as a form of formal control to influence remote employees' attention.

Informal and technical control. Under the transactional view, we expect organizations to ensure employees are reachable and responsive via synchronous and asynchronous channels. In doing so, organizations exercise informal control over remote employees' attention by emphasizing connectivity with "always on" normative expectations. Again, this does not mean constant work, but constant availability for directing attention to work "early in the morning, late at night, or over the weekend" (Perlow, 1998: 337). Consistent with boundary control theory, organizations consider remote availability a replacement for on-site presence (Afota, Provost Savard, Ollier-Malaterre & Léon, 2023).

Under the relational view, we expect organizations to allow remote employees discretion in how and when communication occurs. Organizations will prioritize autonomy, allowing employees to divert attention away from (and back to) work as needed. Recognizing the pressure associated with rapid responsiveness, organizations may take steps to informally limit constant connectivity by discouraging managers from sending emails outside of standard work hours or encouraging email signatures that inform recipients an immediate response is not expected (Giurge & Bohns, 2021). For example, University of California San Francisco's Anesthesia Department encourages email signatures that "let colleagues know that just because you may be working off-hours does not mean you expect a response outside of their working hours" (UCSF Department of Anesthesia and Perioperative Care, 2025). Thus, organizations can promote expectations that mitigate constant connectivity.

Under the relational view, organizations can use technical control for this same purpose. Whereas organizations with a transactional view are likely to focus on short-term performance, organizations with a relational view will focus on long-term performance. As a result, they will be more likely to protect (their investments in) employees (Osterman, 1994) by ensuring they are not "tethered" to their devices (Ferguson, Carlson, Boswell, Whitten, Butts & Kacmar, 2016; Mazmanian, Orlikowski & Yates, 2013). Technical control (i.e., constraining communication) can be wielded to shield employees from diminished returns in productivity (Pencavel, 2018) and burnout (Kühner, Rudolph, Derks, Posch & Zacher, 2023). For example, Daimler experimented with email auto-delete, a functionality that enables the immediate deletion of received emails during specified time periods (BBC, 2014). Such restrictions are compatible with the relational view, where organizations prioritize employees' long-term well-being and commitment as strategically critical (Kelman & Hong, 2016; Roberts & Ferro-Almeida, 2019). We propose:

Proposition 3b. Organizations with a transactional (relational) view of human capital are more (less) likely to emphasize connectivity as a form of informal control to influence remote employees' attention.

Proposition 3c. Organizations with a transactional (relational) view of human capital are less (more) likely to constrain communication technology as a form of technical control to influence remote employees' attention.

Degree of Work Interdependence: Formal, Informal, and Technical Control

Formal control. More interdependent work requires greater coordination. The activities of one employee directly influence the activities of others, reiterating the need to closely manage individual behaviors (Raghuram, Garud, Wiesenfeld & Gupta, 2001). Organizations may rely on activity monitoring to avoid disruptions to workflow, ensuring employees promptly engage with one another and contribute to shared tasks. Content collaboration "scores" provide detailed insights by tracking when employees open, review, and contribute to shared documents, which help organizations detect team member disengagement and identify behaviors that lead to productivity bottlenecks (Microsoft, 2024). Activity monitoring allows organizations to create structured systems for administering rewards or imposing penalties based on contributions to interdependent work, including the use of gamification to rank the employees based on key performance metrics.

When work is less interdependent, successful task completion is less contingent on collaboration and coordination. Thus, it may be less critical to monitor the processes and specific behaviors leading to outputs. Organizations using output monitoring to evaluate individual employees' end results can direct attention to focusing on indicators of performance associated with quality and timeliness of output, rather than the nuances of how work time is spent (Jeske, 2021; Laker, Godley, Patel & Cobb, 2020). Output monitoring can also facilitate greater autonomy that employees may anticipate when engaging in less interdependent work. Therefore, we propose:

Proposition 4a. When work is more (less) interdependent, organizations will be more likely to rely on activity (output) monitoring as a form of formal control over remote employees' attention.

