Digital Burnout and the Future of Human Sustainability at Work: A Critical Reflection from Organizational Development (2015–2025)

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Abstract: Over the past decade, the accelerated digitalization of work has enhanced connectivity and productivity but has also generated new and often invisible forms of psychological exhaustion that threaten the sustainability of human performance. This article presents a qualitative, non-systematic review of fifty peer-reviewed studies published between 2015 and 2025, selected based on their explicit examination of digital burnout, technostress, or technology-related exhaustion in professional and academic contexts. The synthesis integrates empirical and conceptual contributions from psychology, management, and Organizational Development (OD), identifying three core mechanisms: technological overload and loss of autonomy, organizational cultures of hyperconnectivity, and resilience-related protective factors. Collectively, these findings indicate that digital burnout is not a matter of individual weakness but a structural imbalance between technological acceleration and human sustainability. By reframing digital burnout as both a symptom of systemic dysfunction and an opportunity for organizational renewal, the study highlights the need to shift from individual coping approaches to organizational interventions that redesign digital work environments around autonomy, empathy, recovery, and ethical digital practices—foundational principles for creating sustainable, human-centered workplaces in the digital era.

Keywords: Technostress; Occupational burnout; Organizational development; Digital burnout; Job sustainability

Introduction

Between 2015 and 2025, research on digital transformation has increasingly revealed an unexpected consequence of technological acceleration: the emergence of digital burnout. This phenomenon, which extends beyond the traditional concept of occupational burnout, reflects the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral costs of permanent connectivity, information overload, and the pressure to adapt continuously to evolving digital demands (Alvarez-Risco et al., 2021; Ceylan et al., 2024; Dragano & Lunau, 2020; Maier et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2023). Although the integration of digital platforms in professional and academic settings has improved efficiency and access to information, it has simultaneously generated subtle yet pervasive forms of fatigue that threaten well-being and long-term job sustainability (Bunjak et al., 2021; Li & Liu, 2022; Topsakal & Irmak, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the abrupt shift to remote and hybrid work intensified these dynamics, amplifying experiences of technostress, blurred work–life boundaries, and emotional exhaustion across sectors (Marrinhas et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022; Zis et al., 2021). Evidence from healthcare, education, and service industries shows that continuous exposure to digital environments increases perceived workload, cognitive overload, and vulnerability to mental health risks (Bahr et al., 2023; Consiglio et al., 2023; Durmuş et al.,

2022; Picone et al., 2024). As a result, digital burnout undermines not only individual energy levels but also job satisfaction, creativity, and engagement—elements that are essential for sustainable organizational development (Gemmano et al., 2023; Jia et al., 2025; Sharma & Tiwari, 2023).

Across the literature, technostress consistently appears as a central antecedent of digital burnout. Excessive information flow, digital interruptions, and techno-complexity have been repeatedly identified as mechanisms that erode autonomy, fragment attention, and increase emotional strain (Khedhaouria & Cucchi, 2019; Pflügner et al., 2024; Srivastava et al., 2015). However, recent studies highlight that digital burnout extends beyond technological pressures: it reflects misalignments between organizational expectations, leadership styles, and employees' psychological resources (Kamel, 2025; Yener et al., 2021). Variables such as self-efficacy, digital competence, and emotional intelligence offer partial protection against digital overload (Consiglio et al., 2023; Dharma & Mahaardhika, 2025; Shaban et al., 2025), yet these individual capacities often fall short when organizations normalize hyperconnectivity and constant availability (Bunjak et al., 2021; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2025).

The evidence also suggests that digital burnout compromises innovation and creativity by restricting cognitive flexibility and fostering climates of exhaustion incompatible with sustainable performance (Bunjak et al., 2021; Dawa et al., 2025; Misara et al., 2025; Santiago-Torner et al., 2025). In professions requiring high cognitive and emotional engagement—such as healthcare, education, and IT—digital burnout has been linked to reduced empathy, impaired decision-making, and higher turnover intention (Bail et al., 2023; Michalik & Schermuly, 2023; Muhamad et al., 2025; Tu et al., 2025). Across contexts, a similar mechanism emerges: digitalization has expanded the temporal and psychological reach of work, transforming previously discrete tasks into continuous processes of digital interaction (Choi & Kim, 2024; Da Silva et al., 2024; Li et al., 2025).

