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Navigating connectivity expectations and work–life boundaries through sensemaking in global teams

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ABSTRACT

Connectivity expectations, the experience of being expected to be technologically connected to work during non-work hours, can pose challenges for employees working in a global environment. This study employs the sensemaking framework to examine how global team members and leaders negotiate these expectations and how they reflect in team members' work–life boundary management. The data consists of 55 in-depth interviews with employees working in nine different teams in a global organization. Team members collaboratively made sense of connectivity expectations within the team, while team leaders engaged in sensegiving to influence team members' interpretations. Sensemaking was reflected in team members' work–life boundary management as cocreated connectivity rules enabled them to disconnect from work. Team leaders' sensegiving allowed work–life boundary adjustments, creating a supportive culture. The study makes theoretical and practical contributions to sensemaking in global work by emphasizing its communicative nature and its reflection on employees' boundary management and well-being.

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Connectivity; connectivity expectations; sensemaking; work–life boundary management; global work

The everyday use of communication technologies necessitates managing boundaries between work and life because both work and nonwork contexts are pervaded by connectivity (Mattern & Klein, 2022). Communication technologies, such as email, instant messaging, phone calls, and text messages, allow for maintaining connectivity, regardless of time and place, giving greater flexibility and permeability of work–life boundaries (Wajcman & Rose, 2011). However, it is not only the communication technologies that drive boundary flexibility and permeability; rather, it is the responsibility of individuals, teams, and work communities (Kolb, 2008). Thus, it is essential to communicate and share a common understanding of connectivity expectations within organizations, as it also enables the negotiation of boundaries between work and life. Discussing connectivity expectations is particularly important in global organizations where connectivity outside office hours may be common among geographically dispersed team members due to time zone differences.

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Connectivity describes how employees search and share work-related information and communicate for work through various communication technologies. Connectivity is a part of employees' social infrastructure – a system of social contacts and norms regarding availability and responsiveness – that determines their level of accessibility to team leaders, colleagues, or customers (Mazmanian & Erickson, 2014; Wajcman & Rose, 2011). We use the concept of *connectivity expectations*, defined as the experience of being expected to be technologically connected to work during non-work hours, which arises from the demands of global work (Nurmi & Hinds, 2020) and the social environment in which global teams operate (De Alwis et al., 2022; Derks et al., 2015; Dettmers & Biemelt, 2018).

Normative expectations, especially when there are no clear guidelines regarding connectivity outside office hours, can pose challenges for employees in global organizations and result in stress and strain in global work. This is particularly true for nonurgent or minor tasks that may be perceived as interfering with personal life responsibilities (Nurmi & Hinds, 2020). Despite an organizational culture that values work–life balance and family-friendly policies, management may still expect connectivity outside working hours, especially from employees seeking career advancement and wanting to demonstrate their commitment (Choroszewicz & Kay, 2020). The way employees react to and deal with connectivity expectations is related to their supervisors' behavior (Derks et al., 2015). To a certain extent, supervisors influence the values and norms of the organization (Derks et al., 2015; Koch & Binnewies, 2015). Their expression of these norms must be interpreted by employees (Derks et al., 2015).

The present study focuses on the perceptions of employees in a global organization by looking at how global teams, including team leaders and members, understand connectivity expectations and how this sensemaking is reflected in their work–life boundary management. This is important because constant connectivity that extends beyond regular working hours has been shown to be related to diminished psychological detachment (Büchler et al., 2020), stress (Mazmanian et al., 2013), sickness absence, and self-reported health impairments (Arlinghaus & Nachreiner, 2013). Although there are many downsides, especially with constant connectivity, it can also be experienced as a positive factor benefiting employees in their work performance (ten Brummerhuis et al., 2021) and autonomy (van Zoonen et al., 2023). It is critical to explore the perspectives of global team members regarding connectivity expectations outside working hours because operations in a global work environment run 24/7.

We examine the ways in which connectivity expectations are understood and navigated through the theoretical framework of *sensemaking*, which conceptualizes connectivity as a shared process of negotiation. This approach moves beyond the idea that connectivity in global work is something negative beyond team members' control. Sensemaking (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005) is a 'socially constructed process in which individuals interact with their environment and with others to create meaning and enable action' (Christianson & Barton, 2021, p. 572). Thus, sensemaking is a communication process in which individuals collectively assign meaning to what happens around them by communicating with others (Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Our research contributes to the existing literature on sensemaking, boundary management and connectivity by showing how sensemaking around connectivity that draws cues from specific, organizational, and global frameworks, can

benefit global teams and have practical implications for employees' boundary management and well-being.

The role of supervisors and team leaders in connectivity practices

The social norms of connectivity are set within an organization, both by team leaders and colleagues (Derks et al., 2015). Because team leaders can be seen as representatives of organizational values and norms (Derks et al., 2015; Koch & Binnewies, 2015), team members observe their leaders' communication. These observations can reveal both attitudes and practices concerning connectivity – which may contradict each other (Kirby & Krone, 2002). At the same time, team leaders act as role models regarding work–life balance (Hammer et al., 2009). Team leaders can emphasize the significance of connectivity practices to team members (Stempel et al., 2022) in a similar manner as they can shape the norms regarding the implementation of work–life policies (Brumley et al., 2022). For example, ter Hoeven et al. (2017) highlight the potential for team leaders to impede employee leave-taking, even when such leave is in accordance with organizational policies. Such leader behaviors can prevent employees from engaging with work–life policies and practices (Blight et al., 2022).

Conversely, by serving as positive work–life role models, team leaders can help employees perceive that taking time away from work is socially acceptable (Koch & Binnewies, 2015). Team leaders' work–life-friendly role-modeling behavior is also a critical resource when it comes to employees' emotional exhaustion, work–family conflict, and performance. Team leaders embody organization's standards regarding work–life boundaries and convey valuable information on handling connectivity demands (Stempel et al., 2022).