Informal and technical control. Task accomplishment for more interdependent work is contingent on others' activities and input, necessitating frequent and clear communication among employees (Marlow, Lacerenza, Paoletti, Burke & Salas, 2018). Organizations will want employees to remain available for "teammates who might call with a question, a request, or feedback at any time" (Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024: 1271), encouraging interactions that facilitate quick and effective information sharing, maintain coherent workflows, and achieve desired collaborative outcomes (van Zoonen, Sivunen & Treem, 2021). Thus, connectivity can serve as an informal control to keep remote employees in sync and focused when working on interdependent tasks (Leonardi, Treem & Jackson, 2010). For example, UK-based consulting company Tribal Impact uses Asana's project management tools to "see what work is being done and when a task or project was last updated," which affords "less calls, less messaging and more visibility across the team" (Torres, 2020).

When work is less interdependent, frequent availability is not only less critical but also potentially counterproductive (Rico & Cohen, 2005). Remote employees may experience disruptions from constantly receiving work-related emails or instant messages, delaying task completion (Orhan, Castellano, Khelladi, Marinelli & Monge, 2021; Wajcman & Rose, 2011). Organizations might exert informal control by de-prioritizing immediate responses (Byun & Kirsch, 2021) or encouraging managers to limit their own connectivity (Koch & Binnewies, 2015). Furthermore, just as organizations block on-site access to nonwork-related technology to retain employees' attention when on-site (Stanko & Beckman, 2015), so too might they use technical control to constrain work-related communication during traditional nonwork hours when remote work is less interdependent.

Proposition 4b. When work is more (less) interdependent, organizations will be more (less) likely to emphasize connectivity as a form of informal control to influence remote employees' attention.

Proposition 4c. When work is more (less) interdependent, organizations will be less (more) likely to constrain communication technology as a form of technical control to influence remote employees' attention.

STRATEGIC BOUNDARY CONTROL AND ORGANIZATIONAL PERFORMANCE

Propositions 1 through 4 account for how strategic choices influence organizations' design of remote work policies and technology processes that constitute an HRM system for remote work. Yet, it is critical to examine how remote work policies and technology processes "fit" together to enhance organizational performance (Delery, 1998; Dyer & Reeves, 1995). As noted earlier, organizational performance is a primary strategic goal for organizations when they pursue remote work. Organizations are "more efficient and/or effective when they achieve fit relative to when a lack of fit exists" (Wright & Snell, 1998: 756), based on "reducing poor pairwise matches and creating good pairwise matches" across polices and processes (Chadwick, 2010: 87). This allows us to consider pairwise matches between

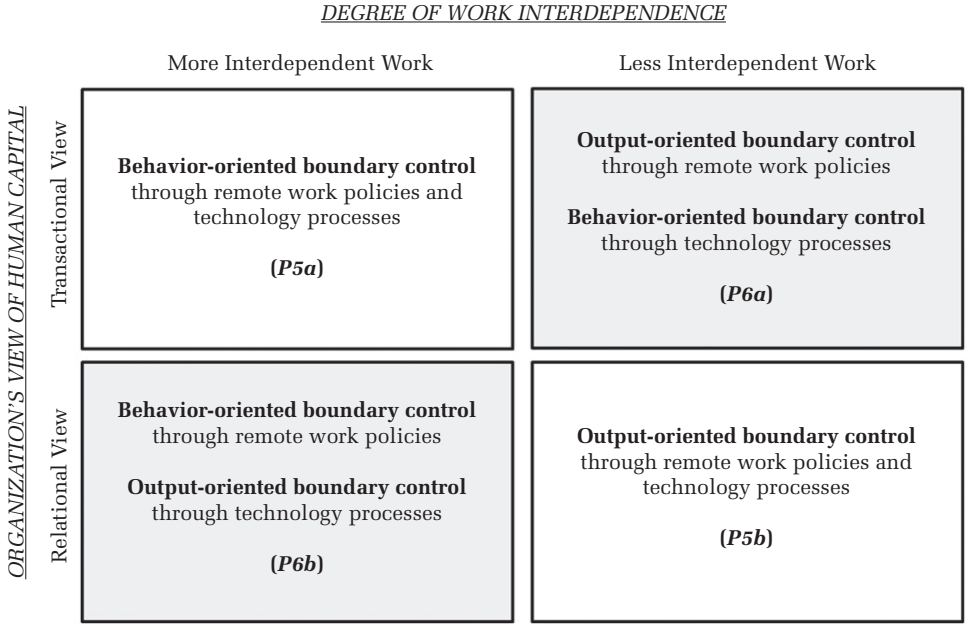
remote work policies and technology processes that can enhance organizational performance, summarized in Figure 2.