Although recent years have seen a proliferation of digital well-being initiatives, most interventions remain centered on individual strategies—mindfulness, self-help applications, or time-management tools (Aye et al., 2024; L'Engle et al., 2025; Zielhorst et al., 2015). In contrast, few organizations have implemented systemic measures that address structural causes such as workload design, communication norms, or managerial expectations (Dragano & Lunau, 2020; Sanchez-Segura et al., 2023; Shen & Kuang, 2022). This fragmentation reveals a clear gap: the need to integrate digital well-being and organizational sustainability within the framework of Organizational Development (OD). The challenge is not only to help individuals cope with digital stress but also to redesign work systems so that technological efficiency does not override human needs for recovery, meaning, and connection (Gemmano et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2020).

In light of this evidence, the present article conducts a qualitative, non-systematic review and critical reflection on digital burnout between 2015 and 2025. The goal is to synthesize empirical findings, identify the underlying organizational and psychological mechanisms, and examine their implications for job sustainability and the future of organizational development. By framing digital burnout as a systemic outcome of digital transformation, this reflection seeks to illuminate new pathways for building healthier, more balanced, and sustainable digital workplaces

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, non-systematic review design grounded in interpretative and reflexive analysis. Unlike systematic reviews that aim for exhaustive inclusion, this approach prioritizes depth of understanding and conceptual integration over quantitative coverage (Snyder, 2019). The objective was to capture the evolution of the concept of digital burnout and its relationship with job sustainability and organizational development (OD) across multiple contexts between 2015 and 2025.

Selection Criteria and Corpus Construction

The database used for this review consisted of 50 peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2015 and 2025 in leading outlets indexed in Scopus and Web of Science. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

(a) the article explicitly addressed digital burnout, technostress, or technology-related exhaustion; (b) the study examined psychological, organizational, or social implications of digitalization at work; (c) the research provided empirical or conceptual contributions relevant to sustainability, performance, or well-being in digital environments.

Exclusion criteria included non-peer-reviewed materials, purely technical studies without psychosocial focus, and articles centered exclusively on non-work digital contexts (e.g., gaming or entertainment). The final corpus integrated research from diverse sectors — healthcare, education, technology, and service industries— to ensure a multidimensional understanding of the phenomenon.

Analytical Procedure

Following the principles of integrative and reflexive review (Baumeister, 2012; Grant & Booth, 2009), the analytical process involved three iterative stages:

Immersion and familiarization: Each article was read in full to identify its theoretical orientation, conceptual definitions of digital burnout, and empirical findings.

Thematic synthesis: The material was coded into preliminary categories (e.g., antecedents, mediators, consequences, mitigation strategies, and organizational implications). Through constant comparison, patterns and relationships between technological stressors and organizational variables were identified.

Critical reflection: Beyond thematic grouping, a meta-interpretative reflection was conducted to link the empirical findings with broader questions of organizational development, human sustainability, and digital transformation. This phase allowed the articulation of integrative insights and conceptual gaps.

Reflexive Stance and Validity

The interpretative process was guided by a constructivist epistemological stance, recognizing that meaning emerges through the interaction between empirical evidence and theoretical reflection. The review did not aim for exhaustive representativeness but for conceptual saturation—that is, identifying recurring mechanisms, tensions, and paradoxes that characterize digital burnout as an organizational phenomenon.

To strengthen validity, methodological triangulation was achieved by contrasting findings across disciplines (psychology, management, education, and information systems) and by maintaining a reflective journal of analytical decisions. This process ensured transparency and coherence between the corpus, the interpretative categories, and the final theoretical insights.