Global work contains specific characteristics further underscoring the critical role of team leaders, particularly in cases of connectivity issues. Team leaders might need to sustain a greater degree of connectivity beyond standard work hours compared to other team members (Lirio, 2017; Ruppel et al., 2013), which emphasizes the significance of sensemaking in managing the balance between organizational work–life practices and the expectations associated with their position. This indicates that the concept of 'normal' working hours may shift due to the global nature of their responsibilities. Team members spread across different locations may remain connected beyond regular work hours to demonstrate their engagement in work-related activities (Cristea & Leonardi, 2019; Fonner & Roloff, 2012), suggesting that team leaders should be attentive and thoughtful in understanding their team members' connectivity patterns. Therefore, it is crucial that global team leaders approach communication outside of working hours in a manner that fosters trust and respect (Afota et al., 2023).

Sensemaking and work–life boundary management

Weick's (1969) three-phase model of sensemaking illustrates the process through which organizational members seek to clarify situations when faced with moments of uncertainty. The first phase, known as enactment, involves the act of giving meaning to an event or circumstance as it evolves. During the second phase, selection, individuals

consciously choose information or cues from the broader environment that they deem relevant or significant. These cues may be drawn from existing frameworks, such as institutional constraints, organizational premises, plans, expectations, justifications, and traditions (Buzzanell et al., 2005; Weick et al., 2005). In global work, institutional constraints could include labor laws, such as work time regulations of different countries where the global organization has operations. The third phase, retention, involves preserving the constructed meanings from the enactment phase over time, which can shape future actions and decisions (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2015; Weick et al., 2005).

When leaders engage in sensegiving, which involves both interpreting and attempting to influence the sensemaking processes of others to shape organizational reality, organizational members or teams actively participate in their own sensemaking by adopting, changing, resisting, or rejecting the sense given to them (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensegiving can occur both when a more experienced colleague offers a framework for less experienced employees to comprehend their job duties and when less experienced workers with specialized knowledge, such as technology proficiency, contribute to sensegiving. (Barrett, 2020). When sensemaking or sensegiving fails, most often the change initiative also fails (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

Furthermore, sensemaking is not only something that the team leader does: the members of the organization also gather cues from the environment that contribute to interpretations and sensemaking. Wyant and Kramer (2022) showed that local employees of a global organization made sense of new expatriates' roles and responsibilities by gathering cues from their environment by communicating, observing, and applying knowledge from previous experiences. Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) proposed the concept of 'immanent sensemaking' as an alternative to the prevailing idea that sensemaking is only something the leader does and is triggered by significant disruptions. Immanent sensemaking is an ongoing, practical process that involves individuals adjusting their actions in response to information gained in everyday interactions (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020).

Sensemaking is a useful approach when analyzing connectivity expectations and work-life boundaries. Boundary management describes how individuals blend or draw boundaries between work and other life domains (Cruz & Meisenbach, 2018). Boundaries are both physical and psychological but also socially constructed and define when domain-relevant behavior begins or ends (Clark, 2000). Here, making sense of connectivity expectations is a form of boundary management. As team members work out what kind of connectivity is expected based on cues from existing frameworks (Weick et al., 2005), they construct ideas about how to manage the boundaries between work and life. In this process, the role of team leaders' enactment is crucial, as addressing these diverse interpretations can lead to heightened connectivity expectations. When connectivity expectations are high, global employees adjust their boundaries to best meet both work and personal expectations. When employees feel they cannot meet the expectations, they negotiate boundaries to create, change, or maintain them (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996).

Family-supportive team leaders are especially essential for team members' well-being and organizational functioning, acting as gatekeepers for connectivity practices, handling

effective implementation of work–family initiatives, and acting as change agents for informal and supportive organizational culture (Straub, 2012). However, how connectivity expectations are interpreted depend on the organizational norms. Our study explores the sensemaking of connectivity expectations in a global organization and how this sensemaking is reflected in team members’ work–life boundary management. We aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How are connectivity expectations navigated through (a) team members’ sensemaking and (b) team leaders’ sensegiving in global teams?

RQ2: How is sensemaking of connectivity expectations reflected in global team members’ work–life boundary management?

Methods

Participants

The present study is based on in-depth interviews with 55 employees working in a global organization with offices in Europe, the Asia-Pacific region, and the U.S. The global organization, totaling 5,000 employees, operates in the natural resources sector and is headquartered in Northern Europe. The organization had its unique emphasis on prioritizing employee well-being and work–life balance, a principle deeply ingrained in its values and culture. The company engaged in the production, processing, and marketing of natural resources and offered engineering services and production technology. The interviewed employees worked across nine global teams, spanning finance, logistics, marketing, procurement, and sustainability development. Their work week typically consisted of 40 h, with standard working hours ranging from 8 am to 4 pm or 9 am to 5 pm, and workers were covered by a local collective agreement. The interviewees held knowledge-intensive and autonomous roles with varying titles, such as managers, coordinators, specialists, analysts, and controllers.

Of the 55 people interviewed, 23 were female and 32 were male, ranging in age from 24 to 63 years. Their tenure in the organization averaged 3.6 years, with the shortest being less than a year and the longest over 40 years. The employees extensively used communication technologies to perform their work. The company was using a collaboration software suite consisting of Google Workspace (email, instant messaging, meeting tools, shared files), and employees also used the company’s social media platform, WhatsApp, and phone calls for communication and collaboration. [Table 1](#) presents the respondents’ characteristics.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews between October 2020 and August 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the employees had worked from home for several months at the time of the interviews. All interviews were conducted via Google Meet or Zoom video conferencing platforms. The participants were given information about the study, and a suitable time for the interview was arranged. They were also asked to sign a consent form.