The top left and bottom right quadrants reflect instances where the two strategic choices—(1) organization's view of human capital and (2) the degree of work interdependence—when combined, share similar orientations as to how organizations configure remote work policies and technology processes in an HRM system for remote work. When organizations have a transactional view of their employees and work is more interdependent (top left), we propose that both choices point to behavior-oriented boundary control, defined as the ways in which organizations influence where work occurs, when work occurs, and remote employees' attention to closely supervise their actions to achieve desired outputs. Here, we expect "intricate systems" of behavior controls (Lupu & Rokka, 2022: 1396), including remote work policies designed with on-site requirements and strict scheduling to afford opportunities for direct observation of employees' behaviors *and* on-site, concurrent collaborative activity. Further, we expect activity monitoring, greater emphasis on connectivity norms, and fewer restrictions on communication as part of technology processes that effectively eliminate work–nonwork boundaries, allowing organizations to control attention from any place at any time *and* facilitate coordination (Choudhury, Foroughi & Larson, 2021). Applied to practice, behavior-oriented boundary control reflects a combination of options (see Schuler & Jackson, 1987) from the upper portions of Tables 1 and 2.

Likewise, when organizations have a relational view of their employees and work is less interdependent (Figure 2, bottom right), we propose that both choices point to output-oriented boundary control, defined as the ways in which organizations influence where work occurs, when work occurs, and remote employees' attention to allow employees discretion in the means to achieve desired outputs. Here, we expect reduced rigidity in governing both where and when work occurs *and* how remote employees' attention is managed. In practice, output-oriented boundary control reflects a combination of options from the lower portions of Tables 1 and 2.

Both combinations (behavior- and output-oriented boundary control in the top left and bottom right quadrants, respectively) include "intentional redundancies" where remote work policies and technology processes work together to motivate employees in similar ways (Chadwick, 2010: 90). While each orientation is different in how it motivates employees, both focus on enhancing organizational performance rather than controlling employees per se.

FIGURE 2
Configurations of HRM Systems for Remote Work to Enhance Organizational Performance



Proposition 5a. When organizations have a transactional view of their human capital and work is more interdependent, they will be more likely to engage in behavior-oriented boundary control across both remote work policies and technology processes to enhance organizational performance.

Proposition 5b. When organizations have a relational view of their human capital and work is less interdependent, they will be more likely to engage in output-oriented boundary control across both remote work policies and technology processes to enhance organizational performance.

These combinations reflect the paradigmatic view in SHRM that organizations can configure HRM systems around either behavior controls or output controls (Walton, 1985). Yet, this is incomplete, as these combinations do not address the inherent tensions that arise when strategic choices regarding the view of human capital and the degree of work interdependence seemingly misalign, as represented by the two shaded quadrants in Figure 2. When organizations have a transactional view of their human capital and work is less interdependent, this creates tensions around whether and how to use behavior controls (Propositions 1 and 3; transactional view) and output controls (Propositions 2 and 4; less interdependent work) across remote work policies and technology processes. Similarly, when organizations have a relational view and work is more interdependent, the opposite tension emerges around whether and how to use output controls (Propositions 1 and 3; relational view) and behavior controls (Propositions 2 and 4; more interdependent work) across remote work policies and technology processes.