Ethical and Temporal Scope

Not all the studies included in this review were open access; therefore, access to some documents was obtained through institutional databases and academic repositories. Only peer-reviewed and ethically approved research was considered, ensuring respect for authorship and intellectual property rights. No confidential, personal, or sensitive data were used.

In organizing and synthesizing the literature, artificial intelligence tools were employed exclusively as assistive instruments—to support text organization, detect redundancy, and aid in translation or back-translation of selected passages when necessary. All analytical

decisions, interpretations, and conceptual integrations were made by the author to preserve academic integrity and originality.

The temporal scope (2015–2025) was intentionally chosen to capture the decade in which digital burnout evolved from a peripheral topic into a central organizational concern, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent consolidation of remote and hybrid work models.

Results

Technological Overload and Loss of Autonomy

Across the literature, one of the most consistent findings is that technological overload—caused by constant digital interaction, excessive information flow, and task fragmentation—plays a decisive role in the emergence of digital burnout. Studies across multiple sectors describe how employees and students experience mental fatigue, loss of concentration, and emotional exhaustion due to continuous exposure to digital platforms and the expectation of permanent responsiveness (Bunjak et al., 2021; Marsh et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2023; Zhao et al., 2022). These conditions are often intensified by multitasking and by the inability to disconnect, which gradually erode autonomy and cognitive control (Khedhaouria & Cucchi, 2019; Kuadey et al., 2024; Pflügner et al., 2024; Santiago-Torner, 2023a, 2023b).

Empirical evidence suggests that this overload is not simply technological but also psychological and organizational. For instance, Durmuş et al. (2022) observed that nursing students exposed to prolonged online environments report elevated levels of exhaustion and depersonalization. Similarly, Gemmano et al. (2023) found that dual-earner families faced an imbalance between personal and professional demands during remote work, leading to increased work–home conflict and fatigue. These findings align with research in professional sectors where constant monitoring and performance metrics exacerbate pressure and reduce perceived control over the workday (Kaltenegger et al., 2024; Kutlutürk Yıkılmaz et al., 2024; Picone et al., 2024).

Several studies link these effects to the loss of job autonomy. Workers report feeling trapped in systems that dictate their rhythm of interaction, leaving little room for recovery or self-regulation (Atanasoff & Venable, 2017; Dragano & Lunau, 2020; Srivastava et al., 2015). The imbalance between technological efficiency and human energy management emerges as a key theme, highlighting that burnout in digital contexts originates in the structure of digitalized work rather than in individual weakness. This axis thus underscores how excessive technological demands progressively undermine autonomy, creativity, and well-being across occupational settings.

Organizational Culture and Systemic Hyperconnectivity

A second dominant theme concerns the cultural and structural roots of digital burnout. Numerous studies emphasize that the most harmful effects arise when organizations cultivate implicit expectations of constant digital presence and rapid response (Kamel, 2025; Maier et al., 2015; Sharma & Tiwari, 2023). These cultures of hyperconnectivity gradually erode the boundaries between work and rest, normalizing chronic stress and diminishing employee engagement.

Evidence from healthcare and education illustrates this pattern clearly. Bahr et al. (2023) and Marrinhas et al. (2023) show that digitalization reshapes workloads and professional identities, positioning digital systems as tools that facilitate coordination yet simultaneously extend working hours and intensify surveillance. Similarly, Muhamad et al. (2025) reported that Malaysian healthcare professionals experience fatigue and burnout when high digital demands coexist with limited institutional support. Tu et al. (2025) observed the same dynamic among STEM teachers, for whom role ambiguity and heightened digital expectations undermined job satisfaction.