Table 1. Profiles of the respondents.

| | Pseudonym | Gender | Age | Job Title | Current location | Nationality |
|---------|-----------|--------|-----|---------------------|------------------|----------------------|
| Team 1 | Giuseppe | male | 41 | Team leader | Singapore | Italian |
| | Thomas | male | 32 | Manager | Australia | Australian |
| | Zander | male | 40 | Manager | Singapore | Singaporean |
| | Yusuf | male | 45 | Manager | Singapore | Malaysian |
| Team 2 | Patrick | male | 31 | Manager | Australia | Australian |
| | Antoine | male | 36 | Team leader | Singapore | French |
| | Kevan | male | 38 | Manager | Singapore | Singaporean |
| | Ami | male | 29 | Specialist | Singapore | Singaporean |
| Team 3 | Harish | male | 28 | Manager | India | Indian |
| | Dina | female | 40 | Controller | Singapore | Singaporean |
| | Simo | male | 35 | Team leader | Singapore | Finnish |
| | Wei | male | 31 | Controller | Singapore | Singaporean |
| Team 4 | Johanna | female | N/A | Manager | China | Finnish |
| | Ethan | male | 52 | Manager | Australia | Australian |
| | Bert | male | 44 | Manager | Netherlands | Dutch |
| | Ken | male | 44 | Manager | Singapore | Singaporean |
| Team 5 | Paul | male | 53 | Manager | US | American |
| | Hugo | male | 56 | Manager | Netherlands | Dutch |
| | Sebastien | male | 63 | Manager | Belgium | Belgian |
| | Adam | male | 48 | Manager | US | American |
| Team 6 | Daniel | male | 53 | Team leader | Finland | Finnish |
| | Hannele | female | 41 | Manager | Finland | Finnish |
| | Chin | female | 36 | Manager | China | Chinese |
| | Mira | female | 29 | Specialist | Finland | Finnish |
| Team 7 | Venla | female | 34 | Manager | Finland | Finnish |
| | Tommi | male | 35 | Specialist | Finland | Finnish |
| | Kiia | female | 35 | Manager | Finland | Finnish |
| | Nicolas | male | 31 | Specialist | Australia | Australian |
| Team 8 | Lucy | female | 38 | Specialist | US | American |
| | Zian | male | 31 | Specialist | China | Chinese |
| | Nadia | female | 40 | Data analyst | Finland | Malaysian |
| | Sari | female | 52 | Team leader | Finland | Finnish |
| Team 9 | Xin | female | 35 | Specialist | Singapore | Singaporean |
| | Rafaek | male | 42 | Controller | US | Brazilian |
| | Kasandra | female | 48 | Controller | US | American |
| | Joseph | male | 32 | Business partner | Netherlands | Dutch |
| Team 10 | Erja | female | 36 | Team leader | Finland/ US | Finnish |
| | Allen | female | 37 | Specialist | US | American |
| | Lance | male | 46 | Senior risk analyst | US | American |
| | Martin | male | 36 | Specialist | US | American |
| Team 11 | Ilona | female | N/A | Specialist | US | Finnish |
| | Zack | male | 26 | Operator | US | Brazilian/ Norwegian |
| | Keely | female | 56 | Coordinator | US | American |
| | Juliana | female | 30 | Coordinator | US | Columbian |
| Team 12 | Sean | male | 61 | Coordinator | US | American |
| | Oili | female | 40 | Team leader | US | Finnish |
| | Dana | female | 37 | Specialist | US | American |
| | Matteo | male | 49 | Team leader | Sweden | Swedish |
| Team 13 | Frans | male | 46 | Manager | Finland | Finnish |
| | Lily | female | 43 | Manager | Sweden | Swedish |
| | Noah | male | 63 | Manager | Finland | Finnish |
| | Maja | female | 24 | Summer Trainee | Finland | Finnish |
| Team 14 | Wilma | female | 55 | Specialist | Finland | Finnish |
| | Vera | female | 46 | Manager | Finland | Finnish |
| | Alma | female | 47 | Team Lead | Finland | Finnish |

The interview protocol included several themes, including the use of different communication technologies, connectivity expectations and boundary management practices within the global team and global work and well-being. Questions such as ‘Have you discussed connectivity expectations in your global team?’ or ‘How would you describe

work–life boundaries in general in your global team?’ led the interviewees to describe with whom and how they talked about connectivity practices, the ways in which connectivity was viewed in the organization, and how team members structured their perceptions when making sense of connectivity expectations.

The interviews were conducted in collaboration with three members of the research team, of which two are the current study’s authors. The interviews lasted from 52 to 134 min, with an average duration of about 75 min. All 55 interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Data analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), in which the first stage of analysis began by reading all 55 interviews, including nine interviews with team leaders and 46 with team members. Both authors reviewed the data, but the first author engaged in memo writing to identify aspects that were prominent, patterned, or unexpected. Following a discussion, the first author shifted to open coding, which included a line-by-line analysis of the dataset coding all the instances where team leaders and members talked about boundary management and work–life balance, communication technology use, connectivity expectations, and the global work environment, producing a broad set of 17 codes. Coding was carried out with qualitative analysis software Atlas.ti.

The second level of coding was carried out using a phronetic iterative approach (Tracy, 2020, p. 11) by revisiting the theory and empirical data, allowing the analysis to be data and theory driven. Returning to theory here was essential because the analysis required theoretical concepts from sensemaking theory (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), in addition to the literature on connectivity, to analyze the team members’ discussions about connectivity practices. The first author analyzed team leaders’ and members’ perceptions of team connectivity issues, collaborating with the second author on coding to create categories.