SHRM scholarship asserts that "no consensus has developed on how to combine HR [policies and processes] into (synergistic) systems" (Boon et al., 2019: 2499). Yet, the ability to address emergent tensions is considered a significant competitive advantage (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Sine, Mitsuhashi & Kirsch, 2006), particularly when organizations grasp "the complexity of strategic priorities and the multiplicity of work arrangements that supports it" (Snell & Morris, 2021: 224). Rather than write off the two shaded quadrants as inherently inferior for enhancing organizational performance (Becker, Huselid, Pickus & Spratt, 1997), we discuss how organizations make trade-offs by balancing between behavior *and* output controls across remote work policies and technology processes to enhance organizational performance. In doing so, we address a prevalent critique within SHRM research—that existing studies often concentrate solely on motivating employees through either behavior or output control—by exploring how organizations effectively use both.

Transactional View of Human Capital and Less Interdependent Work

When organizations have a transactional view of human capital and work is less interdependent, we propose that they will make trade-offs by engaging in output-oriented boundary control via remote work policies, while simultaneously engaging in behavior-oriented boundary control via technology processes (Figure 2, top right quadrant; a combination of options from the lower and upper portions of Tables 1 and 2, respectively).

Organizations with a transactional view are particularly concerned with monitoring the time employees spend working, using it as an indicator of their commitment to work (Feldman, Reid & Mazmanian, 2020). Traditionally, this was achieved by requiring a set number of hours on-site, with the assumption that physical presence meant dedication to work and the prioritizing of work over home responsibilities (Perlow, 1998, 1999). Yet, technology processes allow organizations more precision in behavior control (Miele & Tirabeni, 2020). Behavior-oriented boundary control via technology processes can involve activity monitoring (formal control) that reduces the need for managerial presence in situ (Conzon & Huising, 2024), increased connectivity norms (informal control) that allow managers to check on employees in real time, and a lack of constraints on communication technology (technical control). The speed and ease of technological observation suggest that in-person monitoring via spatial and schedule controls in remote work policies may be unnecessary, time consuming, and costly (or "inefficient redundancies"; Chadwick, 2010: 91).

When work is less interdependent, spatial and schedule control become less critical for successful task completion, as less interdependent work requires less collaboration and coordination. Employees do not necessarily need to be in the same place or follow the same schedule. Although this is perhaps counterintuitive to the transactional view, we argue it is a form of arbitrage. Organizations can capitalize on untapped benefits, such as improving employees' job attitudes (Boon, Den Hartog, Boselie & Paauwe, 2011; Lepak & Snell, 1999; Nishii, Lepak & Schneider, 2008). With technology processes focused on behavior-oriented boundary control, remote employees are still likely to make efforts to "get noticed" and demonstrate their value (Cristea & Leonardi, 2019), especially to maintain their gains in autonomy over where and when

they work (Barsness, Diekmann & Seidel, 2005). Thus, organizations with a transactional view of their human capital when work is less interdependent can design HRM systems for remote work that drive organizational performance by combining behavior-oriented boundary control in technology processes with output-oriented boundary control in remote work policies, motivating employees to engage in desired behaviors via close monitoring while allowing some flexibility over where and when these behaviors occur.

Proposition 6a. When organizations have a transactional view of their human capital and work is less interdependent, they will be more likely to engage in behavior-oriented boundary control through technology processes and output-oriented boundary control through remote work policies to enhance organizational performance.

Relational View of Human Capital and More Interdependent Work

When organizations have a relational view of human capital and work is more interdependent, we propose that they will make trade-offs by engaging in behavior-oriented boundary control through remote work policies, while simultaneously engaging in output-oriented boundary control through technology processes (Figure 2, bottom left quadrant; a combination of options from the upper and lower portions of Tables 1 and 2, respectively).