Leadership and managerial practices play a decisive role in shaping these outcomes. Studies by Li et al. (2025) and Sanchez-Segura et al. (2023) indicate that digital transformation strategies centered exclusively on efficiency tend to exacerbate burnout. In contrast, organizations characterized by participatory decision-making and transparent communication mitigate the negative consequences of digitalization. Consistent with this, Wang et al. (2020), Zhao et al. (2024), and Topsakal and Irmak (2023) show that clear digital norms and explicit organizational support promote psychological safety and reduce stress associated with digital demands.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that digital burnout cannot be understood solely as an individual reaction to technology. Instead, it reflects systemic hyperconnectivity deeply rooted in collective norms and institutional expectations. The literature calls for cultural change toward recovery-oriented, humane, and sustainable digital practices—principles that align closely with the values at the core of Organizational Development.

Resilience, Digital Competence, and Job Sustainability

The third axis highlights the protective role of personal and organizational resources in counteracting digital burnout. Among the most studied variables are self-efficacy, digital competence, emotional intelligence, and resilience. Consiglio et al. (2023) found that e-work self-efficacy moderates the relationship between technostress and burnout among remote workers, while Yener et al. (2021) showed that technological self-efficacy and time management skills help sustain performance under high digital demands.

Emotional intelligence also emerges as a key buffer. In healthcare and nursing settings, Shaban et al. (2025) demonstrated its mediating role in mitigating the effects of digital strain, and Prikhidko et al. (2020) linked emotional regulation and digital emotion contagion to psychological well-being during crisis situations. These capabilities support the maintenance of interpersonal connection and emotional stability in hyperconnected environments.

Digital competence further contributes to protection against digital burnout. Research from various countries indicates that higher levels of digital literacy reduce perceived stress and enhance adaptability in online learning and remote work settings (Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2021; Li & Liu, 2022; Dharma & Mahaardhika, 2025). Beyond facilitating efficiency, such competence reinforces autonomy and confidence in navigating digital demands.

The literature also highlights promising interventions aimed at reducing fatigue and enhancing engagement. Digital self-help programs, coaching tools, and wellness initiatives show partial effectiveness (Aye et al., 2024; L'Engle et al., 2025; Pospos et al., 2018; Zielhorst et al., 2015). However, as Da Silva et al. (2024) and Pagan-Garbin et al. (2024) note, these initiatives have limited impact when they are not embedded within broader organizational efforts. Sustainable job performance therefore requires integrating resilience-building into the organizational fabric and not relying solely on individual-level coping mechanisms.

Overall, the evidence depicts a complex and interconnected landscape in which technological acceleration, organizational expectations, and individual capacities interact dynamically. Digital burnout thus transcends the personal sphere, underscoring the need for systemic learning and organizational redesign. These insights provide the empirical grounding for the discussion that follows, which explores the implications of these dynamics for job sustainability and the future of Organizational Development in the digital era.

Discussion

The purpose of this review was to critically examine how digital burnout has evolved between 2015 and 2025 and to interpret its implications for job sustainability and Organizational Development (OD). The analysis of 50 peer-reviewed studies reveals that digital burnout has transitioned from a peripheral psychological concern to a structural

organizational issue. This transformation reflects a deeper tension between technological acceleration and human sustainability — a gap that current models of organizational change have yet to fully address.

Reframing Digital Burnout Through the Job Demands–Resources Lens

Interpreted through the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017), digital burnout emerges as a result of increasing job demands—such as information overload, permanent availability, and digital monitoring—combined with insufficient organizational and personal resources. While some studies in the corpus identify individual buffers such as digital competence or self-efficacy (Consiglio et al., 2023; Yener et al., 2021), most show that these resources are easily depleted in high-demand digital contexts. The imbalance produces a cycle of exhaustion and disengagement consistent with the patterns described by Maslach and Leiter (2016).

However, the findings extend beyond the JD-R framework. The reviewed literature shows that digital burnout is not only a consequence of high demands but also of systemic design failures —organizations that prioritize productivity and immediacy over reflection and recovery. The shift toward remote and hybrid models has intensified this imbalance by diffusing boundaries and redefining control mechanisms, making employees responsible for self-regulating workloads that were once collectively managed. In this sense, digital burnout becomes an indicator of the organizational inability to maintain equilibrium between digital efficiency and human capacity for restoration.