Descriptive first-level codes, such as ‘communication on all organization levels’ and ‘receiving guidelines from top down regarding connectivity practices,’ were formed into the second-level category ‘sensemaking through effective communication of connectivity issues.’ Descriptive first-level codes such as ‘terminating work at seven p.m.’ and ‘agreeing separately on availability’ formed a second-level category ‘sensemaking by implementing temporal boundaries for connectivity in a team.’

The coding was finalized by grouping the second-level categories into third-level conceptualizations. The first two conceptualizations describe collaborative sensemaking, including ‘collaborative sensemaking: raising awareness’ and ‘collaborative sensemaking: cocreating connectivity rules.’ The third conceptualization is based on team leaders’ interpretations and attempts to influence the sensemaking processes of team members and is labeled as ‘team leaders’ sensegiving: showing example. These third-level conceptualizations respond to RQ1.

To respond to RQ2, we followed the same, three-level analysis structure as with responding to RQ1. First, we examined the ways the identified sensemaking strategies related to connectivity shaped work–life boundary management. The first author

identified descriptive first-level codes, and these were grouped after discussions between authors into second-level categories and third-level conceptualizations. The structure of the coding is shown in Table 2.

To ensure the participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for all individuals, and identifying details were modified. Additionally, some of the quotes were translated from their original language into English.

Table 2. Coding structure.

| First-Level Descriptive Coding | Second-Level Categories | Third-Level Conceptualizations | Research Questions |
|---|---|--|--------------------|
| Communication on all organization levels Receiving guidelines from top down regarding connectivity practices Providing regular opportunity to discuss connectivity issues in teams Paying attention to blurring boundaries Noticing intensified conversations about connectivity issues Providing information about connectivity practices during pandemic | Sensemaking through effective communication of connectivity issues within the team Sensemaking by improving connectivity consciousness within a team | Collaborative sensemaking: Raising awareness | RQ1 |
| Terminating work at seven p.m. Responding the following day Agreeing separately on availability Mutual understanding about urgency Agreed communication channels for urgent matters Considering when scheduling meetings Marking calendars for availability Considering time differences before reaching out for colleague | Sensemaking by implementing temporal boundaries for connectivity in a team Sensemaking by limiting connectivity to urgent needs within a team Sensemaking through spreading out the need to work outside of standard work hours within a team | Collaborative sensemaking: Cocreating connectivity rules | |
| Having separate phones Not replying outside working hours Respecting free time Not sending messages at night Empowering to set boundaries | Sensegiving by showing disengagement practices by team leaders Sensegiving by not placing too high connectivity expectations by team leaders | Team leaders' sensegiving: Showing example | |
| Reducing work-related stress Minimizing constant monitoring Avoiding burdensome flexibility Negotiating workload concerns Guiding toward well-being Enhancing personal boundaries | Detaching from work through cocreated rules Adjusting boundaries through team leaders' sensegiving | Supportive culture for managing work–life boundaries | |

Findings

Navigating connectivity expectations through sensemaking

Global team members managed connectivity expectations through collaborative sensemaking and team leaders' sensegiving. Cues for sensemaking were mainly drawn from organizational and global work frameworks. However, in some cases, connectivity expectations were interpreted through frameworks that emphasized the need for constant connectivity. Additionally, team leaders' sensegiving was not always successful due to their occasionally conflicting actions.

Collaborative sensemaking: raising awareness

Team members navigated connectivity expectations through collaborative sensemaking by raising awareness of connectivity issues. This served as a basis for other ways of making sense of connectivity expectations, as connectivity, particularly outside of working hours, was recognized as an aspect that required attention, improvement, and ongoing negotiation. The organization placed a high value on employee well-being and work-life balance, and communicated this message consistently throughout the organization, including communication from the CEO. This enactment created cues for team members to select to make sense of roles and connectivity expectations, as observed by Communication Manager Vera who noted: 'We have talked about this topic in the team and how important it is that you can't work around the clock; you must have personal life and free time. Our CEO emphasizes this in his own speeches.'

Participants also mentioned that discussions in which all team members were able to participate contributed the most to the collaborative sensemaking. In other words, one-way communication from the management was not always enough, but it was crucial for teams to form a shared interpretation of connectivity issues so that the importance of employee well-being or work-life balance did not remain mere talk. Sensemaking was largely enacted by using concrete examples, such as what was deemed urgent. Kevan, a manager working in Singapore, described an ideal situation where all team members were present and contributed to collaborative sensemaking:

Last year, there was a session [on work-life balance]. Everyone got together and our office manager was explaining how to work on a balanced work-life scenario. What are deemed important [emails] and what are considered nonessential and could be replied to the following days.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the vast majority of the global team members worked from home, resulting in blurring boundaries between work and personal life. This was due to factors such as the absence of a physical transition from work to home, making it challenging to disengage from work. In this new way of working, teams felt an increase in connectivity expectations, leading to a growing need to reevaluate these expectations. Team Manager Bert noted that 'We often discuss this topic, but it's more crucial now during the COVID crisis when working from home disrupts our usual rhythm.' Team members sought cues from higher-up in the company and from the organizational framework. Kasandra, who worked as a controller, explained: 'I think they [management] made it clear that though we are in COVID and just because you are working remotely it doesn't mean you have to keep on working all the time.' As the organization prioritized

employee well-being and emphasized it across various levels, employees selected cues that aided them in retaining connectivity expectations at a level conducive to their well-being, despite the changed work environment.

Through collaborative sensemaking employee well-being was highlighted and connectivity expectations reevaluated in the changed work environment. This meant raising awareness of connectivity expectations not only within teams but also in the broader organizational discourse, and this helped global team members to prevent overwork. Nevertheless, there were also moments when organizational discourse did not align with daily work practices. Ilona, who had extensive expertise in global work, conveyed: 'Although guidelines have been provided, work must still be completed. The only way to manage working hours is by increasing staffing levels; otherwise, we stay connected 24/7.'