The successful completion of interdependent work is "a function of reciprocal, interactive relationships and exchanges among members" (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011: 140), which remote work can complicate by making collaboration networks more static or siloed (Yang et al., 2022). Remote teams often struggle with the "mechanics" of accomplishing interdependent work because, unlike co-located teams, they lack the inherent opportunities to build trust, cohesion, and shared routines through in-person interactions (Bailey, Leonardi & Barley, 2012: 1487; Levina & Vaast, 2008). Behavior-oriented boundary control via remote work policies provides "the necessary lubricants of virtuality" (Handy, 1995: 6), allowing on-site collaborative success and experiences to seamlessly translate into remote settings on days when employees are not physically co-located together or working at different times based on their daily demands and preferences.

Here, spatial and schedule control are more important for facilitating collaboration and coordination than for ensuring employees' attention remains focused on work. When combined with the relational view, behavior-oriented boundary control via technology processes in remote settings is likely inefficient, primarily restricting autonomy and only secondarily facilitating collaboration and coordination. Instead, output-oriented boundary control via output monitoring (formal control), reducing emphasis on constant connectivity (informal control), and periodically constraining communication (technical control) is a superior complement, emphasizing results over monitoring daily activity or time spent on work and preserving employees' autonomy.

Organizations with a relational view of their human capital can also gain an ironic advantage by combining behavior-oriented boundary control in remote work policies with output-oriented behavior control in technology processes: they can effectively reinforce literal boundaries demarcated around time and place (Voronov, Glynn & Weber, 2022), fostering efficient separation between work and home responsibilities. Spatial and schedule control may signal commitment to employees' well-being by creating substantive windows of overlap for co-worker interactions, thus preserving time for personal activities. This can diminish time shift (i.e., work-related communication that occurs outside of normal hours; Chauvin et al., 2024; Heaphy & Trefalt, 2024), ensure efficiency in interdependent task accomplishment to protect predictable time off (Perlow & Porter, 2009), and minimize unwanted permeation of work into employees' personal lives (Creary & Locke, 2022; Lupu, Ruiz-Castro & Leca, 2022). Output-oriented boundary control via technology processes can be leveraged to protect the sanctity of off-job time. Thus, organizations with a relational view when work is more interdependent can design HRM systems for remote work that drive organizational performance by combining behavior-oriented boundary control in remote work policies with output-oriented boundary control in technology processes, motivating employees to accomplish work as they see fit but placing some restrictions around where and when work occurs to facilitate interdependent work and preserve work–nonwork boundaries.

Proposition 6b. When organizations have a relational view of their human capital and work is more interdependent, they will be more likely to engage in behavior-oriented boundary control through remote work policies and output-oriented boundary control through technology processes to enhance organizational performance.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Remote work is a critical strategic consideration for organizations as they aim to control work–nonwork

boundaries while balancing employees' demands for flexibility. Integrating insights from boundary control theory and SHRM, we developed a theory of strategic boundary control for remote work to explain how organizations—driven by strategic choices associated with their view of human capital and the degree of work interdependence—design HRM systems for remote work by combining remote work policies and technology processes to drive organizational performance.

Theoretical Contributions

We make several contributions to boundary control theory and, more broadly, the work–life literature addressing the organization's perspective on remote work.

Strategic focus. Boundary control theory emphasizes maximizing on-site presence to enhance organizations' control over employees, neglecting the viability of remote work. Integrating SHRM, we add a strategic focus to boundary control in three ways. First, we theorize in our model of strategic boundary control for remote work how organizations can effectively design remote work policies and technology processes that collectively influence where work occurs, when work occurs, and remote employees' attention. This challenges the notion that organizations should aim to maximize on-site presence, shifting the emphasis of boundary control from maximizing control over employees to enhancing organizational performance.

Second, we shed light on the dual-importance of strategic choices that influence *why* and *how* remote work policies are implemented, two related considerations often studied in isolation (De Menezes & Kelliher, 2011). We link these with a system-level approach where remote work policies and technology processes embedded in the HRM architecture are guided by strategic choices, highlighting the superiority of a strategic perspective over siloed approaches that view policy availability as the starting point to examine effects of organizations' boundary control.