Organizational Development and The Ethics of Digital Transformation

From an Organizational Development (OD) perspective, the findings emphasize that digital burnout must be understood as a systemic challenge rather than an individual pathology. Waddell et al. (2016) define OD as a process of planned change aimed at enhancing both organizational effectiveness and human well-being. Yet, as the evidence shows, digital transformation has often neglected this dual purpose, focusing on optimization while disregarding sustainability.

Studies within the corpus reveal that organizations with participatory structures, supportive leadership, and explicit digital-wellness policies experience lower burnout levels (Li et al., 2025; Sanchez-Segura et al., 2023). In contrast, environments characterized by rigid hierarchies and digital surveillance report higher emotional exhaustion (Bahr et al., 2023; Kamel, 2025). These results point to an ethical and developmental dilemma: how can organizations integrate technology without eroding the human conditions that sustain learning, trust, and collaboration?

The present review fills a critical knowledge gap by bridging the discourse between psychological research on technostress and organizational theories of change. Most prior studies treat digital burnout as a health or productivity issue; this article reframes it as a diagnostic lens for organizational imbalance—a symptom revealing the need for more human-centered digital transformation. This conceptual shift is essential for the evolution of OD in the digital era, calling for organizations that not only adapt to technological change but also preserve their human and relational core.

Toward Sustainable Digital Organizations

The synthesis of evidence suggests that sustainable digital organizations are those capable of embedding recovery, learning, and ethical reflection into their digital infrastructures. Several studies emphasize that well-being must be recognized as a strategic component of digital transformation, not merely an individual concern. For instance, Sanchez-Segura et al. (2023)

highlight that integrating occupational health principles into digital strategies strengthens both performance and employee safety, while Li et al. (2025) demonstrate that organizations valuing psychological support and open communication achieve better adaptation to digital workloads.

This transition also requires leadership that acknowledges digital well-being as a collective priority. Research in educational and service settings shows that leaders who model empathy and flexibility mitigate burnout and enhance engagement (Shaban et al., 2025; Tu et al., 2025; Yener et al., 2021). Similarly, Gemmano et al. (2023) and Marrinhas et al. (2023) found that shared responsibility for boundary management—such as team agreements on communication schedules—helps restore equilibrium and prevent overload in hybrid work environments.

Moreover, digital literacy initiatives should evolve beyond technical skill-building to encompass digital emotional competence and organizational empathy. Consiglio et al. (2023) and Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al. (2021) observed that self-efficacy and digital competence act as psychological buffers against technostress, while Aye et al. (2024) and L'Engle et al. (2025) reported that digital well-being interventions improve resilience and perceived control. These findings underscore that sustainable digital organizations invest not only in technology but in the emotional and relational capacities that sustain healthy connectivity.

Ultimately, digital burnout offers a window into the broader transformation of work and human relations in the digital age. It challenges organizations to reconsider not only how technology is implemented but also why. By linking burnout to organizational design and culture, the literature demonstrates that preventing digital exhaustion is not merely a wellness initiative—it is an imperative for long-term viability, innovation, and social responsibility (Da Silva et al., 2024; Muhamad et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Practical Implications

The findings of this review suggest several practical avenues for addressing digital burnout and promoting sustainable organizational development. Across the studies, a recurring recommendation is the need to redefine digital work boundaries. Evidence from remote and hybrid contexts shows that clear communication norms and recovery periods help reduce cognitive overload and emotional exhaustion (Gemmano et al., 2023; Marrinhas et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Establishing structured "disconnect" times and reasonable response expectations may restore autonomy and protect psychological health.

Another practical implication concerns the role of digital competence and training. Research has demonstrated that improving digital literacy and self-efficacy not only enhances performance but also mitigates technostress (Consiglio et al., 2023; Kumpikaitė-Valiūnienė et al., 2021; Li & Liu, 2022). Therefore, organizations should design training programs that go beyond technical instruction to include awareness of healthy digital behaviors, emotional regulation, and time management in virtual environments.