Collaborative sensemaking: cocreating connectivity rules

Team members also navigated connectivity expectations collaboratively, cocreating rules for connectivity within the team by implementing temporal boundaries for connectivity, limiting connectivity to urgent needs, and spreading out the need to work outside of standard work hours. The first rule, creating temporal boundaries for connectivity, was agreed upon in team meetings through open discussion. In several teams this rule enabled team members to make sense of connectivity expectations through sharing experiences of being contacted by their global colleagues throughout the evening and agreeing together on when they should respond. Martin (Specialist), working in the U.S. with colleagues from Asia and Europe, noted that 'We essentially said [in the team] that if you send out an email, I think the cut-off is like 7 pm Don't expect a chat or an email to be responded after that time.' The rule involved a shared agreement not to send or reply to work-related messages beyond a specific time. Rather than selecting cues from a global work framework, such that constant connectivity is an inherent aspect of global work, cues were selected from the organizational framework in which respecting employees' personal time was valued.

However, implementing temporal boundaries did not prove feasible in all teams. Instead, some team members relied on their professional frameworks to determine their work hours. Lily, a manager working within European-based team, stated that she always responds to messages, even outside of regular work hours, as 'it is part of our job to be always available.' Working across global work boundaries also caused pressures that team members perceived as stemming primarily from self-imposed expectations, rather than from organizational connectivity expectations. Mira, in her role as a Specialist, conveyed the stress brought about by temporal boundaries by saying that 'The team doesn't impose the pressure; it's my personal sense to stay connected. Messages coming at different times add to the pressure, making me doubt my ability to respond quickly enough.' Still, in several teams this cocreated rule helped team members make sense of situations that were naturally associated with global work, such as time zone differences in office hours.

The second rule was limiting connectivity to urgent needs. Team members had made it clear based on their prior experiences that they would contact each other outside office hours only for urgent matters. This was agreed because teams recognized the importance of respecting others' personal time. Depending on the job function, perceptions or

frequency of urgency varied; on the operational side, urgency was more frequent than for those working in development tasks. This implied that teams selected cues for their sensemaking also from their professional frameworks. For instance, operational professionals experienced rapidly evolving circumstances demanding urgent connectivity as Zack, Specialist in Operations noted: ‘With those people [coworkers, team leader], if they need something they know they can reach out to me anytime, and if I need something, the same.’

Coupled with the rule of limiting connectivity to urgent needs were norms about the relationship between communication technologies and task urgency. The global team members often reported that phone calls should be used for the most urgent matters:

I shut my computer down at the end of the day, and I have my phone. If it’s urgent, I expect somebody to call, text, or send a Google Chat, but frankly, if it’s urgent, then I just expect them to call me. There’s nothing more rapid than a phone call for a sense of urgency. (Paul, Manager)

The third rule was to spread out the need to work outside of standard work hours within the team. This meant considering time differences in global, day-to-day collaboration, especially when (virtual) meetings were organized. Chin, a team member on an Asia-based team, said: ‘The team leader always considers everybody. Maybe this month, he will consider the time in Asia. Next month, he will consider time in the U.S.’ The team leaders similarly reported that they considered time differences when organizing meetings. Team leader Antoine reported that he always asked his team members ‘to display on Google calendar their working hours so you make sure you book a slot in a sweet spot when they are free and within their working hours.’ Yet, team leader Oili observed that such enactment was not always possible, especially when connectivity expectations were imposed from external sources, such as from the headquarters. She pointed out that ‘Many team members do complain that it’s a bit much when you participate in a meeting at 10 pm, and then it lasts until midnight.’ This kind of experience was also shared by Ethan, a member of an Asia-based team, who said that ‘I think there’s a little bit of lack of consideration from some of the global folks, it might be midday (in headquarters) but what does that mean for us ... so we tend to get the short straw.’

Establishing connectivity rules was sometimes hindered by individual team members’ routines, where they mainly relied on professional frameworks for cues about appropriate choices. Moreover, the created rules did not always account for connectivity expectations outside the team, and these external expectations were sometimes in conflict with the team level norms.

Team leaders’ sensegiving: showing example

Finally, team members navigated connectivity expectations through team leaders’ sensegiving. Team leaders engaged in sensegiving by demonstrating disconnecting practices and communicating that it was acceptable to disconnect from work when needed. Team leaders also avoided setting overly high connectivity expectations, thereby assisting team members in navigating them.

Team leaders communicated connectivity expectations by demonstrating how to disconnect from work, as illustrated by a team member who learned disconnection practices from a team leader:

Our manager sets a good example: she has a work phone and private phone, and she puts the work phone in a locker for the evening. The fact that she sets an example through her actions emphasizes the importance of separate leisure time from work. If management sends out a message like that, which means that it is really allowed to disconnect, I think the company manages it quite well. (Vera, Communication Specialist)

Although team leaders were trying to promote a healthy work–life balance, there were instances when emails were being received after work hours. Sometimes this also led to confusion because sensegiving was not aligned with actions. Lucy, whose team leader worked in a different time zone, mentioned that ‘I know that my manager is working late, sometimes it’s eleven or twelve here and she’s still responding to my emails. So it’s almost the end of my day and she’s still working, so it’s crazy.’ Despite the occasionally conflicting actions, team leaders’ practices facilitated team members’ sensemaking and demonstrated that connectivity does not need to be constant, even in a global work setting.