Third, our model incorporates two key organizational realities: (1) an organization will value its human capital in different ways, and (2) the degree of work interdependence varies across different teams or units. Building on the concept of differentiation in the SHRM literature (Marescaux et al., 2021), we capture how a single organization can configure *multiple* HRM systems for remote work uniquely tailored to different employee groups (Boon, Eckardt, Lepak & Boselie, 2018; Kang et al., 2007). Our model is thus distinct from centralized approaches in boundary control research that assume uniform policies for all employees and overlook inequalities in employees' access to remote work within the same organization (see also Kossek & Lautsch, 2018).

Expansion of "control." By integrating SHRM, we distinguish how boundary control can be behavior oriented or output oriented, capturing organizations' efforts to closely oversee remote employees' behaviors or allowing remote employees discretion in accomplishing desired outputs, respectively. While there is a clear connection between boundary control theory and behavior control, our work offers a more compelling view of the "business case" for providing employees with autonomy. We reframe the potential misunderstanding that increased autonomy comes at the organization's expense (i.e., relinquishing control to employees), instead positioning this as a distinct form of boundary control—output-oriented boundary control—emphasizing how organizations use output controls to achieve desired performance.

Beyond distinguishing that boundary control can be behavior oriented or output oriented, we highlight the spectrum of each control embedded in remote work policies and technology processes (Tables 1 and 2). Spatial control includes not only whether to embed on-site requirements, but also how many days to require on-site and combinations of specified on-site and remote days. Schedule control includes decisions to provide (broader or narrower) windows for starting or ending the workday and may include a daily work hours quota. Formal control is afforded through different types of technologies with activity and output monitoring capabilities that are used individually or combined in different ways. Informal control through connectivity is a continuum ranging from low to high, while technical control varies based on how long (synchronous or asynchronous) communication is constrained. Therefore, both behavior-oriented and output-oriented boundary control can leverage a multiplicity of controls embedded in remote work policies and technology processes that make up HRM systems for remote work.

Role of technology. We add nuance to understanding the role of technology in boundary control theory. Boundary control assumes technology distracts employees' attention from work (Perrigino, Raveendhran & Ryu, 2024; Stanko & Beckman, 2015), creating the need for organizations to ensure employees' attention remains focused on work. We challenge this assumption, as technology plays a dual role in remote work: it acts as an enabler of

remote work and a control mechanism to direct attention toward (rather than away from) work. Our work highlights that technology processes afford multiple controls allowing organizations to influence remote employees' attention. Thus, we shift the focus on technology in boundary control from a mere distraction for employees to a facilitator of boundary control (and work itself) in the remote work context.

The broader work–life literature predominantly focuses on the informal influence of technology with limited emphasis on the formal ways organizations leverage technology to impact various work–nonwork outcomes for employees (Becker, Belkin, Conroy & Tuskey, 2021). By highlighting how organizations can use different controls—formal, informal, and technical—in their technology processes as part of their boundary control, our model offers a framework for understanding when and why organizations choose certain technological controls over others and how they can be combined with policies to synergistically impact organizational performance.

Advancing the SHRM Literature

Our work also advances the SHRM literature in several ways. First, SHRM research has traditionally focused on employees working in physical office settings, offering limited consideration of how its principles apply to novel work arrangements like remote work (Collings et al., 2021). This is salient as contemporary organizations "feel like they have less grip on even their most valued employees," given increased demands for flexibility (Snell, Swart, Morris & Boon, 2023: 9). By adopting SHRM as a key theoretical foundation, we address this shortcoming by developing a model of strategic boundary control for remote work, theorizing ways in which organizations can design HRM systems suitable for thriving in the remote work context. In doing so, we demonstrate how insights from SHRM can inform contemporary work arrangements.