Leadership and managerial practices also require attention. Several studies indicate that supervisors who display empathy, provide constructive feedback, and model balanced digital engagement contribute to lower levels of burnout among employees (Shaban et al., 2025; Tu et al., 2025; Yener et al., 2021). Encouraging leaders to integrate well-being goals into performance management systems can foster a culture where technological use aligns with human needs rather than undermines them.

Finally, digital burnout management should be embedded in organizational policies and development strategies. As Sanchez-Segura et al. (2023) argue, digital transformation cannot be sustainable if it ignores occupational health and safety principles. Integrating psychosocial indicators into digitalization projects, promoting participatory feedback channels, and creating interdisciplinary well-being committees are practical steps that reflect the essence

of Organizational Development—continuous learning, collaboration, and respect for human limits.

Together, these measures translate the theoretical insights of this review into actionable strategies. They underscore that preventing digital burnout is not an isolated wellness initiative but a core responsibility of organizations seeking ethical and sustainable performance in an increasingly connected world.

Limitations and Future Directions

As a non-systematic qualitative review, this study is interpretative rather than exhaustive. It synthesizes a wide but delimited body of literature (2015–2025) and is therefore limited by the availability and scope of existing studies. The corpus includes diverse sectors and methods, which enriches insight but also introduces heterogeneity that complicates direct comparison.

Future research should deepen the integration between digital psychology and Organizational Development, examining longitudinally how digital burnout interacts with organizational learning, identity, and performance over time. Empirical models that include organizational culture, leadership ethics, and digital governance could illuminate the systemic pathways that sustain or mitigate burnout. Moreover, interdisciplinary collaboration between management science, occupational health, and information systems is essential to build a comprehensive theory of digital sustainability at work.

In sum, this study responds directly to its objective: to interpret digital burnout as a systemic indicator of imbalance between technological acceleration and human sustainability, and to propose its integration into the OD framework as both a diagnostic and developmental concept. By doing so, it fills a relevant theoretical and practical void, offering a path toward organizations that are not only digitally efficient but also psychologically sustainable and ethically grounded.

Conclusions

This critical reflection on research published between 2015 and 2025 confirms that digital burnout is a systemic manifestation of organizational imbalance—an outcome of how technology, culture, and work design interact in the digital era. The evidence consistently shows that hyperconnectivity, information overload, and the normalization of constant availability undermine autonomy, creativity, and psychological health across professions. At the same time, resilience, digital competence, and emotionally intelligent leadership emerge as decisive resources for restoring balance and sustaining meaningful work.

By integrating insights from psychology and management into the framework of Organizational Development (OD), this article fills a significant theoretical and practical gap. It redefines digital burnout not as an individual failure to adapt, but as a diagnostic signal of the limits of current organizational models—models that often prioritize efficiency and immediacy over sustainability and recovery. Addressing digital burnout, therefore, requires a paradigm shift: organizations must evolve from digitally reactive systems to digitally regenerative systems, where technology serves human potential rather than exhausting it.

The implications are profound. Sustainable digital work demands structures that protect recovery time, foster trust, and promote shared responsibility for well-being. It also calls for leaders capable of embedding ethical reflection and empathy into digital transformation. In this sense, the prevention of digital burnout becomes an essential pillar of responsible organizational development and a prerequisite for innovation that truly enhances human flourishing.

Ultimately, the future of work will not be defined by the speed of technology but by the wisdom with which organizations use it. Recognizing digital burnout as a signal—not of weakness, but of imbalance—offers an opportunity to redesign the digital workplace as a

space where connection, learning, and well-being coexist. In doing so, this article invites scholars and practitioners alike to envision a new model of digital sustainability, one that harmonizes technological progress with the enduring human need for balance, meaning, and care.

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