Team leaders also reported that they tried not to create overly high expectations for connectivity through their own actions and examples. This meant that leaders’ communication practices did not pressure team members to be always connected or available beyond what was reasonable. To some extent, the team leaders found this enactment paradoxical as they had to balance the cues arising from different frameworks, such as a professional framework of leading a global team and an organizational framework of respecting employees’ personal time. Even though the team leaders would have allowed higher connectivity expectations from their own leaders, they did not want to reciprocate these in their teams. Alma, one of the team leaders, said, ‘I try to set an example myself, although sometimes I have to be connected in the evenings, I try not to contact them [team members] late at night.’ Team leader Erja, based in Europe but leading team members in the U.S., drew on cues for sensegiving from the organizational framework of respecting employees’ personal time. She stated.

I’m always connected, reading Hangouts (instant messaging program), and checking emails outside of work hours. Although I expect myself to be constantly connected, I don’t expect the same of my team. They’ve been told that they don’t need to be connected.

By demonstrating disengagement practices, communicating the acceptability of disconnecting from work when necessary, and avoiding the setting of excessively high connectivity expectations, the team leaders fostered a culture in which team members felt empowered to establish their own boundaries. This approach was particularly important as they navigated connectivity expectations in a global work environment.

Sensemaking of connectivity expectations and work–life boundary management

The way in which global team members made sense of connectivity expectations was mirrored in employees’ work–life boundary management in two ways: first, cocreated rules enabled team members to disconnect from work, and second, through team leaders’ sensegiving, team members could adjust their work–life boundaries. These efforts resulted in a supportive culture for managing work–life boundaries. However, in some instances, cues drawn from the professional framework disrupted employees’ work–life boundary management.

Detaching from work through cocreated rules

Global team members navigated connectivity expectations through collaborative sense-making by cocreating connectivity rules. These rules, from a boundary management perspective, helped team members disconnect from work by reducing work-related stress and fostering confidence that they did not need to be constantly connected. The rules also assisted in minimizing the monitoring of phones outside of working hours and avoided the imposition of burdensome flexibility. Zack, a Specialist in Operations, described how the mutually agreed upon rule of limiting connectivity to only urgent needs supported his detachment from work and contributed to a reduction in work-related stress:

It helps we have the different rules of communicating after hours – there’s no point in stressing and having anxiety after the work hours because now you’re done and did what you were supposed to, and I did everything I needed to do and tomorrow is a new day.

The utilization of these cocreated rules was instrumental in maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life. The implementation of connectivity rules, such as limiting connectivity to only urgent matters, allowed team members to establish realistic expectations for connectivity and minimize work-related stress. Rules also helped to minimize the constant monitoring of phones outside of working hours, reducing uncertainty, and promoting a better work–life balance. Teams recognized the negative impact of continuous monitoring and encouraged team members to avoid it by adhering to these guidelines. Bert, the head of a small subteam, expressed that ‘If there is anything urgent, people can reach me, but I avoid constantly monitoring the situation as it would negatively impact my work–life balance.’

Similarly, team members’ boundary management reflected the rule of continuous attention to time differences. When time differences were considered, team members avoided burdensome flexibility and managed boundaries more easily. Team member Wei from an Asia-Pacific-based team described how the cocreated rule of continuous attention to time differences helped manage work–life boundaries when meetings with colleagues were scheduled. He noted: ‘My colleague rescheduled meetings to fit within office hours, ensuring we avoid overtime. I appreciate this effort, promoting a more balanced work–life culture.’

In almost all teams, guidelines for considering time differences and limiting contact to urgent needs were established, yet the work–life boundary management was disrupted by cues drawn from the professional framework. These individual team member’s routines were marked by phrases like ‘I always have my phone on,’ ‘I’m always available,’ and ‘This job requires 24/7 connectivity’ which conveyed the expectation for constant connectivity. This presented a challenge to boundary management. A Specialist, Ilona, who worked in a global role, described it as ‘palpable sense of burnout’ and Manager Lily, responsible for global corporate communications, expressed it as ‘It is very clear that I stress, I work too much.’

In the most successful instances, the cocreated rules had a positive impact on the work–life boundary management of global team members. Conversely, in the most unsuccessful cases, these rules may have gone unrecognized or rejected, offering no support for boundary management.

Adjusting work–life boundaries through team leaders’ sensegiving

Team leaders played a crucial role in helping team members navigate connectivity expectations through their sensegiving. They facilitated the negotiation of workload concerns, guided team members toward well-being, and fostered the enhancement of personal boundaries. These efforts enabled team members to adjust their work–life boundaries, ultimately contributing to their overall work–life boundary management.

Hanne, a team member in a Europe-based team, talked about the importance of team leaders for managing boundaries: ‘We meet with the team leader once a week to discuss our working hours, workload, and general progress, among other things.’ Because of this, Hanne felt that ‘there is a strong encouragement in our workplace to take care of ourselves, and it has been incredibly reassuring to feel that people’s well-being is genuinely cared for.’ Team leader’s sensegiving when negotiating working hours and workload as a team created a positive experience by demonstrating team leaders’ concern for employees and the importance of work–life balance. In addition, team leaders’ sensegiving increased the perception that work–life boundaries were adjustable and could be shaped by collective discussion.

Team leaders’ sensegiving proved to be especially beneficial during the pandemic, providing insights into how to adjust work–life boundaries at unprecedented times. Team leaders helped members understand the significance of work–life boundary management and guided team members toward well-being. Ethan, a manager from a team with members across Asia-Pacific, reflected on these guidelines and his own boundary adjustment:

We know when to turn off [communication technologies] and just be disciplined around making those decisions to turn off. I think that’s the most important thing. And well-being, it’s health, it’s wealth, it’s family – you just need to make sure that you find that balance between the elements of your life.

Team leaders who encouraged adherence to official working hours drew cues for sensegiving from the organizational framework of respecting employees’ personal time. This enabled some team members to enhance their work–life boundaries. Team member Harish, who had previously worked in another global organization, described this as follows:

Every time we meet, he [team leader] asks me whether I’m facing any difficulty in terms of work–life balance and whether my work is properly distributed. He ensures that the team is not too busy to disrupt the work–life balance—so I think the work–life balance has improved from my previous organization. That’s for sure.