Second, SHRM research traditionally focuses on the idea of enhancing "fit" between different components of HRM systems (Schuler & Jackson, 1987). We began by adopting this premise, recognizing the validity of configurations of remote work policies and technology processes that naturally "align" in their emphasis on behavior-oriented boundary control (Proposition 5a) or output-oriented boundary control (Proposition 5b). Yet, our work goes beyond simply accepting this paradigm: consistent with recent critiques, we build on wisdom that successful organizations are those that balance seemingly inconsistent structures or practices. By theorizing how organizations effectively resolve tensions created by multiple strategic choices (by balancing behavior-oriented and output-oriented controls through seemingly "misaligned" combinations of remote work policies and technology processes), we advance the important notion that "actual models of HRM can contain a complex and 'contradictory' set of messages" that enhance—rather than detract from—organizational performance (Boxall, Ang & Bartram, 2011: 1504).

Third, SHRM tends to treat behavior control and output control as mutually exclusive when examining HRM systems (Wright et al., 2018). Our work offers nuanced insights into the complementarity of behavior and output controls, rather than the common either–or dichotomous approach. Underscoring the important role of behavior control, we address critiques that SHRM "implicitly adopted a normative paradigm" that favors and takes for granted assumptions around the efficacy of output control (Wright & Essman, 2021: 208). We recognize that output control enhances organizational performance only to the extent that organizations have clear standards of desired performance, while behavior control enhances performance only to the extent that cause–effect relations between behaviors and performance are known; when these assumptions are not met, controls will be inefficacious in driving performance (Snell, 1992). For example, output-oriented boundary control may not be feasible when cause–effect relations between behaviors and performance are known but output cannot be accurately measured, instead requiring behavior-oriented boundary control (e.g., activity monitoring; Raveendhran & Fast, 2021).

Implications for Practice

Our work has several implications for managerial practice. Recent wisdom suggests that organizations "reward output, not activity" (Waytz, 2023: 63) and "measure output, not time put in" (Kalev & Dobbin, 2022: 107), even going so far as to laud output control while panning behavior control (Elliott, 2024). Indeed, this syncs with evidence that activity and time are not always linked to productivity (Ng & Feldman, 2008) and is consistent with our critique that controlling employee behaviors risks losing focus on strategic outcomes (Baird & Meshoulam, 1988). Yet, our theory also recognizes organizations are justified in measuring time (e.g., billable hours) and activity when those factors *are* correlated with desired performance outcomes, which are contextual

to specific business units, teams, and jobs (Guest, 1997; MacDuffie, 1995).

Despite good intentions to reduce employee inequalities in access to remote work with "one-size-fits-all" approaches (Peng, Xu, Matthews & Ma, 2020), this is often impractical. We build on calls to shift focus from reducing inequalities to maintaining a sense of fairness across all employees regardless of whether they have access to remote work (Kossek, Varizi, Perrigino, Lautsch, Pratt & King, 2025). Rather than devise ways to increase access to remote work for employees whose jobs require on-site presence, organizations can instead focus on improving their on-site experiences (such as offering various amenities to help address personal or family-related demands; Bourdeau, Ollier-Malaterre & Houlfort, 2019).

Focus on employees' remote work experiences should extend beyond *where* work occurs to also include *when* work occurs. Organizations must be mindful of how they manage remote employees' attention during traditional "nonwork" hours. This is critical for globally distributed, interdependent teams wherein off-hours communication is often unavoidable (Hill, Axtell, Raghuram & Nurmi, 2024). Thus, a strategic approach to remote work must account for both spatial and temporal flexibility, while thoughtfully leveraging technology processes to enable sustainable work arrangements.

As organizations navigate a dynamic remote work environment—with some introducing return-to-office mandates and others doubling down on remote work—a steady reality is that employees prefer remote work (e.g., 64% of remote workers and 29% of hybrid workers would consider leaving their jobs if remote flexibility is withdrawn; Gallup, 2025). This returns us to the challenge of how organizations balance employees' flexibility expectations with their own desired levels of boundary control. Our theory offers a framework to navigate this by posing key questions for organizations to consider: What is the rationale for requiring employees on-site or allowing remote work? Is the goal to reassert control over work processes and boundaries? If so, how does this align with the organization's view of its human capital and the degree of interdependence within work units? How can organizations answer these questions in ways that preserve (and strengthen) their existing competitive advantages?