Through the process of sensemaking, global team members managed their work–life boundaries. The emerging interpretations and understandings from this process not only aided in personal decision making, such as choosing to disconnect from work or establishing boundaries between work and leisure time; it also established boundaries that were negotiable where connectivity expectations became too challenging, creating a supportive culture for managing work–life boundaries.

Discussion

Our aim was to investigate how members of global teams navigate connectivity expectations by engaging in sensemaking processes. The findings show that sensemaking

around connectivity expectations involves collaborations within the team related to raising awareness and cocreating connectivity rules. In these two conceptualizations, sensemaking refers to the process where both team members and leaders become aware and understand the jointly created rules. In the third conceptualization – team leaders’ sensegiving by showing example – team leaders’ actions helped team members interpret and understand connectivity expectations.

Additionally, global team members’ sensemaking of connectivity expectations manifested in how they managed their work–life boundaries. First, cocreated rules helped team members disconnect from work. Second, through team leaders’ sensegiving, team members could understand how boundaries could be adjusted, negotiated, and confirmed. This process created a supportive culture for managing work–life boundaries.

Previous studies have shown that excessive connectivity, particularly outside working hours, can have numerous effects on well-being (Arlinghaus & Nachreiner, 2013; Büchler et al., 2020; Mazmanian et al., 2013). However, the use of communication technology during after-hours also reduces exhaustion by increasing autonomy (van Zoonen et al., 2023), which helps employees manage the pressures of global work (Lirio, 2017; Nurmi & Hinds, 2020). Considering these previous, and somewhat contradictory findings, our research elucidates the role of connectivity in work–life boundary management and employee well-being. We found that global team members and leaders used organizational, global work, and professional frameworks to make sense of connectivity expectations. At the same time, these frameworks guide how connectivity expectations are approached and managed.

Our conceptual model of connectivity sensemaking (Figure 1) highlights the significance of the organizational framework prioritizing employee well-being and respecting personal time in providing cues for sensemaking. The organizational framework was reflected in employees’ work–life boundary management, guiding employees towards disconnection outside office hours. In addition to the organizational framework, employees drew cues from global and professional norms and practices, such as leading global teams or being in an operational role. By strategically selecting or deselecting cues from various frameworks (Buzzanell et al., 2005), employees navigated the connectivity demands arising from global work and took a more holistic approach to sensemaking. However, relying solely on professional or global work frameworks often led to the perception that constant connectivity was the appropriate way to meet connectivity expectations. This, in turn, seemed to challenge employees’ boundary management.

Theoretical implications

Our study underscores the significance of collaborative sensemaking in fostering a shared understanding of connectivity expectations and facilitating navigation through the complexities of global work. Conversely, our findings also highlight situations where sensemaking occurred without communication from team leaders, or where the sensegiving attempts by team leaders were rejected. We believe such rejections are connected to employees’ opportunities to draw on multiple frameworks in their sensemaking, and specifically when employees’ identities are strongly intertwined with these frameworks, identities can shape employees’ actions, and provide diverse rules and resources for connectivity practices (Scott et al., 1998).

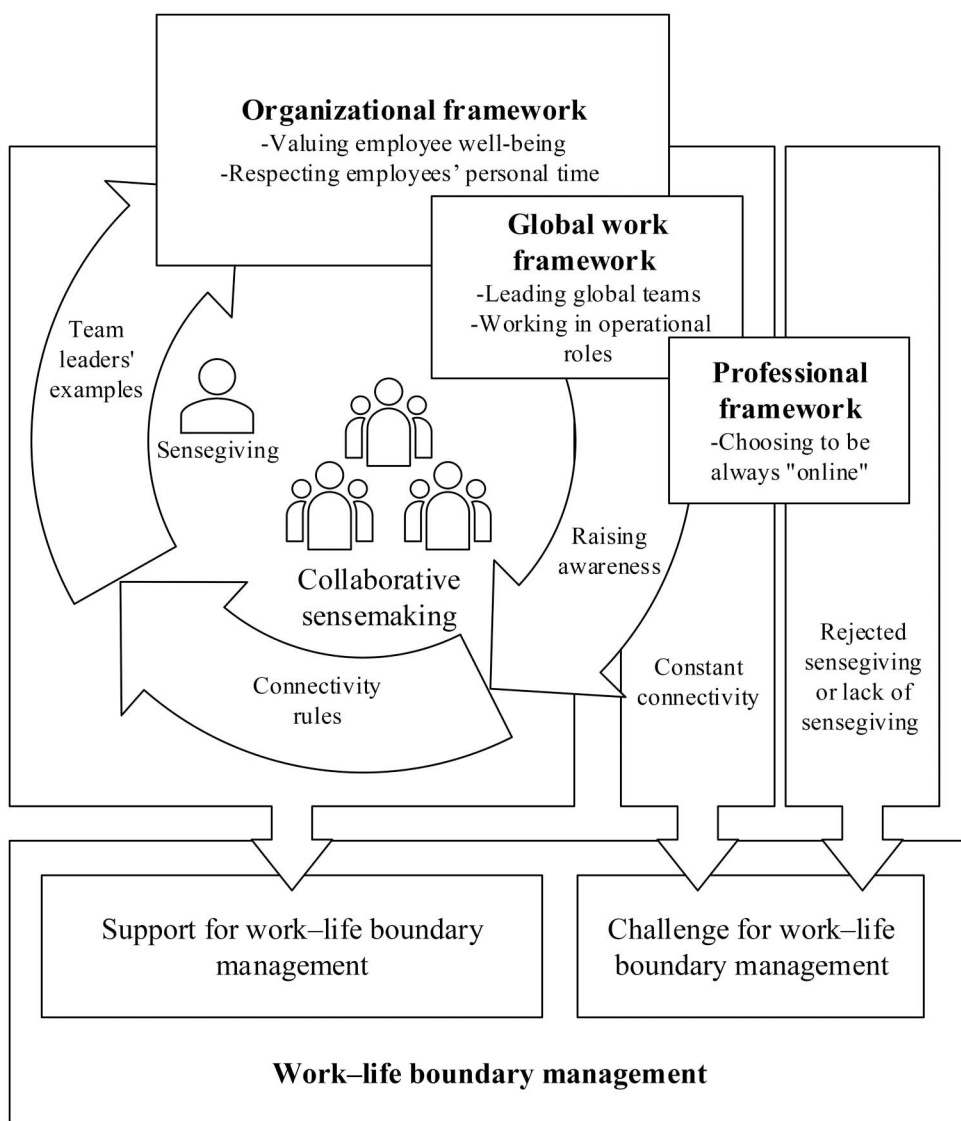


Figure 1. Conceptual model regarding sensemaking of connectivity expectations in global teams.

First, this study contributes to research on how individuals interpret and respond to workplace norms and expectations through sensemaking, especially in dispersed work environments (Afota et al., 2023; Cristea & Leonardi, 2019; Fonner & Roloff, 2012). These findings also contribute to broader discussions in organizational communication and management research about how employees and organizations can co-create and navigate expectations and prevent after-hours connectivity from becoming the norm.

Second, our study demonstrates the importance of socially constructed and negotiated work-life boundaries (Ashforth et al., 2000; Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996) and how they can be supported through the establishment of connectivity rules especially when team frameworks align with organizational frameworks. By unpacking the social

construction of work–life boundaries through sensegiving framework, this study extends prior research by showing how team leaders, in particular, are able to communicatively construct work–life practices in organizations (Blight et al., 2022; ter Hoeven et al., 2017). As our findings suggest, establishing such practices, such as creation of connectivity rules, requires an active participation of both team members and leaders. In a global work environment with multiple overlapping frameworks, discussions at an abstract level or guidelines presented top-down can pose challenges. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate participation in decision-making around which framework's cues are selected for sense-making, and what do the cues provided by the frameworks mean in practice for the daily work of team members and team leaders.

Third, even though supervisors and team leaders can define acceptable levels of connectivity, set boundaries, and guide team members in managing their work–life balance (Brumley et al., 2022; Derks et al., 2015; Koch & Binnewies, 2015; Stempel et al., 2022) our findings suggest that team leaders' sensegiving is not always successful. This lack of success was sometimes due to navigation between cues from different frameworks (global work versus organizational), which occasionally caused confusion for team members as expectations were not clear or the actions of the team leader did not align with the given meanings. Several factors, such as having organizational structures where the team leader is primarily an administrative manager with limited interaction with team members, may also contribute to the lack of sensegiving in global teams. Furthermore, employees who rely on a professional framework with the idea of constant connectivity being a part of their work identity (see also Weick, 1995) may reject team leaders' sensegiving. A strong work identity is created through social interaction (Scott et al., 1998), highlighting who we are, who we represent and with which groups we wish to identify (Endacott & Leonardi, 2022). By embracing established professional norms and values, individuals showcase their ability to adapt and thrive in the work environment. However, on the flip side, such a strong identification to the professional framework may present challenges in boundary management.

Practical implications

Our findings have several practical implications for team leaders, team members, and organizations. While boundary management can be approached as a strategic action at the individual level (Kreiner et al., 2009; Ruppel et al., 2013), organizations' social norms and connectivity expectations set by top management play a critical role in shaping employee behavior and expectations around connectivity (De Alwis et al., 2022). Based on our findings, we encourage organizational leaders to engage in discussions that build mutual understanding of connectivity expectations as such sensemaking can support employees' boundary management, foster a positive work environment, and mitigate employee burnout. These discussions could be fostered through training programs and seminars specifically designed for team leaders, supervisors, and HR practitioners. In the context of global work, we also recommend organizations carefully review their meeting practices, acknowledging the potential challenges. It is crucial to scrutinize whether these practices are tailored to meet the needs of employees or whether they are, for instance, dictated by headquarters. As highlighted by our findings, team leaders may find themselves unable to influence the connectivity expectations imposed on team members from external sources,

such as organizational policies, industry standards, or client demands. Consequently, this dynamic may further solidify the belief among employees with a strong work identity that sustained success in their roles necessitates constant connectivity.

The importance of an open communication culture related to connectivity issues cannot be overstated. Employees who feel empowered to talk about connectivity expectations can take charge of their work–life boundaries and may enhance their self-regulation skills and overall well-being at work. This way, an organizational culture that is open to sensemaking related to connectivity expectations can support employees' work–life boundary management and well-being.

Limitations and future research

The study has been conducted in one organization, which limits our ability to generalize findings beyond this organizational context. Some interviewees who had worked at different companies noted that they were surprised by the organization's strong focus on employee well-being and work–life balance. This suggests that further research could examine how sensemaking processes may differ in organizations with different organizational cultures. Our findings highlighted the role of organizational, global, and professional frameworks in making sense of connectivity expectations, but other frameworks may be relevant in different types of organizations. Additionally, future research on the relationship between employees' identity and sensemaking, such as identification with certain sensemaking frameworks, seems relevant as the selection or deselection of cues from those frameworks might be related to multiple identities offering different rules and resources of action.

Finally, our study found that global teams' sensemaking regarding connectivity expectations was shaped by multiple factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to remote work during this period may have heightened the difficulties and stress associated with connectivity expectations and work–life balance, particularly at the outset of the pandemic. Further research should study how the sensemaking of connectivity expectations and work–life boundary management is shaped by new, hybrid ways of working.

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