Since 2019, organizations have experimented with the full range of remote work configurations—from fully on-site to hybrid to fully remote—revealing two key insights: (1) *any* arrangement can be seen as a legitimate strategic choice, and (2) *no* one configuration inherently provides a competitive advantage, regardless of its momentary popularity. Our theory suggests that what matters is not *which* remote work strategy an organization adopts, but *how* it designs and implements HRM systems to enact that strategy. We emphasize that organizations are more likely to improve organizational performance through remote work when they adopt distinctive and difficult-to-replicate approaches that align remote work policies and technological processes with internal capabilities and strategic objectives. It is this thoughtful integration—grounded in the organization's view of its human capital and the degree of work interdependence—that enables the creation of coherent remote work strategies for sustaining competitive advantage.

Directions for Future Research

Our work opens numerous avenues for future research. First, we consider remote work policies and technology processes as the central parts of an HRM system for remote work but advocate for future research to integrate other relevant (albeit less central) HRM considerations. This includes whether compensation systems reward the "right" behaviors or output of remote employees (Kerr, 1975), the impact of training (Snell, 1992), and how HRM systems for remote work externally fit with other strategic goals (Delery & Roumpi, 2017; Han, Kang, Oh, Kehoe & Lepak, 2019).

Second, while our model incorporates differentiation across different employee groups (Kang et al., 2007), we recognize that differentiation further occurs through informal practices, such as managers' one-off requests to keep employees on-site (Perlow, 1998) or employees negotiating flexible work arrangements (Hornung, Rousseau & Glaser, 2008). Both the SHRM (Kehoe & Han, 2020) and work–life flexibility (Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999) literatures highlight the critical role of managers in implementing remote work policies. Future research should integrate these informal elements, including implementation inconsistencies where some employees are granted more favorable remote work arrangements than others. Future research should also consider how the HRM system for remote work influences the organization's culture (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Third, while we focused our theorizing on reciprocal interdependence, we encourage future research to consider the design-related implications of HRM systems for remote work for other types of interdependent work. It will be interesting to determine how organizations situate geographically dispersed

teams that work on sequentially interdependent tasks (i.e., "each group member must act in a predefined sequence"; Saavedra, Earley & Van Dyne, 1993: 62). Perhaps jobs with tasks that occur earlier in the sequence are situated in more Eastern time zones compared to jobs with tasks that occur later in the sequence, allowing "normal" local working hours for all employees.

Fourth, our model posits that HRM systems for remote work enhance organizational performance by motivating and enabling employees to engage in desired work-related activities, assuming employees respond to different controls as intended. Yet, various attitudinal responses are possible (Wright & Snell, 1991), especially since employees differ in their preferences for managing work–nonwork boundaries (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000). Future research can consider how HRM systems for remote work create unintended "backlash" (Perrigino, Dunford & Wilson, 2018), including how employees devise workarounds to bypass controls (Kellogg, Valentine & Christin, 2020; Wei, Chen & Rice, 2023).

Finally, we recognize that technologies may be positioned as one type of control but function as another (e.g., "productivity scores" intended as output controls but based on behavioral metrics; Sandler, 2020). Future research can address the copresence of activity and output monitoring technologies, examining how organizations use these and the relative salience of each for employees (Ravid et al., 2020). It will also be important to determine whether employees perceive these controls as organizations intend. Employees may still feel connectivity pressure with output monitoring or may perceive that certain nonevaluative technology tools are used in evaluative capacities (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022; Thiel, Bonner, Bush, Welsh & Garud, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Our theory addresses how organizations strategically control work–nonwork boundaries while balancing employees' demands for flexibility by designing HRM systems for remote work, combining remote work policies (influencing where and when work occurs) and technology processes (influencing remote employees' attention) informed by strategic choices pertaining to the organization's view of human capital and the degree of work interdependence. We are excited about the prospects for future research to build on this foundation, hoping to move the needle from "going with the flow" to more *strategic* approaches to boundary control for remote work.

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